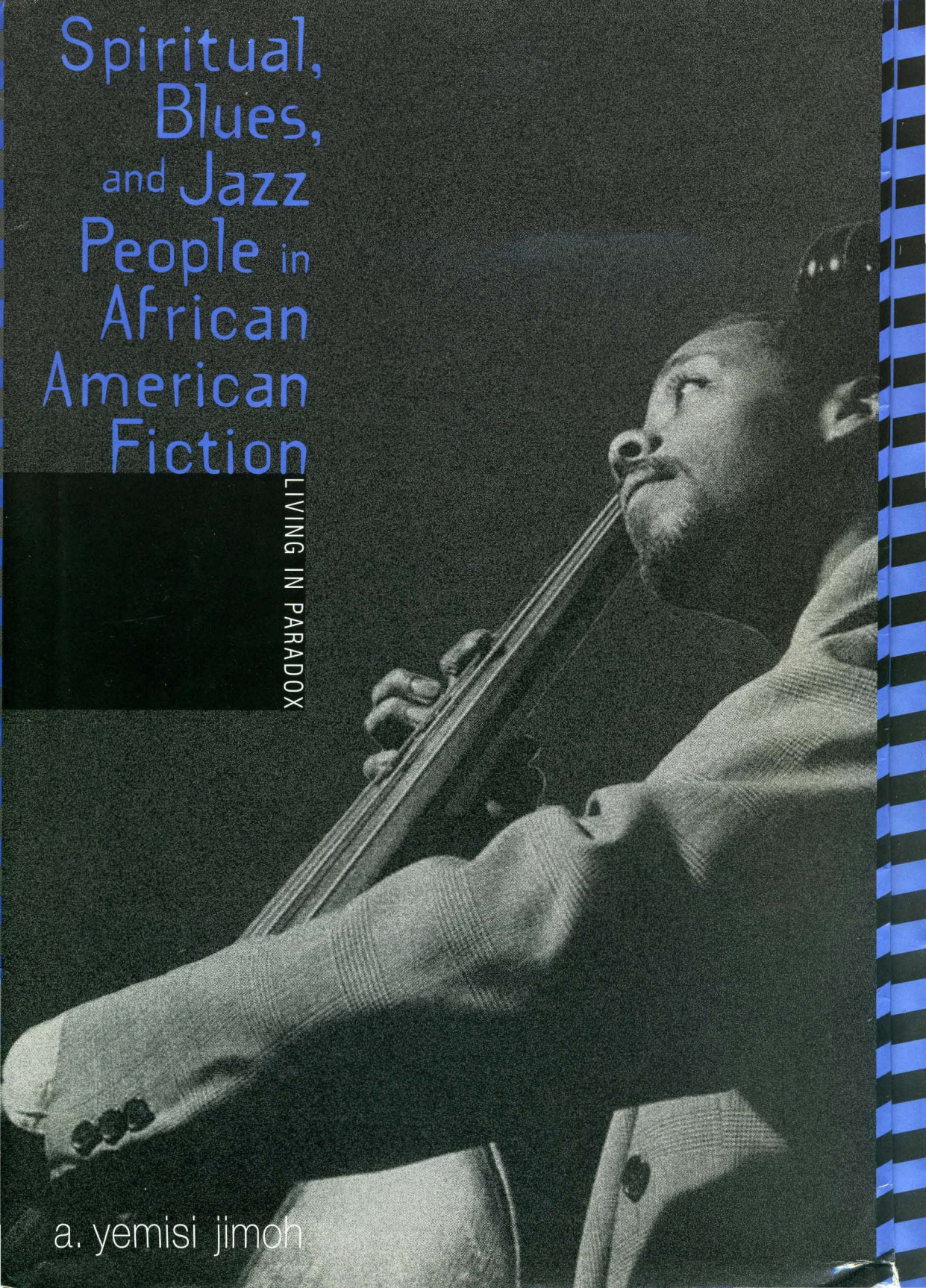


Spiritual,  
Blues,  
and Jazz  
People in  
African  
American  
Fiction

LIVING IN PARADOX

a. yemisi jimoh



Spiritual, Blues,  
*and* Jazz People *in*  
African American Fiction



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A. Yemisi Jimoh



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# INTRODUCTION

We'll Understand It Better By and By

## Contexts



**F**rom ancient times music and storytelling have been closely tied among the peoples of oral cultures worldwide. In oral cultures, quite frequently, a person comes to understand her life and the world in which she lives through the tales of the bards, troubadours, jongleurs, and fili, among others. Historically, among many African oral cultures, the ancient tradition of singing the lives of the people was given a special and valued designation. The Swahili mneni, the asunrara of Nigeria's Yoruba, and, after colonization, the griots in a number of francophone West African nations, all sang the lives of their people.

