

ABSTRACT

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 AURAL AESTHETICS AND AFRICAN
 DIASPORIC FICTION

Daniel LeClair Hartley, Doctor of Philosophy,
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Directed By: Professor Mary Helen Washington
 Department of English

This dissertation examines the influence of jazz and blues on African Diasporic fiction. While the influences of jazz and blues on African American cultural production have received critical attention for many decades, I contend that literary criticism neglects to recognize that jazz and blues are more than just national forms. They are international forms that have influenced a diverse group of writers and their novels. My work fills gaps in current scholarship by examining well-known and lesser-known novels that depict jazz and blues both within and without American contexts. This international approach is crucial to any examination of jazz, blues, and fiction because it expands our understanding of how authors aim to represent the experiences of African Diasporic people throughout the world.

Building on the work in African American literary criticism and jazz studies, this dissertation examines the varying elements of jazz and blues — what I refer to as “aural aesthetics” — that writers incorporate into fiction in order to understand the continued influence of music on African Diasporic fiction. In Chapter One, I contend

that Langston Hughes uses the blues as a form of protest in his first published novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930) to advance critiques of racism and African American involvement in World War I. In Chapter Two, I argue that Ann Petry fills her first novel *The Street* (1946) with a blues aesthetic that not only undergirds her representations of protest but also responds to the call for the use of vernacular forms in literature. In Chapter Three, I argue that Jackie Kay in *Trumpet* (1999) and Paule Marshall in *The Fisher King* (2000) represent the jazz-inflected solo as a means through which their characters build individual identities that challenge notions of an undifferentiated, monolithic African Diaspora. In Chapter Four, I contend that John A. Williams in *Clifford's Blues* (1999) and Xam Wilson Cartiér in *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991) present protagonists as composers that use jazz and blues as methods to assert individual African Diasporic identities and to express communal histories that are not present elsewhere in literature.

By providing a critical framework for understanding the influence of jazz and blues in African Diasporic fiction, this project responds directly to criticism that limits the study of jazz and blues to American texts and contexts, calls for a reconsideration of those nationalistic tendencies, and argues for the critical engagement of jazz and blues as forms international in scope.

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By

Daniel LeClair Hartley

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Mary Helen Washington, Chair
Professor Barry Lee Pearson
Professor Linda Coleman
Professor Eugene Robinson
Professor Elsa Barkley Brown

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Dedication

To my two greatest collaborators: Jessica Nyel Hartley and Hunter Davis Hartley.

May our blessed trio continue make such sweet thunder.

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Introduction: "Not heard with the ears:" Listening to Aural Aesthetics

When it was initially published in 1912, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*, a novel that merged music and fiction, was the first of its kind. Johnson remains the pioneer of representing jazz and blues in a full-length novel. Therefore, *The Autobiography* serves as a fitting text to begin this examination of aural aesthetics and African Diasporic fiction. Johnson's novel serves as a foundational text in studying the intersections of music and African Diasporic fiction for two reasons. First, the novel's mixed-race protagonist travels extensively, both within and without the United States, studying the musical practices that will later shape his art. Second, it is a foundational text because it underscores the centrality of musical practice to the expression of personal and communal identities, suggesting a journeying through musical practice to achieve some sense of self and community. Throughout the novel, Johnson hears in jazz and blues their international influence. Johnson's narrator, who at times offers verbatim the cultural commentary that Johnson expresses in the prefaces to his *Book of American Negro Poetry*, calls the music that the narrative depicts "world-conquering." Johnson intentionally makes the musician the novel's centerpiece, and he depicts this character as a descendant of not only multiple racial heritages but also multiple cultural traditions, focusing on the ex-colored man's negotiation of these racial and cultural traditions. The protagonist learns vernacular approaches to music, specifically aural learning and improvisation, from his mother, who sings "Old slave songs" and plays hymns on piano, and he

applies these approaches to classical piano playing to develop his identity as musician. He applies these approaches later in the novel on his quest to be a race man and to elevate the "elusive undertone" of African American spirituals to classical forms. Like his protagonist, Johnson hears within jazz and blues "that elusive undertone" and creates a literary work to represent "the note in music not heard with the ears."¹ *The Autobiography* is one of the first, if not the very first, novel to exhibit this practice of incorporating jazz and blues into fiction. Since Johnson's novel was published in 1912, jazz and blues have continued to influence African Diasporic literary production. Why do writers engage these musical forms and incorporate them into their literary works? How might these acts of intersection or influence be detected? How do these literary practices of "listening" to jazz and blues shape our ways of "hearing" meaning in African Diasporic literature? What, then, are the meanings of a narrative that use jazz and blues music in these ways? This dissertation provides a sustained examination of African Diasporic fiction and offers answers to these questions. By depicting this protagonist as an aspiring musician and by positioning music that influenced the world as the novel's centerpiece, Johnson transformed the novel genre and ushered in a new type of African Diasporic fiction.

For nearly a century, African Diasporic writers have deliberately incorporated music into their novels. For example, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* depicts two central characters that face bitter racism, but also find refuge in the local speakeasies filled with jazz and blues music. Albert Murray fills his novel *Train Whistle Guitar* with the blues, as the novel's protagonist Scooter navigates the difficult environment

¹ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 123.

of Gasoline Point using the blues philosophy of perseverance in the face of adversity as his guide. These authors are thus able to transform Western literary conventions through these vernacular and vernacular-based forms. More importantly, they have identified jazz and blues as the primary forms through which to convey the articulations of the self and the group, and the continued use of jazz and blues in African Diasporic fiction amplifies that claim. All of the novels in this dissertation show that writers are deliberately using a specific African Diasporic tradition of transforming the literary form through the cultural forms of jazz and blues. Langston Hughes uses the blues as protest against racial oppression and African American military participation during World War I. In this tradition, Ann Petry not only affirms the importance of vernacular and vernacular-based forms in African Diasporic fiction, through the blues, but also asserts black female resistance to gender oppression. The traditions of blues and jazz as ways to bear witness to African Diasporic experience in the face of totalizing forces of oppression provide Jackie Kay and Paule Marshall with the methods to explore, both within and outside of U.S. contexts, matters of difference within the Diaspora. These musical forms are at the heart of each novel, demonstrating the continued importance that writers place on them to articulate the overall meanings of their works. In each novel, the music underscores the ways in which authors both identify and align themselves with this negotiation of the self and community. The aspects of jazz and blues that African Diasporic writers seek to evoke in their fiction are not mere literary devices. These aspects reflect the larger cultural imperative of expressing the self through community, which is a central feature of jazz and blues. These forms provide a sense

of freedom for authors to experiment with the merging music with written works, but the forms also provide strategies that allow for the assertion of community through the self that counteracts a larger history in which slavery and racism limited that agency.

By examining the novels of James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Jackie Kay, John A. Williams, and Xam Wilson Cartiér, I contend that authors "hear" in jazz and blues modes of articulation; each form provides a means of personal expression, social critique, community affirmation, and historical redress. This dissertation provides close textual analyses of Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Petry's *The Street* (1946), Cartiér's *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991), Williams's *Clifford's Blues* (1998), Kay's *Trumpet* (1999), and Marshall's *The Fisher King* (2000). Through these close readings, I examine the aural aesthetics – the varying characteristics and elements of jazz and blues – that these writers incorporate into these novels. I argue that the use of these aural aesthetics demonstrates the importance of jazz and blues to African Diasporic literature and to the expression of African Diasporic experience during the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

I chose this specific group of writers for two reasons. The first is that each one recognizes the importance of music to revising the literary conventions of fiction. For instance, by drawing on the non-linear, disjunctive dimension of jazz music to establish the overall structure and pace of the novels *Trumpet* and *Muse-Echo Blues*, writers Kay and Cartiér disrupt the expectation of a linear narrative. Langston Hughes and Ann Petry use jazz and blues elements to enhance narration. For example, both

writers use the call-and-response dynamic of the blues to shape dialogue between characters. For this dissertation, I selected writers whose novels illustrate this intentional engagement with the specific qualities of jazz and blues like non-linearity and call-and-response to enhance literary conventions such as narration.

The second reason I chose these writers is that they depict in their novels jazz and blues at home and abroad, allowing for the depiction of experience not present elsewhere in African Diasporic fiction. Depicting jazz and blues at home throughout the world is a more accurate representation of how these musical forms originated. Studies focusing exclusively on American texts and contexts ignore this fact. By looking at this specific group of writers, this dissertation corrects this scholarly error and places proper emphasis on the international heritage of jazz and blues that these novelists portray in their works.

For example, James Weldon Johnson's nameless narrator travels throughout the American North and South, and East to Europe to attest to the "world-conquering influence" of early jazz during the first decades of the twentieth century. Paule Marshall's jazz pianist Sonny-Rett Payne merges his Caribbean and American heritage into the jazz music he plays in Brooklyn, New York and expatriates in the 1950s to Paris, France to access greater artistic and personal freedom. Xam Wilson Cartiér's character Lena Ames leaves Kansas City, Missouri and sings in Montevideo, Uruguay in the 1930s in order to become an international star similar to Josephine Baker. John A. Williams's protagonist Clifford Pepperidge travels to Germany and plays music not only as a free man in Berlin, but also as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in Dachau. In each case, the narrative depictions of jazz and

blues either move away from or are based in locations other than the United States, which more accurately reflects how both musical forms developed historically. In order to understand fully how and why authors continue to use the structures, principles, and elements of jazz and blues music in their writing, we must study these representations because they reveal the histories of how jazz and blues were formed and how they continue to circulate around the world.

The terms “transnational” and “Diasporic” in this dissertation’s title point to the dispersal and movement of African-descended people. It follows, then, that jazz and blues, the two cultural forms perhaps most frequently associated with twentieth-century African Diasporic expressivity, are characterized by this movement. As jazz and blues have circulated, different individuals and communities have embraced these musical forms and their various elements, from the syncopated rhythms inherent to jazz that imply a sense of freedom to the call-and-response dynamic prevalent in blues that conveys affirmation of the self and community. Throughout this dissertation, I discuss the importance of jazz and blues as international forms to the use of aural aesthetics in each novel. Jazz and blues reflect the global movement of African Diasporic people who helped to generate and inspire these distinct but connected musical forms.

In all of the novels that this dissertation analyzes, movement is a signature feature of jazz and blues aesthetics. For example, Johnson’s ex-colored man describes early jazz, as “world conquering,” and Johnson illustrates that the music’s sphere of influence stretches not only to European cities but also to countries around the globe. This is important to extend our understanding of jazz and blues as not simply

national, but also international in influence. In his novel *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes's Jimboy Rodgers, a living embodiment of the blues, is sent to the front to fight in France during World War I. He takes his blues music and blues spirit with him "over there" while his family remembers him through the communal performance of a blues song back in the U.S. The soldiers returning from, and returning to, World War II dance to the popular torch song "Darlin" that Ann Petry's blues protagonist Lutie Johnson sings at a Harlem casino in *The Street*. In Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*, the central character Joss Moody is an Afro-Scottish musician who achieves international acclaim as a major jazz figure and establishes a home in Scotland. In *The Fisher King*, Paule Marshall creates a character Sonny-Rett Payne who is a product of the traditions of the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. It is Sonny-Rett's cultural heritage, his expatriation to Paris, France, and the return of the grandson Sonny who returns to the States decades later that underscore the importance of the international. John A. Williams's *Clifford's Blues* places the novel's protagonist, a musician who travels to Europe during the early rise of jazz and blues music, inside of a Nazi concentration camp in Germany. Xam Wilson Cartiér's novel *Muse-Echo Blues* features a chanteuse who attempts to flee racial and gender oppression and pursues a singing career in South America. In nearly all of these novels, jazz and blues are significant because of their circulation outside of U.S. borders and contexts.

By including the phrase "transnational jazz and blues," I contend that jazz and blues are more than just national forms, and this dissertation moves the academic discussion of jazz, blues, and fiction beyond U.S. borders. By moving beyond the

borders of the United States, we understand how a diverse group of writers expand the possibilities of incorporating jazz and blues into fiction. By looking at jazz and blues as international forms, we understand more fully why they are important musical forms that writers across the African Diaspora seek to include in their literary works.

I recognize jazz and blues as transnational forms because that is how they originated. They have always been local and global, have always enjoyed homes in the United States and in France, South Africa, Germany, Cuba, and England. Jazz in particular is a hybrid form created from a range of musical traditions from around the world - African, Caribbean, European traditions primarily. James Reese Europe and his 369th Infantry Regiment, a band of musicians more commonly known as the Harlem Hellfighters, brought jazz and blues to Europe during the first World War, introducing these new sounds and sights of musical performance to a region that had little or no exposure to jazz and blues previously. In the 1920s South African groups like William Mbali's Big Four established these musical traditions in Queenstown. Decades later, pianists Abdullah Ibrahim and Chris McGregor, as well as trumpeter Hugh Masakela, added to the heritage of jazz in South Africa. Paris nightclubs and performance venues served as incubators for jazz and blues during the 1920s and the 1930s. During that same time period, Germany enjoyed the presence of Valaida Snow and Samuel Wooding, who performed jazz and blues for German audiences and other audiences throughout Europe. At the beginning of the 1940s, jazz, particularly swing, had made its way to West Africa and influenced many artists like Victor Olaiya from Nigeria. Jelly Roll Morton, who claims to have created the blues long before the

publication of W.C. Handy's *St. Louis Blues* in 1912, always remarked about the "Latin tinge" of early New Orleans jazz music that found its roots in Cuban music. This "tinge" has since become a crucial component of jazz history, and it was figures like Chano Pozo who worked with Dizzy Gillespie who incorporated the rhythms and textures of Cuban music into bebop.

Jazz represents a collection of musical practices from around the world. Resembling the cultural diversity of one of its birthplaces New Orleans, jazz has been, and continues to be, a music developed by many sources and by many forces that extend beyond the United States. Yet, literary and cultural scholarship on the intersections of music and fiction seldom focus on jazz and blues as international forms. As E. Taylor Atkins states about jazz, "seldom have its parochial parameters and implicit nationalism been questioned."² This dissertation extends the scholarly discussion beyond the "parochial parameters" of American texts and contexts. Atkins states that, "jazz, though certainly born on U.S. soil, it was both product and instigator of early-twentieth-century processes and trends that were global in scope: the mass manufacture of culture, urbanization, the leisure revolution, and primitivism."³ While some historians, artists, and cultural critics argue for jazz as "America's classical music" or the only art form America has ever produced, it was created through the collaborative efforts of people from various national and ethnic heritages and continues to exert influence around the globe.

The novels throughout this dissertation each have specific historical, political, and social contexts that affect the ways in which authors depict jazz and blues. For

² Atkins, *Jazz Planet*, xiii.

³ Ibid.

instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the world had just begun to embrace the rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic innovations that came to mark the formations of early blues and jazz music. James Weldon Johnson, who produced music at the turn of the century, understood the fluidity of both musical identity and personal identity. His understanding of music and identity affects the way in which one can “hear” his examination of these intersecting subjects in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Much like jazz music itself, this dissertation does not seek to provide a definitive answer. Instead, it offers ways to listen to the complex yet fruitful interplay between text and sound, between narrative and song, between novels and music through the use of differing aural aesthetics.

Aural aesthetics are the tools that authors use to incorporate jazz and blues into their fiction. Aural aesthetics is not a self-evident term, and the word "aural" carries meanings that are important to this dissertation's examination of African Diasporic texts. It is important, then, to recognize the problems, limitations, and opportunities that using the word “aural” presents. At first glance, using a word that indicates sound or that which is experienced “through the ear” in context of a written text or literary work seems contradictory and potentially confusing. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "aural" means “received or perceived by the ear,” or the *sense* of hearing.⁴ I emphasize the word “sense” because I show throughout this dissertation how authors use written language to evoke music or create a *sense* of music for a reader. Literary texts do not make sounds, so it is not possible for a novel to convey the actual sounds of jazz and blues. I do not suggest

⁴ "aural, a.2" Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press, May 01, 2010, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50014862>>.

that the use of jazz and blues creates a written text that can make its own sounds, nor do I suggest that there are actual representations of jazz and blues sounds. Instead, I use the term to indicate the ways in which authors use the various aspects of music in fiction. Writers experience jazz and blues “through the ear” or as productions of sound, but it is often qualities other than actual "sounds" that writers "hear" and aim to reflect their influence in novels. Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate how writers use jazz and blues – their structures, themes, symbols, histories, and social meanings – to incorporate them into African Diasporic fiction.

For my purposes in this dissertation, the term "aural aesthetics" functions on a metaphoric rather than a literal level, indicating the symbolic use of music in written texts. This dissertation explores works of African Diasporic fiction that highlight music, represented in each novel by jazz and blues songs, characters who are either jazz or blues musicians, historical or cultural aspects, and elements such as improvisation and call-and-response. The complexity of these jazz and blues aspects generates varying levels of meaning, and the authors of these novels attempt to approximate that complexity by incorporating music into their respective written works.

The term "aural aesthetics" means the components or characteristics of jazz and blues. There are numerous characteristics of each form, and it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to list all of them. Instead, I focus on only those characteristics that appear within the examined novels. Blues aesthetics can refer to dominant themes of a song or a song's inherent structure. For example, a blues aesthetic can emphasize common blues themes of lost love. A blues aesthetic can also refer to the AAB

structure of the twelve-bar blues. When a blues aesthetic shapes dialogue between characters, one line of dialogue is stated, that same line of dialogue repeats “with a difference,” and the final line of the dialogue “resolves” the first two lines in a similar way as a blues song. A blues aesthetic, however, is more than components or elements derived from the music. It also refers to the music's development and its various social and historical meanings. In defining aspects of a blues novel, Steven C. Tracy suggests that, “the portrayal of the social and historical context that led up to the birth of the blues...that was part of and necessary to its time reflects the spirit of the blues as well.”⁵ As this dissertation demonstrates, the presence of blues can also be detected in the ways in which African Diasporic fiction represents blues history.

In African Diasporic fiction, a jazz aesthetic can also be assessed in terms of jazz history – and blues history – it represents. A jazz aesthetic is present in references to real jazz musicians and performances. A novel reflects a jazz aesthetic when its language suggests evoked through improvisation. Novels that depict a jazz solo often reflect through their language the spontaneity and creativity of improvisation. A novel can also reflect a jazz aesthetic in its structure when an author depicts multiple narrative voices, just as a jazz band has multiple instruments that create music.

Beginning with James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, writers of African Diasporic literature have turned to jazz and blues as creative sources for their written texts, and there is an elusive aspect to both musical forms that African Diasporic writers attempt to approximate. Part of that elusive

⁵ Steven C. Tracy, "The Blues Novel" in Mary Emma Graham, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126.

quality is wound up in the impossibility of concretely defining blues and jazz. It falls outside the scope of my research to whittle down the numerous attempts at definitions that exist, but I will provide here briefly, and in the following chapters, descriptions of each form. The blues developed primarily in the Southern United States as a single-person vocal music accompanied by guitar or piano. Blues is at once a feeling and a musical form, a type of interaction between performer and audience, and also a statement of personal history that can represent group experience. In many respects, jazz is similar. Jazz is a musical form created primarily by African Diasporic people during the first decade of the twentieth century. Jazz emerged from diverse social environments, from New Orleans to Chicago to New York, its predominant musical influences are from African and European musical traditions, and its early development took place all over the world. Jazz is a style or an approach to music, a genre built on the tradition of the blues, and a type of interaction between not only performer and audience but performer and other performers. These aspects of jazz and blues offer writers powerful cultural forms to be explored, modified, and expressed in African Diasporic fiction.

Besides identifying the specific elements of jazz and blues that appear in each novel, I attempt to address the broader strategies of incorporating music into fiction. The novelists in this research project make use of jazz and blues to buttress their literary forms because music presents a compelling mode of individual and communal expression of history that finds its roots in forms such as the Sorrow Songs, as W.E.B. Du Bois suggests in his landmark work *The Souls of Black Folk*. These songs convey for Du Bois the “articulate message” of African Diasporic

experience, and Du Bois hears the “siftings of centuries.”⁶ In this regard, the Sorrow Songs, and their offshoots jazz and blues, serve as conduits of personal and communal stories, and the writers in this study incorporate this important aspect into their novels. Barbadian author and critic Kamau Brathwaite also views both the connection of jazz and blues to the heritage of the Sorrow Songs and the importance of jazz and blues as communicators of personal and communal narratives. As Braithwaite notes in his examination of Caribbean Anglophone literature of the 1950s, a “jazz text” will “express the community through its form. It will absorb its rhythms from the people of this community; and its concern will be with the community as a whole, its characters taking their place in that community, of which they are seen and felt to be an integral part.”⁷ Brathwaite observes the possibilities of reading according to a jazz aesthetic as important to opening up meaning in Caribbean Anglophone literature and discusses strategies for interpreting using the frameworks – the aesthetic modes and models – of jazz music. This negotiation of the individual and the community, the narrative of self and the history of the group, is a negotiation that is a defining feature of jazz and blues.

To make clear the significant influence of jazz and blues on and presence in twentieth-century African Diasporic literature, this dissertation takes as its focus only those novels that emphasize jazz and blues as predominant themes or structures, that foreground jazz and blues musicians as central characters, or that contain overt references to jazz and blues music. As Fritz Gysin suggests, there are inherent

⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, 267.

⁷ Kamau Brathwaite, “Jazz and the West Indian Novel” in Bill Ashcroft, et al. eds, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 330.

dangers in arguing for one-to-one “equivalents” between literature and music, especially with works that neither thematize nor depict jazz and blues to any appreciable degree.⁸ After all, nothing prevents a critic from arguing for the influence of improvisation or the presence of call and response in novels that do not correspond to these criteria. Yet, what Gysin views as a “pastime of writers and critics” in “crossing the boundaries between the two art forms,” however, has developed into a crucial part of a considerable field of scholarly inquiry most commonly known as jazz studies. Jazz studies involves not only the evolution of jazz and blues, but also their continued influence on a wide range of African Diasporic texts. This dissertation, then, contributes further to scholarship that examines how authors of African Diasporic literature across the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries avail themselves of jazz and blues by analyzing only those novels that fit the criteria above.

This dissertation also bypasses Gysin’s “risks” by examining novels by those authors who either comment on the importance of African Diasporic musical expressivity elsewhere or explore the relationship between music and literature in other works. These works provide the necessary context for the novels that this dissertation examines by clarifying the specific historical, social, political, and cultural forces that shaped the novels. For example, James Weldon Johnson’s work on African American songwriting and his views as an international politician in the early twentieth century help to contextualize his innovative exploration of music and race in *The Autobiography*. The overwhelming presence of jazz and blues in Langston Hughes’s poetic production both before and immediately after he published

⁸ Fritz Gysin, “From ‘Liberating Voices’ to ‘Metathetic Ventriloquism’: Boundaries in Recent African American Jazz Fiction.” *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002): 275.

Not Without Laughter helped to fine tune the subversive politics of that novel. Ann Petry's "Solo On The Drums" (1947) remains a stellar example of the thematic and structural exploration of blues and jazz in the short story genre. This short story, along with Petry's short story "Like A Winding Sheet" (1945) published just before *The Street*, demonstrates Petry's explicit understanding of blues as a crucial element in African Diasporic fiction and provides ways to understand her use of jazz and blues in that novel. Petry depicts the violence implicit in blues songs to articulate a specific critique of the racism and sexism that sought to limit black female subjectivity.

Music plays a small role in Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, but it highlights the importance of music to the articulation of individual and communal heritage. Marshall, whose work often focuses on African Diasporic heritage and Caribbean identity, engages those subjects in *The Fisher King*. In her writings on Bessie Smith, Afro-Scottish writer Jackie Kay reveals the possibility of African Diasporic connection through Smith's blues. In *Trumpet*, she thematizes and subverts notions of African Diasporic connection through her central figure Joss Moody. John A. Williams's novel *Night Song* makes clear his understanding of the historical forces that helped shape jazz music in the 1940s and 1950s, and he expands this understanding to encompass the development of jazz and blues in 1920s, 30s, and 40s Germany in an effort to reclaim a history that has not been narrativized in African Diasporic literature in his novel *Clifford's Blues*. The language in Xam Wilson Cartier's novel *Bebop Rebop* is often regarded as the literary rendering of jazz music,

her own “sheets of sound”⁹ that reflect both the dynamism and the history of the music. She continues this approach in her novel *Muse-Echo Blues*, using both the structural and thematic elements of both jazz and blues in her depiction of her protagonist: a black female instrumentalist who forges her identity through engagement with jazz and blues history and bears witness to the centrality of black female creativity to musical history.

While it would be a matter of convenience and academic convention to collapse this dissertation’s theoretical assertions into one catchall idea of how every author uses the same aural aesthetic, the idioms of blues and jazz actively resist such practices. Indeed, the cumulative effect of the almost infinitely varied structures and approaches to and the convoluted heritages and diverse contributors of jazz and blues make such an endeavor not only daunting, but also nearly impossible. As Charles Hersch succinctly puts it, “Jazz was never singular but always multiple, constantly overflowing the containers critics tried to force it into.”¹⁰ It is only fitting, then, that this dissertation reflects this “overflowing” of the brackets that some scholarly procedure often demands. While it is beyond the scope of my research to suggest one sole musically informed strategy at work in all of these novels, I do suggest that all of these authors identify in jazz and blues the capacity of social and political commentary and the communication of personal and communal history. For Johnson, the development of African American music is curtailed by the legacy of violence

⁹ Rayfield A. Waller, “‘Sheets of Sound’: A Woman’s Bop Prosody,” *Black American Literature Forum* 24.4 (1990): 791. “Sheets of sound,” a term that jazz critic Ira Gitler coined in the liner notes to John Coltrane’s *Soultrain*, refers to Coltrane’s approach to improvisation.

¹⁰ Charles Hersch, *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 8.

against African Americans. His ex-colored man abandons a career as a musician, a representative of African Diasporic culture, and his identification with African Americans after witnessing a lynching. Hughes portrays music and musicianship as central to the conveyance of African Diasporic history. In *Not Without Laughter*, the characters Harrietta Williams and Jimboy Rodgers both encounter the oppressive matrix of racism and sexism in the early twentieth century, but their depictions as blues and jazz performers allow for the expression of these experiences. Hughes uses blues in particular as a subversive strategy that sought to limit the expression of such narratives in the early twentieth century.

In order to understand how jazz and blues function to express African Diasporic experience in well-known and under-examined novels, it is necessary to attend to the linkages between jazz and blues. The novels make clear how jazz and blues are connected both musically and historically. In terms of musical development, the foundations of jazz music are found in the blues. For example, Albert Murray describes jazz as an “extension, elaboration, and refinement of blues-break riffing and improvisation.”¹¹ Sterling Brown identifies this connection in his crucial work on the blues. Brown sees the “inter-relationships of blues with jazz,” most specifically with small bands playing with singers such as Billie Holiday and Joe Turner.¹² Brown emphasizes the inclusion of a “booting saxophone” and increased rhythmic complexity in “a rolling bass” as indicators of the strong connection between a blues “folk tradition” and blues-based jazz tradition that merges the vocal and the instrumental. Pianist Mary Lou Williams offers visual counterbalance to Brown’s

¹¹ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (Deco: New York, 1989), 63.

¹² Sterling Brown, “The Blues.” *Phylon* 8 (Autumn, 1952), 291-292.

musicological explanation of the connection between jazz and blues. In her “tree of jazz,” Williams illustrates the origins of jazz music by including blues as a considerable portion of the tree trunk.¹³ According to biographer Linda Dahl, Williams felt that “jazz meant very little indeed if it lacked the emotional resonance that comes from understanding not only the form of the music, but where the blues came from. ‘You ain’t said nothin’,’ she played in a song, ‘’til you play the blues.’”¹⁴

The dissertation also reflects the aesthetics of jazz and blues in terms of its organization. I see the work in this introduction and the first two chapters as establishing just a few ways in which we can read jazz and blues in fiction. In each of the final two chapters, I compare and analyze two novels to approximate a sense of correspondence that is consonant with call and response. In Chapter Three, I make conspicuous this approach to utilizing the aesthetics that this dissertation examines. The chapter presents the examination of Paule Marshall’s *The Fisher King* and Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* as a type of “trading fours” that is a signature style of both jazz and blues. The root of trading fours is that African Diasporic practice of call-and-response. Much like two instruments in a band play a similar theme in different ways, I first establish the overarching shared themes of the novels and then alternate their close readings. The last four novels I examine illustrate that jazz and blues are transnational musics that can help shape an expanded African Diasporic subjectivity.

Jazz and blues are wellsprings of creative strategies that these writers use in their novels. The use of music is a consequence of what each individual artist hears in

¹³ Tammy Lynn Kernodle. *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2005), 257.

¹⁴ Linda Dahl. *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 6.

the music, but it is music's ability to express individual identity in a group context that defines the practice of incorporating aural aesthetics into African Diasporic fiction. This dissertation points to how crucial jazz and blues have been to the expression of African Diasporic experience and how their influences resonate throughout twentieth century African Diasporic fiction. These chapters on the intersections of music and African Diasporic fiction bring into focus the importance of jazz and blues in expressing the diversity of experience, providing scholarship that is more reflective of their multicultural origins, more consonant with their transnational circulation, and more harmonic with their global futures.

Although this dissertation centers on how and why authors use jazz and blues in African Diasporic fiction in order to address the obvious gap in scholarship that does not consider jazz and blues as international forms, it is important to discuss the significant influence of jazz and blues on African Diasporic literary production over the past century. For example, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown have long been recognized for their treatment of jazz and blues in literature, especially in their poetry. Hughes's *The Weary Blues* and Brown's *Southern Road* are regarded as primary examples of merging text and music wherein jazz and blues serve not only as subjects, but also as structural and thematic components. During the New Negro Movement, many writers reflected jazz and blues as elements in their poetry and prose. Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, and Wallace Thurman all used qualities of jazz or blues (or both) in their works. Since their early literary productions, there have been many African Diasporic writers who have incorporated blues and jazz into literature: James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Paul Beatty, Kamau

Brathwaite, Ralph Ellison, Nikki Giovanni, Michael S. Harper, Robert Hayden, Bob Kaufman, Nathaniel Mackey, Clarence Major, Albert Murray, Ishmael Reed, Ntozake Shange, Leopold Senghor, Melvin Tolson, Alice Walker, Colson Whitehead, and Sherley Anne Williams. This list is just a small sample of authors who explore through their creative writing the intersections of text and music.

There is also a great deal of scholarship that explores the intersections of jazz, blues, and literature, and some of the artists noted above have served as the most compelling literary and cultural critics. Amiri Baraka in *Blues People* (1963), Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act* (1964), Albert Murray in *Stomping the Blues* (1976), and Sherley Anne Williams in "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry" (1977) all examine the pronounced presence, influence, and significance of jazz and blues to African American cultural production.

In response to the literary production and cultural assessments that these writers have provided, there are a number of critical texts that examine and build on their important work. Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) presents a theory of the blues as the foremost symbol of African American cultural production, and he uses his vernacular theory of the blues as a way to read African American literary works such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Scholar and author Gayl Jones's *Liberating Voices* (1991) was one of the first scholarly attempts at organizing the various strategies that authors use to examine, as Paul Gilroy put it, the

“syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures.”¹⁵ Even though Jones examines a variety of genres, she focuses exclusively on American authors.

Studies subsequent to the publication of Baker's and Jones's work continue this emphasis on American texts and contexts. The emergence of jazz studies as a field of academic inquiry continues to produce a significant amount of scholarship that examines the interplay of music and text, of “script and sound,” but these studies continue to promote jazz and blues as exclusively American forms. Literary analyses according to jazz and blues paradigms are insufficient because criticism focuses on American authors and texts that deal exclusively with the United States. Few studies examine how and why authors depict jazz and blues outside of the U.S. In addition, few studies explain why those representations help to understand the international scope of these musical forms and their meanings to African Diasporic fiction. This dissertation attends to these neglected areas in scholarship to demonstrate a literary kinship among a diverse group of novels that incorporate jazz and blues into fiction.

For example, *Jazz Cadence of American Culture* is an important anthology to the development of jazz studies generally and to the development of literary analysis according to musical paradigms specifically. *Jazz Cadence* is a comprehensive collection of scholarship by notable scholars who examine the intersections of jazz, blues, and culture. The anthology provides interpretive strategies with which to read elements of American culture according to the elements of jazz and blues: from Albert Murray’s ruminations on the importance of improvisation to the artistic process to Hazel Carby’s examination of black female sexuality and the inherent

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, Verso 1993), 101.

freedom of classic blues expressivity. The anthology's section on the correspondence between jazz and writing focuses on widely known American writers and their frequently studied texts. This dissertation is another voice that joins the expanding scholarly conversations on the influence of jazz and blues on literary practice evident in *Jazz Cadence* by looking at lesser-known writers and texts that scholars have not examined. While both jazz and blues are important to American culture, their import to writers and cultures beyond the United States should be examined to offer new ways of reading African Diasporic fiction that makes evident the connections between text and music.

The writings on the interplay of music and literature in *Jazz Cadence of American Culture* serve as a foundation for literary and cultural scholarship that make jazz and blues both their topics of study and their frameworks of analysis. The collection also represents a small sample of the increasing and increasingly important scholarly output in recent years that exclusively focuses on American artists and contexts. Two works in particular, Michael Borshuk's *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* and Jürgen Grandt's *Kinds of Blue: African American Literature and the Jazz Aesthetic* examine the intersection of jazz and American literature and African American literature.

Swinging the Vernacular concentrates on arguing for a modernist approach to jazz aesthetics but also exhibits the "implicit nationalism" in scholarship that this dissertation contests.¹⁶ Borshuk's primary aim is to link jazz to the expression of African American modernity. For example, Borshuk identifies Langston Hughes as a primary practitioner of African American modernist expression in the early twentieth

¹⁶ E. Taylor Atkins, *Jazz Planet* (University of Mississippi Press, Tupelo, 2003), xiii.

century, arguing that music was “key to Hughes’s expression of the racial self-assertion that defined Harlem’s developing New Negro spirit.”¹⁷ The New Negro “spirit,” however, was a movement to which international figures such as Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes all contributed. The New Negro Movement took place in locales other than Harlem and was characterized by artists’ movement both domestically and internationally. Indeed, Hughes’s travels to Africa and Europe refined his creative sensibilities, and his experimentation with merging artistic forms of literature and music gave rise to international acclaim. The evolution of American modernist literature was very much a product of Hughes as a transnational figure. In this dissertation’s first chapter, I contend that the global experience of African Diasporic people impacted Hughes’s mode of blues discourse in his novel *Not Without Laughter*. Using blues as a form of protest, Hughes provides a subversive critique of African American involvement in World War I, which bore significant meaning to African American soldiers who traveled, fought, and died for democracy abroad while being denied citizenship rights at home.

In its title, *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative* suggests jazz’s indebtedness to the blues form for much of its meaning and development. The blues is considered a foundation of jazz music, and Grandt recognizes its importance to the development of jazz music and his configuration of a jazz aesthetic. Grandt states that

blues *tends* to be a guitar-based vocal music over certain chordal patterns, whereas jazz tends to be a horn-based instrumental music extending and

¹⁷ Michael Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.

amending the harmonic and rhythmic language of the blues. Thus, a *literary jazz aesthetic* is not necessarily completely different from a blues aesthetic; rather, the jazz aesthetic can offer a complementary way of interpreting African American narrative.¹⁸

He argues that the texts he examines do not simply make use of jazz, but actually *are* jazz, and the quote above places some distance between blues and jazz in his close readings. Grandt identifies the blues as the predominant theoretical element in literary analysis according to musical paradigms, and privileges jazz in his readings of African American fiction and autobiography. Grandt's work focuses on African American narrative almost exclusively and does not suggest jazz's global significance or that writers from varied backgrounds can exhibit similar artistic influence.

In Chapter One, I explore the ways in which Langston Hughes depicts blues as a vehicle of protest in *Not Without Laughter*, the first of two novels he wrote. I provide a framework with which to detect the overwhelming presence of blues protest in the novel. I examine scenes where characters engage in blues dialogue and scenes that depict characters during performances that highlight call-and-response, which is a prominent feature of the blues. Both of these blues practices are crucial to creating and sustaining community, and Hughes constructs these scenes to indicate that these blues-inflected interactions constitute protest because they give voice to notions of community not commonly heard. Hughes faced considerable opposition to the portrayal of any form of protest or "propaganda: in his novel, and I contend that he uses the blues to thwart that opposition.

¹⁸ Jürgen Grandt. *Kinds of Blue: African American Literature and the Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), xv. Emphasis in original.

In my second chapter “Revising the *Bluesprint*: Ann Petry’s *The Street*,” I examine various aspects of a blues aesthetic that permeate Petry’s novel. Responding to Richard Wright’s call in his famous manifesto “Blueprint for Negro Writing” for the inclusion of African American vernacular and vernacular-based forms in African American literature, Petry incorporates the aspects of blues in three primary ways. First, she depicts her main character Lutie Johnson as a blues singer capable of uniting Harlem communities through her song. Second, Petry uses the structures of blues, specifically patterns derived from the 12-bar blues and from blues performance interaction, to depict the violence common to blues expression. Third, Petry draws on the blues symbol of the train. It is Petry’s extensive use of blues in *The Street* specifically and her commitment to incorporating African Diasporic music into her literary productions generally that differentiate her from her Left contemporaries.

In the third chapter, I compare and analyze Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* and Paule Marshall’s *The Fisher King*, two lesser-known novels that are very similar not only in terms of their narrative content, but also in terms of types of jazz and blues aesthetics each represents. In terms of their narrative specifics, they share a lot of similarities: both novels focus on the subjects of family, loss, and death. In addition, both novels feature fictional “riffs” of real-life jazz figures. Most importantly, it is their use of aural aesthetics that require this type of comparative analysis and demonstrate a literary correspondence between the two novels. Both novels privilege blues as the foundational element of jazz. Both novels explicitly draw on jazz organizational structures to depict varying narrative points of view. And both novels focus on scenes of improvisation, the ever-important element of blues and jazz. In the scenes of

improvisation, which each novelist depicts as a jazz solo, I also suggest that Kay and Marshall use jazz and blues aesthetics to challenge notions of an undifferentiated Diaspora by highlighting the process of creating a unique identity during moments of performance. Each novelist represents the improvisation-inflected soloing moment as a moment where a character can establish his or her own identity “within and against the group.” The representations of jazz and blues in each novel indicate that Kay and Marshall wish to expand African Diasporic subjectivity because they reveal in their novels characters that, in their expressions of individuality, disrupt the notion of a monolithic Diaspora.

In the fourth and final chapter, I compare and analyze two lesser-known works to argue for the expanded African Diasporic subjectivity that I see at work in the preceding chapter. Blues and jazz provide authors John A. Williams and Xam Wilson Cartiér with the means to depict and to connect to African Diasporic histories and experiences that have received little attention in African Diasporic fiction and criticism.

These representations of African Diasporic experience differ greatly from other representations in African Diasporic literature because the narrative events occur in places that do not commonly appear in African Diasporic fiction. In his novel *Clifford's Blues*, John A. Williams depicts the experiences of a black gay musician imprisoned for 12 years in a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust, which has not been seen before in African Diasporic fiction. The novel's central character and narrator Clifford Pepperidge discloses through diary entries made over the course of twelve years his tale of struggle, suffering, and survival at the Nazi

concentration camp in Dachau, and his story also represents the experiences of other prisoners. In her novel *Muse-Echo Blues*, Xam Wilson Cartiér depicts the experiences of the protagonist Kat, a black female instrumentalist in San Francisco and a black female musician named Lena living in Montevideo, Uruguay, both of which have not been represented in African Diasporic fiction. The experiences of central characters Kitty and Lena who navigate environments that oppress women creatively and socially also represent the struggles of the protagonist Kat and other women. Both novels feature jazz and blues musicians as central characters, and Williams and Cartiér depict these characters as bearers or communicators of histories that are not portrayed elsewhere in African Diasporic fiction.

These characters should be seen as composers. These composers not only create music, but they also create personal narratives that ultimately represent the histories and experiences of larger communities. A jazz composer presents a particular personal history and perspective that shapes the creation of music, but the individual must always consider the needs of the group when acting as a composer. The central characters of *Clifford's Blues* and *Muse-Echo Blues* are composers because they express their individual experiences while attending to a larger communal sense of African Diasporic history.

Chapter One: No One's Protest Novel – Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*

The publication of Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), the first of the two novels he wrote, was a watershed moment in his career. Already a world-renowned writer and luminary of what is commonly called the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement, Hughes had achieved success with his poetic productions that incorporate aspects of music into written texts. While his contemporaries praised Hughes for his artful rendering of African American experience in *Not Without Laughter*, few critics recognized the novel as overtly political. Sterling Brown applauded the novel's sweeping "humanity" while George Schuyler praised the novel's realism, as, according to Schuyler, it accurately represented African American lives in the 1910s.¹ Few critics, however, identified Hughes's incorporation of music as a signal feature of the novel and the medium through which he presents protest in the novel. Since 1930, Hughes's use of jazz and blues in his first novel *Not Without Laughter* has received scant attention. This chapter argues that blues provides a vehicle for varying types of protest within the novel.

While current scholarship of Hughes's novel either minimizes or underestimates the importance of blues, I suggest that Hughes encodes his polemics through the blues in three ways: through characters who reflect the blues, through the representation of a blues-inflected tale, and through the depiction of blues performance.² In each of these instances, Hughes uses blues to comment on economic disenfranchisement, racial

¹ Tish Dace, ed. *Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate, University of Cambridge, 1997), 139-42.

² See John P. Shields, "'Never Cross the Divide': Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*," *African American Review* 28.4 (1994): 601-15, and H. Nigel Thomas "Patronage and the Writing of Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*: A Paradoxical Case," *CLA Journal* (1998): 48-70.

antagonism and violence, and black participation in U.S. military action abroad, three subjects that receive significant focus throughout his literary oeuvre.

This chapter explores the ways in which Langston Hughes draws upon the technical, stylistic, and philosophical dimensions of blues in order to demonstrate that protest, as a fundamental element of the blues, resonates throughout Hughes's first novel *Not Without Laughter*. I argue that since the novel's initial publication in 1930, Hughes's literary act of protest in this novel has remained largely undetected. By discussing the development of Hughes's perspective on the blues, this chapter offers a framework with which to detect protest in Hughes's use of the blues in this novel. Protest becomes evident in scenes that highlight blues dialogue between characters, and in performances that feature call-and-response as crucial to creating and sustaining community. In his commitment to representing African Diasporic history and life in the early twentieth century, Hughes constructs these scenes to indicate that these interactions constitute protest because they give voice to notions of community not commonly heard. Despite the intense editorial pressures to silence protest in his work, the blues-informed narration and characterization in *Not Without Laughter* emphasize Hughes's conscious determination to employ blues forms and blues ethos as techniques of protest.

Worldwide Blues: The Introduction of Not Without Laughter

And at last it was on the stands: *Not Without Laughter*. Distributed to San Francisco and Melbourne, Bombay and London, Tokio and Paris. Listen, Aunt Hager! Listen, Harriett! Listen, Annjee! Listen, Jimboy! Hey, Benbow! I wanted to make you as wonderful as you really are—but it takes a lot of skill in words.

– Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940)

The period before Langston Hughes began gravitating, both politically and artistically, toward the Far Left has been most commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance.³ The term “New Negro Movement” more closely approximates the period of wholesale change not only in the creative areas of literature, music, visual art, dance, theatre, but also in social, economic and political realms for African Americans. It was also a period of tremendous personal and artistic growth for Langston Hughes. Through consistent contact with a cadre of revered artisans and influential patrons, Hughes’s creative and social networks blossomed: he came to call Carl Van Vechten, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen friends. Constituting a cultural force along with other writers and artists, these figures became vital members of Hughes’s professional and personal networks in the United States.

Yet as his autobiography *The Big Sea* makes clear, Langston Hughes also continued his rise as a world-renowned artist, most specifically for his treatment of jazz and blues in poetry. With Hughes’s history of and proclivity for international travel, he, more than anyone among his entire cultural cohort, became an emblem of the transnational writer. His extensive travels to and experiences in Europe and Africa afforded Hughes a globally-informed sensibility that resonate throughout his literary oeuvre. His widespread popularity outside of the United States and establishment as an

³ Hughes completed his political and ideological shift by serving as President of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, a Communist-formed US organization, as Joseph McClaren states in *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 5.

international man of letters led publishers to print the accomplished poet's first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, in eight different languages.⁴

Having struggled for nearly three years composing the novel, Langston Hughes had reached a watershed moment in his literary career when *Not Without Laughter* was finally published in July 1930. The novel, which Hughes began writing as a student at Lincoln University, was recognized as a literary achievement that surpassed all other previous works of African American fiction. *Not Without Laughter* "was perhaps the most appealing and completely realized novel in black fiction to that date," receiving a "chorus of praise" following its release:

Blacks and knowledgeable whites were struck by Hughes's power to sound deep racial notes without being polemical; more than any novel of the twenties, *Not Without Laughter* captured ordinary black life "without bitterness or apology and yet with truth and deep feeling," as Arthur Spingarn wrote Hughes. Professor Larabee found it "an artistic and most gripping human document," one that made him feel "more than ever ashamed of my white race" and yet (in a typical reaction to Hughes) left him "without any resentment to the man who showed us up."⁵

Robert Larabee, a sociology professor at Lincoln University, helped Hughes to edit early versions of the novel. Arthur Spingarn, brother-in-law of one of Hughes's patrons Amy Spingarn, was then the newly elected Chairman of the National Association for the

⁴ Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-bibliography of Langston Hughes* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1972), 126-28.

⁵ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes—Volume 1: 1902-1921: I, Too, Sing America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 190.

Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP). Amy Spingarn sponsored Hughes by giving him the necessary funds to return to Lincoln for his junior year, and Hughes would later dedicate the novel to Amy and her husband Joel. Both Larabee and Spingarn were familiar with Langston Hughes both personally and professionally, and both reviews touched on Hughes's ability to capture the natural essence of the "ordinary Negro" in this novel.

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, which had a tenuous relationship with Hughes after the organ critically upbraided Hughes for the representations of African Americans in his two poetry collections *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, reversed fields to praise Hughes's novel. Literary contemporary George Schuyler extended an olive branch in his positive review of the book:

Bring out the laurel wreath and drape the brow of Langston
Hughes [...]. [T]o the ordinary Negro reader it arouses memories
of youth, of yesterday and today. I know the people in this novel
every one of them.⁶

The African American newspaper that championed the political struggles of Blacks and "f[ou]ght for the rights of the Negro race" regarded Hughes's novel as more of a mirror held to a presumed monolithic face of Black America rather than a work of art with a social conscience.

While *The Pittsburgh Courier* observed Hughes's literary capture of the true experiences of "the ordinary Negro," author V.F. Calverton – who in 1932 published *The*

⁶ Tish Dace, ed. *Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press Syndicate, 1997), 139.

Liberation of American Literature, a Marxist analysis of American literary history – echoes elements of the *Courier* review:

As a Negro [Hughes] has grown up with these realities as part of himself, as part of the very air he has breathed. Few blurs are there in these pages, and no fumbling projections, and no anxious searching for what is not. Here is this Negro, or at least one vital aspect of him, as he really is, without ornament, without pretense.⁷

In this book review printed in *The Nation* in August 1930, Calverton sees archetypes: “the Negro in his most picturesque form –the blues-loving Negro, the spiritual-singing Negro, the exuberant, the impassioned, the irresponsible Negro, the Negro of ancient folk-lore and romantic legend.”⁸ But Calverton does not acknowledge the novel as having any critique of oppressive American social or economic systems that compromise the livelihood of blacks. Instead, Calverton's list of archetypes comments on the perspective of African Americans engaged in leisurely activities and as stock characters in literature. Beyond his vapid remark on the “Negro of ancient folk-lore,” Marxian Calverton, surprisingly, misses one important character in Hughes’s novel specifically: the African American at work.

Sterling Brown, one of Langston Hughes’s contemporaries who often explored the intersections of jazz, blues, and poetry in his own work, provided a more penetrating analysis on the dimensions of African American humanity expressed in the novel. In a September 1930 review printed in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, Brown also

⁷ V.F. Calverton, rev. of *Not Without Laughter* by Langston Hughes, *The Nation*, August 6, 1930, rpt. In *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives of the Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 14.

⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

praised *Not Without Laughter* for its “simplicity.” Brown’s remark on the novel’s simplicity recognizes, however, more nuance of artistry than do the reactions and reviews of Larabee, Spingarn, Schuyler, and Calverton:

Its simplicity is the simplicity of great art; a wide observation, a long brooding over humanity, and a feeling for beauty in unexpected, out of the way places, must have gone into its makeup.⁹

Sterling Brown, who continued to revolutionize jazz and blues poetry in the 1930s, focused on Hughes’s ability to create characters that resonate with a universal spirit yet reflect culturally specific experiences. It is Hughes’s ability to represent the beauty of the blues – enduring life’s hardships with a philosophy of enduring perseverance – that Brown points to throughout his review.

The overwhelming critical response to *Not Without Laughter* left Hughes without much cause for celebration. In view of the criticism from Larabee, Calverton, Brown, and others, Hughes wrote to his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, noting his critics’ limited ability to interpret his latest literary endeavor:

I never read a letter in praise of the novel—what they call its simplicity and lack of propaganda—but that I think, “They do not know who helped me write it—Godmother[;]” and every criticism in the papers must inevitably bear comparison with the superior and flaming criticism that you wrote long ago when the book was only half-finished.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid, 16.

¹⁰ H. Nigel Thomas, “Patronage and the Writing of Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter*: A Paradoxical Case,” *CLA Journal*, 1998: 52.

In exchange for a \$150 per month stipend that he was receiving from Mason, known during the New Negro Movement as “Godmother” to a host of African American writers that received her patronage, Hughes also received Mason’s regular guidance and critique of his writing. As a stipulation of their agreement, Hughes kept their affiliation a secret – a stipulation Hughes honored long after the dissolution of their relationship, which occurred just following the novel’s publication.¹¹

Mrs. Mason had significant influence over *Not Without Laughter*’s structure and content, curtailing much of its political import. Whatever meaningful projects Hughes envisioned from the outset were, then, mediated by Mason’s strict insistence on “simplicity,” which was rooted in her beliefs surrounding primitivism and African American folk, and her constant admonitions against strains of “propaganda” that Hughes hoped to include in his first novel.¹² Although literary scholars and biographers offer limited discussion on Hughes’s ability or attempt to mitigate this censorship,¹³ Hughes’s

¹¹ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes—Volume 1: 1902-1921: I, Too, Sing America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 187. The denouement of their business and personal relationships coincided not only with the Great Depression and Mason’s growing interest in other New Negro Movement figures like Zora Neale Hurston, but also with the publication of *Not Without Laughter* and, most notably, Hughes’s satirical poem “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria.” A critique of the conspicuous consumption that fully illustrates the incongruities and injustices of classist, racist practice at the hotel, “Advertisement” was viewed as a thinly veiled attack against Mason and wealthy individuals of her ilk.

¹² Charlotte Osgood Mason’s attempt to have Hughes agree with her firm belief in primitivism and its discourses had limited effects. In my view, Rampersad and others overestimate Hughes’s personal and artistic investment in primitivism. *Not Without Laughter* was an attempt to disable the very primitivism that was implicit in Charlotte Osgood Mason’s mandate for Hughes to write the novel. Understanding the role that primitivism played in the marketplace, Hughes often countered in his depictions of African American life the widespread strains of atavism that permeated some Harlem Renaissance artistic production.

¹³See Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1983), Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes—Volume 1: 1902-1921: I, Too, Sing America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), John P. Shields, ““Never Cross the Divide”: Reconstructing Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter*,” *African American*

use of blues and jazz allowed him to circumnavigate these editorializing forces in order to speak to the diversity of African American experience.

Hughes sets the narrative proper in a period of tremendous social, political, and economic activity: during the years of World War I that saw rampant industrialization, rising capitalism, and massive African American migrations from the South. The novel illustrates African American music and performance in transformative flux, as Kansas City, Chicago, and other Northern cities functioned as the incubators of what later became known as “classic blues” and jazz. At the same time, the novel reveals the capacity of the blues to express manifold layers of meaning in environments that constantly threaten to silence direct protest against economic, social, and political oppression.

Hughes’s first novel was, like blues music itself, a mediated form that was, historically, subject to censoring of social and political content. There were genuine consequences to creating blues songs with overtly political lyrics. Musical creativity during this period was significantly circumscribed by an atmosphere of Jim Crow and segregation that constantly threatened African American existence. In the case of classic blues, record producers with a keen ear for what sounds would yield the highest profits often wrote and selected songs that privileged themes of romance, love, and emotional despondency, rather than songs with overtly political material. This pattern of silencing, in part, led some cultural scholars to believe that blues songs (and the texts they

Review 28, 4 (winter 1994): 601-15, and H. Nigel Thomas “Patronage and the Writing of Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter*: A Paradoxical Case,” *CLA Journal* (1998): 48-70. Each study examines Hughes’s relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason and how that relationship had direct and tangential effects on how he would write and edit *Not Without Laughter*. The argumentative arcs of the Shields and Thomas articles pivot on these external pressures that considerably shaped Hughes’s first work of fiction.

presented) possessed no calculable trace of protest. The published version of *Not Without Laughter* was subject to intensive editorial pressures, which subsequently drained the work of much of its political import. My arguments here, in conversation with other African American cultural scholarship, aim to dispel this belief and to illustrate the elements of protest that exist within the blues tradition. Although he was strongly discouraged from including explicit “propaganda” in his first novel, Hughes, much like his musical counterparts, still encoded strains of protest through his deployment of blues.

The Blues He’s Playing: Langston Hughes and Blues Models

To view blues as a central feature of *Not Without Laughter* and as the primary method by which Hughes establishes his platform of protest, I feel it is necessary to first provide an explanation of the ethnomusicological differences between the types of blues that appear in *Not Without Laughter*. The three primary types of blues that appear in the novel are country blues, city or urban blues, and vaudeville or classic blues: Jimboy Rodgers and Harriett Williams perform both country and urban blues in Kansas during the first half of the novel, and Harrietta Williams performs vaudeville or classic blues at the end of the novel. Within the novel, there is a seemingly chronological progression from country blues to city blues to vaudeville blues or classic blues, each having distinct musicological elements and historical meanings to Hughes. While I suggest a progression of these blues types, I do not propose a hierarchy among them, nor do I assert that these blues types developed in isolation from one another. Instead, each blues type occupies a specific position along the African American musical continuum, each with its own

distinct history of development. Each blues type figures prominently in *Not Without Laughter* and contributes to Hughes's overall strategies to reflect blues in his novel.

One important blues type that Hughes refers to in the novel as a "low down, country blues" is the Delta blues, arguably the most recognizable country blues type within the blues tradition. The Mississippi Delta region served as an agricultural anchor of the south, but more than cotton, rice, and sugar grew from its fertile soils. Its ethos draws from the African Americans that lived and worked in close proximity to farm areas. In towns such as Clarksdale, Memphis and St. Louis, Delta blues musicians formulated and formalized the percussive, melodic, and vocally dexterous form. In terms of instrumentation, the guitar dominates the Delta blues. The most prolific, influential, and iconic blues musicians were guitarists: the legendary Robert Johnson, Son House, and Charley Patton. To an unquantifiable degree, these figures, among others, shaped the Delta blues musicality by expanding the African American vernacular traditions of the field holler and the shout. The Delta blues is the principal type to which Hughes was exposed as a Kansas youth; however, given the diverse musical milieu of neighboring Kansas City it was not the only one.

Hughes viewed the Delta blues as the wellspring that provided poetic and technical inspiration for city or urban blues. In Chicago, Kansas City, Detroit, and Atlanta, city blues became representative of an emergent African American populace outside of the southern sites of "origin," extending the musical parameters of Delta blues with new instrumental and vocal innovations. The movement towards larger bands, the electrification of instruments, and the diversification of blues lyrics – marked specifically by migration activity – distinguished urban blues from its rural counterparts. As musical

expressivity encompassed new realities of African American city life, blues music's movement from the community into the popular marketplace also became more pronounced.

The roots of vaudeville or classic blues demonstrate influence from the rural and urban blues traditions. Classic blues artists, predominantly female singers, showcased what some would regard as more "sophisticated" blues that reflected the energy and urbanity of major cities as well as articulating the individual and communal struggles found in rural and urban blues. As all aspects of African American performance gained more widespread national recognition, primarily through the Theatre Owners' Booking Association circuit and the recording explosion of race records during the 1920s, vaudeville blues changed the dynamics between performer and audience. Elaborate costumes and other visual elements were integrated into performances. Concurrent with the rise of jazz music and its ascent into mainstream cultural discourse, vaudeville blues broadened urban blues with its movement toward larger bands while maintaining the primacy of the blues singer as individual performer. The demanding forces of commercialism insisted on a blues formula. As a result, blues songs became – to a degree – standardized and shortened commodities.

By titling the concluding chapter of *Not Without Laughter* "Princess of the Blues," Hughes not only looks towards the development of these vernacular forms, but also forecasts the eventual cultural ascendancy and commercial dominance of blues queens like Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Victoria Spivey as well as blues kings such as Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson.¹⁴ These artists achieved considerable success in

¹⁴ The Delta blues, however, would not enjoy widespread commercial success (i.e. high record sales) until decades after the classic blues enraptured the American listening public.

the early twentieth century; however, there were innumerable, lesser known musicians, like the characters Jimboy Rodgers and Harrietta Williams, that also provided their respective communities with the life-affirming powers of the blues before the recording industry boom of the 1920s.

Literary Lion at Lincoln: The Precedence of Protest

Hughes returned periodically to higher education towards the late 1920s to complete his undergraduate studies at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Already an accomplished author of the period's most seminal poetic productions, *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes for the Jew*, Hughes found both comfort and camaraderie at his new university after a failed attempt to pursue engineering studies at Columbia University at the urging of his father. At Lincoln, Hughes developed the dimension of his blues aesthetic that would incorporate strategies of protest. In order to more fully approximate Hughes's methods and meanings of protest, one must attend to the multivalent experiences that comprised Hughes's worldview at that time. I argue that Hughes's experiences at Lincoln University substantially influenced the ways in which he imagined community, social protest, and propaganda, ways that would be strongly reflected in *Not Without Laughter*.

At Lincoln University, Hughes was surrounded by many students who dedicated their lives to positive social change for African Americans after they graduated. In the introduction to *The Alumni Directory of Lincoln University* published in 1946, then-President of the General Alumni Association Tollie LeRoy Caution states that the purpose of the directory's publication "is to record the names, whereabouts, occupations, achievements, and position of the living sons of Lincoln. By means of this

directory, Directory Lincoln men can be drawn closer together in spirit through knowledge of each other. May it be a source of inspiration to its readers."¹⁵ Ordained a deacon in 1929 and a priest the following year, Caution, like numerous living sons of Lincoln, had continued his careers in education, religion, and social change, which had their foundations during his university years. In 1946, he had just completed his first year at the National Council of the Episcopal Church as "Secretary for Negro Work", which is his listed professional title. Of the 350 persons listed in the first 50 pages of the directory, over 40% are listed as having educational and religious professions; however, Langston Hughes is the only "Lion at Lincoln" listed among them with the title of "Author." When the Alumni Directory was published, Hughes served as Historian in the General Alumni Association. For Hughes, this university climate, constituted largely of aspiring or active race men, provided some models that would affect not only his personal outlook but his professional vision as well.

Although Hughes began to compose the initial outline of *Not Without Laughter* while attending Lincoln, it was one of Hughes's senior projects, a sociology report on the state of Lincoln, that became his signature and long-lasting textual contribution to the university. Under tremendous editorial scrutiny from Charlotte Osgood Mason, which included a 24-page letter that critiqued the first draft of the novel, Hughes turned to his academic work to develop his blueprint for protest. While enrolled, Hughes often heard student claims that having an all-white faculty was in the best interests of the all-black student body. According to Hughes, many students described white teachers as "inherently superior" to black teachers. In an effort to expose Lincoln's environment of racial bias and to show that such thinking ran counter to the fundamental educational and

¹⁵ *The Alumni Directory of Lincoln University*, 1946, 1.

social tenets of Lincoln, Hughes polled students on a variety of issues, from their affinity for Bible study to their views of African American faculty:

I wanted to prove that the students believing this were wrong, and that Lincoln was fostering—unwittingly, perhaps—an inferiority complex in the very men it wished to train as leaders of the Negro race. I wanted to show that the color line is not good on campus or off.

Of course I did not say so, but that was in the back of my head.¹⁶

The concluding line above intimates not only Hughes's growing awareness of and sensitivity to charges of propaganda, particularly in view of the backdrop of Mason's reproofing of polemical prose, but also his predetermined strategy of concealing protest. As he makes clear, his project was a subversive effort at uncovering the pervasive propaganda circulating on campus and lodging protest against racial bias.¹⁷ I suggest that Hughes executed this strategy of indirection as part of a larger strategy of protest in *Not Without Laughter*.

Framing Protest and the Blues

While blues and protest appear throughout Langston Hughes's first novel, the subject of protest in blues has been a contested terrain in African American cultural scholarship. Some scholars have concluded that a protest tradition in blues is incalculably small or does not exist. These scholars base their conclusions primarily on a supposed scarcity of blues songs that possess discernable lyrics of unconcealed protest. In

¹⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York & London: Knopf, 1940), 307.

¹⁷ After it was "leaked" to the local press, presumably by Hughes, controversy surrounding the sociology report increased substantially.

his explanation of blues poetics, for instance, Samuel Charters asserts that as a theme or subject, “protest is only a small thread in the blues.”¹⁸ In an effort to elucidate the importance of blues “poetic language,” Charters turns his argumentative focus to the blues as a unifying cultural mode in the U.S., one that at once recognizes the “separateness” of black and white social experience and seeks to ameliorate tensions through the acceptance of “difference.” For Charters, it is the “strength and vitality of its imagery and expression” that undergirds the emotive and poetic “force” of the blues.¹⁹ Through the poetry of the blues, Charters envisions a reinvigoration of American popular music and a reconciliation of social divisions between black and white cultures. Charters claims that the theme of protest, however, is nearly absent from the blues, and what Charters views as an expression or “attitude toward the separateness of Negro life in America” is non-existent.²⁰

Charters’s remarks on the protest dimension, or general lack thereof, in the blues echo Paul Oliver’s comments in his important scholarly treatise *Blues Fell This Morning*. Oliver also argues that the musical form is bereft of protest, overt or otherwise, specifically refuting the view of blues as “a form of expression against racial discrimination.”²¹ Quantifying the presence of protest in the blues tradition as negligible, Oliver’s engages less the metaphoric valences of blues and more the literal products. One of his arguments against protest in blues centers on his rather strict definition of the term

¹⁸ Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963) 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of Blues, 2nd Ed.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 269.

“political.” From the limited examples of what qualifies as political or protest blues, one can conclude that Oliver’s definition of protest focuses specifically on the machinery of American government and African American responses to it.

The concept of protest during the first two decades of the 20th century takes on a different tenor when one considers that African Americans were targets of virulent forms of racism and oppression. Although Oliver recognizes the “potentially dangerous” ramifications that overt protest would have on a blues practitioner in those types of social environments, which spawned “countless manifestations of ignorance, brutality, race hatred, and violence,” he does not discuss the capacity of blues to afford the most accessible means of covert protest.²²

The underestimation, misreading, and dismissal of the protest dimension of blues, as expressed by Charters, Oliver, and others have generated numerous responses in subsequent decades. As Steven C. Tracy states, “[t]his creative expression is itself a revolt against authority and the conventional and makes the black blues singer automatically a representative of protest and revolt by virtue of existing and performing.”²³ Tracy further suggests that protest in blues has been willfully suppressed, wholly misinterpreted, or consciously ignored by some scholars. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis argues that blues songs by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith possess a “protest consciousness” that “is an integral part of the blues.”²⁴ Forwarding blues as a powerful, popular, and complex form of black feminist discourse, Davis

²² Ibid., 270.

²³ Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), 103.

²⁴ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 82.

suggests that Rainey and Smith used blues to counteract the oppressive, intersecting forces of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the early 20th century. For these and other blues queens during the classic blues or vaudeville blues era, the blues became a mode of contestation and resistance, particularly through the poetics of its lyrics and the valences of its public performance. As Davis argues, this blues served as a vehicle for the assertion of black female subjectivity that challenged bourgeois ideologies of the African American middle-class as well as the prevailing stereotypes circulating in American culture writ large.

While the artistic and personal lives of blues women influenced Hughes's novel, his fascination with the developing cultural forms of jazz and blues in general undergirds *Not Without Laughter* in significant ways. Hughes does not represent the blues as a static folk archive with untapped potential to be elevated to "true" or "high" art. Nor does he suggest a musicological evolutionary narrative from a simplified rural blues to sophisticated urban jazz. Hughes believed the musical forms generally associated with poor and working class African Americans during the 1910s and 1920s should be utilized to create more representational characters in African American letters.

Langston Hughes's affiliations with the Communist Party influenced this engagement with jazz and blues as vernacular forms to create literature that better reflected African American life. The Party's Black Belt Nation thesis – that African Americans in the American South constituted a self-determining nation with its own culture – encouraged Hughes's decision to use vernacular forms in his literary production. Hughes used these vernacular forms to express opposition to the rampant racial and economic oppression that faced many in the American South. Although

Hughes's affiliation with the Party was more significant and pronounced in his literary production after *Not Without Laughter* was published, his writings before 1930 demonstrate the Party's emphasis on the use of African American vernacular forms. Hughes's political and artistic alignment with the Communist Party was complete in 1931, when the Communist Party used the Scottsboro Incident to galvanize the Southern white and black proletariat against overt racism and oppression.

"Also why": Narrative Beginnings

Despite the occasional congruence between his real life family and the one he chose to represent in his first full-length prose work, Langston Hughes initially conceived of and eventually wrote *Not Without Laughter* not as a strict autobiography but as a work of fiction that would still reflect his experiences specifically and African American experience broadly. For many years, Hughes had thought to "write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West [sic], about people like those I had known in Kansas."²⁵ Although Hughes used his own childhood to give flesh and spirit to the blues bildungsroman's protagonist James "Sandy" Rodgers, nearly all of the remaining characters were fictional characters developed during his brief summer writing residence at Lincoln University in 1927. In his first autobiography, Hughes describes his creative method:

Then suddenly I began with the storm, and my characters seemed to live in the room where I worked. Their chairs and tables were there, too, and the lamp.

Then I wrote out short histories for all my characters as they came to life—how

²⁵ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 303.

old they were, where born [sic], things that had happened to them, and what might happen to them. Also why.²⁶

This passage highlights the importance of history, be it real or imagined, to Hughes's novel. The literary storm mirrors the real-life meteorological event of April 12, 1911 that blew away his grandmother Mary Langston's fence in Lawrence, Kansas. Hughes's concluding qualification of "also why" emphasizes the reasons for and the consequences of those histories as crucial elements of his novel. In short, it was not merely enough for Hughes to construct a convincing plot to fulfill some criterion of literary convention; he was otherwise compelled to create characters that had similar heritages and experiences as the people he knew throughout his life.²⁷

One way to organize the short histories of his characters was to unify them through jazz and blues, the musical forms that expressed the experiences of what Hughes saw as an African American community. Originally received as a lesser creative achievement than his poetry collections *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, two works that represent Hughes' early engagements with jazz and blues, *Not Without Laughter* represents a novelistic expansion and transformation of these musical forms. Though the novel remains an understudied text, it presents fertile ground for examinations of Hughes's early blues aesthetics. In a literary context, Hughes develops the blues into a politically charged discourse that reflects Black experience throughout the United States.

²⁶ Ibid., 304.

²⁷ As most early reviews make clear, this leaning towards authentic representations of common African American life remained a touchstone of Hughes's writing.

Not Without Laughter depicts the life of the Williams-Rodgers family during the second decade of the twentieth century. Hager Williams is a well-respected washer woman and domestic in the small town of Stanton, Kansas. Providing various services to many of the town's white families, Aunt Hager, a faithful Baptist, serves as the family matriarch and religious center. Anjelica Rodgers, Hager's married daughter and mother of James "Sandy" Rodgers, works as a domestic for a local wealthy white family. Her husband Jimboy Rodgers is a blues man and itinerant southern migrant worker. Harriet Williams, Hager's teenage daughter, attends high school and works at an exclusive country club in the small Kansas community. Throughout the novel, Harriet is often at odds with Aunt Hager's strict Baptist household and the town's oppressive racial, and often racist, climate. Hager's eldest daughter Tempy, also married, disconnects herself from the family through her middle-class aspirations and black bourgeois sensibilities. Sandy Rodgers, the protagonist of this blues bildungsroman, is the young son of these seldom-employed blues migrants Jimboy Rodgers and Annjee Rodgers. The novel revolves, in large part, around Sandy and his development from well-mannered pre-pubescent to precocious young man. There is not, however, a plot in the novel, a literary "failing" that many of Hughes's critics pointed out after its initial publication.²⁸

Not Without Laughter also successfully illustrates the formation of the distinct American cultural apparatuses that helped to circulate blues and jazz in the early twentieth century. Hughes also indicates that these two musical forms, represented in their respective states, travel extensively both within and without the American cultural matrix. Yet it is through two characters, Harriett(a) Williams and Jimboy Rodgers, that

²⁸ An August 1930 review in the *New York Times* stated rather plainly that the novel "really has no story at all." "*Not Without Laughter*" and *Other Recent Fiction*. *The New York Times on the Web*. 27 April 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/specials/hughes-notwithout.html>

such circulation is demonstrated and sustained. The novel tracks the growth of an emerging blues singer, Harriett(a) Williams, and is one of the first African American novels to create such a figure, a point scholar Cheryl Wall argues convincingly.²⁹ The presence, disappearance, and reemergence of Harriett as Harrietta, blues vaudevillian and Wall's "real hero of the novel" are important.³⁰ I maintain, however, that the presence and disappearance of Jimboy Rodgers, itinerant blues musician and unsung "hero" of the novel, are equally important. In other words, it is critical that any discussion of blues in *Not Without Laughter* conspicuously attend to the blues culture in the period that Hughes deliberately narrativizes—a period that preceded the rise of the 1920s blues queens.

While Walls' Black feminist reading of *Not Without Laughter* traces the genealogy of the female blues singer in the African American literary tradition, the interpretation overlooks the overarching historical particularities surrounding the rise of blues singers as entertainers before Mamie Smith's monumental recording of Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues" in 1920. I suggest that Hughes selects this specific historical period to illustrate blues as an active cultural matrix; he intentionally chooses this pre-recording phase of blues by African Americans to highlight the importance of blues to community building and individual preservation during a period of rising industry, increasing mechanization, surging urban growth, dramatic economic change, escalating sociopolitical unrest, and global war. Before the world marketplace seized, commoditized, industrialized, and globalized African American music, the blues thrived and preserved African American communities even as these cultural expressions were

²⁹ Cheryl A. Wall. "Whose Sweet Angel Child? Blues Women, Langston Hughes, and Writing During the Harlem Renaissance." *Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence*. Ed. C. James Trotman. (New York: Garland, 1995), 42.

³⁰ Tracey, 121.

curtailed by racial violence, economic oppression, and Jim Crow segregation. Working against these curtailing forces, *Not Without Laughter*, with blues as its central organizing element, provides necessary commentary on America, at home and abroad.

Hop that train and ride: Blues and Migration

Mobility is a crucial element of the blues idiom. Movement is part of blues's dynamism, and often refers to not only spatial movement, but figurative or ideological movement as well. In this sense, the blues resonances throughout *Not Without Laughter* constitute what Houston A. Baker regards as a "web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit"³¹. In short, the blues is a music of meaningful activity. The "productive transit" that Baker suggests points to the pervasiveness of blues, the propensity of its movement, and its potential to provoke change. The novel speaks to both presence and absence of African Americans in major urban centers, and simultaneously calls attention to the international circulation of blues and jazz before recorded blues by African American artists flooded the marketplace in the 1920s. As Hughes demonstrates through the use of blues, *Not Without Laughter* is a novel that resonates with this character of mobility; it is a novel preoccupied with movement and change.

The novel begins in Stanton, Kansas—with a major meteorological storm, which is in itself a symbol that both forecasts and activates a climate of movement—and ends with Annjee, Sandy, and Harriett reunited in Chicago, Illinois fondly remembering their Kansas home life. Harriett travels to numerous Midwest cities while aspiring to become

³¹ Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

a vaudeville star. Jimboy, a living repository of any number of black expressive forms, collects blues songs from “Natchez, Shreveport, Dallas” and other Southern and Midwest towns.³² After enlisting in the Army, Jimboy is sent “to the front” to fight in France during World War I. *Not Without Laughter*, then, reflects numerous national and international “Great Migrations.”

In this sense, it is not difficult to suggest that *Not Without Laughter* satisfies Farah Jasmine Griffin’s theoretical criteria for the migration narrative. Griffin asserts:

[M]igration narratives portray the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area.

Within the migration narrative the protagonist or central figure who most influences the protagonist is a migrant. The representation of the migration experience depends on the genre and form of the narrative as well as the historical and political moment of production.³³

Not only do the characters in the novel undertake a northward pattern of migration, but the blues does as well. Hughes employs the traditional geographical trajectory from the rural, agrarian South to the urban, industrial North that typifies many migration novels. He succeeds, however, in gesturing towards the more nuanced migrations of African Americans both within southern regions and overseas. Hundreds of thousands moved from Southern locales to Northern urban settings during the Great Migration, with many of them looking to

³² Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 47.

³³ Farah Jasmine Griffin, 'Who Set You Flowin?': The African-American Migration Narrative (New York: Oxford. UP, 1995), 3.

escape the harsh economic and social realities that Hughes's blues novel underscores. Conservative estimates show that "at the height of wartime migration between 1916 and 1919, a half a million Black southerners resettled in the North, and more than a million followed during the next decade."³⁴

The characters that exemplify this overarching thematic of movement are those that Hughes specifically relates to, or more accurately those that embody, blues and jazz: the members of Benbow's Famous Kansas City Band, Harriett, and Jimboy. The men who comprised Rattle Benbow's band were representatives of various southern towns extending from Georgia to Texas. While Harriett travels extensively after becoming an emerging vaudeville star, her initial movement away from home to tour with a carnival establishes the pattern. Hughes, however, emphasizes Jimboy as an emblem of locomotion, connecting him both literally and figuratively to the blues sign of movement: the train. Among the many types of employment Jimboy has throughout the novel, he works on "laying ties" for the railroad. By providing the foundation of rail lines, Jimboy facilitates the construction of the system of movement that delivered scores of African Americans to the Midwest and North during the Great Migration.³⁵ At the same time, Hughes links Jimboy to movement through blues songs. In the chapter "Guitar," Jimboy's blues lyrics point to movement or departures, from getting "a mule to ride" to "goin' North":

³⁴ Lawrence Rodgers, *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 11.

³⁵ Hughes's mention of Union Pacific, a railroad system also active in World War I efforts, is worth noting here.

On and on the song complained, man verses and women verses, to the evening air in Stanton that Jimboy had heard in the pine woods of Arkansas from the lumber-camp workers; in other stanzas that were desperate and dirty like the weary roads where they were sung; and in still others that the singer created spontaneously in his own mouth then and there[.]³⁶

As blues community members are linked through a shared past in specific environments, Hughes provides the ancestral voice that attests to their experiences in the South, where they faced economic hardship, legalized discrimination, and social terror. The undernarrativized Sister Johnson, who stands as the secular, vernacular counterpoint to Aunt Hager, represents the historian or griot of the novel's Kansas community of migrants. Sister Johnson's tale of Crowville is a familiar one not simply because it recounts elements of a shared history but also because she has told the story before to the blues community members. What is interesting here is that all of the community members request, in their own subtle ways, to hear the story again even though they "all heard it at least a dozen times."³⁷ This framework establishes the call-and-response dynamic central to blues expression. When Sister Johnson inquires whether those assembled have heard the story before, Hughes provides different responses that reflect each character's standing in the novel. While Harriet is presented as "assur[ing]" her to continue, Jimboy is presented as "lying" to Sister Johnson, mainly because he was

³⁶ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

“anxious to keep her going.” Overall, her audience recognizes the importance of their elder’s story and responds to her initial call.³⁸

Sister Johnson communicates the continuation of their legacy; the blues vernacular tale is a cornerstone of the community’s historical foundation. Vernacular stories of this type possess an element of performance on the part of both the story teller and the audience members. While there is a performance aspect to Sister Johnson’s yarn, the implications of retelling the story far exceed mere entertainment. Mostly all members are assembled during Sister Johnson’s tale, including Sandy and Willie-Mae, two children that are not sent away but are present to hear the impending tragedy of this blues tale. Hughes, however, leaves Annjee, who is departing for The Royal African Knights and Ladies of King Solomon Scepter drill for the September Emancipation Celebration, on the corner of the street.³⁹ Annjee’s physical separation from the assembled blues group is both significant and ironic: she is eager to represent Sweden in the “Drill of All Nations” yet is unwilling to participate in this important blues moment. She proffers no request for Sister Johnson to repeat her tale and remains at a distance from her family and friends.⁴⁰

³⁸ Hughes provides no other character in the novel with a full two pages of uninterrupted vernacular narrative to share a story with the community. Aunt Hager provides a lengthier narrative later in the novel; however, Sandy is the sole member of her audience. The blues community is otherwise fractured by this point in the narrative: Harriet has left home and resides in a house of ill repute, and Annjee ventures northward in pursuit of Jimboy. Sister Johnson’s blues tale, then, stands in stark contrast to Aunt Hager’s gospel-tinged narrative.

³⁹ *Not Without Laughter*, 70.

⁴⁰ In this respect, Annjee serves as a literary precursor to Bea Ella Thornhill, who is also known as “Red Ella”, in Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*. Bea Ella is also unable to align herself with the town’s blues community and blues philosophy, which results in tragic circumstances. While Annjee is not necessarily “saved” by the blues, she is able to successfully engage the blues and avoid tragedy by the novel’s conclusion.

After Sister Johnson begins with “well, it were like dis” to set up the reader’s expectation for a vernacular Southern tale told in “dialect,” Hughes’s narrator interrupts to provide the “preliminary details” of her personal history. This personal history includes discussions about her own family and her role as caregiver to not only her own children, but to “her white charges” as well. This narrative strategy yields two effects. One, Sister Johnson is not presented as telling a story simply about herself, but about a group experience. By not focusing on Sister Johnson’s immediately available personal blues, Hughes allows the reader to enter easily into her vernacular tale about the community’s blues history.

From the tone and length of Sister Johnson’s story, Hughes makes apparent its importance to the novel. While Mason took exception to the inclusion of this blues propaganda – propaganda that speaks out against the legacies of Jim Crow, lynching, and white mob violence – Hughes remained pointedly resistant to modifications based on Mason’s suggestions. In 1930, *New Masses* recognized the presence of this protest element, reprinting part of the novel’s scene as “Sister Johnson’s Story” from the chapter “White Folks.”⁴¹ Although the novel came to symbolize the first great success at capturing the everyday lives of both Southern and newly migrated African American folk, it would not be widely embraced by leftists who sought to coalesce a Black proletariat bloc. Nonetheless, what is interesting about the reprinting in *New Masses* is that it is not Sister Johnson’s story in a literal sense. Rather, it is the representation of blues experience for an entire community, a vernacular tale that speaks to the tragedy of Jim Crow segregation and white supremacist attitudes towards black economic and

⁴¹ Langston Hughes Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

cultural advancement. No lynching of an actual character takes place within Sister Johnson's episode; however, lynching is portrayed as a persistent challenge and threat to African American existence.

The illustrations that accompany the piece printed in *New Masses* visually reinforce lynching as a major point of emphasis even though Sister Johnson does not narrate an actual lynching. The *New Masses* illustrations present the following visual accompaniment to "Sister Johnson's Story": an African American worker tilling the fields with a mule; an African American hanging from a bare tree limb with a nose around his neck and his dark arms clearly bound behind his back; a sexually indeterminate African American bent over, hat covering the eyes, positioned in the foreground of a cotton field while toiling away in the hot sun with rays like needles shooting out of it, with other workers in the background doing the same. In each image, we do not see the eyes of the figure, as each figure is bent over or has the head lowered.

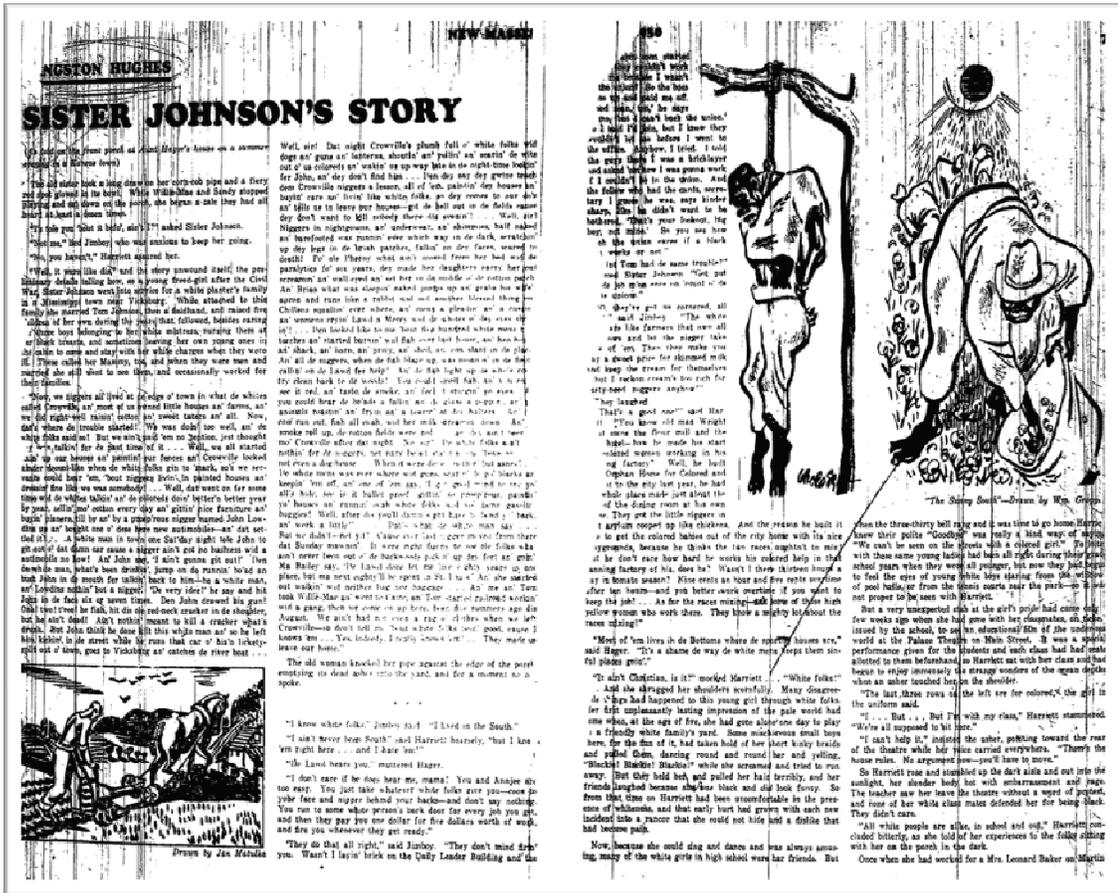


Figure 1. Sister Johnson's Story from *New Masses*. Langston Hughes Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library

The effect of these images, one can reasonably suggest, is to distort or elide the divisions between the older history of enslavement and the more current but similarly pernicious system of Southern sharecropping. These images are at odds with Sister Johnson's story, as she provides a sense of both individual personhood and improved conditions in the community, specifically renovated homes and other signs of increased financial standing. This overall sense of community empowerment and progress is lost in the *New Masses*

illustrations, as each visual depiction isolates black figures to underscore the hardships of a chronologically indeterminate Southern life.

In other words, *New Masses* strategically presents those visual representations of African American existence that most clearly evoke an oppressed proletariat population: picking cotton in the hot sun, tilling the fields with a mule, and a lynched body. These images are at odds with the narrative details of Sister Johnson's vernacular tale, which is taken completely out of its context in the novel. Sister Johnson's narrative in the novel does much more than depict a group of faceless people in a field picking cotton or walking behind a mule that the *New Masses* illustrations present. Instead, her story portrays African Americans investing in themselves, their homes, and their communities to provide a greater standard of living. The chapter in the novel that contains Sister Johnson's story highlights the overall mistreatment of African Americans by whites across regions, which caused Mason much discomfort with this and other forms of "left wing didacticism."⁴² The Crowville story highlights the organized white resistance to economic parity with African Americans, followed by the violent divestment of property and liberty by the town's "white folks wid dogs an' guns an' lanterns, shoutin' an' yellin'."⁴³ Sister Johnson's story is a blues tale that expresses the synchronized resistance against the prevailing hegemonic structures that sought to curtail African American economic prosperity and community development.

What brings Sister Johnson's tale further into alignment with blues protest are the responses that immediately follow it. The two characters associated with blues and jazz,

⁴² Shields, 611.

⁴³ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 84.

Jimboy and Harriett, extend the parameters of Sister Johnson's story and provide extended commentary on the persistence of Jim Crow segregation and its effects on economic prosperity. Both Harriett and Jimboy cite "white folks" as the cause of employment discrimination. After Harriett briefly discusses wage inequality and the seemingly capricious nature of layoffs, Jimboy concurs, offering a short narrative of his workplace struggles with unions. Sister Johnson agrees, affirming the continuance of oppressive forces acting against this blues community.

Not Without Laughter, then, was decidedly subversive, as it attempted to speak back to the tragedy of southern lynching and the effects it had not simply on individual black bodies but on entire black communities. In *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, Adam Gussow effectively argues for a consideration of lynching and the southern blues tradition beyond the prima facie examination afforded by other blues scholars. Not only was lynching a taboo subject in blues music, it was otherwise a muted discourse in everyday life. It is worthwhile to quote Gussow at length:

Lynching, I propose, casts such a broad shadow across the blues lyric tradition because it was one of the prime social catalysts – even, debatably, the prime social catalyst – for the emergence of blues song out of a welter of pre-blues black musics. It was not merely a covert theme of blues songs, in other words, but the ontological ground out of which blues expression arose: an overhanging threat of nonbeing, at once highly personal and utterly phantasmic, in the face of which black southerners articulated a

restless, grasping, sometimes surreal form of lyric first-person address.⁴⁴

It is what Hughes is able to accomplish discursively through aural aesthetics – that is, the sounding of blues against such a system of silencing – that is of prime importance to the protest dimension of *Not Without Laughter*. The blues dynamic within Sister Johnson’s tale expresses the history of the novel’s main characters and reflects Hughes’s engagement with segregation and lynching in the South as primary forces of disruption within African American communities. In the next section, I examine how Hughes configures blues to protest the significant and singular disruption of World War I.

Bugle Call to Arms – Blues and the Aurality of War

Throughout Hughes’s oeuvre, as reflected by the historical period in which he lived, lynching and the war draft were two major causes of black male absence during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The blues created by this absence permeates not only Hughes’s works, but the many artistic products of the early twentieth century as well. During the 1940s, Hughes vociferously argued against America’s hypocrisy: calling for patriots to secure democracy abroad while denying basic freedoms to African Americans at home. Indeed, this “terrible contradiction,” in part, led to the evolution of Hughes’s signature literary character, Jesse B. Simple.⁴⁵ Hughes sought to expose the

⁴⁴ Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 23.

⁴⁵ See Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, *Not So Simple: The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 23-25. Sullivan Harper clarifies Hughes’s positions on World War II and his role within the African American press.

false hopes of black participation that existed after World War I, false hopes which were amplified and symbolized a twice betrayal during the Second World War.

It is no surprise, then, that Hughes sought to explore the theme of the black soldier and Black military participation during World War I in *Not Without Laughter*. Just after the start of the war, these highly controversial issues divided many in the nation, including members of African American communities. The propaganda circulating on Black military participation in and general support for United States armed conflict with Germany was both substantive and polarizing. African American newspapers, whose influence not only helped to shape popular opinion among Blacks but also spurred their migrations during this period, often editorialized on the federal government's blatant duplicity that denied African Americans the very democratic freedoms at home that they were asked to safeguard abroad.⁴⁶ In a controversial *Crisis* editorial, W.E.B. Du Bois entreated African Americans to suspend their pursuits of equitable treatment as enfranchised citizens and supplant it with demonstrations of unequivocal national allegiance:

That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations

⁴⁶ William G. Jordan presents compelling arguments in “‘The Damnable Dilemma’: African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No.4: 1562-83 and *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly, with our eyes lifted to the hills.⁴⁷

This temporary abandonment of the “double V” campaign was deemed necessary to coalesce disparate voices around the country and to propel African Americans toward wartime service. Yet, as Hughes would come to realize, the “hills” would promise precious little: soldiers, trained in segregated camps and fighting in Jim Crow platoons, would return to the United States in 1919 to some of the worst race violence the nation had ever faced.

While Hughes is the first author to produce a prominent female blues figure in the African American novel, he is also one of the first to forecast, through the representation of the African American soldier, the intercontinental manifestations of blues and jazz. Hughes’ conception of an aesthetic where blues and jazz converge more closely approximates Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic configuration than Houston Baker’s blues matrix. If, as Albert Murray suggests, blues texts incorporate the onomatopoeics of railroad trains, then Hughes’s “blues as matrix” also rests upon images of moving ships and the big sea.

In a letter to Carl Van Vechten, Hughes explains the importance of vernacular learning while traveling abroad. Hughes’s encounters with George, a Kentucky boy who sang any number of blues songs during the voyage overseas, exposed him to the richness of the blues idiom and its migratory character.⁴⁸ Although Houston Baker asserts the blues is a cultural matrix “always in productive transit,” the theoretical underpinnings of his paradigm are grounded, literally, in U.S. geography. Instead, I suggest that applying

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Close Ranks,” *Crisis* 16 (July 1918) ,111.

⁴⁸ Wall, “Whose Sweet,” 40.

Paul Gilroy's configuration of the Black Atlantic proves useful in two ways: one, it reflects the fluidity of the blues – its structure and content exhibit any number of variations and formulations; and two, it reflects the dynamic, international mobility of blues – its sites of creation and circulation are not necessarily limited to the American cultural or physical landscape.⁴⁹

In the *Black Atlantic*, Gilroy states, “narratives of love and loss [in black popular culture] systematically transcode other forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror.”⁵⁰ Love and loss served as primary thematic in an inestimable number of blues songs written and performed by African Americans throughout the 1910s and 1920s. In *Seems Like Murder Here*, Adam Gussow suggests that Gilroy's “transcoding” speaks of and to a “larger history of white violence against hangable, stompable, shootable, bombable, disposable black bodies, a history that blues song alone has the power to mourn.”⁵¹ This section demonstrates how Hughes employs blues in *Not Without Laughter* to “mourn” the African American males lost to lynching and to a “white folks’ s war for democracy [that] ain’t so hot nohow!”⁵²

The incongruous rift between American foreign policy and domestic practice further shaped Hughes’s views in the years following the First World War. It was

⁴⁹ I recognize the numerous limitations of Gilroy’s articulation of Black Atlantic connectedness; however, it is Gilroy’s arguments regarding the fluidity of African Diasporic expression, particularly those arguments in which music figures prominently, that are paramount here.

⁵⁰ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) 201.

⁵¹ Gussow, 58.

⁵² Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 300.

Hughes's intent to represent that inherent hypocrisy in his first novel. Charlotte Osgood Mason, then, would have lodged considerable objections to any overt and sustained representations of certain political perspectives on African American participation in global conflict. While I suggest later that Hughes deamplifies these perspectives in his novel through use of the blues to avoid Mason's objections, his dramatic poem "The Colored Soldier," similar to his senior sociology report at Lincoln University, amplifies the sounds of his protest.

Printed in a poetry collection entitled *The Negro Mother* just months after *Not Without Laughter* was published, "The Colored Soldier" demonstrates a seemingly marked shift in poetic and political tone for Hughes. At the same time, it illustrates Hughes developing aural aesthetic, attempting to link music and text to create manifold layers of meaning. With stage directions written in the left margin parallel to establish the poem's "mood," Hughes indicates, "[m]artial music on a piano, or by an orchestra, may accompany the recitation---echoing softly, 'Over There,' 'There's a Rose That Grows in No-Man's Land,' 'Joan of Arc,' and various other war-time melodies."⁵³ A military veteran has a dream of his deceased "brother," a soldier who died fighting in France during World War I. Upon being called to duty, both soldiers laid down the swords with which they battled against racial injustices stateside in the interest of hurriedly picking up arms to battle threats to "Democracy" abroad. After the assurances proffered by Du Bois's "Close Ranks," other newspaper and magazine editorials, and government entities, the brothers enlisted:

⁵³ Hughes, "The Colored Soldier." Of these songs, Hughes often points to what may be considered as the signature martial song of the period, "Over There."

We were sent to training camp, then overseas---
And me and my brother were happy as you please
Thinking we were fighting for Democracy's true reign
And that our dark blood would wipe away the stain
Of prejudice, and hate, and the false color line---
And give us the rights that are yours and mine.
They told us America would know no black or white:
So we marched to the front, happy to fight.⁵⁴

Hughes's stage direction, or mood here, is hopefully optimistic: with "head up, shoulders back and eyes shining," the actions of those with "dark blood" would help to create a new America. In the vision, the dead brother, a ghost that floated "[o]ut of his grave from over the sea," reminds the living brother of the great sacrifices made to secure fair access to gainful employment, unionizing rights, increased educational opportunities, improved social relations, and an end to de jure and de facto segregation.

Hughes continues the mood of optimism in the next stanza, as the deceased soldier "speaks with his face full of light and faith" about the changed America that his government promised.⁵⁵ In earnest, he speaks of the rights to which the living "brown" brother is entitled, presumably, as a result of their fulfilled military responsibilities. The mood of the poem, however, quickly changes as the living brother reveals that the "dark misery" continues and that what was done "Over There" had absolutely no impact on life in America:

It's a lie! It's a lie! Every word they said.

⁵⁴ Ibid., l 6-12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., l 13-18

And it's better a thousand times you're in France dead.

For here in the South there's no votes and no right.⁵⁶

Recognizing that African Americans are as disenfranchised as they were before the war started, the living brother switches from somber to “fierce and angry,” as indicated by the stage directions and the repeated, exclamatory phrase “It’s a lie!”

As the poem concludes, the living brother awakens, saddened, to the reality of so many “gone:” he recalls the graves of his comrades buried beneath white crosses in France, those who lost their lives in pursuit of a Democracy that would continue to treat African Americans as a devalued segment of its citizenry. For the living soldier, it is better to be dead and buried in France than to face the “shame” of betrayal as a military veteran in the United States. The last three phrases of the poem, all of which end with exclamation points, announce that Hughes’s “propaganda” on war reached a full throated pitch in “The Colored Soldier” as opposed to the muted, submerged propaganda in his first novel.

I suggest, then, that the themes Hughes explores in “The Colored Soldier” are echoes of themes first introduced in the paradigmatic *Not Without Laughter*. Having split, for all intents and purposes, from his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason by the time *The Negro Mother* was published in 1931, Hughes was able to present, at full volume and seemingly unfettered by certain editorial filters, the protest that resounded just beneath the surface of *Not Without Laughter*. In fact, one specific excised portion of the novel that Charlotte Osgood Mason believed read too much like propaganda deals specifically with African American involvement in war:

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1 31-3.

Nobody seemed to know how many colored people there were, since they didn't matter anyway and weren't really counted until the war came and captured them in the draft.⁵⁷

This “capturing” of African American males bears tremendous significance in this context and is not without its rather obvious historical resonances. More to the point, the narrative voice, which for Mason resembled authorial political discourse rather than novelistic artistry, discusses realities that disproportionately affected black males since they were more likely to be lynched and the only ones to be officially drafted into combat service abroad.

Hughes draws on the transcoding powers of the blues to hide the “propaganda” that his benefactor, Charlotte Osgood Mason, sought to suppress. John P. Shields reveals the strong editorial influence that Charlotte Osgood Mason, the popular rich white patron who funded several Negro (Harlem) Renaissance authors, had on Hughes' text. In a comparative examination of *Not Without Laughter* and extant copies of Laughter's manuscripts, Shields asserts that Mason insisted that Hughes avoid and remove overt instances of “propaganda.”⁵⁸ Given the “overwhelming abundance of evidence of serious censorship”⁵⁹ by his “Fairy Godmother,” I suggest that Hughes imbues the text, through blues, with a political consciousness that thwarts her attempts.

The novel's final chapter, “Princess of the Blues,” contains a blues performance dynamic that reveals Hughes's submerged political consciousness. This concluding

⁵⁷ Thomas, 66.

⁵⁸ Shields, 605, 611.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 612.

chapter features rising vaudeville and blues star Harrietta Williams's appearance at the Monogram Theatre in Chicago. Her performance exhibits several typical elements and dynamics of a blues performance. The chanteuse's incantatory effect, not entirely divergent from that produced by gospel and spiritual singers, causes the audience to "sway" en masse. The scene's vibrancy and vitality hinges on the element of call and response; ultimately, both Harriett's call and the audience's response reveal the novel's "propaganda."

The call and response dimension of this blues performance is predicated on shared experience and the "communal" knowledge of the "typical Black Belt audience" in attendance.⁶⁰ Already circulating within this cultural milieu, as the presence of the *Chicago Defender* in the novel indicates, are discussions regarding violence against Southern and Northern blacks. One headline "in big red letters" reads "Negro Boy Lynched. There was also an account of a race riot in a Northern industrial city."⁶¹ The *Chicago Defender*, along with the W.E.B Dubois-headed publication *Crisis* that the novel also references, commonly reported the recurring incidents of lynching during this period.⁶² In *Paris Noir*, Tyler Stovall states, "[t]he number of blacks lynched in [1917] rose to seventy. The increase in racist violence was especially noteworthy in the North, often sparked by white workers resentful of the ever increasing black population."⁶³ The

⁶⁰ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 295.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶² Charles Simmons regards this strategy as sensationalism put into service to attract readers and sell African American newspapers. See *The African American Press* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1998) 25-43.

⁶³ Tyler Stovall. *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) 4.

novel makes few explicit references to lynching; however, Sister Johnson's "Crowville" tale suggests that the terrors of the white mob violence and spectacle lynching are ever-present haunts. The audience, then, is quite familiar with the causes of black male absence. The resonances of meaning of Harrietta's song are accessed through a shared understanding founded in blues experience.

The discussion of black male absence due to the military "imperatives" of international conflict takes center stage in this blues performance. This absence remains textually undetectable in the novel's printed blues lyrics, but this absence is revealed through Hughes's construction of this moment of blues performance. When the audience "recalls," not only the immediately available meaning of Harrietta's blues but also the entrenched meaning concealed by song, they also "re-member" the many black men already fighting and dying "Over There." During her performance, Harrietta sings the following:

Red sun, red sun, why don't you rise today?

Red sun, O sun! Why don't you rise today?

Ma heart is breakin – ma baby's gone away

[...]

Little birds, little birds, ain't you gonna sing this morn

Says, little chirpin' birds, ain't you gonna sing this morn?

I cannot sleep—ma lovin' man is gone.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 298. Hughes's blues was later set to music by Albert Hague and recorded under the title "Red Sun Blues" in 1957. For Hughes's complete original lyrics, see *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Arnold Rampersad et al, eds.* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004) 656.

While Harrietta's song superficially discusses a troubled romance, its subtext suggests a communal concern with the black male absence in general. Hughes' use of the singer-audience dynamic, integral to blues performance, reveals this subtext. Although Annjee remains part of this communal group moving to Billy Sanderlee's percussive accompanying piano notes and Harrietta's "familiar folk-blues," Annjee's response to the various levels of meaning does not come from her directly.⁶⁵ Instead, the dynamics of a blues performance allows for other members to orally "bear witness" to the reality, the blues, of black male absence.

Blues scholars often suggest that blues performers can relate another person's suffering to the group. I simultaneously maintain that other audience members speak on Annjee's behalf in this scene. When the woman "a few rows ahead of Annjee" cries "True, Lawd!" and "sway[s] her body," Hughes is not experimenting with ventriloquism of Annjee's emotion. Instead, he invokes the atmospheric ethos of a Baptist church, thereby creating the sacred secularity of the blues, which overwhelms Annjee. Unlike earlier in the narrative, Annjee cannot disconnect herself from this blues environment and interaction. Fully immersed in this blues congregation, with performance attendees crowding the aisles, Annjee cries while "remembering Jimboy," and the "understanding audience" testifies to the power and purpose of Harrietta's song with "exclamations and shouts."⁶⁶ They continue to move to the pulse of Harrietta's plaint, thinking about black men "over yonder."

This process of re-membering is significant since Jimboy is first slowly constituted and then virtually disembodied as the narrative progresses. When Jimboy

⁶⁵ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 295.

⁶⁶ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 298.

initially appears in the text, it is through notice of his letters. In the chapter “Guitar,” blues music announces the presence of his voice to the text and precedes any mention of his physical body. Next, his omnipresence is signaled by the pervasiveness of his “rich baritone voice” that “all the neighborhood could hear.”⁶⁷ Hughes points to Jimboy’s inherent aspect of movement even while he is, for the most part, physically inert—his blues “floats down in the alley, over back fences.”⁶⁸ With his voice permeating the environment, Jimboy is characterized by this ability to be everywhere through the blues. Following “Guitar,” his physical presence is more significantly represented.

Yet this physical presence is not sustained; through his migrations, Jimboy eventually disappears from the novel. First, he is a voiceless body traveling from here to there; his “hand” then appears, symbolized by his letter to Annjee; shortly after his guitar is broken in a crowded rail car, his letters stop and his “hand” disappears. After Jimboy “enlists” in the armed forces and is shipped quickly from camp to the front in France, he does not “speak” in the narrative again. The “specter” of the deceased brother that haunts the dramatic recitation “The Colored Soldier” finds its literary antecedent here.

Hughes made his position on African American participation in the armed forces a major platform within his creative output. The Great Migrations of the twentieth century saw African Americans flocking to any number of urban areas in pursuit of freedom and opportunity: economic, social, political, religious, and sexual. *Not Without Laughter* depicts such multidirectional migrations not simply over rivers, lakes and streams, but also over seas and oceans. As Tyler Stovall states, “[m]ore than 400,000

⁶⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 57.

African Americans served in the United States armed forces during World War I.”⁶⁹

Although Tempy “earnestly believed that the world would really become safe for democracy, even in America, when the war ended and that colored folks would no longer be snubbed in private and discriminated against in public,”⁷⁰ the soldiers who returned to enjoy the democracy they battled for abroad were welcomed home to oppressive acts of mob violence during the “Red Summer” of 1919.

Conclusion

As the blues developed in the second decade of Du Bois's color-line century, African Americans began to face challenges to their everyday existence. Jim Crow segregation, lynching, and the war draft were just three examples that posed a significant threat to African American life and community stability. This period also witnessed a substantial black flight from the south, beginning with one of many Great Migrations from southern rural areas to northern urban cities. Langston Hughes chose to depict—without resorting to reductive, romanticized configurations of the folk—dimensional characters that would persevere with a resilience of spirit encapsulated by the blues. And while he expressed in *The Big Sea* that he was not entirely satisfied with the end result of struggling against prevailing discourses to render what he heard in lives of “ordinary” African Americans, it is clear that he wanted his characters, and his readers, to listen for themselves.

⁶⁹ *Paris Noir*, 5.

⁷⁰ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 257.

Chapter Two: Revising the *Bluesprint*: Ann Petry's *The Street*

Introduction

This chapter explores the ways Ann Petry uses the blues in her 1946 novel *The Street*, which she called a novel of “social criticism.” In the previous chapter, I identify the way Langston Hughes used blues to present protest in his first novel *Not Without Laughter* as a subversive strategy of critique. This strategy allowed Hughes to critique the forces that sought to limit depictions of black subjectivity in the first two decades of the twentieth century. One of Hughes’s motivations for using the blues in his novel was to undermine Charlotte Osgood Mason’s attempts at censoring protest, which she called “propaganda.” The blues also facilitates Hughes’s critique of racial oppression, economic inequality, and African American involvement in World War I. To illustrate the ways in which Hughes depicts blues to express this form of protest, I located and explicated the scenes of blues performance and interaction, in which three important blues figures: communicate their personal narratives of tragedy, while, at the same time, they express the history of larger communities that faced racism, and economic oppression and disenfranchisement. Like Hughes, Petry presents individual experience as representative of communal experience. In *The Street*, Petry depicts the life of Lutie Johnson, who struggles every day with the forces of sexism, racism, and violence that exist within and without Harlem. As I showed in the Hughes chapter, there are important connections between protest and the blues. In this chapter, I argue that a blues aesthetic marks the entire novel: it is evident in the depictions of Lutie’s encounters with these oppressive

forces, and Petry conveys her critiques of these forces through the blues, creating in the process, one of the most important protest novels of the twentieth century.

Although literary critics often identify Petry as a crucial voice in the protest fiction genre and compare her novel *The Street* to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*¹ what distinguishes Petry's protest fiction from that of Wright and Himes and what makes her literary artistry truly remarkable is her emphasis on African Diasporic music. This emphasis on African Diasporic music reflects her creative and political alignment with the Literary Left, since authors such as Richard Wright called for the use of vernacular and vernacular-based cultural forms in literature.² In his 1938 essay "Blue Print for Negro Writing," Wright calls for African American writers to create literature that incorporates more inclusive aspects of African American experience and culture. Wright expresses the need to depart from what he sees as literature informed by the limited black bourgeois philosophy of uplift and to guide African American literary production in a new direction that reflects a wide range of African American perspectives and cultural elements, including vernacular and vernacular based forms.

Until Petry's first novel *The Street*, few authors of African Diasporic literature had produced protest literature that responded to the call of using musical vernacular and vernacular-derived forms in writing to the extent that Petry did. I view Petry's work as

¹ Literary scholar Heather Hicks identifies this tendency in criticism to compare Petry to Wright. See "'This Strange Communion': Surveillance and Spectatorship in Ann Petry's *The Street*." *African American Review* 37 (2003): 21-23.

² The title of American Studies scholar Alex Lubin's *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left* suggests that Petry's literary output revises the Leftist framework of African American protest fiction that Richard Wright established in his 1938 essay "Blue Print for Negro Writing." See *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3-14.

crucial because she is one of the few novelists of this period who emphasizes the importance of these forms in literature with such clarity, and with such depth in a literary landscape that privileged African American male writers. I title this chapter of the dissertation “Revising the *Bluesprint*” because I see Petry’s work in *The Street* as a response of sorts to Richard Wright’s manifesto. Petry fills the novel with the characteristics and elements of the blues. Petry’s *The Street*, as well as other novels and short stories such as *The Narrows*, “Solo On The Drums,” and “Miss Muriel” all reflect her substantial understanding of jazz and blues and her original approaches to drawing on music to enhance narrative. What differentiates her from other Left writers is her use of these vernacular and vernacular-based forms of jazz and blues to reflect the experiences of African Diasporic women

The centrality of music to Petry’s novels and short stories, then, requires increased scholarly attention, particularly Petry’s adept ways of employing blues as thematic and structural elements of narrative. In this chapter, I present a reconsideration of the blues aesthetic that influences *The Street* because current scholarship on the novel rarely offers a close textual analysis of blues aesthetics. That is not to say that the jazz and blues in Petry’s fiction have not received any critical attention. Given the presence and persistence of these musical forms in her novels and short stories, however, I believe additional readings of her works according to musical aesthetics are necessary to demonstrate her unique contributions to African Diasporic literature.

The essays and reviews in *The Critical Response to Ann Petry* (2004) span nearly 60 years, but only one essay is dedicated exclusively to the relevance of music in Ann Petry’s fiction. In that essay, literary scholar Joanna X. K. Garvey discusses how Petry

draws on the traditions of African Diasporic music, including blues. Garvey does not engage, however, how crucial the blues is to the thematic and structural aspects of *The Street*. For example, in discussing Lutie's physical movement in the novel, Garvey states "her train travel is limited to trips to and from employment, whether in Connecticut or in midtown Manhattan."³ It is startling that Garvey does not examine the train as an important blues symbol, since Petry deliberately references trains throughout the novel and even places Lutie on various trains for an entire chapter. In this chapter, I explore the structural and thematic implications of the train's recurring presence as blues symbol in the novel. More recent scholarship explores the connection between Petry's fiction and music, but scholars focus more on jazz than they do on the blues.⁴ Responding to scholarship that neglects blues structures and themes and emphasizes jazz music over blues music, this chapter provides close textual analysis of *The Street*, and aims to reinvigorate the scholarly conversation that examines the connections between music and Ann Petry's fiction.

Petry uses the word "blues" only once in the narrative, but the novel demonstrates the significant influence of aural aesthetics and calls attention to Petry's important contributions to African Diasporic literature.⁵ Before I explore the specific examples of the influence of musical forms on Petry's novel, I need to restate and to clarify what I

³ Joanna X.K. Garvey, "That Old Black Magic: Gender and Music in Ann Petry's Fiction" in *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*, Saadi Samawi, ed. (New York, Garland, 2000), 132.

⁴For example, literary scholar argues that rather than being a book about jazz, *The Street* "is jazz" insofar as it reflects the structures of jazz time. For more discussion of jazz time and improvisation in *The Street*, see Grandt's *Kinds of Blue: African American Literature and the Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 22-42.

⁵ This dissertation focuses exclusively on the short story and novel genres.

understand when I encounter evidence in African Diasporic fiction that writers are consciously referencing and utilizing the structures and characteristics of jazz and blues. I want to make clear what I mean by the using the term “aural aesthetics.” I define aural aesthetics as the varying characteristics and elements of jazz and blues that authors use in their literary works. I suggest that authors attempt to reflect the sounds of jazz and blues – and the structures, philosophies, and histories that inform those sounds – in written representations. The word “aural,” in its strictest of definitions, means “received or perceived by the ear.”⁶ I readily admit that using a word that points to sound heard by the ear within the context of the written word seen by the eye seems both contradictory and confusing, especially since there is no use of the physical ear when reading a book. A book emits no sound beyond that of vigorously, or lightly, turned pages. When I open the covers of a blues novel or a jazz novel, I expect to hear neither the actual blue notes of Ma Rainey singing “Sweet Rough Man” nor the delicate arpeggios of Charles Mingus’s “Myself When I Am Real.”

I do not claim that one can literally hear blues or jazz music by simply reading, nor do I suggest that the book is a type of musical instrument that generates sound. I assert, however, that the inherent contradictions of jazz and blues that authors of African Diasporic fiction engage – most clearly articulated in the expression “laughing to keep from crying” that is so crucial to a fundamental understanding of the blues – allow me the room to take liberties with a seemingly contradictory term. I use the term “aural aesthetics” to point to the various aspects of jazz and blues that writers experience “through the ear” and make a conscious effort to utilize them in their literary works.

⁶ "aural, a.2" *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press, May 01, 2010, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50014862>>.

In this chapter, I show that the blues figures prominently in Petry's *The Street* because the blues allows Petry to expose the social inequities of 1940s Harlem. The influence of the blues appears in three specific ways. First, Petry represents her protagonist Lutie Johnson as a blues singer who connects to community. Petry evokes the blues through this depiction of Lutie, who tries to gain regular employment as a blues singer to financially support herself and her young son Bub and to escape from the oppressive environment of the street. As I examine Petry's depiction of Lutie Johnson as a blues figure, I look at two specific scenes. In the first scene, Lutie sings in a local bar and connects her individual experience to a larger group experience, which is a key feature of the blues. In the second scene, Lutie sings at the Casino, where her performance again helps foster a sense of community and reflects the call-and-response dynamic that is central to blues. In these two scenes, Petry reveals Lutie as a blues figure.

The Street also reflects a blues aesthetic in its depiction of violence. Petry's two short stories "Like A Winding Sheet" (1945) and "Solo On The Drums" (1947) illustrate her commitment to using musical forms in her writing and offer parallel ways to "hear" the blues-based thematic and structural aspects of *The Street*. These two short stories reflect Petry's familiarity with the blues form and illustrate the link between blues and violence that shapes Lutie's final confrontation with Boots, which ends in murder. In "Like A Winding Sheet," Petry uses the AAB pattern of the 12-bar blues to depict this violence. In "Solo on the Drums," Petry uses the blues performance dynamic of head-cutting⁷ as the means through which a drummer can express his murderous rage. *The Street* reflects these aural aesthetics – the blues pattern and head-cutting – to demonstrate

⁷ In terms of a jazz tradition, this interaction between two musicians who attempt to outperform each other is called a "cutting session." The act of "cutting" another musician is a figurative term that suggests this dynamic of one-upmanship.

the connection between blues and violence in the penultimate scene in the novel. Lutie's murder of Boots is a way for her to overcome not only the immediate threat of sexual violation but also the ever-present threat of violation and oppression that Petry depicts.

Literary scholar and blues musician Adam Gussow uses the term “intimate violence” to define “a particularly intense form of expressiveness” reflected in blues culture.⁸ Gussow states that blues culture – not only its musical lyrics but also its ritualized appearance in jook joints – reflects the historical legacy of violence enacted upon black people by systems of oppression such as Jim Crow laws. Thus, Gussow uses the term “intimate violence” to describe the assault on one blues figure by another blues figure, not as a personal attack, but as an act of violence against the structures of oppression and dominance that limit black subjectivity. I find Gussow’s concept of *intimate violence* useful in analyzing the overwhelming presence of violence between characters that reflect the blues in *The Street* and in understanding how Petry structures these depictions of violence. To prove this idea of violence as an integral part of blues expression in *Street*, I first examine Petry's depictions of intimate violence in her two short stories "Like A Winding Sheet" and "Solo On The Drums."

The third aspect of *The Street* that reflects a blues aesthetic and shapes Petry’s novel is the repeated use of the prime symbol of the blues: the train. Throughout the novel, Petry depicts Lutie on two types of trains: a traditional railroad car and a subway car. For example, she travels to from Jamaica, Queens to Connecticut, from downtown Manhattan to Harlem, and from Harlem to Chicago by train. The train as blues symbol functions as a site of violation and oppression, a space of possible racial accord, and a

⁸ Adam Gussow clarifies the blues violence in *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 197.

means of escape from sites of oppression. By emphasizing Lutie's travels via train, Petry critiques the various oppressive forces that Lutie faces in the novel, and Petry simultaneously complicates the freedom that the train symbolizes in blues culture.

In this chapter, I argue that Petry's novel of social criticism reflects the influence of a blues aesthetic in three primary ways—through its depiction of Lutie as a blues figure, demonstrating the link between an individual's history and a community's history; through its representation of blues and intimate violence as a major part of *The Street*; and third, through its use of the blues symbol of the train to highlight Lutie's encounters with oppression, the train providing at once a means of escape from oppression – a type of safe space for Lutie – and a place where Lutie feels the repeated, and repeating, assault of oppression. These examples demonstrate Ann Petry's knowledge of and proficiency with aural aesthetics that separates her from her Left contemporaries. She foregrounds a female protagonist in her work of protest fiction, which is significant given the prevalence of male authors and male protagonists in protest fiction.

Without an overabundance of direct reference to blues and jazz songs or real-life jazz and blues musicians, Ann Petry fills *The Street* with the thematic and structural aspects of the blues. Her depiction of Lutie as a blues singer, her use of the classic blues pattern in scenes of violence, and her use of the train as a complex blues symbol all point to her deep, nuanced understanding of the blues. *The Street* – and her other literary works – illustrate Petry's knowledge of these musical forms and their importance to African Diasporic literature. Petry excels and provides a foundation – what I call a “bluesprint” – for future writers who will grapple with how to use these complex cultural forms in literature and how to create inspiring, imaginative, and important fiction like *The Street*.

Lutie Johnson's narrative is the blues: to use the words of Ralph Ellison, it is a "chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."⁹ The depiction of Lutie as blues figure, the portrayal of intimate violence in the final scene between Lutie and Boots, and the recurrent symbol of the train show that blues is a crucial part of Petry's novel and illustrate her commitment to utilizing these important musical forms in African Diasporic literature.

The Street is a third-person narrative about Lutie Johnson, an African American woman who moves to 116th Street in West Harlem with her young son, Bub. Lutie moves to Harlem because her husband committed adultery while she was away in Connecticut working for a wealthy white family the Chandlers. The novel opens with Lutie's arrival in Harlem, where she finds and rents an apartment in a building and secures low-paying clerical work. While at a local bar, she sings a song playing on a jukebox, which attracts Junto, a local business man with interests in real estate and entertainment, and Boots Smith, who works for Junto as a band leader at an entertainment venue. Boots recruits Lutie to sing at Junto's Casino, but he secretly angles to become romantically involved with Lutie. While Lutie is at work or out looking for employment, her son Bub stays at home and befriends William Jones, the building superintendent. The Super secretly lusts for Lutie Johnson, and gets her son involved in stealing mail from neighborhood mailboxes. After the authorities catch and detain her son for committing mail fraud, Lutie seeks the help of a lawyer, who will work to have Bub released for \$200. Lutie asks Boots for the money to retain the lawyer, and Boots directs her to ask Junto for the money. Junto wishes Lutie to barter her body for the money, but Boots angles to have

⁹ Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues" in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 79.

Lutie for himself before Junto. After Lutie refuses both Junto's proposition and Boots's unwelcomed sexual advances, Boots attempts to rape her. She returns the attempted violence with violence of her own; she mortally wounds Boots, leaves her son with the authorities, and escapes to Chicago via train. On that Chicago-bound train, Lutie thinks about the events of her life that led her to that point.

In *The Street*, her first novel, Petry sought to illuminate the social conditions of 1940s Harlem through the experiences of her protagonist Lutie Johnson. In the novel, Petry depicts a Harlem environment that pulses with a blues ethos of tragedy and transcendence, linking the substandard living conditions and lack of employment opportunities to pernicious racism and sexism. The novel is about an entire community besieged by the ills of conspicuous racism and persistent sexism. The novel, however, tells this story of community through Lutie Johnson's individual experience. In an interview immediately following the publication of *Street*, Petry clarifies the purpose of her novel. She says, "I hope that I have created characters who are real, believable, alive. . . . I wanted to show [African Americans] as people with the same capacity for love and hate, for tears and laughter, and the same instincts for survival possessed by all men."¹⁰

Since she spent time writing about Harlem and its residents, and led an active life in Harlem in journalism, theatre and community involvement, Ann Petry's familiarity with the Harlem community resonates throughout her literary works, and this familiarity helped to create a compelling novel that is filled with the blues. Even though Ann Petry was not a native New Yorker, her experiences living, working, and contributing to Harlem life serve as the core of her fiction and contributed to the success of *The Street*. Born Ann Lane in 1908, Petry grew up in the small town of Old Saybrook, Connecticut.

¹⁰ James W. Ivy, "Ann Petry Talks about First Novel," *The Crisis* Feb. 1946: 48-49.

She spent most of her early life there, and earned a pharmacy degree. She later worked as a pharmacist at drugstores that her family owned. In 1938, she moved to Harlem with her husband George D. Petry, a fellow author. She worked as a journalist and writer for many years, first at the *Amsterdam News*, and then at the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. organ *The People's Voice*, a politically focused publication where Petry satisfied the political demands of the Left by writing general news stories about African American experience. She also served as an editor for the women's page, examining the lives of African American women workers, particularly domestics. In addition, Petry covered issues about youth and children. Over the years, she wrote extensively about Harlem, and the article topics ranged from pieces about latchkey kids to the Harlem race riot of 1943. Her experiences as a Harlem community member and as a chronicler of Harlem's everyday histories provide the basis for *Street*, a novel in which the main character Lutie Johnson, a blues singer, becomes a conduit through which Petry conveys the experiences that she witnessed and reported on frequently.

Characterization of Lutie as Blues Figure

Petry provides two scenes in *The Street* where Lutie evokes the blues through her music performances. In the first scene, Lutie goes to Junto's Bar and Grill alone to escape from the realities of her present situation: raising her son Bub alone, earning a low wage as a clerical worker, and living in a small, confining apartment on "dirty" West 116th Street. Lutie immerses herself in the lively environment that the bar provides for its patrons. Singing to herself, Lutie revises the song "Darlin'" while, as the narrative notes, the other patrons listen attentively:

The men and the women at the bar stopped drinking to look at her. Her voice had a thin thread of sadness running through it that made the song important. That made it tell a story that wasn't in the words – a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until they died.¹¹

The hidden narrative, or the “story that wasn't in the words,” evokes the ethos of the blues. The blues is often described as the expression of suffering, and Petry points to the blues in Lutie's performance as “a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration.” Lutie's individual expression becomes representative of group experience, and she moves the group to silence with a “note so low and so long sustained.”¹² This “note” – and I suggest it is a blue note – connects Lutie to the community through the blues.

The second scene features Lutie during her performance at Junto's Casino, and Petry once again links Lutie to community through the blues. This blues is a story of celebration and laughter rather than the “story of despair” that Lutie sings in Junto's Bar. Lutie becomes part of the community through her singing, uniting her with the crowd that has come to enjoy the blues:

Lutie sang at frequent intervals. There was violent applause each time, but even while she was singing, she could hear the babble of voices under the music.

White-coated waiters scurried back and forth to the boxes carrying trays heavy with buckets of ice, tall bottles of soda, and big mugs foaming with beer. And all

¹¹ Ann Petry, *The Street* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 148.

¹² *Ibid.*

the time the dancers moved in front of her, rocking and swaying. Some of them even sang with her.¹³

Lutie becomes the center of this communal blues performance, and the audience responds with “violent applause” each time. The members of the band and the dancers respond to Lutie’s call – her blues singing in this scene – to create an atmosphere where the community can enjoy music and merriment. As the members of the crowd leave the Casino, they “walked close to each other as though still joined together by the memory of the music and the dancing.”¹⁴ Through Lutie’s singing and interaction with the crowd at the Casino, and through her singing the “hidden” narrative of the community at the Bar, Petry portrays Lutie as a blues figure and creates a powerful female voice in protest fiction.

Structures and Violence of the Blues

By examining how Petry draws on the structures of the blues in this chapter, I show that the blues influences Petry’s depiction of characters interacting in violent ways toward each other. Ultimately, this depiction of violence reflects a kind of blues expression against oppression, a type of “speaking out” when external forces sought to silence the black subject. This literary depiction of the assault on black subjects by other black subjects reflects what Adam Gussow identifies as intimate violence in blues culture. Gussow explains that

¹³ Ibid., 224.

¹⁴ Ibid., 226.

[th]e intimate violence of blues culture could be rage-filled, a desperate striking out [...] when what one really wanted to strike back at was a white world that had defined one as nameless and worthless.¹⁵

Gussow argues that this concept of intimate violence relates directly to the blues because blues culture reflects a history of violence imposed on black communities and on black bodies. Gussow points specifically to lynching and Jim Crow as sources of the violence prominent in blues culture, and he states that violence in blues expression constitutes the voicing of personhood in the face of, and in response to, such oppression.

As an example of a blues song that illustrates intimate violence, Gussow offers Ma Rainey's "See See Rider Blues" (1925):

I'm gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I am tall, Lord, Lord, Lord
Gonna kill my man and catch the Cannonball
If he don't have me, he won't have any gal at all.¹⁶

Ma Rainey's song presents a narrative common to blues songs that portray this type of violence: a failing relationship, the expression of intended violence using a specific implement or weapon, and the plan to escape from the site of violence. Citing Angela Davis's claims that the sexual freedom and freedom of movement expressed in blues provides evidence of black selfhood after Emancipation, Gussow argues that the ability for black subjects to express violence against other black subjects constitutes another form of black selfhood. For Gussow, post-Emancipation freedom for African Diasporic people was

¹⁵ Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁶ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 4.

a wide ranging freedom: the freedom to sing, dance, curse, boast, flirt, cultivate large grievances and—not least fight with and kill other black folk without undue fear of the white law, which considered black life cheap and black labor power easily replaceable.¹⁷

The term “intimate” in Gussow’s construct suggests a closeness or familiarity based on a shared culture. African Americans are united by their shared experiences with social, political, and economic forces that inform blues expressivity. In his analysis of archived recorded and transcribed blues songs in particular and blues culture as a whole, Gussow asserts his concept of intimate violence to differentiate it from other forms of violence found in blues. For instance, another form of violence that Gussow identifies in the blues tradition is “disciplinary violence,” or the violence enacted by whites on blacks. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, the blues reflects a legacy of lynching and assault, and Langston Hughes’s novel *Not Without Laughter* subversively speaks against oppression. Hughes depicts this oppression through white mob violence in Sister Johnson’s “Crowville” story. This oppressive violence devalued the African Diasporic subject and her community, and Hughes’s novel uses the blues to voice opposition to that oppression. Viewing Gussow’s theoretical claims, Hughes’s novel is a speaking out against the disciplinary violence.

The novel’s final scene with Lutie Johnson and Boots Smith demonstrates the intimate violence expressed in blues culture. Indeed, Lutie Johnson’s repeated experiences with institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism raise her anger to climactic levels and culminate in her mortal beating of Boots Smith with a candlestick. This final interaction between Lutie and Boots, two figures Petry closely relates to blues

¹⁷ Gussow, 6.

culture, clarifies Petry's overall goals to critique the oppressive forces that both characters encounter. Lutie's lethal retaliatory assault on Boots represents her desire to "strike back" against the long string of sexist and racist figures and oppressive structures of power that she encounters throughout the novel.

Petry portrays Lutie's "desperate striking out" as a crucial moment of intimate violence in *Street*, and Petry's two short stories "Like A Winding Sheet" and "Solo On The Drums" also emphasize this form of violence expressed through the blues. These two short stories clarify her depictions of intimate violence in *Street*. Her short story "Like A Winding Sheet" published in *Crisis* shares in common with *Street* its setting in wartime Harlem and the interaction between a black man and a black woman that culminates in violence and gender conflict regarding employment. "Like A Winding Sheet" provides a snapshot of the intimate violence repeated with a difference in *Street*.

Petry opens "Like A Winding Sheet" with the scene from which the title is derived. As a Harlem man struggles to raise himself out of bed up in the morning, his wife Mae's jokingly taunts that he looks "like a huckleberry – in a winding sheet."¹⁸ He yearns to sleep a little longer because his legs ache from working at a war plant where he stands on his feet for an entire shift. After he argues with Mae and begs her to go to her job, he leaves for work at the plant. He arrives late and gets into another argument with his boss, a white female foreperson who reproaches him and all of the other "niggers" who arrive late for work repeatedly. He acknowledges the validity of the reprimand because of his tardiness, but he takes exception to being called a "nigger." He becomes

¹⁸ Ann Petry, "Like A Winding Sheet" in Maureen Honey, ed. *Bitter fruit: African American Women in World War II* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 117. A winding sheet is a type of burial garment.

enraged and moves toward her ready to strike her with his “clenched tight, hard” fists.¹⁹ The foreperson Mrs. Scott calls the remark “an accident,” and backs away from him.

After his shift at the plant, he stands in a line at a local restaurant for coffee, but he is rebuffed by the white woman server who tells him that there is no coffee left in the urn and that it will take some time to brew more. He glanced down at his hands that were “clenched tight, hard into fists.” Thinking again that he could not hit the server, who he thought dismissed him with a toss of her head covered with blonde hair, he fights to keep from attacking the woman and leaves to ride the train home. Mae believes he has returned home with an unpleasant demeanor when he “grunts” out a hello. After a few antagonistic exchanges, she says, “you’re nothing but a old hungry nigger trying to act tough.”²⁰ No longer able to control his rage, he strikes his wife Mae repeatedly, describing the feeling “like being enmeshed in a winding sheet.”²¹

“Like A Winding Sheet” depicts the type of violence that *The Street* presents, and I suggest that Petry's short story, like her novel, expresses this violence through the use of the classic 12-bar blues form. As I demonstrated in the preceding chapter on Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, the classic 12-bar blues form follows the pattern AAB. The first “A” line is repeated with a difference in the second “A” line, and the B line resolves the statement expressed in the “A” lines. In “Winding,” the short story’s protagonist channels the frustration and anger that his workplace and his coffee shop experiences produce into a violent confrontation with his wife. In other words, the incident at work forms the first “A” line, the incident at the restaurant constitutes the

¹⁹ Ibid, 120.

²⁰ Ibid, 124.

²¹ Ibid, 125.

second “A” line, and the incident at home constitutes the “B” line. The “clenched tight, hard” fists are the visible signs of violence that go unexpressed with his boss and with the coffee server, but that violence is resolved with his wife.

Petry's short story "Solo On The Drums" also offers ways to understand the intimate violence of blues culture that *The Street* portrays in the conflict between Boots Smith and Lutie Johnson. "Solo On The Drums" is about a drummer and bandleader named Kid Jones, who has just lost his wife to the band's pianist named Marquis of Brund. Kid Jones finds out his wife has left him for the pianist in the morning, and his band must perform that evening. This lost love theme is popular in blues, and the short story presents a blues atmosphere through the description of a trumpet solo during the evening's performance:

And now – well, he felt as though he were floating up and up on that long blue note of the trumpet. He half closed his eyes and rode up on it. It had stopped being music. It was that whispering voice, making him shiver. Hating it and not being able to do anything about it. "I'm leaving it's the guy who plays the piano I'm in love with him and I'm leaving now today." Rain in the streets. Heat gone. Food gone. Everything gone because a woman's gone."²²

The trumpet's "long blue note" immediately establishes the scene's blues atmosphere. In addition, Petry makes use of the repetition central to blues expression. Kid Jones floats "up and up" and then rides "up on" the blues. The repetition of the word "gone" reinforces Jones's use of the blues here, and it reveals how Kid Jones's resembles the theme of so many blues songs that discuss lovers leaving relationships. His wife has left

²² Ann Petry, "Solo on the Drums," in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 237.

him for a band member with whom he must perform music, and this dynamic forms the potential for violent confrontation between the two musicians.

Petry presents the performance of this music as a virtual fight between Kid Jones and Marquis of Brund. Rather than depicting a physical altercation between drummer and pianist, Petry depicts the two musicians participating in a battle of alternating musical statements that respond to each other. This call-and-response dynamic between the two musicians serves as the mediating form of Kid Jones's violence, a call-and-response dynamic that constitutes a type of "head-cutting" session common to blues performance. In a head-cutting session, two musicians attempt to outperform each other by taking turns expressing musical ideas. At the theatre, Kid Jones the drummer and Marquis of Brund the pianist engage in this blues performance ritual:

The drums and the piano talked the same rhythm. The piano high. A little more insistent than the drums. The Marquis turned sideways on the piano bench. His left foot tapped out the rhythm. His cream-colored suit sharply outlined the bulkiness of his body against the dark gleam of the piano. The drummer and the pianist were silhouetted in two separate brilliant shafts of light. The drums slowly dominated the piano.²³

Although Kid Jones and Marquis of Brund begin with the same rhythm, Marquis makes his "high" piano statement, which is more "insistent." This suggests a level of assertion, or aggression when read in this context of blues expression and intimate violence.

Recognizing this display of one-upsmanship, Kid retaliates and begins to "dominate" the rhythm or pacing of the song.

²³ Ibid., 238.

This rhythmic dominance quickly progresses to an explicit act of intimate violence common to blues culture. As Kid Jones recalls earlier that morning when his wife tells him that she is leaving him for the piano player, his drum performance explodes with violence:

When he hit the drums again it was with the thought that he was fighting the piano player. He was choking the Marquis of Brund. He was putting a knife clean between his ribs. He was slitting his throat with a long straight blade. Take my woman. Take your life.²⁴

Kid channels his "fury" into his drum solo, and through this musical expression he assaults Marquis of Brund with the intention of killing him. The succession of the verbs "fighting," "choking," and "slitting" all add to the violence of this scene. Drumsticks are the tools of this musical expression, and Kid, interestingly, envisions himself using two common handheld implements of violence in blues songs: a knife and a razor or the "long straight blade." Knife and razor songs are popular to the blues, such as Charley Jordan's "Cuttin My ABCs." Petry's vivid depictions in this scene make clear the connections between violence and the blues.

Both "Like A Winding Sheet" and "Solo On The Drums" depict the intimate violence of blues culture that appears in the final scene between Lutie Johnson and Boots Smith in *The Street*. The figurative violence in the blues interaction between Kid Jones and Marquis of Brund transforms into literal violence between Lutie and Boots. Boots frames his intimate violence in the classical AAB pattern and enacts that intimate violence on Lutie. Lutie's imagined violence becomes real physical violence, as she "strikes out" against the forces of oppression that Boots represents. The interaction

²⁴ Ibid., 240.

between these two blues figures ends in Boots's death and Lutie's hastened departure from New York alone via railroad.

The final scene between Boots and Lutie demonstrates the influence of the blues through this representation of intimate violence between two characters who reflect the blues. For the moment, I will focus briefly on those aspects of the blues that inform Boots's characterization as a blues figure in order to set up my subsequent analysis of the final scene between Boots and Lutie. Just as Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* connects Jimboy Rodgers to the blues through the symbol of the train, Petry's *Street* also links Boots Smith to the blues in this way.²⁵ Boots survives the depression as an itinerant piano player in Harlem, and he performs at various local bars, rent parties, and other Harlem events before he gets a job as a Pullman Porter. As a Pullman Porter, Boots rides the train frequently between Chicago and New York. The train provides Boots with the freedom of movement described in many blues songs. Indeed, Boots does "hop on a train and ride" to gain steady employment that he could not otherwise secure with the occasional piano-playing that he did during the Depression.

The train, however, also functions as a site where Boots's freedom is minimized. During his work as a Pullman Porter aboard the train, Boots experiences oppressive, overt racism:

Porter! Porter this and Porter that. Boy. George. Nameless. He got a handful of silver at the end of each run, and a mountain of silver couldn't pay a man to stay

²⁵ In her analysis of the role of music in Ann Petry's fiction, scholar Johanna X. K. Garvey suggests that "[i]n Boots, Petry has created a character who personifies a history of the blues, at least in its urban forms. Though we do not learn his origins or complete life story, Boots is not one of the first generation bluesmen, but he embodies some of their spirit." See Garvey's "That Old Black Magic: Gender and Music in Ann Petry's Fiction" in *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*, Saadi Samawi, ed. (New York, Garland, 2000), 129-135.

nameless like that. No Name, black my shoes. No Name, hold my coat. No Name, brush me off. No Name, take my bags. No Name. No Name.²⁶

Boots is connected to the blues through the symbol of the train, but the blues of his experiences aboard the train suggest that he becomes “nameless” as a result. This namelessness is reinforced by the repetition of the phrase “No Name.” This “namelessness” is a source of oppression that Boots struggles to endure.

Boots longs to “strike back” against this type of oppression that limits his freedom and renders him nameless, and the concluding scene with Lutie illustrates an act of intimate violence against another character that symbolizes this violent retaliation against oppression. It is important to recall Gussow’s assertion that this retaliation is a “strike back” against a “world that had defined one as nameless and worthless.”²⁷ The scene depicts two characters engaged in a violent exchange, and it illustrates a marked influence of blues on its structure. Unlike the musical battle between Kid Jones and Marquis of Brund in “Solo On The Drums,” the cutting session that Petry depicts in *The Street* ends with murder.

Closely analyzing this scene of intimate violence, I contend that Petry presents Boots’s intentions of violence in the classic 12-bar blues pattern:

’Junto can get his afterward.’ And the rhythm of the words sank into him, seemed to correspond with the rhythm of his desire for her so that he had to say them again. Let him get his afterward. I’ll have mine first.²⁸

²⁶ Petry, *Street*, 264.

²⁷ Gussow, 13.

²⁸ Petry, *Street*, 428.

Here, Petry describes a “rhythm” to Boots’s words during his violent violation of Lutie. Boots states the initial line, the A line, of the blues pattern: “Junto can get his afterward.” Boots repeats, with a difference, the initial line of his intentions to have Lutie succumb to his desires despite her resistance to them. The restated and revised A line is “Let him get his afterward.” The words “Junto can” in the first A line have been replaced with “Let him” in the second A line. This restatement of the initial line sets up the concluding line that brings his threat to resolution when Boots states, “I’ll have mine first.” For Boots, his desires for Lutie are comingled with his desires for revenge against not simply against Junto, but against all white men who seek to “claim” black women.²⁹ Here, Petry presents the intimate violence between one blues character and another, and it is through the evocation of the elements and the intimate violence of the blues.

Lutie, however, continues and concludes this scene of intimate violence. Just as Boots seeks to “strike back” against Junto as a representative figure, Lutie seeks to do the same. Just before Boots declares his intentions to make sure that a “white man can have a black man’s leavings,” Lutie states rather plainly that she “would like to kill” Junto.³⁰ Lutie wishes to kill Junto because he represents the oppression which she fights against the entire novel. Looking at Junto, Lutie says it was “as though he were a piece of that dirty street itself, tangible, close at hand, within reach.”³¹ Instead, Lutie channels her desire to kill Junto into killing Boots Smith after Boots physically assaults her for resisting his “desires.” First, Boots smacks Lutie. He smacks her again, but Lutie thwarts

²⁹ Ibid, 423.

³⁰ Ibid, 422.

³¹ Ibid.

the concluding line of Boots's blues expression of intimate violence, and resolves it with her own retaliation:

He was the person who had struck her, her face still hurt from the blow; he had threatened her with violence and with a forced relationship with Junto and with himself. These things set off her anger, but as she gripped the iron candlestick and brought it forward in a swift motion aimed at his head, she was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure – a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her.³²

For Lutie, the “triple vision” of Boots “transforms” into one “anonymous figure” that serves as an outlet for her anger. Although the knives and blades popular in violent blues songs are absent from this scene, the repetition of the word “everything” serves to reinforce Lutie's blues violence. Indeed, the violence visited upon Boots is a violence that makes Lutie “scarcely aware of him as an individual” and renders him into “a thing” that symbolized everything that works against her in the novel. In the next section, I contend that Lutie's escape via train is crucial to Petry's novel of social criticism because it connects Lutie to the blues symbol of the train. The train is a contested symbol for Lutie, as it offers not only the means of escape, but also a place of assault, and a site where socioeconomic difference can be temporarily suspended.

The Train As Blues Symbol

Throughout the novel, Petry repeatedly uses the train as Lutie's primary mode of transportation, and it is important to examine the specific incidents surrounding Petry's

³² Ibid., 429.

use of trains. These specific incidents reveal Petry's social criticism regarding racism and sexism. For example, Lutie takes the train to Connecticut to work as a domestic for the Chandlers, a wealthy white family. When Lutie leaves the safe space of the train, Mrs. Chandler immediately calls attention to her race and her status as Mrs. Chandler's employee. When Lutie commutes to her clerical job in midtown Manhattan via subway, she expresses a sense of sexual violation by men who look at her legs with "wet eyes." She again takes the subway from the Crosse School that advertises performance training for aspiring singers after Mr. Crosse tells Lutie to barter her body for training classes. To get her son Bub from the authorities after he is caught stealing mail, Lutie emerges from the subway in a section of Manhattan she had never seen before. And finally, Lutie flees from New York aboard a train to Chicago, repeating the route that Boots Smith takes as a Pullman Porter, which is the last appearance of the train as a blues symbol in the novel.

While Boots's time aboard the train is to work to gain some economic freedom, Lutie's spends time aboard the train to travel to places of employment. In this example, the novel illustrates that the symbol of the blues is different for Lutie than it is for Boots and that the primary symbol of the blues differs along gender lines. I suggest that the depiction of Lutie's connection to trains highlights these differences, as Petry attempts to make distinctions between the oppressive forces that Lutie faces and the ones Boots faces. African American literary and cultural scholar Hazel Carby rightly argues that the symbol of the train in blues does not suggest the same freedom for women as it did for men. Carby comments on Houston Baker's configuration of the blues matrix as a male-centered theoretical framework. Baker's blues aesthetic focuses on the train as a symbol of movement that implies both literal and figurative freedom. Carby states, "[t]he sign of

the train is one example of the way in which the blues were a struggle within language itself to define the differing material conditions of black women and black men.”³³ I suggest that Petry’s novel reflects the train as a complicated blues symbol because the train is a means to achieve freedom, but is also a symbol of oppression for women. The train allows Lutie a safe space to reconcile, albeit temporarily, socioeconomic difference. At the same time, the train becomes an unsafe space where she must battle against sexual oppression and assault. The train is a complicated symbol throughout *The Street*, but its repeated appearance throughout the novel reflects Petry’s use of a blues aesthetic.

In order to work in Connecticut for the Chandlers, a wealthy white family, Lutie leaves her son and husband and travels via train. She is able to provide a decent wage to keep her house in Jamaica, Queens and to improve her family’s economic condition. During her train ride to Connecticut, Lutie does not reflect on race or the socioeconomic differences between herself and her employers. As soon as she steps out of the train onto the platform in Connecticut for the first time, however, she becomes immediately aware of her race:

But almost the instant she stepped on the platform at Saybrook, a young blond woman came toward her smiling and saying, ‘Hello there. I’m Mrs. Chandler.

You must be Lutie Johnson.’

Lutie looked around the platform. Very few people had got off the train, and then she wanted to laugh. She needn’t have worried about Mrs. Chandler recognizing her; there wasn’t another colored person in sight.³⁴

³³ For more gender differences in the blues, see Hazel Carby’s “It Just Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” in *Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Robert G. O’Meally, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 471-483.

Mrs. Chandler readily identifies Lutie as her hired domestic worker based solely on her race, and Lutie immediately contrasts her modest clothing with the well-heeled, fashionable Mrs. Chandler. Outside of the train, Lutie becomes aware of the socioeconomic “barrier” between her and Mrs. Chandler.

During her train ride to New York with Mrs. Chandler later in the novel, however, this barrier between Lutie and Mrs. Chandler disappears, and Lutie does not think about race or class. The train provides a safe space for Lutie to be free of the oppressive forces that seek to define her based on race, gender, and class. Unlike Boots whose Pullman Porter experiences with racism render him nameless, Lutie not only has a name but she also is able to have a conversation with Mrs. Chandler about fashion, current events, and popular culture. Traveling back to New York, race is only “incidental” for Lutie and the two women interact as though they are “just two people who knew each other.”³⁵

As soon as they arrive in New York and Lutie leaves the safe space of the train, Mrs. Chandler immediately establishes their relationship as employee and employer and re-erects the “wall” of socioeconomic difference. Using her voice, Mrs. Chandler binds Lutie to her “station”:

There was a firm note of dismissal in her voice so that the other passengers pouring off the train turned to watch the rich young woman and her colored maid; a tone of voice that made people stop to hear just when it was the maid was to report back for work. Because the voice unmistakably established the relation between the blond young woman and the brown young woman.³⁶

³⁴ Petry, *Street*, 35-6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

As soon as Lutie and Mrs. Chandler disembark from the train, the barrier of difference looms once again. The train had for a moment provided Lutie with a sense of equality with Mrs. Chandler, but that equality ends on the train platform at Grand Central Station.

Although the train serves as a safe space for Lutie in her travels to and from Connecticut, the subway train serves as both an escape from oppression and an unsafe space where she is assaulted and demeaned. For example, during her ride home to Harlem after she moves to West 116th Street, Lutie describes the train as an unsafe space but a necessary vehicle to freedom:

She got off the train, thinking that she never felt really human until she reached Harlem and thus got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway. Escaped from the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes seemed to go through her clothing to her long brown legs. On the trains their eyes came at her furtively from behind newspapers, or half-concealed under hatbrims or partly shielded by their hands.

And there was a warm, moist look about their eyes that made her want to run.³⁷

Lutie expresses her opposition to the oppressive environment of racism, sexism, and predatory behavior of white men. She wishes to flee from their “the appraising looks” where she escapes this environment of objectification. Lutie’s descriptions of this scene suggest that she is besieged on the train. The train at once symbolizes a way to freedom, but that transit is fraught with dangers. As symbol of the blues, the train actually captures Lutie in a double bind. It is a way to escape, but it is also a place where she is a racialized, sexualized captive. Literary scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin recognizes the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 57.

potential for this double bind and the irony of the concept of “safe spaces,” stating that “[b]ecause safe spaces are created by as well as resistant to sophisticated urban power, they have a tenuous and contradictory existence.”³⁸

The train serves as a means of escape from this type of oppression, and it also serves as a means of escape and a place of release when Lutie retaliates against oppression. For example, at her meeting at the Crosse School, Lutie speaks with Mr. Crosse about taking singing and dancing lessons to help her secure work as a performer. Mr. Crosse tells Lutie that she can take the classes for free if she is willing to date him. This infuriates Lutie, who suggest that Mr. Cross might have been better off if he “lived back in the days of slavery, so he could have raided the slave quarters for a likely wench any hour of the day or night.”³⁹ Lutie violently responds to Mr. Crosse’s inappropriate proposition for her to trade romantic outings for performance classes by throwing an inkwell at his face. She flees the office, and boards a crowded train headed to Harlem. The train provides an escape from Mr. Crosse, but her anger is still unresolved. Unable to strike out against Mr. Crosse again, Lutie imagines the train “plunging suddenly off the track in a fury of sound”⁴⁰ to escape from her anger.

Yet this escape from anger and the sexist and racist oppression it produces is only momentary. After Lutie imagines crashing the train in her mind to quell her anger, she imagines herself “running around a small circle, around and around like a squirrel in a

³⁸ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9-10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

cage.”⁴¹ Lutie recognizes that the train, and her escape, provides only temporary freedom from oppression. She feels once again “captured” or “caged in,” similar to the cramped confines of her apartment. Indeed, Lutie runs in a “small” circle, further amplifies this idea. After she murders Boots, Lutie once again uses the train to escape from her violent retaliation against oppression and from the immediate consequences of that retaliation. On this train, however, Lutie not only imagines circles, but also draws them on the train window. The blues symbol of the train provides Lutie with the freedom to escape her present, but that freedom is at great cost: she must abandon her son to reform school and attempt to establish a new life in Chicago.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this chapter by returning to my introductory discussion on Ann Petry’s accomplishments with merging fiction and music in these skillful and nuanced ways, and I want to discuss briefly how these accomplishments differentiated her from one specific Left writer: Richard Wright. Petry’s importance to African Diasporic literature is her commitment to these vernacular and vernacular-based forms that Wright outlined in “Blue Print for Negro Writing.” Wright states:

Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom of a black father to his son; [...] work songs sung under blazing suns – all these formed the channels through which racial wisdom flowed.

⁴¹ Ibid.

One would have thought that Negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people.⁴²

When taken in its most literal sense, Wright's comments suggest an emphasis on the oral, or what is communicated "from mouth to mouth." He specifically points to the mouth as the main mode of communicating "blues, spirituals, and folk tales." Yet, Wright neglects the aural aspect of vernacular and does not attend to the crucial element of communication: what is heard by the receiver. Songs – whether they are spirituals or blues, or jazz – are not simply passed from "mouth to mouth." The ear – the aural – is an important component in the transmission of the vernacular wisdom that Wright identifies.

In addition, Wright's comment neglects the other components involved in the creation of blues music: the feet stomping, guitar strumming, and the other sounds (and sights) that are part of blues performances. Ann Petry emphasizes the importance of the aural throughout *The Street*: she depicts Lutie's singing and her audiences hearing her "low" blue notes; she presents the classic AAB blues pattern in her depictions of the symbolic violence prevalent in blues expression; and she repeatedly uses the train, which not only serves as a "definitive influence" on the sound of blues music as Albert Murray suggests⁴³ but also serves as a complex symbol in blues expression. Petry responds to Wright's call, turning to these and other elements – these aural aesthetics – to create a

⁴² Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey, eds., *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 54.

⁴³ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 124-125.

remarkable blues-inflected novel that reflects throughout its silent pages the powerful influence of the blues.

Chapter Three: Music, Diaspora, and Difference in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* and Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*

My father always told me he and I were related the way it mattered. [...] He said you make up your own bloodline.

– *Trumpet*

There're all kinds of family and blood's got nothing to do with it!

– *The Fisher King*

The history of the black Atlantic [...], continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people – not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship – provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity and historical memory.

– Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1999) and Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* (2000) are two novels that have striking similarities. Each novel presents a fictionalized “riff” on the life of a real-life jazz musician. Both novels focus on family, loss, death, and memory. Each novel highlights African Diasporic identity as a central subject. And both novels present music as an important element that influences the narrative structure, content, and

meaning of each work. This chapter focuses on the various characteristics of jazz and blues that permeate both novels. In particular, the depiction of jazz and blues as international forms helps to unite disparate communities while maintaining individual difference within those communities. Through a close reading of the soloing performances that each novel depicts, specifically the language, history, and characters involved in these depictions of soloing, I argue that these representations of jazz and blues connect differing Diasporic identities and expand notions of African Diasporic subjectivity.

Trumpet focuses on a black Scottish jazz trumpeter named Joss Moody. Although Kay depicts one of Joss Moody's jazz solos close to the middle of the novel, he is, in fact, dead for the majority of it. Joss does not have any present-day interaction with any of the other characters. Instead, the novel portrays various characters dealing with Joss Moody's death, after a coroner's report reveals a long-time secret: Joss was actually born a female and lived the majority of her life as a man. The novel is littered with differing voices offering their stories about Joss: the medical examiner who reveals Joss's true gender; the drummer who recalls Joss's life as a bandleader and close friend; and the childhood friend who remembers Joss's life as a girl. Among the primary voices in the novel are Joss's wife Millicent and their son Colman. Throughout the novel, the grief-stricken widow Millicent reminisces fondly about their twenty-year marriage and enduring romance, but takes comfort knowing that she was a long-time trustee of Joss' secret. Although Joss Moody's wife Millicent knows, even well before they are married, that Joss was born female, the majority of the characters who provide the narrative bulk of the novel do not. Upon discovering his father lied to him for many years, Joss and Millie's

adopted son Colman becomes enraged and plans to expose his father's secret publically by writing Joss's biography with the help of tabloid writer Sophie Stones. Joss's secret also causes Colman to question his own identity, since he is an adopted child of mixed heritage with no definitive understanding of his own biography nor of his father's history. Colman goes on figurative and literal journeys to reconcile his father's conflicting identities and to negotiate his personal and familial identities.

Similarly, Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* is a novel that focuses on a jazz musician, Everett "Sonny-Rett" Payne, who is dead for most of the novel. Although Marshall features Sonny-Rett's bebop piano performance at a Brooklyn nightclub as an important part of the narrative, Sonny-Rett appears in very few flashbacks scenes. A large portion of the novel is dedicated to other characters that deal with the legacy and the music Sonny-Rett leaves behind. The novel begins with his grandson Sonny's journey from Paris, France to the United States with Sonny-Rett's old friend, former business manager, and guardian of his grandson Hattie Carmichael. Following conflict between Sonny-Rett's mother Ulene Payne and his wife Cherisse's mother Florence McCullum, Sonny-Rett leaves the United States for Paris with Cherisse and Hattie to pursue life as a successful international jazz musician. Grandson Sonny and Hattie travel back to the US many years later at the request of Edgar Payne, Sonny-Rett's brother, who wants to unite his grandnephew with his American families to resolve the decades-old conflicts between the Payne and McCullum families, and to enlist Hattie in participating in a Sonny-Rett memorial concert to benefit Edgar's Brooklyn community restoration organization. Throughout the novel, these and other characters explain their connections not only to Sonny-Rett Payne's personal history, but also to his musical legacy.

Jazz trumpeter Joss Moody in *Trumpet* and jazz pianist Everett Carlyle “Sonny-Rett” Payne in *The Fisher King* are the focus of these explorations of Diaspora through the aural aesthetics of jazz and blues. This chapter illustrates how these aesthetics contribute to African Diasporic fiction. Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* and Paule Marshall’s *The Fisher King* allow characters to express Diasporic identities. At the same time, both texts challenge notions of an unproblematized, undifferentiated, and harmonious African Diaspora by examining individual, familial, and communal identity.

The Call for Difference in the Diaspora

Cultural scholar Robin D.G. Kelley suggests that one “limitation” of Diaspora is that it “places emphasis on similarities and cultural continuities,” which can “elide differences in Black cultures.”¹ As an alternative to this limitation, Kelley calls for a more sustained critical focus on the differences in Diaspora to avoid this elision. In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Brent Hayes Edwards avoids this “limitation” and contributes a useful theoretical approach that I will apply to examine jazz and blues in *Trumpet* and *The Fisher King*. Edwards’ concept of *décalage*, or “what resists or escapes translation through the African Diaspora,” emphasizes difference between members of the Diaspora.² While Edwards presents explorations of Diasporic articulations in early twentieth century print culture and does not examine these specific novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, he intimates that one can see jazz and blues also functioning as acts of “black internationalism” or transatlantic discourse. Through the deployment of aural aesthetics, *The Fisher King* and *Trumpet* present narratives of

¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, “How the West was One: On the Uses and Limitations of Diaspora,” *The Black Scholar* 30.4 (2001), 32.

² Edwards, 15.

departures, arrivals, and dispersals and offer distinctive texts that disrupt undifferentiated concepts of self and nation that will lead to an “articulation of connection *across* difference.”³ Heeding Kelley’s cautions about collapsing difference in the service of creating Diaspora and applying Edwards’s concept of *décalage* to provide a bridge between differences, this chapter demonstrates how Paule Marshall and Jackie Kay employ jazz and blues aesthetics to articulate difference in the African Diaspora.

This chapter first examines the specific characteristics and influences of jazz and blues that are present throughout *Trumpet* and *The Fisher King*. In the section “Sound On,” I clarify the specific elements of jazz and blues that Jackie Kay and Paule Marshall incorporate into these novels. The novels’ common subjects, similar structural frameworks, and comparable narrative content invite the comparative analysis that follows. The subsequent sections “Soloing” provide close textual analysis based on jazz and blues aesthetics, and I interrogate those scenes that feature the main protagonists in the soloing moment. Drawing on call-and-response for this chapter’s organizational structure, I aim to evoke a sense of correspondence or a literary conversation of ideas taking place between these two novels. Finally, this chapter concludes with a return to the chapter’s original call: in the sections “Difference in the Diaspora,” I examine how Jackie Kay and Paule Marshall negotiate the aural aesthetics of jazz and blues to address matters of difference and to create expanded African Diasporic subjectivities.

Sound On: Jazz and Blues Aesthetics

³ Ibid., 68.

Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* and Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* demonstrate the influence of jazz and blues aesthetics in three ways. First, these works privilege blues as crucial part of their respective aesthetics. The novels not only draw on the technical aspects of the musical form, but also use blues' philosophical, social, and political underpinnings. As Amiri Baraka, Sterling Brown, and Eileen Southern have argued, the blues is the spiritual center and musical progenitor of jazz.⁴ The blues is a mode of cultural expression that expresses an individual's struggles with the "troubles of the world" and attests to a history of enslavement, oppression, and disenfranchisement of Africans and their descendants. Reflecting blues' function as a cultural archive, jazz is simultaneously a music of recovery and discovery, or as Jon Panish asserts, "convention and invention."⁵ The novels reflect blues' insistence on communal history and tradition.

Trumpet and *The Fisher King* underscore the importance of blues as an integral, inseparable part of jazz's developing history, and the novels use both blues and jazz to present a historically and culturally complex notion of Diaspora that emphasizes difference among members of the Diaspora. In *Playing the Changes*, literary scholar Craig Werner links his concept of "the jazz impulse" to a blues heritage:

Both the individual expression and the affirmative, and self-affirming, response of the community, then, are crucial to the blues. Seen in relation to the blues impulse, the jazz impulse provides a way of exploring implication, of realizing the

⁴ See Amiri Baraka's *Blues people: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), Sterling A. Brown's *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Mark A. Sanders, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), and Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) 369.

⁵ Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 80.

relational possibilities of the (blues) self, and of expanding the consciousness of self and community through the process of continual improvisation.⁶

Werner's comment reveals two important elements of the blues-jazz relationship: one, the individual's relationship to a larger constituency is part of an ever-evolving matrix of communication; and two, a reassessment and revision of the blues are vital parts of jazz as process. The two novels both demonstrate this privileging of blues.

Second, each novel utilizes polyphony to structure their respective narratives. In musicological terms, polyphony is defined as two or more melodic parts interwoven in a composition. For author Jackie Kay, the decision to use multiple narrative perspectives reflects a polyphonic model derived specifically from jazz:

I wanted to tell a story, the same story, from several points of view. I was interested in how a story can work like music and how one note can contain the essence of the whole. I wanted to write a novel whose structure was very close to jazz itself.⁷

Kay approximates both the structure and the texture of jazz through this polyphonic framework. According to Eileen Southern, "[t]he polyphonic texture of the music [is] a result of 'collective improvisation,' with each melody player improvising his or her part in such a way that the parts combined into a balanced, integrated whole."⁸ This textual

⁶ Craig Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), xxii.

⁷ Jackie Kay, "An Interview with Jackie Kay." Bold Type 13 Jan. 2004 <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0499/kay/interview.html>>, 1.

⁸ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 369.

collage of voices adds both narrative structure and dimensionality to the novel, with each character asserting its own “voice” to yield a complete narrative.

Third, both works highlight scenes of improvisation, the ever-important element most commonly associated with jazz. Improvisation requires an engagement with the past to build personal identity through communal interaction. Kay and Marshall both use improvisation to fuel the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the self “within and against the group.”⁹ In other words, autonomy balanced against dependence is the touchstone of the jazz improvisational mode expressed in these texts. The textual representations of improvisation during musical performance, especially during the soloing moment, allow characters to express their identities that are informed by different historical and cultural heritages that are part of the African Diaspora.

The textual representation of the solo in particular illustrates the influence of blues and jazz on African Diasporic fiction. Kay and Marshall carefully shift focus to the Diasporic musician in the moment of artistic recreation and personal rebirth. This moment is a moment of self-recreation and assertion of Diasporic identity. In *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*, scholar Jon Panish offers two specific types of literary representations of jazz performance. Panish is worth quoting at length because he details the ways in which writers represent jazz and blues in fiction:

The particular foci of these representations are the interaction between performer and the audience, and the creative process of the performer himself. The first of these obviously reflects the communal value that has been constitutive of musical performance in the African and African American tradition. [...]. The second

⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 36.

focal point of these representations also reflects an essential element of African American music: improvisation. In this literature, improvisation—or, more generally, the jazz musician’s creative process while on the bandstand—is invested with a multiplicity of meanings, ranging from the strictly musical to the cultural, political, historical, and social.¹⁰

The representation of jazz performance in African Diasporic fiction takes on increased meaning since it emphasizes the two elements that Panish outlines above: the communal value of musical performance and the presence of improvisation. As subsequent sections of this chapter will illustrate, improvisation facilitates the access of personal history, and both fictional musicians engage cultural memory to expand the Diaspora’s developing history.

Soloing: Jackie Kay’s Trumpet

Throughout her literary career, Jackie Kay has frequently returned to themes and events that reflect aspects of her own life. In particular, Kay often explores the valences of personal identity, the importance of familial bonds, and the valences of African Diasporic experience. Born to a white Scottish mother, and a Nigerian father, Kay was adopted in 1961 and reared in Bishopbriggs, near Glasgow, for many years. Unfamiliar with a large black populace in Scotland, disconnected from black Scottish history, and growing up in a relatively homogenous cultural and racial landscape, Kay maintained a connection to Black culture through a variety of African American figures. In *Bessie Smith*, a mixture of personal memoir and creative biography, Kay explains her affinity for and attachment to “Queen of the Blues”:

¹⁰ Panish 80-1.

What was it she reminded me of? Whenever I impersonated her in front of my mirror with my hairbrush microphone, I had a sense of something, at the edge of myself, that I mostly ignored; the first awareness of myself being black. I'd only ever think about it if something reminded me. Bessie Smith always reminded me. I am the same colour as Bessie Smith.¹¹

Through the image and the music of Bessie Smith, Kay experienced a sense of "blackness." Combined with the images of Angela Davis, Count Basie, and Cassius Clay in her "politically internationalist household," Kay created an "imaginary black family."¹²

Kay, however, did more than create an imagined family. She noted the "common bond" of racial discrimination that united people of the African Diaspora. Linking the Jim Crow South to South African apartheid, Kay suggests that "all black people could at some point in their life face racism or racialism," an experience that was tantamount to "sharing blood."¹³ For Kay, such experiences were expressed through Bessie Smith's stories, communicated through blues and jazz.

Kay's book *Bessie* focuses on jazz, blues, and the connections between people of the African Diaspora. In her novel *Trumpet*, however, Kay complicates the simplified configuration of Diaspora based on a shared experiences of racism. Conscious (and perhaps self-conscious) of easy identifications across the Diaspora based on race and racism, Kay draws attention to Diasporic presence and deliberately complicates formulations of Diaspora that would subsume difference. *Trumpet* explores themes of self, family, and the Diaspora through the structures, principles, and jazz and blues

¹¹ Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Somerset, England: Absolute Press, 1997), 15.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

aesthetics that are not necessarily bound to an American ideological, physical, or sociohistorical landscape.

In terms of its structure, *Trumpet's* repeating chapter headings, multiple narrative perspectives and dexterity of language provide the structures, textures, and rhythms of blues and jazz. In terms of its subjects and themes, the novel uses music to explore complex identities and to critique notions of an undifferentiated Diaspora since the Diaspora should not be seen as a monolithic construction. Each character articulates, given the body of information available, his or her relationship to the recently deceased Joss Moody, who is discovered to be anatomically female after living most of his life as a male. In the chapters entitled "House and Home," the newly-widowed Millicent Moody mourns the death of her husband and weighs the significance of their shared secret of his "true" gender. Their adopted son Joss, like his father, has a mixed racial heritage, and comes to terms with his father's identity in sections with differing titles: "Sex" and "Travel: London" in particular. The remaining sections include characters that have varying reactions to Joss Moody's secret: the government agent who administers Joss' death certificate; a childhood friend who knew Joss, then Josephine, as a little girl; the long-time band mate and drummer in Joss' band; the journalist who wants to publish an official biography on Joss' life as a man.

Although the interpersonal relationships and resultant conflicts between Joss Moody and other characters constitute most of *Trumpet's* narrative, the chapter "Music" provides a rare instance of "direct reportage" from Joss Moody. By using improvisation during his musical performance, Joss can "bear witness" to his personal story without other intervening voices. Kay's decision to depict Joss in a moment of improvisation

reveals her aim to make music a compelling part of her narrative. Making a connection between improvised jazz music and narrative, jazz musician and scholar Vijay Iyer asserts, “the story that an improviser tells does not unfold merely in the overall form of a ‘coherent’ solo, nor simply in antiphonal structures, but also in the microscopic musical details, as well as in the inherent structure of the performance itself.”¹⁴ I suggest that Iyer’s analytical paradigm for describing the activity during jazz performances also functions as a sound model for interpreting Joss’ performance in this text, the musical flights with language that Kay creates. In other words, examining the “microscopic” literary details in the improvised jazz solo represented in the text will generate a more comprehensive “story,” just as Iyer’s analysis of the body provides a more complete narrative of jazz performance.

In the chapter “Music,” Joss Moody delivers a personal narrative empowered by jazz and blues that is not simply an engagement with the past, but also a forecast of the future. During this exploration of identity and being, Joss confronts the forces of living and death, swiftly moving from the moment of his blue birth to his afterlife observances of his own undertaker. Joss’s journey into the self, activated by jazz improvisation’s “wild star-burst of metamorphosis,”¹⁵ begins with frenetic swinging:

When he gets down, and he doesn’t always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. He strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he’s barely human. Then he brings himself back, out of this world. Back, from way.

¹⁴Iyer, Vijay. “Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation.” O’Meally, Robert G., Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 395.

¹⁵Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), xxii-xxiii.

Getting there is painful. He has to get to the center of a whirlwind, screwballing in musical circles till he is very nearly out of his mind. The journey is so wacky, so wild that he sometimes fears he'll never return sane. He licks his chops. He slaps and flips and flies. He goes down, swirling and whirling till he's right down at the very pinpoint of himself. A small black mark. The further he goes, the smaller he gets. That's the thing. It's so fast, he's speeding, crashing, his fingers going like the hammers, frenzied, blowing up a storm. His leather lips. His satchel mouth.¹⁶

Kay configures this moment of self-assessment, activated by and during the jazz performance, as a method of “stripping” or “unwrapping” of the self. This soloing through identity, however, involves a dialectic of both deconstruction and reconstruction. The above paragraph's concluding words draw attention to parts of Joss' physical body. This concentration on Joss' fingers, lips, and “satchel mouth,” on a surface level, appears quite insignificant. Kay's intention, however, is to reference not only Joss' mouth, but to allude to one of jazz's most accomplished musicians: Louis Armstrong. Known popularly by the nickname “Satchmo,” a fusion and reduction of “satchel” and “mouth,” Armstrong is a major innovator of jazz soloing. Regarded as one of the most successful and influential jazz trumpeters, Armstrong is also world-renowned entertainer remembered for not only his musical accomplishments but also his affected smiles during performances. By evoking this iconic figure, Kay connects Joss' soloing to Armstrong's artistic individualism and places him on a cultural continuum of jazz history. Kay makes these connections because in order for Joss to assert his own individuality as a jazz

¹⁶ Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 131.

musician, he must first acknowledge the musicians and musicianship that have preceded him.

The repetition of the word “he” in this passage is significant because it reinforces the notion that this performance moment is a “solo” in the most literal sense of the word – the blues-based repetition emphasizes this moment of individual expression. This scene isolates the jazz artist, momentarily shifting focus from a mode of collective improvisation to one of self-definition. The unspecified audience and “galloping” piano that appear in the paragraph immediately following this one further emphasize Kay’s focus on the individual since the language implies that there are no other people in this scene.

This literary solo, a moment of improvisational exploration, provides little temporal or spatial continuity. Kay textually renders Joss’ solo as an animated downward and upward spiral, a chaotic vortex produced by the “wacky,” “wild,” “swirling,” and “whirling” musical atmosphere. What Kay generates here is the disjunctive nature of jazz performance, a model entirely consistent with her approach to building narrative. The associative powers of jazz, its insistence on referencing past musical successes for present and future artistic endeavors, produce a discontinuous and non-sequential story. Viewing the soloing moment as an expression of personal narrative, Joss’ improvisational performance should be seen as an act of non-linear storytelling that adheres to an aesthetic framework found in jazz. Vijay Iyer comments on this aesthetic framework:

The story dwells not just in one solo at a time, but also in a single note, and equally in an entire lifetime of improvisations. In short, the story is revealed not as a simple linear narrative, but as a fractured, exploded one. It is what we take to be the shifting, multiple, continually reconstructed subjectivities of the

improvisers, encoded in a diverse variety of sonic symbols, occurring at different levels and subject to different stylistic controls.¹⁷

As Iyer's description of the jazz solo indicates, Joss's soloing disrupts time and space, preventing the presentation of a sequential narrative. Joss retrieves fragmented memories "back, from way," "pulling out the past or the future."¹⁸

Following the initial paragraph of the "Music" chapter, Kay continues to construct this scene to reflect the dynamism and the extemporaneous creativity of the jazz solo. In the chapter's second paragraph, Kay utilizes language, particularly the present verb tense, to establish a mood and mode of constant activity:

And [Joss] is bending in the wind, scooping pitch, growling. Mugging heavy or light. Never lying. Telling it like it is. Like it is. O-bop-she-bam. Running changes. Changes running faster, quicker, dangerous. A galloping piano behind him. Sweating like a horse. Break it down. Go on, break it down. It is all in the blood. Cooking. Back, from way. When he was something else. Somebody else. Her. That girl. The trumpet screams. He's hot. She's hot. He's hot. The whole room is hot. He plays his false fingers. Chokes his trumpet. He is naked. This is naked jazz. O-bop-she-bam. Never lying. Telling it like it is.¹⁹

The upsurge and prevalence of active verbs propels both character and reader deeper into Joss' past where he can "break down" the bodies of his past, both his male body and his female body until he is "naked." More importantly, this "valorization of the verb" also

¹⁷ Iyer 395.

¹⁸ Kay, *Trumpet*, 132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

emphasizes “process” rather than “product,” shifting attention to the self-creating subject in this “soloing” moment.²⁰

This soloing moment is also replete with the lexicon of jazz performance that is worth examining here. Reviewing the musical vocabulary expressed in this passage will help to develop a more complete understanding of Joss’ personal journey through the transformative portal of jazz performance. The terms “scooping,” “growling,” and “mugging heavy or light” refer not only to technical or musicological aspects of Joss’ soloing, but to performance or showmanship aspects as well. In musical terms, *scooping* refers to a change in pitch (or musical note) achieved, in the case of the trumpet, by Joss’ mouth positioning, or embouchure. “Growling” a stylistic technique used by a variety of early jazz musicians alters a note’s timbre, or the quality of the note. The act of “mugging,” or making different facial expressions to entertain an audience, was also used as an early jazz performance technique, and was popularized particularly by Armstrong. All of these terms directly follow the “satchel mouth” reference, and are linked to Joss’ continued innovative expressions of individuality in the face of a jazz history where Armstrong’s iconic visage is significant.

These techniques reappear as the chapter progresses, and Joss’ improvisation leads him to experience any number of literal and figurative “changes.” In terms of music, the “changes” in this passage refer to the chord progression of jazz music, which principally involves harmony. The “running changes,” then, refer to the improvisation of the harmonic changes in a song. In this case, Joss both follows and leads the “galloping

²⁰ My use of the term “soloing” follows Baraka’s formulation of improvisation as a dynamic activity. For a more sustained explanation of the implications and consequences of its use, refer to Nathaniel Mackey’s “Other: From Verb to Noun,” *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 517-21.

piano” through the changes and must constantly adjust his performance to each new shift. He considers this journeying through music as “dangerous” because it activates a self-exploration that forces him to confront his past. For Joss, creating “naked jazz” demands revelation, leaving the bodies of his past exposed.

Kay illustrates that Joss’ soloing moment requires a truthfulness that exposes the self. The phrases “never lying” and “telling it like it is” are quite significant in the jazz and blues realms, but take on amplified meaning in this moment of self deconstruction and reconstruction. Sifting through the metaphorical content of these two phrases, which benefit from blues-like repetition throughout the chapter, reveals the meaning produced by this improvisational moment. As many real-life jazz musicians express, Joss must “tell the truth” through his music: he must strive for musical excellence by going through the “running changes” and by satisfying other musical criteria. Joss, however, must also be honest to his audience and himself about his personal history. Here, he presents an authentic, complete narrative, revealing his “true” gender and his experiences as a young Black Scot.

Joss first sees his younger female self “skipping along an old disused railway line in a red dress, carrying a bunch of railway flowers for her mother”.²¹ Just as soon as he sees this little girl, he is immediately shuttled farther into his past to observe his birth. At this point, the music and Joss seemingly merge, as he watches the midwife, with her “fleshy and too soft hands,” unravel or unwrap the umbilical cord from around the infant’s neck:

²¹ Kay, *Trumpet*, 132.

The music has no breath, no air. Small ghost notes sob from his trumpet. Down there at the bottom he can see himself when he was a tiny baby, blue in the face.

The trumpet takes him back to the blue birth.²²

The presence of death at this moment of birth reflects the dialectic of destruction/reconstruction established in the chapter's initial paragraph, and Kay returns to the act of "unwrapping" or unraveling to give rise to a renewed self.

Although the chapter begins with the personal history, it slowly progresses to "true" testimonial of Diasporic history. Joss's individual experiences as a Black Scot crystallize during this improvisational moment; however, his "blues" also represent the perspectives, attitudes, traditions, and histories of a larger collective. As Iyer suggests about John Coltrane's "intentions" during a performance solo, Joss "reach[es] for musical statements in which no less than his whole community could hear its inexhaustible narrative multiplicity reflected"²³. Joss successfully moves beyond the self to attest to the legacy of the African Diaspora. Joss's soloing moment is an assertion of both personal and communal narratives, "perfect for encapsulating the story of a "stranger in a strange land," as it was developed in American to tell the story of Diasporan Africans.²⁴

²² Ibid.

²³ Iyer, 394.

²⁴ Alan Rice, "'Heroes across the Sea': Black and White British Fascination with African Americans in Contemporary Black British Fiction" by Caryl Phillips and Jackie Kay." Heike Raphael-Hernandez, ed. *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 228.

Soloing: Paule Marshall's The Fisher King

Reconnection and cultural memory are common motifs that run throughout Paule Marshall's literary oeuvre. The subject of Diaspora links all of her novels, beginning with her 1959 classic, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. She captures the "workaday" legacy of Diasporic people, and her characters reconnect with an African Diaspora. The settings of these reconnections are often Caribbean locations or environments where Caribbean culture is significant. For example, in *Praisesong for the Widow* takes place in the Caribbean island of Carriacou. On this island, music and dance function as performance rituals that permit the novel's protagonist Avey Johnson's spiritual renewal and ancestral reconnection. Marshall evokes the ritualistic aspects of jazz and blues in *The Fisher King* and brings into focus her familiar subject of the African Diaspora reestablish the historical and cultural connections that were severed during slavery.

In *The Fisher King*, New York serves as the site of reconnection, but Marshall establishes this sense of African Diasporic reconnection throughout the novel through her use of jazz and blues. At the beginning of the novel, character Hattie Carmichael returns to the United States after a self-imposed exile from her country of birth. Accompanying her on the journey back is Sonny Carmichael Payne, the grandson of Everett Carlyle "Sonny-Rett" Payne, a jazz pianist of Caribbean descent who expatriates to France in the mid-twentieth century to escape artistic, social, economic and racial oppression. His brother Edgar Payne organizes a benefit concert to raise funds for rebuilding Brooklyn homes, to revitalize the late Sonny-Rett Payne's jazz history and to reunite Sonny-Rett's grandson, Sonny Carmichael Payne, with his American relatives. Edgar invites the estranged Hattie – Sonny-Rett's former friend, lover, manager and little Sonny's guardian

– to Brooklyn from Paris as a special guest for the memorial concert. While visiting his American relatives, Sonny witnesses a decades-old feud between Mrs. Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, the mother of his grandmother Cherisse Payne, and his paternal great-grandmother, Ms. Ulene Payne.

Although Kay does not wholly place Joss Moody's solo performance in the context of a community of living members, Marshall highlights Everett Carlyle's relationship to his listening audience during his solo moment at the Putnam Royal club. Here, Sonny-Rett does not undergo the same type of personal destruction/invention emphasized during Joss' solo performance, and Marshall's text does not reflect the same sense of improvisation that Kay draws on. Instead, Marshall highlights "sustained antiphony"²⁵ to demonstrate the transformative powers of music in this scene. The constant dialogue between self and group, operating as acts of collective improvisation, amplify Marshall's strategy to connect all individuals of the African Diaspora.

This soloing moment in which Everett Payne performs a bebop song and begins his new identity as Sonny-Rett Payne is crucial to understanding how Marshall interrogates concepts of personal and communal identity in *The Fisher King*. Although the novel does not directly mention it by name, this scene of improvisation calls attention to jazz's most pervasive "form" during the 1940s: bebop. The practitioners and pioneers of bebop were predominately members of the African Diaspora including Dizzy Gillespie, Chano Pozo, Charlie Parker, and Kenny Clarke. Bebop's musical innovations "changed the sonic language of jazz," but the bebop movement overall reflected wider, more significant ideological and cultural changes. Among these changes were

²⁵ Iyer provides an extended explanation of the call-response dynamic during jazz performance. See Iyer, 392.

commitments to more thoughtful artistic and political positions. Bebop artists prized their African Diasporic identities in the face of ongoing discrimination and segregation, and their music reflected these perspectives.

By indirectly referencing bebop, Marshall imbues the text with not simply the musical innovations of that movement, but also with the cultural, political, and social contexts of that period.²⁶ For example, Everett Carlyle delivers his nearly twenty-minute interpretation of “Sonny Boy Blue” with “great care” and “thoughtfulness” typical of bebop performance.²⁷ The lengthy extemporizing and the presentation of “fresh, brash, outrageous ideas” in the song that Everett Carlyle plays at the Putnam Royal reflect the intelligence and experimentation most often referenced as bebop’s hallmarks. As Eric Porter asserts, “even if bebop should not be read as a direct expression of black militancy, we can understand it as a product of a worldly intellectual orientation and an experimental aesthetic sensibility”.²⁸

Marshall allows Everett Carlyle to draw on the same showmanship techniques utilized by bebop practitioners. At the start of his solo, he begins playing “without announcing the name of the tune” and “without in any way acknowledging the

²⁶ Jazz scholar Scott Deveaux rightly points out that the advent of bebop “marked the emergence of a particular aesthetic and critical orientation in the African American musicians’ community. African American musicians changed the direction of jazz as an art form by rising to the artistic challenges presented by existing music, drawing from their own experiences and from a broader social, cultural, and intellectual milieu. Musicians expressed a keen sense of African American identity, while calling into question narrowly defined racial categories and embracing a forward-looking worldliness.” For more on the emergence of bebop in jazz history, see Deveaux’s *The Birth of Bebop* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 99-101.

²⁷ Paule Marshall, *The Fisher King: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 136.

²⁸ Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 56.

audience”²⁹. In this way, this moment closely resembles the emphasis on the individual found in Joss Moody’s solo. During the bebop era, this disregard for audiences symbolized a renewed artistic focus on producing imaginative works and a political subversion of traditional relationships between audience and musician as pure entertainer. Joss Moody's solo symbolizes the bebop musician's purported movement away from swing-era musicians who were seemingly extroverted and emphasized performing for an audience. In an important meditation on jazz and bebop, Ralph Ellison explains this shift in creative and political ideology:

Often they were quiet and of a reserve which contrasted sharply with the exuberant and outgoing lyricism of the older men, and they were intensely concerned that their identity as Negroes place no restriction upon the music they played or the manner in which they used their talent. They were concerned, they said, with art, not entertainment.³⁰

Ellison’s remarks suggest an interiority in “bop” musicians that contrasted starkly with the extroverted elder statesmen of jazz. Many bebop artists negotiated their quest for innovative compositions while rejecting audience expectations inherited from the swing period. Akin to his musical brethren, Everett Carlyle takes no notice of his audience; however, he does turn his attention to the exigencies of collective music making, a signal feature of bebop.

The group transformation of the tune “Sonny Boy Blue” is not only significant musically, but also speaks volumes about the sociopolitical import of bebop procedure that allows Sonny-Rett to articulate through music a new sense of self for him and for his

²⁹ Marshall, *Fisher*, 136.

³⁰ Ellison, *Living*, 63.

community. Bop songs were often melodic reinventions of popular songs,³¹ and Marshall portrays Sonny-Rett's bebop recast of a pop song to assert a new identity for himself and the group that collaborate with him during his solo. Sonny-Rett reclaims Al Jolson's "Sonny Boy," written and produced by several Tin Pan Alley songwriters, and refashions what an audience member calls a "hokey-doke tune" with dimensionality. Here, Marshall engages not only the purported superficial sentimentality of Tin Pan Alley tunes, but also the larger cultural apparatus and historical legacy that place the caricatured pathos of minstrelsy at its center. Faced with dehumanizing depictions of black experience explicitly presented in film and music, jazz artists endeavored to counteract these oppressive forces through the self-assertive energies of bebop. By depicting Sonny-Rett's performance and reclamation of the superficial Tin Pan Alley song, Marshall emphasizes the sociopolitical and musical importance of bebop and presents Everett Carlyle's music making as an assertion of an African Diasporic experience.

Everett Carlyle fills this bebop performance with the technical aspects and the communal energies found in blues. Although many musicians attempted to distance themselves from the social and political dimensions of blues, Marshall presents blues as a crucial part of Everett Carlyle's musical development:

He was lucky not to have been sent overseas, and luckier still that he got to play a lot of piano, and all kinds of music at that: the oompah-pah, military stuff in the band, light classics and pop tunes in the officers' club, jazz in the combo they had on the base. And the blues. The base was near Kansas City so that he got to hear

³¹ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

and occasionally even play some pure down-home Kansas City blues. That had helped his own playing a lot.³²

His commitment to blues, ultimately, betrays his bebop “posturing” that distances the artist from the Putnam Royal audience. His reconnection to the idiom signals a reconnection to its ability to transform, its function as archive, and its communal ethos.

Using a shared cultural memory, Everett Carlyle relies on his connection to community through cultural memory in order to create a musical work more reflective of his individual Diasporic experiences. After “treating the original as if it were a serious piece of music,” an approach not entirely dissimilar to that expressed by James Weldon Johnson’s ex-coloured man, Everett Carlyle leads the small combo of bass, drums and piano to transform the artistically vacuous piece of music:

[H]e hunched closer to the piano, angled his head sharply to the left, completely closed the curtain of his gaze, and with his hands commanding the length and breadth of the keyboard he unleashed a dazzling pyrotechnic of chords (you could almost see their colors), polyrhythms, seemingly unrelated harmonies, and ideas—fresh, brash, outrageous ideas. It was an outpouring of ideas and feelings informed by his own brand of lyricism and lit from time to time by flashes of the recognizable melody. He continued to acknowledge the simpleminded tune, while at the same time furiously recasting and reinventing it in an image all his own.³³

Everett Carlyle assumes a new physical posture, which later becomes a quintessential part of his jazz identity. This posture symbolizes Everett’s creative repositioning similar

³² Marshall, *Fisher*, 135.

³³ *Ibid.*, 136-7.

to that seen in bebop musicians. As opposed to his initial distanced, “surgical” approach to “Sonny Boy,” Everett Carlyle moves, both literally and figuratively, closer to the music when he begins his personalized revision of the tune.

The repetition of “ideas” underscores the intelligence and innovation of Everett Carlyle’s performance. His “own brand of lyricism” reflects not only his technical approach to the music, but his Caribbean heritage, his experiences with African Americans in Brooklyn, and his exposure to different national cultures while in the United States military as well. During this bebop moment of “charting the unfamiliar and the familiar,” Everett Carlyle finds “a fuller freedom of self-realization.”³⁴ After his performance, the audience applauds and gives Everett Carlyle the new name Sonny-Rett. The subsequent shouts, renaming, and celebration symbolize a ritual of rebirth, a rite of passage for Everett Carlyle and the community gathered at the Putnam Royal club that Sunday evening. Thus, Sonny-Rett emerges not simply through personal agency, but through communal authorization as well.

Paule Marshall’s narrative approach in this scene provides a unique perspective: the description of a textual bebop performance by an African Diasporic woman. While Mary Lou Williams, Valaida Snow, and other female musicians made valuable contributions to jazz during the bebop era, female absence from jazz history proper is a silencing too great to ignore.³⁵ As Eric Porter states, “it must be noted that this broad-minded approach to art and life was generally articulated by men and did little to challenge gender prescriptions in the jazz community. The bebop movement further

³⁴ Ellison, *Living*, 58.

³⁵ Among the precious little produced on the subject of female jazz musicians is Sherrie Tucker’s *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

consolidated the notion that jazz was a masculine expression”.³⁶ Marshall attempts to correct this “silence” by filtering Everett Carlyle’s performance through Hattie’s consciousness.

The repeated phrases of “for her” and “it seemed to Hattie” indicate this important narrative shift. The phrases underscore Hattie’s role as cultural interpreter and living repository for communal history throughout the novel. Here, she describes what Sonny does to the entire group, not just herself:

For her, he was turning them all into twelve- and thirteen-year-olds from around the block again, strapped into the Cyclone and the Hurricane at Coney Island (five cents on the Franklin Avenue El had gotten them there), and they were repeatedly soaring skyward in the rattling steeplechase cars, close to the sun, high above the Atlantic nearby and with what they liked to think was a bird’s eye-view of Prospect Park in the far distance and, beyond that, their world of Bed-Stuy, or Central Brooklyn; then seconds later, the cars plunging down again, taking them headlong toward what could only be an atomic ground zero, all of them screaming in terror while loving every second of it [...].³⁷

Hattie provides insight into not only Everett Carlyle’s history, but jazz’s musical legacy as well. Everett Carlyle's performance transports the listening audience backwards through time and "above" Brooklyn. She describes his music as taking the entire community out of its normal surroundings and giving it a new way to see those surroundings. This legacy sustains links between Diasporic members of their Brooklyn “world.”

³⁶ Porter, *What is this Thing*, 58.

³⁷ Marshall, *Fisher*, 138.

Difference in the Diaspora: The Fisher King

As Paule Marshall's novels illustrate, links within communities are the result of constant negotiations between conflicting members of the African Diaspora. Beginning with her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Marshall has explored the theme of discord, which rejects concepts of a stable, unified African Diasporic community. Not unlike Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*, Marshall's novel highlights difference through filial and cultural conflict. Jazz and blues function to both fortify and disintegrate family bonds in the novel. The blues is a form that often chronicles, negotiates, results in, or diffuses conflict. As literary and cultural scholar Stephen Henderson puts it, blues is "a music of confrontation."³⁸ Ultimately, the improvisational energies of jazz and blues used to form nontraditional family structures are diffused, and the possibility of an undivided African Diasporic community is abandoned.

Although *The Fisher King* begins with an attempt to reunite family members with a commemorative concert, jazz and blues initially function to fracture familial bonds. Everett Carlyle's first piano lessons began on an upright piano in Ulene Payne's living room, which "had originally been a formal Victorian front parlor."³⁹ Originally taught to play by "dutifully practicing Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, et al. on the old t'row-off player piano," Everett Carlyle's growing interest in jazz and blues causes tremendous conflict with his mother.⁴⁰ When her son returns from Army service, which helped to expose him

³⁸ Stephen E Henderson, "The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown." *Black American Literature Forum* 14.1 (1980), 35.

³⁹ Marshall, 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

to Kansas City blues and to expand his musical repertoire, his mother summarily rejects him for playing “Sodom and Gomorrah music.”⁴¹ Here, Marshall evokes the historical discourse on the secularity of jazz and blues to emphasize difference in the African Diaspora. Ulene’s repetition and emphasis of the term “Sodom and Gomorrah music” to describe jazz and blues not only signifies a moral or religious condemnation, but also reflects a critique of Everett Carlyle’s emergent Diasporic identity as well. Since Ulene most readily identifies with the culture of the colonial metropole, as evidenced by her Victorian parlor, her use of Bach piano rolls, and her affinity for “the King’s English,” I suggest that she objects to jazz and blues because they are representations of “Yankee” culture.

When Everett Carlyle shows up on her doorstep in his United States Army uniform, Ulene encounters the visual or external symbol of Everett’s musical development and negotiation of his Diasporic identity. His mother seeks no reconciliation of difference through music: she remains at odds with Everett’s articulation of cultural identity through jazz and blues. In other words, his musical development indicates a broader cultural change in which Ulene sees no allegiance to his Caribbean and, by extension, British past. As the Bach piano rolls demonstrate, Ulene Payne privileges the exact replication of classical musical text, which preserves a Caribbean identity rooted in its relationship to a colonial center. Conversely, Sonny-Rett uses his experiences in America to translate the “tune as written” into “a new kind of music: splintered, atonal, profane, and possessing a wonderful dissonance that spoke to him, to his soul-case.”⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., 135.

⁴² Ibid., 136-7.

Everett's multiple heritages are brought to bear on a process to create a new self that is reflective of and predicated on difference in the Diaspora.

In *The Fisher King*, Marshall also illustrates cultural difference within the African Diaspora through interfamily discord. During little Sonny's visits to his great-grandmother, Florence Varina McCullum-Jones reveals her disdain for the Payne family in particular and the rather large West Indian population in Central Brooklyn in general. Florence Varina holds Sonny-Rett responsible for "robbing" her daughter Cherisse of her opportunities to become a Broadway star and for stealing her away to Paris, France. Overtaken by "rage," Florence Varina then characterizes "W.I.s," or West Indians, as an untrustworthy "gang of thieves" who are responsible for "ruin[ing] the block."⁴³

Ulene Payne expresses similar contempt for the McCullum-Jones family. Regarding Florence Varina and Cherisse as "schemers" responsible for corrupting her son, Ulene disavows their pretentious, bourgeois sensibilities. Cherisse has "nothing on her mind but putting clothes on her back," a value that Ulene Payne believes her mother taught Cherisse. Florence Varina, who worked as a domestic, "would go to clean the white people's toilets dress better than the Madams-self."⁴⁴ Along with better economic opportunity and greater artistic acceptance, this interfamily discord provides the necessary impetus for Everett Carlyle and Cherisse's transatlantic expatriation to France and subsequent vows never to step foot on American soil again.

⁴³ Ibid., 37-8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 171-2.

Difference in the Diaspora: Trumpet

Like *The Fisher King*, *Trumpet* often riffs on the subject of Diaspora. Joss Moody and Millicent Moody's wedding reception reflects the international character of jazz and its ability to unite disparate communities. While Millie's white Scottish mother demonstrates racial prejudice towards Joss Moody, jazz and blues sustain an atmosphere of communal festivity and, at least temporarily, cultural understanding. Millie states:

I spot some people singing into their partners' shoulders' [...]. We dance for ages. We dance as if we are in a movie. Everyone grabs the limelight as if their dance was a solo spot. 'Shake, Rattle 'n' Roll'. 'Bill Bailey'. 'Take the A Train', 'Why Don't You Do Right?', 'Blues in the Night'.⁴⁵

In the midst of the "changing music" of jazz and blues, Millie recalls, "The Moody men start singing the songs that have just come in from America like new trains arriving, steaming at the station. Old Mason Dixon Line."⁴⁶ Kay evokes train symbolism in this scene to unite the Moody men, and this evocation recalls the iconography of the blues and Houston Baker's construction of blues as matrix. Using the railroad crossing to symbolize his blues matrix, Baker states that the blues, "comprise a mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding."⁴⁷ Similar to my analysis of Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* in Chapter One, I have, momentarily, extended the geographical boundaries of Baker's

⁴⁵ Kay, *Trumpet*, 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁷ Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 6.

blues paradigm here since Kay also evokes the symbol of the train and depicts intersecting or crossing cultures in this scene. Kay uses a blues-based jazz aesthetic to unite various members in this Diasporic setting.

This temporary harmony, however, gives way to the discordant clashing of cultural identities that riddle *Trumpet*. The novel draws attention to the differences between members of the African Diaspora by frequently returning to “train-wheels-over-track-junctures” imagery.⁴⁸ While journeying to Glasgow via railroad to retrieve his late-father’s “real life,” Colman Moody, adopted son of Joss and Millie Moody, is forced to confront his yet-to-be-established identity:

His father was always telling him: you are Scottish, you were born in Scotland and that makes you Scottish. But he doesn’t feel Scottish. He doesn’t speak with a Scottish accent. He can do a good one, like all children of Scottish parents, but it’s not him. What is him? This is what he’s been asking himself. It’s all the train’s fault: something about the way the land moves out of the window; about crossing a border [...].⁴⁹

During this train scene, Colman’s blues-filled ruminations lead him to previous arguments with his father concerning cultural identity. One source of conflict between Joss and Colman Moody is Joss’ seemingly uncritical praise of African American males, especially jazzmen. Addressing his father, Colman says, “you spend your whole time worshipping black Yanks: Martin Luther King, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis: Black Yanks all of them. You are not an American,

⁴⁸ Baker 8.

⁴⁹ Kay, *Trumpet*, 190.

are you?”⁵⁰ While Joss Moody identifies with and recognizes the importance of his transatlantic brethren, Colman sardonically discounts his father’s romanticized heroes and repudiates any form of relatedness.

Colman not only refuses any connection to African Americans, but also rejects any relationship to Africa. A link to or identification with Africa is beyond Colman’s imagination - “it feels false to him, mates that get dressed up in African gear, wank on about being African [...]. Back to Africa is just unreal as far as Colman is concerned. He’s never been to Africa, so how can he go back?”⁵¹ Conversely, Joss Moody uses jazz and blues to articulate an imagined Africa, titling one of his albums “Fantasy Africa.”

Jackie Kay constructs Colman as the living embodiment of Diaspora. He is an international everyman whose constant search for a father and a sense of self highlight the subject of Diaspora. Colman states, “people are always coming up to me and asking if I’m from Morocco, Trinidad, Tobago, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Jamaica.”⁵² Colman’s nationality and ethnic heritage are indeterminate by most that observe him in Scotland and London. When Joss and Millie first adopt and rename him, Joss insists on naming him after famous jazz saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, and Millie demands that they use the Irish spelling. Reminded of Edward’s *décalage*, Colman’s presence in the novel maintains difference within the Diaspora, recalling Ornette Coleman rather than Coleman Hawkins. Colman’s search for his father’s “true” identity, filtered through the fluidity and dimensionality of jazz, constantly disrupts any stable notion of Diaspora, just

⁵⁰Ibid., 192.

⁵¹Ibid., 191.

⁵² Kay, *Trumpet*, 58.

as Ornette Coleman's singular contributions "shaped" new directions for jazz and redefined narratives of a jazz tradition.

At the novel's conclusion, Kay obliterates the chance of African Diasporic experience being represented as a monolithic experience. Joss originally equates his father's personal history with other narratives of the Diaspora, stating "his story could be the story of any black man who came from Africa to Scotland."⁵³ Throughout the chronicle, Joss repeatedly emphasizes John Moody's journeys via ship, which evokes Gilroy's "chronotope" of the Black Atlantic.⁵⁴ Here, Joss suggests that his father's history is similar to others who experienced enslavement or indentured servitude when they were brought from Africa to Scotland. Joss says that his father's story could be representative of "any" story of that Diasporic experience. Joss then revises his father's narrative to include his particular experiences after arriving in Greenock. He father receives educational and financial opportunities not afforded to "any black man." In a final letter to Colman, Joss reveals, "my father came off a boat right enough, right into a broth of dense fog."⁵⁵ Joss's father shares some commonality with other black men from the Diaspora, but Kay makes a point to have Joss talk about how his father was different. By particularizing John Moody's history, communicated orally to Joss but expressed textually to Colman, Kay rejects the notion of an undifferentiated African Diasporic experience and asserts a transnational history of the African Diaspora.

⁵³ Ibid., 271.

⁵⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Coda

The recent focus on transnationalism and interdisciplinarity in jazz studies emphasizes the importance of Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* and Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*. Scholars have only begun to examine works that reflect "transatlantic concerns"⁵⁶ in African Diasporic literature. Similar to the direction taken by E. Taylor Atkins in *Blue Nippon*, jazz studies must continue to find other "space(s) for Black transnational interaction, exchange, and dialogue."⁵⁷ Edwards' definition of the term Diaspora "forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor."⁵⁸ Through jazz and blues, Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* provide the "clear, piercing note[s]"⁵⁹ for confronting and celebrating differences in the African Diaspora.

⁵⁶ See the Introduction in Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2001), 5.

⁵⁸ Edwards, *Practicing*, 13.

⁵⁹ Kay, "Interview," 1.

Chapter Four: Forgotten Diasporas: Jazz and Blues Composition in John A. Williams's *Clifford's Blues* and Xam Wilson Cartiér's *Muse-Echo Blues*

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which jazz and blues aesthetics allow for the exploration of experience that is not commonly narrativized in African Diasporic fiction. The two novels that I examine, John A. Williams's *Clifford's Blues* (1999) and Xam Wilson Cartiér's *Muse Echo Blues* (1991), highlight underrepresented histories in African Diasporic literature. In both novels, the central characters point to how their individual acts of musical innovation and reinvention serve as acts of communal inscription. These characters are jazz composers; in these novels, the processes of writing through music and with music take on the dual weight of expressing personal and communal histories. The importance of expressing these histories is that they do not take place within the United States or the places usually associated with jazz and blues. This chapter examines, then, the implications of depicting characters who express personal and communal identities through jazz and blues in places other than Harlem, Chicago, and New Orleans. If jazz is, as cultural scholar J.A. Rogers suggests, both abroad and at home, what is the value of a narrative that travels beyond those settings?¹ Williams and Cartiér deploy aural aesthetics in order to call attention to those neglected areas and to speak on their importance to African Diasporic history. By pairing together two seemingly divergent

¹ See Rogers's "Jazz at Home" reprinted in *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 127-132.

texts, this chapter seeks to illustrate voices that have existed beyond the margins of the historical record and the annals of jazz and blues.

John A. Williams's *Clifford Blues* is a first-person narrative in the form of a diary. The protagonist of the novel is Clifford Pepperidge, a black gay musician born in New Orleans. After years of playing music in New Orleans, Pepperidge joins a jazz band lead by Sam Wooding, a real-life jazz musician, and travels extensively throughout Europe, settling for a time in Germany where he achieves success and popularity as a musician and enjoys personal and artistic freedom. After Nazi authorities discover Clifford's romantic relationship with an American diplomat, they imprison Clifford in a Nazi concentration camp in Dachau for his "criminal activity." As a house servant for SS officer Dieter Lange, Clifford cooks, cleans, and keeps inventory of the household goods and is also called upon to satisfy the sexual desires of Dieter Lange and his wife Anna. Yet, Clifford enjoys freedoms other prisoners do not. He has access to Dieter Lange's catalogue of jazz and blues records, including the Lange's baby grand piano, which he plays both for leisure and for work when Dieter and Anna host functions at their home. Clifford's living quarters are in the basement of the Dieter home, where he writes in his diary that he keeps hidden from the Langes. Clifford's diary entries begin just after he is imprisoned in 1933 and end following the liberation of Dachau in 1945. During this twelve-year time period, Clifford chronicles the pain and suffering at Dachau, from the forced labor under abhorrent conditions to the horrific punishments that lead to death. Throughout his chronicles, blues and jazz play a crucial role in his survival, functioning as systems to convey his experience and the experience of others in Dachau.

The materials that precede and follow Clifford's diary demonstrate the ways in which Williams structures the novel according to the elements of jazz and blues. The bibliography, the epigram, and the two letters that introduce and conclude Clifford's diary, make evident Williams's work with African Diasporic music in his fictionalized account of the black experience during the Nazi Holocaust. Williams includes a bibliography at the end of *Clifford's Blues* to indicate its legitimacy as a historical novel. The bibliography emphasizes Williams's efforts to ground his work in history. In this way, Williams's work to historicize his novel echoes the social function of the blues to document individual experience to represent the group. The epigram of the novel, Negritude poet Aimé Césaire's work "Blues of the Rain," features a musician that rescues the "lost histories" of a people. This poem, then, sets the novel's major theme of the blues and establishes the musician as the important interpreter and conveyer of history. In addition, the poem indicates the transnational character of African Diasporic expressive forms.

Following the Césaire epigraph is a letter that sets up a call-and-response dynamic with another letter that Williams places after Clifford's last diary entry. This correspondence introduces Clifford's diary as the subject of the novel. The letter that precedes his first entry in 1933 and the letter that follows his final diary entry in 1945 reveal the importance of Clifford's diary as a recuperation of lost history. The first letter is written by Gerald "Bounce" Sanderson, who discovers Clifford's diary while on vacation in Europe in the mid 1980s. A random old German man hands Bounce a box that includes Clifford's diary. Bounce manages to get Clifford's diary – a tattered assemblage of loose pages wrapped in an old raincoat – through customs by telling them

it is research about Black people imprisoned in Nazi camps. Bounce writes to his friend Jayson Jones, who is a writer. Bounce explains the significance of finding a diary of a black gay pianist imprisoned during the Holocaust and hopes that Jayson will edit Clifford's story – his blues – to make it into a piece of writing so that the history of African Diasporic people imprisoned during the Nazi Holocaust can be told. The second letter is Jayson Jones's reply to Gerald "Bounce" Sanderson after he has read Clifford's diary. Jayson echoes the importance of Bounce's find. Jayson also emphasizes that Clifford's history is part of a larger history of African Diasporic experience during the Holocaust that does not get examined or discussed. Jayson does his own research on the musicians who appear throughout Clifford's diary, including Valaida Snow, Willie Lewis, Freddie Johnson, and Sam Wooding. In real-life, all of these musicians spent some time in Germany either just before or during the Third Reich, and Snow was actually imprisoned in a camp. In Williams's fictional world, Sam Wooding, who serves as Clifford's bandleader and mentor in blues and jazz traditions, provides this necessary grounding in the real-life history that is a major part of Williams's novel.

To understand how Williams uses music to shape Clifford's composition of personal and communal histories not previously seen in African Diasporic fiction, this chapter examines three specific scenes, or entries in Clifford's diary, that highlight jazz and blues as major elements. In the first scene, Clifford must create a jazz band in the face of Nazi pronouncements that the band must not play identifiably Black music. For Clifford and the other musicians, playing blues and jazz becomes a way to manage their blues. The band becomes a small community that helps each member deal with the terrors of Nazi imprisonment. In the second scene, Clifford's band is disassembled and he

must find a new way to “compose” music. Faced with the prospect of enduring years and years of suffering without the ability to play music with his band, Clifford participates in an antiphonal exchange, or call-and-response dialogue, with God and revises the spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord” to bear witness to his and his community’s suffering in Dachau. Clifford composes a blues that reveals and reflects its historical connection with the spiritual. In the third scene, music serves as a platform for Clifford to forge connections with other African Diasporic prisoners in Dachau. During Clifford’s conversation with Dr. Nyassa, a fellow prisoner who is an African medical practitioner and biologist, he establishes a connection with Dr. Nyassa by discussing the “new” music that he hears as a result of his imprisonment. In these three scenes, *Clifford’s Blues* explores jazz and blues to emphasize the expression of individual and communal history. I examine these scenes to demonstrate the profound influence of jazz and blues have in shaping these representations of African Diasporic history.

Muse-Echo Blues, which shares with *Clifford’s Blues* an emphasis on presenting African Diasporic history, is a novel also told predominately in the first-person. The protagonist is Kat, a jazz instrumentalist and composer who lives in 1990s San Francisco. Kat suffers from a creative block: she is unable to compose music. Her struggles with composing music, which often occur while she sits in front of her piano, mirror her struggles in her romantic life. While Kat experiences difficulty in her romantic relationships, those are not the primary focus of the novel. Instead, the novel centers on Kat’s difficulty with finding a way to develop as a musical composer. To make clear how Cartier uses music to shape Kat’s composition of personal and communal histories not

previously seen in African Diasporic fiction, this chapter examines two sets of muses who provide the structure and the content of Kat's composition.

Conscious of the need to move beyond her creative inertia, Kat begins to indulge in daydreams and “fantasies” of the past that feature two women – her muses – who are involved in jazz and blues music. The first muse is Kitty, a woman living in 1940s Kansas City, Missouri who witnesses the development of jazz and blues while developing a relationship with a saxophonist. The second muse is Lena, a singer who leaves Kansas City, Missouri in the 1930s to become a featured artist a la Bessie Smith in a Uruguayan nightclub. Kitty and Lena’s experiences as creators, interpreters, and first-hand witnesses of jazz and blues history during critical moments of musical development provide Kat with hard learned life lessons to inspire her to write new musical compositions and to communicate her own history as a jazz composer.

Before discussing how Kitty and Lena’s experiences provide Kat with a foundation to develop personally and artistically, it is important to discuss the three real-life musicians who influence *Muse-Echo Blues*: Sun Ra, Charles Mingus, and Cecil Taylor. Much like Cartiér’s protagonist Kat, these now-famous but often misunderstood jazz musicians once occupied spaces on the fringes of jazz and blues history because they were considered too avante-garde. Although they are now accepted as crucial contributors to jazz history, their musical accomplishments as jazz composers – like Kat’s work as a composer in the novel – were neither understood nor embraced by mainstream jazz. The following paragraphs illustrate how Sun Ra, Charles Mingus, and Cecil Taylor influence Xam Wilson Cartiér's novel, which aims to foreground the role of women as composers in the development of jazz and blues.

The first muse, the musician Sun Ra, is featured in the novel's epigraph, taken from one of Sun Ra's philosophical poems. The epigraph, "If you're not a myth, whose reality are you?" presents themes of self-inquiry and discovery, and of reality and fantasy. Sun Ra's artistic productions – his music and his philosophical statements presented as poetry – were often meditations on existence. This epigraph points to how the individual identifies herself in relation to the group, which is central to jazz musicianship. Throughout the novel, Kat "discovers" herself by exploring her self-generated fantasies or "myths."

In addition to these thematic influences on the novel, we can note Sun Ra's influence in the disjunctive, non-sequential narrative structure. A major exponent of the free jazz, which sought to liberate the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic dimensions of jazz, Sun Ra reflects a commitment to musical and individual freedom. Cartiér takes similar freedoms when it comes to organizing the novel's scenes, as the narrative shifts from the past to the present both between and within individual chapters.

Another exponent of free jazz that serves as Kat's muse and influences *Muse-Echo Blues* is Charles Mingus. Cartiér includes the sheet music from Mingus's piano solo composition "Myself When I Am Real" just before the narrative begins with Kat at a downtown San Francisco party. This sheet music echoes the theme of identity and freedom implied by the Sun Ra epigraph. The inclusion of Mingus's sheet music at the beginning insists that the reader engage the language of jazz. One can "read" the novel only after "seeing" the musical notation of jazz music. This document of musical notation also points to Mingus's identity as a jazz composer. Cartiér includes this specific composition to call attention to a composer's work, which involves the improvisation-

informed process of defining the self “within and against the group.” This process is central to Kat’s development as an artist and as a person.

The third muse who helps Kat explore her personal and musical identity is Cecil Taylor. Kat’s identification with Taylor is crucial to understanding her development. Cecil Taylor’s music was not accepted as mainstream jazz and his critics often found him difficult to understand because Taylor’s approaches to composition and performance did not conform to some of the standards of what jazz was known to be. Kat identifies with Cecil Taylor’s status as outsider and embraces his unique aesthetic approaches to music. For example, in one scene Taylor’s music plays in the background while Kat has an argument. Taylor’s music helps Kat to make sense of her thoughts and feelings.

Understanding the influence of Sun Ra, Charles Mingus, and Cecil Taylor on the novel clarifies the roles of Kat’s muses Kitty and Lena. Kat experiences fantasies, or what she calls the “insistent vision” of her muses.² She has two primary fantasies. One fantasy features Kitty, a woman living in Kansas City in the 1940s during the bebop era, a period in which that jazz style flourished. The musical landscape changed significantly because of the creativity of jazz and blues artists. Kitty provides a first-hand account of those individuals who helped shape jazz during that period. Kat says that Kitty is “the narrator and also the star of a sequence of strange escapades” of her mind.³ In addition to the focus on the bebop era developments of jazz and blues, Kat’s “strange escapades” of Kitty often focus on Kitty’s romantic relationship to Chicago Ames. Chicago is a jazz musician who plays with the Billy Eckstein band, and Kitty describes his saxophone performances set against the backdrop of the group. Kitty’s experiences are framed by

² Xam Wilson Cartiér, *Muse-Echo Blues* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

her position as an observer and interpreter of a musical landscape that includes a virtual “who’s who” of jazz and blues legends. Kat’s fantasies of Kitty include appearances by Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Miles Davis. Kitty has discussions with Sarah Vaughn and Lester Young, which cements her role as witness to jazz history.

Another source of inspiration for Kat is Lena, who is the mother of Kitty’s love interest Chicago. Lena gives him that name because the city of Chicago represented, at one point, a place of artistic and personal freedom. Chicago was a symbol of change from her life as a married mother in Kansas City, Missouri to a successful singer in the city’s nightclubs. For Lena, singing is something that she has to do, so she leaves her husband and her young son Chicago for the opportunity of singing in South America. She meets and becomes romantically involved with Camvren, a wealthy European businessman who invites her to join him in Uruguay where he is building a hotel replete with a nightclub. Lured by the prospect of realizing her dreams of being a jazz and blues singer, Lena travels to Montevideo, Uruguay with Camvren, forsaking her obligations to matrimony and motherhood. Lena feels that her romantic relationship with Camvren is a means to an end: in order to be featured in Camvren’s lounge, Lena must continue to engage Camvren sexually. After three years of waiting for Camvren’s hotel to be built, Lena finally sings in the nightclub, but does not achieve the success she imagined.

The structure of the novel, therefore, reflects the non-linear aspect of jazz. In the jazz idiom, musical ideas are not necessarily expressed in sequence. The stories of Kat, Kitty, and Lena weave in and out of one another. For example, the novel shifts from 1990s San Francisco to 1940s Kansas City, Missouri to 1930s Montevideo, Uruguay. Two of these places have not been commonly affiliated with jazz and blues music; hence

their importance to this study of underrepresented experiences in African Diasporic literature. The freedom that is a common characteristic of jazz provides Cartiér with a narrative strategy that collapses time and distance between 1990s San Francisco and 1930s Montevideo. Parts of Kat's narrative contain Kitty's narrative "voice," and at the very end of the novel, Kitty and Lena engage in dialogue. In other words, their narrative voices come together and they directly speak to one another across time and space. This dialogue across disparate eras provides the novel with a sense of continuity and a sense of collectivity that is emblematic of jazz music. In addition, it demonstrates that the novel expresses the experiences of a community that have been underrepresented.

Locating Diaspora

Intersecting at similar historical moments, some of primary scenes in *Clifford's Blues* and in *Muse-Echo Blues* occur in drastically different geographical locations: Dachau, Germany, San Francisco, California, Kansas City, Missouri, and Montevideo, Uruguay. I suggest that the novels emphasize these other fields of Diaspora, expressing experience from regions and persons through the imprint of jazz and blues idioms to counteract the silences produced by histories like the one Mingus presents. By examining the "structures of feeling" in African Diasporic expressions of the self rooted in the blues, this chapter avoids what Ann duCille identifies as a pitfall of blues-based literary criticism:

Claiming the blues and the folk as the grand signifier of *the* black experience leaves the blues critic little room to decipher other inscriptions and liberating

rhythms. Too often writers whose expressive geographies are perceived as lying outside the blues space are not remapped but demapped.⁴

The blues in *Clifford's Blues* and Cartiér's *Muse-Echo Blues* are moved off the traditional American map of experience. By locating sites of blues practice and interpretation that are not commonly associated with the more common spaces of the blues tradition, the novels expand the physical and expressive boundaries of Diaspora.

The “liberating rhythms” of Williams’s *Clifford's Blues* and Cartiér’s *Muse-Echo Blues* draw on the technical aspects of jazz and blues. They also make use of the philosophical and social underpinnings of these musical forms. The novels reflect blues’ insistence on communal history and tradition. Blues songs are individual articulations of experience based on collective experience. Therefore, the blues functions as a repository for communal values and history or a form of cultural archive. As the musical idiom demonstrates, new approaches are formed through repetition of old ideas. In these novels, the blues aesthetic allows for communal values to be affirmed, denied, or revised through critique.

Clifford's Blues and *Muse-Echo Blues* illustrate the blues as a mode of resilience and resistance.⁵ The philosophy of the blues recognizes that life is a “low down dirty shame,” but that philosophy does not call for a helpless submission to that power. On the contrary, blues calls for a conscious recognition of that power and insists on a response to it. In other words, the blues philosophy is one of perseverance, asserting a “toughness of

⁴ Ann duCille. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 68.

⁵ See LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 17; Sterling Brown, “Spirituals, Blues, and Jazz—The Negro in the Lively Arts.” *Tricolor* 3 (April 1975) 62-70; and Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 367-69.

spirit.”⁶ The blues music can communicate loss, anguish, suffering or yearning; however, as Albert Murray contends, they often communicate celebration or joy, functioning more as a restorative and stabilizing force.⁷ In many instances, the ritual of blues and jazz performance is both cathartic and rejuvenating. *Clifford’s Blues* and *Muse-Echo Blues* underscore the importance of blues as an integral, inseparable part of jazz’s developing history, while using both aesthetics to create novels that attest to African Diasporic experiences from voices and in spaces not commonly “mapped.”

Blue Dachau: Diasporic Witnessing and The Nazi Holocaust

African Diasporic experience in Germany is a neglected space in the African Diasporic literary imaginary. In *Clifford’s Blues*, John A. Williams presents the first work of its kind: a narrative that exposes the horrors of Nazi Germany from the perspective of an African American homosexual musician. After several years imprisoned in Dachau listening to fellow prisoners disclose their stories of suffering and survival, protagonist Clifford Pepperidge ponders, “I don’t know why people do this with me. Is it because I’m an American, even if a Negro? Or do they look at me and see a witness.”⁸ This instance of identification – and it is not difficult to suggest a triple-consciousness of sorts – reflects a view of witnessing that is moored to and untethered from nationhood. Clifford

⁶ Larry Neal, “The Ethos of the Blues” in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, ed. Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder’s Mouth. Press, 1989), 110.

⁷ Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo 1989), 86. In an extended discussion of blues lyrics, Murray states that they are part of “the fundamental ritual of purification, affirmation, and celebration.” See *Stomping* 84-9.

⁸ Williams, *Clifford’s Blues*, 237.

observes the “Dachau Blues” in its many manifestations, suggesting a transnational character of blues.

I consider the term “Blue Dachau” in this section heading to be a provocation to theorize about what Williams hoped to achieve by employing blues and jazz within the context of a Nazi concentration camp. To prove that these musical aesthetics are systems of witnessing, I examine specific technical and philosophical elements of improvisation and call-and-response that serve in Williams’s purposeful acts of remembrance “[d]edicated to those without memorial or monument.”⁹ Williams uses blues and jazz to serve not only in his project of historical recovery, but also to demonstrate their cross-cultural, transnational capacities for expressing Diasporic experience. First, I discuss Williams’s efforts at retrieving lost history through the interpretive prism of jazz and blues aesthetics. Through close textual analysis, I prove that while the novel at times evinces a limit to the spiritual and philosophical contributions of a jazz or blues orientation, which troubles the compatibility of music and Holocaust memory, it is the work within these limits that leads to the vigor and efficacy of Clifford’s musically informed testimony.

The representations of history in John A. Williams's work involve acts of recuperation and renovation that respond to the silences and omissions of African Diasporic history. Following his earlier literary productions of the 1960s, Williams’s subsequent novels demonstrate a more conspicuous engagement with African Diasporic experience to address these silences. His novel *Captain Blackman*, for example, traces the experiences of an African American soldier from the Civil War to the Vietnam War to inscribe the black subject into the narrative of military history. In his approach to

⁹ Ibid., 9.

Clifford's Blues, Williams conducted extensive research over the course of three decades to create a novel that calls attention to, importantly, the detention and disappearance of African Americans during the Third Reich.

The novel's protagonist Clifford Pepperidge enjoys a comfortable life of performance and leisure in Berlin until German authorities discover his romantic relationship with an American diplomat. The authorities view his homosexual affair as "criminal activity," and Clifford is imprisoned in Dachau from nearly its inception in 1933 to its liberation in 1945. He becomes a house servant to an influential Nazi officer Dieter Lange. In order to carve out some measure of hope, life, and joy in an environment drenched in death, decay, oppression, and injustice – certainly a functional definition that approaches the transcendent character of the blues – Cliff fulfills both the commonplace and sexual desires of Lange and his wife Anna. The three exist in a peculiar blues troika, which may have led Williams to consider initially using three narrators rather than one. Williams avoids the polyphonic approach to voice in favor of a single consciousness serving as experiential archivist and historical interpreter steeped in blues and jazz traditions.

Clifford's Blues should be considered a solo – a singular work that explores the experiences of African Diasporic people and the Holocaust via a protagonist not previously seen in African Diasporic literature. John A. Williams amassed and researched historical material over the course of three decades, particularly during a moment when Holocaust Studies in the academy was in its nascent stages. As he wrote the novel, there were few prevailing methodologies, but his need to chronicle the lives of those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand began with his interest in recording oral histories and

other forms of personal narrative. Williams's novel demonstrates some of the early challenges that surfaced during the formation of Holocaust Studies. *Clifford's Blues* raises the specter of authenticity and agency as to who is qualified or acceptable to bear witness to the Shoah. Williams appends an extensive bibliography within the novel to provide a historical authenticity to the text.

The publication of Williams's novel coincided with a surge in interest in African Diasporic studies along with an increased scholarly focus on transnationality, globalization, and post-colonialism. At that time a still-emerging field of academic inquiry, Afro-German Studies has only recently gained traction and attractiveness. Among the important Afro-German scholarship, Clarence Lusane's non-fiction *Hitler's Black Victims* provides in-depth research on the history of black experience during the Nazi Holocaust. Lusane's work, however, underscores the important part of Williams's project to bring to light the untold number of African Diasporic people who were detained, imprisoned, and killed during the Third Reich. *Victims* uses an excerpt from *Clifford's Blues* because it identifies the importance of Williams's novel as one of the only places that provides access to this portion of African Diasporic history. Lusane's non-fiction emphasizes the significance of "fiction" to provide entry points into previously unexplored histories. It is through his black gay musician Clifford Pepperidge that Williams riffs on, renders, and reads the suffering of the Holocaust.

As its title suggests, *Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* foregrounds a simple query that continues to problematize Holocaust Studies. Why return to the catalogue of unimaginable traumas to articulate their consequences and

meanings?¹⁰ One answer: the seeming paradox of writing about the irretrievable, inestimable horrors of the Holocaust is an increasingly powerful force in cultural imperatives of remembrance. Holocaust Studies continues to examine value of twice-spoken testimony revisited by second generation survivors, third wave witnesses, and those not even culturally affiliated with the Holocaust. In the critical study *Writing the Holocaust*, Zoe Waxman examines to what degree is Holocaust experience “ineffable,”¹¹ particularly in view of the many narratives of suffering and survival that comprise this expanding body of cultural production. Waxman argues that these remembrances are textured not only by the historical circumstances in which they are communicated, but also by the very subject position of each witness. In other words, it is the individual expression of experience that provides the exigence for these holocaust narratives. Nearly as important in examining the subjective, personal nature of witnessing, Waxman states that witnessing has lead to the creation of certain narratives and narrative conventions to the exclusion of others. For example, Waxman points to the predominance of Auschwitz stories in Holocaust narratives, suggesting that authors use such stories furnish a sense of authenticity. The emphasis on this specific narrative element, Waxman suggests, validates not only the narrative’s importance, but also its author. While portions of a witness’s narrative may adhere to such conventions, such a narrative strategy should not outweigh the value of the narrative to a community’s cultural memory nor should it void the witness’s attempt to render a credible personal experience that, in its very expression, moves trauma to triumph.

¹⁰Introduction, 1-4.

¹¹ Zoe Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 174.

Viewing Waxman's assessment of Holocaust narratives, Williams's use of the blues in a Holocaust narrative becomes clear. The cultural significance of the blues moves the ineffable to the realm of the effable. The blues express centuries and sagas of suffering. The blues is the movement through trauma, the use of an entire body of music and meaning to define the contours of the grain.

The Structure of Witnessing

In terms of its first-person narration, *Clifford's Blues* is unlike four of the five preceding novels in this dissertation. Similar to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, it is a blues: an individualized expression that speaks for a community or collective that shares similar views and values. *Clifford's Blues* is linear to a degree, but its fractures and fissures of time reflect the disjointedness of jazz time.¹² While Clifford's journal entries proceed calendrically, they are disjointed, sometimes skipping weeks and sometimes months. This narrative structure lends veracity to his narrative: it conveys a sense of improvisation since Clifford has to find the right moments in which to write in his secret journal hidden in a compartment in the Lange's basement. This extemporal shift, or the disjointed movement across time that reflects improvisation, distorts the approach to the otherwise linear history that Clifford presents in his diary. Clifford must constantly adapt to the ever-shifting climate at Dachau. As more and more people are imprisoned, he must expand his diary – his composition – to incorporate the new sets of experiences and their attendant horrors. In this way, Clifford becomes not only a

¹² *Muse-Echo Blues* traverses different time periods, presenting that non-linearity of narrative progression similarly observed in the presentation of motifs and themes in jazz. Its temporal and spatial dynamism demonstrate further congruity with the principles and practices of African Diasporic music.

chronicler of his own existence but also a witness for those he sees suffering from his privileged viewpoint.

The novel's bookends, which are Aimé Césaire's poem "Blues of the Rain," and the two letters from Bounce and Jay, present Williams's goals: to retrieve and redistribute the temporarily "defeated" histories of African Diasporic experience while establishing blues as a crucial component to communicate those histories. A translation of Aimé Césaire's "Blues of the Rain" that serves as the novel's epigraph foregrounds common blues themes of suffering and loss, linking individual experience to group experience. Referencing Césaire's poem also establishes the internationalism of blues (and by extension, jazz), illustrating the possibility of literature that speaks for and speaks to members of the Diaspora. In the first four lines of the poem, Césaire places the "beautiful musician" named Aguacero close to the "lost harmonies" of a people. Aguacero, meaning heavy rain in Spanish, is linked to the concluding line "we sobbed," foregrounding the novel's blues atmospherics.¹³ Yet, the poem demonstrates that blues is a collective process of working through the "anguish" of experience and memory and highlights Clifford's role as historical interpreter and cultural arbiter.

The two letters that enclose the narrative proper discuss the survival, recovery, and the intended circulation of Clifford's lost story. More, the correspondence shows how call-and-response not only undergirds the narrative structure of *Clifford's Blues* but also recurs throughout the novel to point to the influence of jazz and blues. In the initial call, Gerald "Bounce" Sanderson pens a letter to an old friend, writer Jayson Jones. Bounce, while vacationing in Europe for the summer, obtains the diary of a black "piano man,"

¹³ Aimé Césaire, *Non-Vicious Cycle: Twenty Poems of Aimé Césaire*. Translated by Gregson Davis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 40.

Clifford Pepperidge. Bounce decides that his “strange” experience cannot be sheer coincidence. Bounce writes, “the old soldier giving this [diary] to us, our knowing you, is a spooky triple play. Old soldier to Bounce to Jay. Not an accident. Maybe a mysterious way” (12). Jay’s response to Bounce’s letter and to Clifford’s diary reflects Williams’s concern with recovering and expanding African Diasporic history. Jayson remarks that black presence in Germany has only recently entered into public discussion. More, he provides background stories on real-life jazz musicians who appear in Clifford’s diary, most notably Sam Wooding, Ruby Mae Richards, and the “queen of the trumpet,” Valaida Snow. More, Jayson riffs on Clifford’s story to testify to other African Diasporic experiences: the suffering Ethiopian Jews during that period, the German’s Black sterilization efforts that began in colonial Africa, and government-sanctioned syphilis experiments on African Americans. For Jason, Clifford’s “blues” is one riff in a magnum jazz opus of forgotten, unspoken, or unrecovered African Diasporic history.

This call-and-response dynamic where Bounce and Jay speak about and across Clifford’s 150-entry journal reveals that narratives lie at the fringe or are otherwise lost to a broader historical record. Williams utilizes blues as a form to expose these narratives. The blues as it operates in the narrative supplies a specific philosophical approach that, at least initially, provides the protagonist with a system of sustainment. Clifford’s loss of freedom, lack of love and intimacy, and impending loss of life echo throughout his journal entries. Sadness saturates the air at Dachau; however, the blues provide Cliff with “equipment for living,” a strategy and a salve to thwart the fear and pain of daily existence. Clifford learns blues philosophy from the character Sam Wooding, and this outlook proves to be crucial to Cliff’s survival in the German camp. In one of his earliest

diary entries, Clifford ruminates about escaping from Clifford recalls Wooding's perspectives and discusses the therapeutic properties of the blues:

Mr. Wooding used to say that was the blues, what white folk called a "lament," because what you were lamenting or feeling blue about was what you knew but couldn't do anything about. So you sang or played, and that helped to make things a little better. That was African, Mr. Wooding said, because you were at least saying things were out of your control.¹⁴

Throughout the novel, Clifford remarks on the pervasiveness of the blues; however, his position as Dieter Lange's calfactor allows him regular access to music: Cliff plays Lange's collection of phonograph records and he "tinkers" on the baby grand piano that Lange procures to help host parties in his camp home. Emphasizing the preservative power of the blues here, Williams introduces Sam Wooding – a notable jazz figure in the 1920s – as a crucial part of his recuperative project.

Recovering History

Sam Wooding occupies a unique position, one of underscored significance, in the continuum of jazz history and is important to understanding Williams's use of jazz in the novel. Wooding's presence in the novel emphasizes Williams's consistent efforts to historicize this fictional work. Wooding offers an entry point for considerations of the global impact of jazz, both in terms of what was played and how it was presented in the first decades of the twentieth century. His performances help to alter the very paradigms of receiving, or listening to jazz in that historical moment, amplifying African Diasporic artistry to jazz's international circulation within Germany. Williams, therefore, points to

¹⁴ Williams, *Clifford's Blues*, 20.

this development outside of the United States of both Diasporic consciousness and culture, which is accessed simultaneously through Clifford Pepperidge and Sam Wooding.

The introductory letter from Gerald “Bounce” Sanderson demonstrates Wooding’s importance as a springboard of Williams’s restoration of African Diasporic history and literary reimagining of Holocaust history. This establishes a fictional/factual axis quickly, as Bounce immediately affixes Sam Wooding to Clifford. In the mid 1920s, Wooding and his band toured extensively throughout Europe. It was the review “Chocolate Kiddies” that led to Wooding’s travels outside of the Americas. In this regard, Williams points to the importance of jazz’s international prominence and influence.

In his work on the reception of jazz by African American musicians visiting Germany in the 1920s, Jonathan Wipplinger approximates Wooding’s considerable contributions in not only shaping the way jazz was performed in Germany, but also the way in which it exponentially expanded the sonic palates of German audiences.¹⁵ Indeed, the novelty of those jazz listeners unaccustomed to both the aural and visual presentations of jazz by Wooding’s band produced what Wipplinger regards as “aural shock.” Translating from a variety of news sources, Wipplinger suggests that Wooding’s band, as expressed in the discourse of Adorno and other early European writers on jazz, elicited responses to something previously unseen and unheard. Aural shock notwithstanding, jazz enjoyed a level of dignified reception during the Weimar Republic, coinciding with

¹⁵ Jonathan Wipplinger, "The Aural Shock of Modernity." *Germanic Review* Vol. 82, No. 4 (Fall 2007): 299-320.

the period in which Wooding first introduced jazz, blues, and their cultural diversities of sound.¹⁶

In *Clifford's Blues*, Williams points to the shift in attitude and taste towards jazz and blues specifically, and to African Diasporic music in general. Viewing Wooding's contribution to the development of jazz's reception, recognition, and appreciation by German audiences, Williams establishes Clifford as a cultural arbiter who has been sufficiently mentored and is equipped with an aural orientation to bear witness to the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and World War II. After the announcement of another major Nazi offensive and the growing sense of protracted military engagement, Clifford analogizes blues and war:

For everybody, it must be like doing a crazy solo in a great big band with row upon row of brass, reeds and sidemen doubled up everywhere. When will this solo end? How many more bars to go? What? Another chorus? What? Another and another and another...? No coda in sight? Another bar of a melody that none of the prisoners wants to dance to anymore (though they must, of course)? When does this blues piece end? Cause that's what it is, a blues to end all blues, your soul getting soggy and coming apart like bread in water. Can't put no name on these blues."¹⁷

In this passage, Williams clearly configures blues as an index of suffering, again recognizing the inexplicability of facing an endless existence of punishment and pending death. But his description is also an assertion of a specifically African Diasporic

¹⁶ Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8-13.

¹⁷ Williams, *Clifford's Blues*, 230.

perspective as evidenced by the type of instrumentation that Clifford imagines. Indeed, the very dimensions of jazz that Nazi Germany sought to eliminate from national life and culture, Williams depicts to attest to suffering that pervades Dachau. This depiction is an amplification of African Diasporic expressivity.

Call-And-Response and Diasporic Consciousness

This specific form of expressivity is evident in Clifford's interaction with Nazi officers concerning the presence of jazz and blues in Dachau, which occurs early in the novel. When a band is organized to play at the Lebenshorn, a leisure club for SS officers, Clifford has a conversation with the SS officer Bernhardt over both the type of music acceptable to play and the band's personnel. Given the status of blues and jazz as "Entartete Musik" or "degenerate music" according to Third Reich pronouncements, Bernhardt instructs Cliff not to call the music blues or jazz publically. Instead, he charges Clifford with the task of changing both the lyrics of the songs that he sings and the timber or sonic qualities of the music to remove traces of "Neger Musik." Doubting the sonic productions these restrictions would yield, Clifford remarks, "this band was not going to sound like anything Freddie Johnson or Willy Lewis could put together in Amsterdam or Paris. I hoped it would sound bad enough for Bernhardt to give me some people who he'd let play brass, and more reeds."¹⁸ In this context, I view Clifford's desire to have more brass and reeds as an opposition to the existing hegemonic discourse.

Aside from referencing two other accomplished international stars of 1920s and 1930s jazz to highlight further the international circulation of Diasporic music, Williams points

¹⁸ Williams, *Clifford's Blues*, 78-9.

to the racial polarizing of swing music based on the perceived hegemony of sonic creativity in jazz music. In Nazi Germany, jazz was devalued as an art form because of both its roots in African American culture and because it was a perceived marker of a black nation. Jazz, then, posed a threat to German ideas of racial and national purity, since they identified jazz and blues as a debased art form that compromised the homogeneity of the Aryan race¹⁹. In both its rhythms, harmonies, as well as modes and effects of presentation, jazz and swing represented aural disruptions that potentially could have led to cultural and racial discontinuity. As Germany continued to coalesce a national identity, jazz stood counter to that process. Williams interfaces with that history, aligning swing with a racial hierarchy and hegemony reflected in both America and Germany. Williams elects to represent German attempts to divorce swing from jazz, to cleave the cultural heritage from Diasporic music through its instrumentation and sonic configuration. After the Nazi officer orders Clifford to change the names of the songs and to make the music less conspicuously jazz, Clifford rhetorically wonders if jazz and swing are “from the same big old black tree?”²⁰

His captors allow Clifford to organize a jazz band with other Dachau prisoners, offering its members opportunities to also use music as a refuge. In terms of its instrumentation, the formation of the band is fueled by improvisation since jazz music is considered degenerate music and a national threat in Germany. An accordion and violin

¹⁹ One visual representation of this racist sentiment is the illustration displayed during the 1938 Reich Music Festival, which is used as the cover art for Mike Zwerin’s *Swing Under the Nazis: Jazz as a Metaphor for Freedom*, first edition (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000). Also, see Albrecht Dümmling’s “The Target of Racial Purity: The ‘Degenerate Music’ Exhibition in Dusseldorf, 1938” in *Art, Culture, and Media Under the Third Reich*, ed. Richard A. Etlin (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2002), 57.

²⁰ Williams, *Clifford’s Blues*, 76.

are not standard pieces in a jazz ensemble, yet Clifford must make the music from an eclectic mix of piano, drums, accordion, harmonica, guitar, cello, violin, French horn, clarinet, and flute “swing.” Clifford believes he is given certain personnel since he admits “I couldn’t write music; I couldn’t even read music.”²¹ Cliff participates in “jam sessions” with the camp band, keeping music as the only life-preserving constant in an ever-changing atmosphere where “fear gets to be the kind of pain you have to live with—everybody, all the time.”²²

While blues and jazz afford Clifford and his band members certain luxuries and freedoms inaccessible to other Dachau prisoners, the band’s existence ends after three short years. In the entry dated September 29, 1939, World War II has begun with the invasion of Poland just weeks prior to the entry. A commanding officer visits the Lange home to not only announce the official start of the war, but also the breakup of Clifford’s band. “Cliff Pepperidge and his Wittelsbachers are no more. Immediately.” Clifford enters into the diary, “I’m sure Bernhardt thought he was saying it lightly, but it came across like doom cracking through the house.”²³ Clifford views the loss of the band as a threat not only to his existence, but the existence of his band members as well.

The scene seemingly portrays the inability of the blues to sufficiently bear the weight of Clifford’s anguish. Clifford enumerates instances of suffering and loss – the blues – that will continue at Dachau as the war spreads:

²¹ Ibid., 75.

²² Ibid., 121.

²³ Ibid., 194.

In the camp someone is dying in great pain that You will not ease; someone is hanging himself; someone is hungry and whimpering beneath a blanket whose warmth never was; someone is crying; someone is running away (bang!bang!).²⁴

Clifford admits that music does not always serve as an adequate means of coping with the diverse horrors of the camp. He says, “[m]y music is wounded and it bleeds my life away. It won’t JUMP and SHOUT, do You hear me? It won’t SWING and SWAY.”²⁵ The vitality, the spirit of his music that expresses the collective appears lost here, and Clifford’s litany of atrocities suggests that a magnified war will claim the life and liberty of “another and another and another” without the witnessing power of the blues.²⁶ Yet, it is the antiphonal exchange and improvisation that precedes his claims that demonstrate his ability to open the blues up to express what Albert Murray calls “an epic sense of life.”²⁷

While the concept of call-and-response is pervasive throughout African American expressivity, it is worth turning to the musicological definition of call-and-response here to bring Clifford’s act of improvisation closer to the orbit of religion and spirituality. Clifford modifies the Negro spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord,” substituting the word “Lord” with names of those who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis:

Were You there when they crucified my colonel?

²⁴ Ibid., 199.

²⁵ Ibid., 198.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Murray 68.

Were You there when they crucified my Menno?

ooOOO-sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble,

tremble...

Were You there when they crucified them all?²⁸

This initial stanza establishes the larger pattern of improvisational witnessing, placing Clifford's lovers, friends, and co-prisoners within this sphere of antiphonal exchange. Yet, Clifford's direct address to You, or the Lord, the antiphonal exchange reflects the religious and spiritual dimensions of blues.

The compatibility of Holocaust narratives with the blues also becomes evident when one considers this religious aspect of antiphonal exchange within a blues context. The antiphonal exchange in Clifford's recast of "Were You There" recalls the importance of Moshe the Beadle, a crucial figure to Elie Wiesel's spiritual and personal development in the influential Holocaust memoir *Night*. In his discussions with Moshe the Beadle, who spoke little but sang songs where one could hear the "suffering of the divinity," young Elie finds a theological framework for interpreting man's relation to God. Elie states:

[Moshe] explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer. 'Man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks him,' he was fond of repeating. 'That is true dialogue. Man questions God and God Answers. But we don't understand his answers.'²⁹

²⁸ Williams, *Clifford's Blues*, 197.

²⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982) 2.

Moshe's connection to and correspondence with "divinity" are represented through his singing, and his theological perspectives also signify an adherence to antiphonal exchange or "true dialogue."

I suggest, then, that Clifford's riff on "Were You There" bridges the prime symbol of Christian suffering with blues suffering in Dachau, and this dialogue reveals the historical closeness of the blues and the spiritual. The scene unpacks the religious dimension of the blues and its relationship to the spirituals, extending it beyond the simple dichotomy of the devil's music and sacred Sorrow Songs. The spiritual dimension of the blues, engendered through the aural mode in Clifford's improvisational reworking of a traditional Sorrow Song, diversifies the blues here to speak to African Diasporic experience. At the same time, this reworking acknowledges and reconfigures the "otherworldly" considerations of religion. Indeed, through the transformation of the spiritual, Williams successfully locates the empowering aspect of musical reconfigurations and effectively contracts the distance between the two musical genres, revealing the theological underpinnings of the blues.³⁰

³⁰ Theological scholar James Cone suggests that the similarities of blues and the spirituals are based on a shared "bedrock of experience," and that they derived from not only African American experiences with chattel slavery, but also from a history of systemic political and cultural oppression. Yet, Cone indicates that these "secular spirituals" neglect the religious considerations of the church. He maintains that although the blues interfaces with the existential, its conceptual negotiation of good and evil is not necessarily "God-centered." At odds with Cone's misreading of the relationship between blues and religion, Jon Michael Spencer argues for a blues theodicy where the music could reflect on the origins and purposes of evil. This blues theodicy offers modes of blues performance where "the whole being of the singer [is] engaged in intense spiritual expression, a crooning, crying, and moaning confession that left the blue soul washed clean at the blues alter." Angela M. Nelson clarifies that theodicy in African American expressivity demonstrates an "understanding the cause and nature of suffering in their present and historical lives." See James Cone's "The Blues: A Secular Spiritual." *Write Me A Few Of Your Lines. A Blues Reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 233, Jon Michael Spencer's *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of*

While Clifford admits earlier in the novel that he cannot write or read blues, this antiphonal exchange and improvisation of the spiritual, rendered through writing in his diary, symbolizes a new means of expression for Clifford to bear witness. At other points in the novel, Clifford returns to evocations of “You,” suggesting that this dialogue is central to his modes of blues expressivity. Just as Clifford writes to respond to the “sounding silence” of prayers unanswered, Williams writes to speak back to a history of narratives untold.³¹ The approaches to representing the Third Reich and the Holocaust are fraught with challenges, and the post-Holocaust imperative to “never forget” continues to generate texts of recuperation and remembrance that point to spaces of loss and silence. Williams’s novel brings to light the untold number of African Diasporic people detained, imprisoned, and killed during the Third Reich. It is through his musician Clifford Pepperidge that Williams rescues, renders, and reads suffering and survival expressed through the alembics of jazz and blues.³² In addition to further exploring Williams’s approach to recuperation, the next and final section on *Clifford’s Blues* demonstrates how blues and jazz facilitate identification between Diasporic members.

Black Religion (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990), 112, and Angela M. Nelson’s “‘God’s Smiling on You and He’s Frowning Too’: Rap and the Problem of Evil.” “*Call Me the Seeker*”: *Listening to Religion in Popular Music*, ed. Michael J. Gilmour (New York: Continuum, 2005), 177.

³¹ Williams, *Clifford’s Blues*, 198.

³² This aural expression of survival is key to the cultural function of Holocaust texts, as Holocaust historian Martin Gilbert states, “[t]o resist the dehumanizing, brutalizing force of evil, to refuse to be abased to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive the tormentors, these too were courageous. Merely to give witness by one’s own testimony was, in the end, to contribute to a moral victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit.” See Gilbert’s *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 828.

Connections in the Diaspora

Through Clifford's interactions with Dr. Nyassa, Williams reinforces his project of recovery of Diasporic history and amplifies his project of Diasporic connection. Dr. Nyassa, a German medic of African descent who is imprisoned in Dachau for his marriage to a white German woman, served as an apprentice and colleague of a real-life scientist, Dr. Ernest Just, who left the United States and became internationally reputable, particularly in Germany, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Williams's decision to conflate fiction and fact here is a strategy that appears earlier in the novel with Clifford and Sam Wooding. The Pepperidge/Wooding connection is important to establish not only the veracity of Clifford's story but his overall standing as a musician. The same holds true for the Nyassa/Just parallel. More, it is part of Williams's overall strategy of recuperation to highlight musical innovations and scientific discoveries made by African Diasporic people. Science and music and become the grounds for a sounding out of history that runs counter to the traditional or accepted narrative.

Within this framework of counter discourse, Williams establishes music as the primary medium by which Clifford connects with members of his Diasporic community at Dachau. Through discussions of jazz in particular and music in general, Clifford's relationship with Dr. Nyassa serves as a foundation for Clifford's articulations of jazz and blues-inflected experience throughout the novel. Although Nyassa initially wants to hear about famous jazz and blues musicians that Clifford has played with or befriended, his interest in music becomes the basis of Diasporic identification. Dr. Nyassa first uses jazz to identify Clifford as American, but it is their lengthy discussions of music facilitate to their Diasporic connection.

These conversations between members of this small Diasporic community are important for several reasons. First, they occur in a “demapped” area or outside of settings more commonly associated with jazz and blues. Further, the conversations lead to theorizations of music, a movement away from “feeling” into other musicological and technical considerations. Clifford recounts:

[Dr. Nyassa] excused himself and came back with some “medicinal brandy,” he called it and I said it was good for the Dachau Blues. Then I told him about this music running around in my head, new sounds, and then he said all this reminded him of music by an Austrian named Schoenberg, who developed a 12-tone scale. He wasn’t blue anymore.³³

While the blues is a feeling relieved partially by the medicinal brandy, Williams constructs the scene to show that the evaluation of musical forms and approaches also help to dispatch their blues. Clifford’s internal act of revising structures of the aural and Dr. Nyassa’s consideration of Clifford’s “new” music produced as a result of his imprisonment in Dachau bring their exchange to resolution. Dr. Nyassa recontextualizes the music that Clifford hears into the more recognizable work of Schoenberg. Through this reference to Schoenberg, Williams likens Clifford’s musical musings to innovative composition that expands the possibilities of African Diasporic expressivity.

The diary itself symbolizes Clifford’s composition. He uses the materials and methods of jazz and blues to construct his history and his community’s history. For Williams, this textual transcription of experience rendered through music addresses the silences African Diasporic history. Similar to Williams’s efforts at representing lives that remain at the margins of African Diasporic history, Xam Wilson Cartiér highlights

³³ Williams, *Clifford’s Blues*, 64.

African Diasporic experience in her novel *Muse-echo Blues*. In the next section of this dissertation, I contend that Cartiér establishes this experience – this voice – through her central character Kat, an African American musician and composer living in 1990’s San Francisco. Cartiér demonstrates how inter- and extra-narrative muses provide means to establish the importance of female contributions to jazz and blues history and to uncover underrepresented Diasporic history.

Women of Jazz

Nearly fifty years after the last Holocaust prisoners gained freedom from Dachau, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald, author Xam Wilson Cartiér visited Germany as a cultural ambassador. Cartiér’s work in Germany brings into focus the importance of using aural aesthetic frameworks to enrich readings of African Diasporic experience and history. In 1992, Cartiér traveled there through the federal program Arts America. With a rather broad mission to provide Germans with an “understanding” of the United States, Cartiér toured ten cities and took as her specific task to present African American life primarily through African American literature, particularly her then-recent novel *Muse-Echo Blues*. Yet, Cartiér filtered this “reading” of African American life through music: she brought along Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*, Dizzy Gillespie’s *To Be or Not to Bop*, and an assortment of jazz tapes as secondary materials to support her at readings and talks. For Cartiér, this aural orientation was requisite to her mission of cultural translation. As part of her mission of cultural translation, Cartiér was asked to speak at a multicultural conference and at a presentation of Spike Lee’s movie *Do The Right Thing*. In a predominately white German audience, Cartiér offered commentary on the particulars of

Lee's film. Toward the end of the presentation, Cartiér observed certain glaring omissions by the film's translators, who had not included crucial portions of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. speeches, accompanied by Terrance Blanchard's jazz score sonorously playing in the background, that scroll up the screen at the end of the film. She recalls:

I let the audience know that what had taken place was censorship through translation. Omitted from the German version were two statements from our leaders that reflected our concerns and the tenor of our times. In other words, by selective translation, our history had been distorted and misrepresented.³⁴

Cartiér's mission in Germany was to directly counteract such distortions and misrepresentations through literature and the paradigms of jazz and blues, which offer translations of experience.

This imperative to address historical distortions and cultural misrepresentations, and to translate the experience of African Diasporic people through jazz and blues lies at the heart of Cartiér's novel *Muse-Echo Blues*. For Cartiér, literature serves as a platform to represent African Diasporic personal and communal history. In the novel, Cartiér presents a central character previously unseen in the African Diasporic novel: a black female pianist and composer whose historically and aesthetically informed voice speaks on the development of African Diasporic music, its importance to the cultivation of self, and the preservation of community. Similar to Charles Mingus's attempts in his liner notes to "Let My Children Hear Music" to inscribe himself into jazz history, Cartiér writes from without a male-dominated tradition exemplified by the presence of Mingus,

³⁴ Xam Wilson Cartiér, "A Gypsy in Germany." *Essence*. Nov. 1992: 112-15.

Sun-Ra, and Cecil Taylor in *Muse-Echo Blues* to carve out space for the voices of women in jazz and blues history.

The voices of women in the narrative of jazz history have been, until recent years, vastly muted or altogether absent. In her research on swing era “all-girl bands,” Sherrie Tucker indicates the level of difficulty overcoming the obstacles of proper representation:

Almost immediately on embarking on this project, I encountered notions that all-girl bands lacked an intangible, yet crucial, “authenticity” possessed by men’s bands. The man who answered my first telephone call to the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) Local in San Francisco responded to my request for information by insisting “groups of housewives who got together during the war would not be considered real bands. They wouldn’t have been professional, and they wouldn’t have belonged to the union.”

Ah, that explains it. All-girl bands are absent from recorded history because they weren’t real.³⁵

The dearth of such narratives, Tucker suggests, is a direct result of the “uncritical reproduction of dominant gender ideology”³⁶ that restrict the parameters of “real” cultural production. *Muse-Echo Blues* illustrates a resistive effort in fiction to short-circuit such restrictive gender ideology.³⁷ Cartier’s novel, then, serves as a literary redress of musical history as previously constituted, generating a discordant sound for new voices in the jazz and blues narrative.

³⁵ Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Extending and deepening the dense vernacular language of her first novel *Be-bop Re-bop*, Xam Wilson Cartiér imbues her second novel with similar linguistic complexity affected by jazz improvisation. The title reflects Cartiér's experiments with the oral and aural aspects of language. "Muse-echo" is a phonetic recast of the word "musical," and Cartiér's improvisational revision resembles the freedom and spontaneity of her jazzed Black argot. Collapsed metaphors, rhymed and clipped words further illustrate Cartiér's use of a jazz aesthetic that privileges improvisation. At the novel's beginning, Cartiér presents her protagonist Kat in the process of self-definition "within and against the group" at a party in downtown San Francisco:

Just look at this hair on my head with nerve to be natural, picked into post-'fro compliance and stuffed through token barrette so that long strands spray fountain-like forward, a takeover bush of cascading kinks in a milling milieu where co-guests are laid, sprayed, and ready to get paid; their 'do's are down, the sorors' at least—their coifs are all fried, dyed, and laid to the side.³⁸

Her self-description begins with a series of monosyllabic words, but quickly becomes polysyllabic when her self-description begins. This provides a sense of complex identity while her descriptions of the "co-guests," moored to expressions in African American vernacular, re-establish a monosyllabic rhythm to the text. Throughout the novel, Cartiér evokes the rhythms of jazz improvisation through similar engagements with language.

Muse-Echo Blues explores heterosexual relationships, and these experiments with language also reveal themes of romance and sexuality that are prominent in the blues. Kat often commiserates with her friend Chloe to discuss their respective men troubles. Kat is often tightlipped in her romantic disclosures to Chloe; however, a reader accesses the

³⁸ Cartiér, *Muse-Echo*, 4-5.

intricacies of Kat's intimacy mainly through her internal remembrances where she speaks with the frankness and boldness of the bluest of blues song:

Vide takes his time languidly licking the lips of my hotspot, tasting the juice at its core...lingering there at the well for a moment, then cool-sucking cream from my innermost soul til I wheeze in the wake of warm lava that sails me through serious bliss to some other evenkeel shore. He lingers to savor the flavor of afterglow, nipsipping gustative hightingled spots til I give up/let loose and laughgasp for mercy.³⁹

Cartiér constructs Kat as a sexually-empowered female jazz instrumentalist: a previously unseen character that expands the African American novel tradition. Venturing beyond common representations of blues sexuality that surface in African American novels, Cartiér rescues the pleasure and descriptiveness found in vaudeville blues by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and other blues women. This reclamation and affirmation of black female agency is filtered through the prism of jazz. Kat's internal development is a significant evolution in African Diasporic fiction.

Muses and Music

The term "muse-echo" points to Cartiér's narrative strategy that reflects the group improvisational interaction that is, as mentioned earlier, a key component of jazz.

Organized into three "modes," Cartiér's novel presents three primary narrative voices.

The first voice is Kat from 1990s San Francisco, a jazz pianist mired in the blues of her creative and personal inertia. The second voice belongs to Kitty, a jazz enthusiast from 1940s Kansas City, Missouri who immerses herself in the love and music of a saxophone

³⁹ Cartiér, *Muse-Echo*, 59.

player in Billy Eckstine's band. The third narrative voice is Lena, a chanteuse who leaves her husband and son in the Kansas City and travels to South America in the 1930s to become a blues singer. Unable to compose a new and original musical work, Kat begins to have daydreams of these "muses" from different eras and places. Cartiér draws on improvisational freedom of jazz to set up these the polyphonic exchanges that comprise the novel's narrative structure.

These muses offer Kat a system by which she accesses the contributions of African Diasporic women to the development and historical interpretation of jazz and blues. Against the backdrop of her ongoing romantic relationship with saxophone player Chicago "Go" Ames, Kitty witnesses this growth in music during her encounters with a constellation of jazz and blues greats: Lester Young, Count Basie, Billy Eckstein, and Sarah Vaughn. Similar to the character Hattie's role in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* that I discuss in Chapter Three, Kitty serves as a cultural interpreter by providing important observations of the music these figures create. For instance, she analyzes the performance dimensions of Count Basie's band:

For a minute I heard Basie's tide of gushed chords, then I made out his horn section takin a unified stand, united in states a their rhythm an harmony. There they were for a flash in a open-roofed room in the night of my mind, one solid entity sittin then standin with clarinets, saxes an other brass axes held upright then raised overhead now held level, next lowered down an soundin right low as they're lowered—the trombones an trumpets sound blues-to-you mean as they lean to one side then the other, one balanced body connected.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid., 40.

Here, Kitty provides descriptions of both the visual and aural dimensions of performance. She notes the position of the “brass axes held upright” as well as the “blues-to-you mean” trumpets, emphasizing the relevance of both sight and sound to assessing and interpreting jazz performance. More importantly, I suggest that Cartiér deliberately points to soloing and group improvisation to highlight Count Basie’s moment of composition. Basie’s “gushed chords” call for the “unified stand” of the horn section’s response, as the group makes moves and sounds as “one balanced body connected.” Kat’s personal and artistic development depends on the recognition of this nuanced negotiation of individual and communal expression.

By depicting Kitty’s interaction with a variety of important jazz and blues artists of the 1940s, Cartiér points to the period in which bebop, a major subject of her first novel *Be-bop Re-bop*, began to develop in the United States. To demonstrate the global circulation of jazz and blues music, Cartiér highlights the muse Lena Ames, who travels to Uruguay before the advent of bebop to realize her dream of becoming a singer. Lena serves as a critical observer in this Diasporic space, and her analysis of jazz and blues culture in Montevideo helps clarify for Kat a historical continuum that extends beyond the boundaries of North America. While Kat and Kitty forge their identities in North America according to structures and themes derived from jazz and blues, Lena engages how the blues guides her transformation into a singer in South America. I suggest that since Lena’s experiences in Uruguay lead her not to a life as a successful musician but as a lounge singer who must barter her body to sing the blues, she offers a cautionary tale for Kat’s development as a composer and as a woman. Yet, this cautionary tale serves the

dual purpose of revealing the underrepresented Diasporic history of Montevideo, Uruguay.

Lena's experiences in Montevideo help to illustrate Uruguay's place on the map of African Diasporic history. Positioned to the east of Argentina and just south of Brazil, Uruguay's unique, long colonial history has made African Diasporic consciousness a recent phenomenon. Lena calls "far Montevideo" a "corner of heaven," but her experiences with Camvren, who has numerous sexual encounters with local "negritas" and insists that Lena put their sexual encounters on display suggests Montevideo is a place of suffering for Lena. She decides to "keep silent" about Camvren's lust for "long-stemmed tropical blossoms" and "black-haired morenas" to keep her access to performing in Camvren's venue open.⁴¹

Cartiér depicts Lena's experiences in Uruguay to demonstrate the continued existence of a male-dominated entertainment system that limits African Diasporic subjectivity and devalues the creative contributions of African Diasporic women. Similar to the power dynamic that Lutie Johnson encounters when seeking a job as a singer at Junto's establishment in *The Street*, Lena enters into a relationship with a wealthy and lustful European entrepreneur, Camvren, who builds a hotel and invites Lena to sing in his cabaña. Lena recognizes that jazz and blues venues in America were sites of oppression and exploitation for women. Referencing the Chicago entertainment scene, Lena identifies the "real dealing entrepreneurs with their nightclub plantations of short-salary songsters."⁴² Refusing to fall victim to this lopsided distribution of power that

⁴¹ Cartiér, *Muse-Echo*, 131.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 125.

shaped the cultural production by African Americans in general and African American women in particular, Lena makes the conscious decision to cast her lot with Camvren and head to Uruguay to pursue her artistic and personal goals:

She'd be hub of her own dazzled continent, glistening star of all South America, so went the plan she kept carefully tended, oiled in her mind. What's more, Lena had a head start—she'd brought her own prince to the party, while Jo'd had to choose hers from suitors sunstruck by her glamour. Cam was a means and a method for Lena; she was no babe in the forest of devilish trees, never had been, at least not for long as her memory measured.⁴³

Lena proceeds headfirst into her relationship with Camvren, noting that it was more of a business arrangement to help her career as a blues singer.

Similar to Lutie Johnson, Lena learns that access to professional life as a musician is guarded by men, and that the liberatory potential of jazz and blues are short-circuited by male dominance. Lena is unable to connect to the liberatory potential that she observes as part of the nightclub industry in Chicago. Lena notes Chicago was,

that race-record base where women like her were making their mark on the Jim-Crow controlled industry. So much for Sophie's would-be-black blues, brash Bessie Smith had popped open the top of wax disc recording and Alberta Hunter had taken the stage. Blues and jazz divas were broaching the forefront with songs of their own full of brass-tacks opinion, female opinion on how things were stacked and how to unstack them.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 130, (*italics in original*).

African Diasporic women made inroads into a male-dominated entertainment industry by asserting themselves; however, their success was contingent on communal support.

As an aspiring pioneer of jazz and blues performance in South America, Lena receives no such support. More, Lena sacrifices her self-worth by degrees the longer she remains in Montevideo. The stock market crash of 1929 delays construction materials for Camvren's hotel, so she must "adapt to his heat-seeking ways"⁴⁵ for nearly three years before the hotel is complete and she has an opportunity to showcase her singing talents. These talents are ultimately wasted, since the audience in Camvren's cabaret, which resembles more of a leisure club than a performance venue, is indifferent to Lena's singing. There is no mention of Lena developing Diasporic connections with any Uruguayan and the "housefull crowd of entrepreneurs with their pastime *senoritas*" otherwise ignore her. In addition to Lena's inability to connect with her audience, Camvren makes plans for Lena to sleep with "a business associate" in exchange for future appearances in Camvren's casino.⁴⁶ Forced to face the true blues of her predicament, which she feels is directly connected to her decision to leave her son for her own selfish pursuits in Montevideo, Lena returns to the states, works in a whorehouse, and eventually commits suicide.

Ultimately, it is Lena's abandonment of her family and her disconnection from community that serves as the basis for Kat's growth as an artist. While Kitty and Lena as imagined muses provide Kat with blues-dispelling "transits to past" that result in important life lessons, it is a triumvirate of real-life jazz musicians that influence the novel's structures and themes. Cartiér uses the creative production and orientation of Sun

⁴⁵ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 144-5.

Ra, Charles Mingus, and Cecil Taylor to amend a tradition dominated by male musicians. Cartiér achieves this literary redress by referencing artists who have existed in the margins of jazz history at various times. Ra, Mingus, and Cecil Taylor are iconoclastic jazz composers who, according to artistic liberties that jazz offers, expanded the performative, sonic, and social dimensions of African Diasporic music. In addition to Kat's fictional muses, these real muses, each a pioneer and exponent of free improvisation, give Cartiér the foundation to revise jazz and blues history.

The prefatory material in *Muse-Echo Blues*, the epigraph and the sheet music that precede the narrative proper, point to Cartiér's effort to expand jazz and blues history. In this respect, the text reflects that Ellisonian description of jazz as the development of a unique self "within and against the group," thereby highlighting the theme of self-exploration. While the epigraph emphasizes the novel's jazz-centered preoccupation with individual consciousness and identity, it is important to note that it also engages in antiphonal exchange with the reader. Just as Clifford entreats "You" during his moment of composing, Cartiér establishes from the outset the expectation of correspondence between text and audience. The epigraph to *Muse-Echo Blues* reads: "If you're not a myth, whose reality are you?" Attributed to Sun-Ra and his Universal Arkestra, the epigraph suggests Cartiér wants call-and-response to be a central structural and thematic element.

Cartiér also alludes to Sun Ra to highlight Kat's process of musical creation and self-discovery. As John Szwed points out, Sun Ra is regarded as an innovative musician most noted for his dubious, mythic individuality and unconventional philosophies.⁴⁷ By

⁴⁷ See John F. Szwed's *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. (New York: Pantheon, 1997). Recent scholarly interest in Sun-Ra has cast him as a unique yet increasingly important

referencing Sun Ra, the novel offers the discourses of free jazz, suggesting that the query – the novel’s initial call – foregrounds a dialectical negotiation of the real and the imagined in relation to conceptualizations of freedom. Frustrated by her lack of productivity with composing, Kat explores the “fantasies” of her muses while negotiating the demands of real-life relationships with men. The presence of the Sun Ra quote also anticipates the disruption of narrative time and space. In other words, Sun Ra’s futurism lends to the novel its sense of temporal and spatial disjunction. The novel’s protagonist Kat abruptly shifts from one historical period to another, from one location to another, between reality and fantasy, the truths and the myths of “muses” as she battles to “unstop [her] musical block.”⁴⁸

What follows the Sun-Ra epigraph not only amplifies the initial dialectic of the real/fantasy dialectic, but also encapsulates Xam Wilson Cartiér’s larger project of weaving women’s voices into the quilt of a jazz-blues history dominated by male voices. The piano improvisation sheet music to Charles’ Mingus’ “Myself When I Am Real” responds to the real/fantasy dialectic seen in Sun Ra’s quote. The sheet music gives the direction “out of tempo,” reinforcing the narrative disjunction that I see implied by the presence of Sun Ra. More importantly, it presents one textual rendering of the language of jazz music to foreground the novelistic rendering of jazz. In other words, in order to “hear” the meanings of Cartiér’s novel, one must “see” it through jazz’s systems of notation and vocabulary.

figure in jazz history. See Brent Hayes Edward’s “The Race For Space: Sun Ra’s Poetry” in *The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose of Sun Ra*. Eds. James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken (Norderstedt: Waitawhile, 2005), 29-57; and *The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra’s Polemical Broadshets and Streetcorner Leaflets*. John Corbett and Anthony Elms, eds. (Chicago: Whitewalls, 2006).

⁴⁸ Cartiér, *Muse-Echo*, 50.

By using Mingus's sheet music, Cartiér insists that a reader is conscious of two systems of language: one that is readily available to the reader and one that encodes cultural meaning. I suggest, then, that Cartiér riffs on Du Bois' epigraphic approach in *Souls of Black Folk*. For Du Bois, the Sorrow Song epigraphs are a visual representation of black music key to interpreting the dimensions of his treatise on African American personhood in the United States. Both Cartiér and Du Bois insist that the history of African Americans in relation to nation's economic, social, and political structures should be considered within the framework, or system of signs, of the aural.

As Eric C. Sundquist remarks, the inclusion of the Sorrow Songs is a textually aural expression of Du Bois's signature theoretical contribution of double consciousness, since the Sorrow Songs stood apart from and incongruent with the dominant American culture. While a tradition of the Sorrow Songs existed for nearly forty years before Du Bois's work, their underlying importance to expressing the perspectives and history of African Americans remained largely unknown.⁴⁹ Du Bois's aesthetic approach, which utilizes the symbols of African Diasporic creativity and places them in conversation with Western principles, broadens and deepens this reading of Cartiér's narrative that Mingus's single-page score prefaces. In other words, the sheet music in *Muse-Echo Blues* serves as both a challenge of a reader's cultural knowledge and also an effort to force the reader a see – and hear – language through the prism of jazz that references African Diasporic history.

The cultural productions of Sun Ra and Charles Mingus offer both narrative structures and themes to Cartiér's work, and I suggest that Cecil Taylor is a third muse

⁴⁹ See Sunquist's "Swing Low: The Souls of Black Folk" in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 457-539.

that influences Cartiér's characterization of Kat. He provides the theme of jazz composer as outsider. More, Taylor's standing as the main exponent of free jazz influences the narrative structure of Cartiér's novel.

Kat finds inspiration and motivation in the figure of Cecil Taylor, who is an enigmatic but important jazz figure. For Kat, Taylor symbolizes the composer as outsider that she is: an underappreciated yet inventive composer on the margins of jazz and blues discourse. Kat presents her rationale for why Taylor is an underrepresented figure in jazz history:

His only holdback is late-again critics flapping, dry-rapping like yesterday's leaves on his heels as he trudges through forest of lone-spirit avant garde gloom – Life: It's a solo of crink-tinkling keys on their own with a prensile hook to the past that nobody can see—Just ask Cecil. Ask me!⁵⁰

Here, Kat points to the criticism Cecil Taylor has received during the process of becoming one of jazz's most prominent pioneers of free jazz. Commentators and critics have stated that Taylor's music often confuses rather than inspires.⁵¹ John Litweiler clarifies the inability of some to appreciate and critically engage Taylor's music, which relies on rhythmic virtuosity that disrupts patterns of time. Litweiler states, “[Taylor] remains among the most challenging of improvisers simply because there is no

⁵⁰ Cartiér, *Muse-Echo*, 153.

⁵¹ In the *Blackwell Guide to Recorded Jazz*, Barry Dean Kernfeld cites a German jazz critic who suggests that “a first unprepared encounter with Taylor's [live] music causes complete confusion” (450).

comfortable way to listen to him, no way of accepting or even understanding him within the terms of any aesthetics but his own.”⁵²

Specifically, Cartiér draws on Taylor’s musical aesthetics, particularly with improvisation, in a scene where Kat must assert her individuality. On a date at home with her interest Vide, Kat plays Cecil Taylor on her stereo. As the background music to their violent break-up due to Vide’s drug abuse, Cecil Taylor gives Kat on “a fractured perspective” through his improvisation: a “crashing chord change that lit up the way back to *now*.”⁵³ Fortified by the musical “insight” provided by Cecil Taylor’s extemporaneity, Kat demands that Vide take his crack cocaine and leave her home. After Vide strikes her across the face, Kat feels “in dense tensed-up time” a “dissonant wildness, C. Taylor’s matrix-note thickets, springtight arpeggios all set to go.”⁵⁴ Taylor’s music reaches a complexity that mirrors Kat’s internal landscape, where she retreats for a moment to fantasize about continuing the violent confrontation. Instead, she repeats her desire for Vide to leave, and the violence is avoided just as Taylor completes his improvisation.

Coda: Locating Jazz and Blues in African Diasporic Fiction

Through their novels, John A. Williams and Xam Wilson Cartiér establish the locations of jazz and blues critique in Germany and in Uruguay, putting into perspective the vast reach of musical forms more commonly linked to American imaginative

⁵² John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958* (New York, De Capo Press, 1990), 200-01.

⁵³ Cartiér, *Muse-Echo*, 81 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

geographies. Yet, the central aspects of *Clifford's Blues* and *Muse-Echo Blues* do more than simply migrate away from a literal American landscape; there is also a figurative, aesthetic movement away from traditional conceptions of jazz and blues history. Each novel emphasizes that the solo must always take place within the context of the collective, and that the collective history of the African Diaspora includes many locations too infrequently mapped in literary production.

If one considers the presence and purpose of jazz and blues in African Diasporic fiction, then we see a pattern of composing through the individual to elucidate the group. I have argued in this chapter – and throughout this dissertation – the implications of listening to the influence of jazz and blues aesthetics on African Diasporic fiction. Jazz and blues are implements to address gaps or silences not only in history writ large, but also in the overall creative history of these idioms. More, what *Clifford's Blues* and *Muse-Echo Blues* suggest is that the acts of music making and writing negotiate Diasporic histories through alternative registers. Through their protagonist-composers Clifford and Kat, John A. Williams and Xam Wilson Cartiér demonstrate the necessity to reach music through writing, to insist on blues and jazz as nexuses of cultural exchange, and to render discordant yet unifying notes of African Diasporic experience.

Conclusion: On Hearing: Archibald Motley's Blues

Although it is a work of visual art rather than a work of fiction, Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s *Blues* (1929), arguably his best-known and most widely circulated work, serves as a fitting text to conclude this dissertation's examination of the aural aesthetics represented in African Diasporic fiction for two specific reasons. First, it reveals how pervasive jazz and blues, two historically linked musical and cultural forms, have been in African Diasporic cultural production. Second, it demonstrates that representations of jazz and blues at home and abroad – that is, where they originated and where they have circulated – are important to understanding not only the history of how they developed, but also what is at stake for the future of African Diasporic literary criticism.

Motley's oil-on-canvas painting depicts a scene in a nightclub that bears the markers of cabaret clubs that were popular during the mid- to late- 1920s. The painting is filled with people – mostly couples – dancing, talking, drinking, laughing, and playing music. In the scene, the men wear fine suits and women wear evening dresses. The couple image recurs throughout the painting with blues-inflected repetition. Some couples are seated at tables enjoying wine, martinis, and conversation while other couples dance to the music of a band that is positioned in the image's middle and lower portions. One man wears a dark-colored suit and a bow tie and one woman wears a short red dress with stockings and a string of pearls, which both indicate formal, stylish dress. The high heels, colorful dresses, and stylish cloche hats present in the image all reflect 1920s flapper fashion.

Overall, the painting evokes a sense of activity and movement. The focal point of the image is an elegantly dressed female who, with a burning cigarette in hand and a short, slick flapper-era hairstyle, looks in the direction of several band members while smiling broadly. A man and a woman positioned above and to the left of her look at each other with wide smiles. But unlike that woman and all of the other women who look directly at their male partners as their male partners return the glance, she looks away from her partner. Her gaze away from her partner and in the direction of the band suggests that she is responding to the music – the blues – that the band plays. Her partner, a tall man who is the largest figure in the image, appears to be caught mid-motion with his arm and hand frozen in a dance move. Music seemingly envelopes the couple, adding to the sense of movement. The trombone's outer slide extends nearly past the dancing man's shoulder. The trombone's bell appears between the couple's heads while the clarinet's neck and the guitar's body help to frame the couple with music.

The title of the painting and the visual narrative it depicts reveal the historical closeness of blues and jazz. Sometimes referred to as the same thing during the 1920s, jazz and blues music share a history of influencing literary and visual artists. Motley titled his painting to identify the music not only as a source of influence for the image, but also as a constitutive part of it. One might be tempted to consider the image as a visual representation of the Harlem jazz club scene in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. But the inspiration for this scene filled with music – the jazz and blues that the painting draws on and represents – is not based on the environment of a Harlem or a Chicago cabaret. The history of Motley's painting shows that Motley did

not intend for it to depict African Americans at all. Motley's painting actually depicts African Diasporic people enjoying jazz and blues in Europe.

The initial critical response to and continued use of Motley's painting reveals the nationalistic tendency in viewing the intersections of text and music, specifically blues and jazz. One early interpretation indicates that Motley's *Blues* depicts a "black and tan" club where blacks and whites socialized in a club against the backdrop of music, alcohol, and dancing. Considering for a moment that Motley is known for his important visual representations of African American life during a time when there were few such representations, this interpretation is not unreasonable. But Motley won a Guggenheim fellowship in 1928, and he traveled to France to study and practice art, leaving the United States context to create visual texts in Europe. *Blues* was among the paintings Motley produced while abroad, and the inspiration and the subjects of the painting come from his time spent in a Paris cafe. The cafe's owner, a Frenchman, extended Motley an invitation to visit the club regularly. In an oral interview, Motley describes how his experiences at that cafe formed the basis of his painting:

I used to go down there almost every night. I got to studying the people there. I asked him, "Are there any Americans come in here?" He said, "No Americans, they're all people from Senegal, people from Martinique, people from Libya, people from North Africa and French people, but no Americans. I said, "That's the thing I like about it." So I used to go there with my sketchbook, I'd sit there and order a beer or wine and make sketches of various people in the place. I finally composed a final sketch in my studio for

the painting that I have. I went to work on it and it turned out very successfully. The idea is that there are no Americans in that painting black or white. They are all either French, some of the dark ones are Senegalese from Senegal, some of the lighter ones come from Martinique or North Africa [sic].¹

Here, Motley recounts that Blacks from Africa, France, and the Caribbean are the paintings subjects, represented in various hues in his vibrant painting that foregrounds music. The venue that serves as the painting's inspiration is located neither in Harlem nor Chicago. Instead, Le Petit Cafe, located in Paris, France, provided Motley with the source upon which he would base his text. Instead of African Americans, the painting depicts Africans, Caribbeans, and African-Europeans engaged in music and merriment, free to enjoy jazz and blues and one another. Motley's painting is a work that illustrates the African Diaspora, and it is through the use of jazz and blues aesthetics that he renders the experiences of Africans and others participating in and giving life to music that was, and continues to be, the "world-conquering" influence that Johnson imagined nearly a century ago.

The fact that *Blues* is Motley's most revered work is ironic. Motley is recognized and has been embraced for his portrayals of African American life and culture. His artistic production spans decades, and it is Motley's representations of African Americans that resonate throughout his oeuvre. Yet, *Blues* depicts neither African Americans nor their cultural or social interactions, but it continues to be used

¹ Archibald Motley, Interview with Archibald J. Motley, Jr. by Dennis Barrie (January 1978), AAA/SI.

as a visual symbol of African American cultural production and not as a representation of African Diasporic cultural production and history.

A quick survey of African American literary production brings this problem into focus more clearly. There are anthologies that feature Motley's *Blues* as cover art, but these anthologies focus on Harlem Renaissance literature. His painting has been used to symbolize the Harlem Renaissance itself, but the Harlem Renaissance discussion often offers little discussion on its international aspects. As a result, the history that the painting communicates is muted.² For example, *Classic Fiction of the Harlem Renaissance* features *Blues* as the cover art, but editor William L. Andrews makes only a brief statement about the "international" aspect of the Harlem Renaissance and makes no mention of the importance of jazz and blues music that the cover art represents and that the literary production of the New Negro Movement reflects. Similarly, Motley's painting graces the cover of *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, but throughout the introduction editor David Levering Lewis focuses on African American literary production and spends a great deal of time grounding that discussion in a Harlem landscape.

This practice reveals that jazz and blues remain fixed to American texts and contexts. What is at stake here is that the history of jazz and blues and the ways in which they influence African Diasporic writers is being subsumed in this pervasive nationalism. What I propose throughout this dissertation are ways to examine jazz and blues as transnational forms, to turn our attention to their homes all over the world so that we may better understand how a variety of authors use them in African

² While decisions of cover art are often made by press Art Directors or Marketing Directors, it is no less valid to argue that Motley's painting has not been used in its proper context.

Diasporic fiction. We must look at their representations in New Orleans and New York, in Paris and Glasgow, and in Dachau and Montevideo because they provide ways to discuss why authors turn to these musical and cultural forms to enhance their literary texts. It is only when we open our "ears" to "listen" to the international aspects of jazz and blues that we begin to appreciate how important these expressive forms are to African Diasporic cultural production and why writers make conscious efforts to ensure that this practice persists.

Similar to Archibald Motley in his work *Blues*, writers of African Diasporic fiction have used jazz and blues for nearly a century. In this dissertation's introduction, I first provided a brief discussion and analysis of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* in order to show how Johnson incorporates jazz and blues into that text. I argued that Johnson uses aural aesthetics – the qualities and structures of jazz and blues – in order to demonstrate jazz and blues as transnational forms of influence and as methods to express individual and community identity. I looked specifically at the ex-colored man's early encounters with African Diasporic music, which marked the beginnings of how he negotiated personal and communal identity through three key components of jazz and blues: aural learning, call-and-response, and improvisation.

The novels that this dissertation examines reflect jazz and blues aesthetics in varying ways. Yet, the writers of these novels make clear the influence that these two forms – at once musical and cultural – have on their written works. They give a sense the “elusive tone” that writers since James Weldon Johnson have sought to represent in his first novel *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*. The novels in this

dissertation demonstrate how authors use music to augment the elements of literary form such as characterization, narrative structure, and language. They aim to represent the sense of rhythm, structure, and ethos of jazz and blues by depicting characters soloing, by alluding to real-life jazz musicians, and by including the actual sheet music to songs in their written works. In these ways, this group of novels extends the limits of African Diasporic literature and broadens our understanding of the possibilities of merging music with text.

The authors of these novels, all of whom have written either with or about jazz and blues in other literature, also recognize that jazz and blues are more than collections of train symbols, solos, and songs that serve as inspirations for transforming literature. Jazz and blues are international forms that allow for the expression of individual and communal identities. Jazz musicianship is about defining oneself vis-à-vis the group, and this process of definition requires a journeying through the traditions and the histories of not just the music, but also the cultures from which it developed. That journeying includes a journeying through the traditions of the blues. From Ralph Ellison's oft-quoted statement that the blues is "autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" to Alberta Hunter's statement that "[t]he blues is about truth-telling," the many descriptions of the blues indicate that it is a form of individual expression of group experience. Through the use of aural aesthetics in African Diasporic fiction – the novels examined in this study and others awaiting the critical frameworks illustrated in this dissertation – writers continue the important cultural tradition that attests to the diversity of African Diasporic experience.

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