Among black people in the United States, the Old World tradition of singing the lives of a people was continued by the late-nineteenth-century African American minstrels and vaudevillians, college groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and the early-twentieth-century blueswomen and jazzmen.<sup>1</sup> The foundation of the music they sang and the experiences that the music records come from the field hollers, shouts, plantation songs, or Spirituals that spread throughout the South before the Civil War. The music of enslaved black

people—based in the traditional musics of Africa and on the African's cultural contacts and experiences in the New World—is one of the inter-textual sites of artistic expression in the texts of many African American writers.

Professional blackface minstrelsy begins in the United States in 1843 with the first organized white minstrel performance. Minstrelsy plays a part in entertainment in the United States from the early part of the nineteenth century, but it flourishes throughout the northern United States and in Europe from 1850 through 1870. Until late into the nineteenth century, black entertainers play an extraordinarily minute role in minstrelsy. But after the Civil War black musicians retrieve their music and dance from the caricature and exploitation imposed on them by blackface minstrelsy.<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century Charles Chesnutt transforms minstrelsy into an ironic reversal in literature, which I will discuss later, and which I believe Louis Armstrong captures in many of his musical performances.

Minstrelsy does find its way into African American fiction in the twentieth century. The works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Wallace Thurman, and Nella Larsen contain passages depicting minstrel-like behavior, a minstrel presence that is usually embarrassing or humiliating for these writers' central characters. Ralph Ellison, however, puts minstrelsy to a different use, bringing Chesnutt's and Armstrong's minstrel reversal into African American literature through his portrayal of Armstrong as well as the grandfather in *Invisible Man*. All of these writers' literary uses of minstrelsy are indicators of the connective social, historical, political, and cultural influences that shape a set of aesthetic ideas that have moved into African American art and literature, especially if one considers the philosophical, epic, and narrative qualities that scholars, writers, and social critics have found in Blues and Jazz and in this music's minstrel and plantation forebears.<sup>3</sup>

History and context, then, explain the variations as well as the consanguinity between the ways black people and white people have expressed themselves in art in the United States. The contrasts are illustrated in the different ways these two groups have experienced life together. Formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants locate themselves in a social-political history of exclusion. After the Civil War the already established exclusion of black people is refashioned so that the previous social policy of white dominance remains in place even as slavery is abolished. Post-emancipation and absent the social policies

and practices that sanction the ownership of African Americans by European Americans, black people still find that new laws are enacted that will delineate differences that human captivity established through lived reality.<sup>4</sup> Thus, many of the collective (enslaved and segregated) social and historical experiences of African Americans have contours and shapes that differ from, while also adding to, the European experiences that dominate the cultural ideas within the United States.

There is a difference in the experience of being a descendant of early free settlers or early indentured servants, whose contrast with the dominant culture is not as stark as that of the descendant of Africans, whose historical position within the culture is situated on a tenuous site of specious color-based laws and social policies; there also is a difference in being the descendant of later immigrants in the United States, especially if the possibility exists for becoming "white."<sup>5</sup> Most—but not all—African Americans have ancestors who were enslaved in this country; and nearly all African Americans are descendants of nations that were destabilized by the loss of large segments of their populations—through internal as well as external avarice—to human captivity in the New World. And even when not enslaved, black people such as the free men and women of color in the United States as well as black people living segregated from the full bounty of the United States frequently found their lives severely demarcated by law and by common practice in this country.<sup>6</sup>

For many African American artists, then, a history of aesthetic ideas has been situated within the contexts of a struggle for freedom from chattel slavery and from its reformulation under segregation, numerous unwilling separations (from an ancestral home, from family, from the resident culture, etc.), forced communalism, and other formative experiences in the New World. Black people do share with white people in the United States the inheritance of Western literary traditions based in ancient Greco-Roman culture, which was part of a cross-cultural environment that stands outside the black-white simplicity of color designations.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, African American artists' culture-shaping contact with native peoples, immigrant groups, and the popular culture of the nation influences their artistic expression. Yet the added contours of racial discourses in the United States have shaped early Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz aesthetic and philosophical ideas in ways that differ from the European-based popular and classical music that—until the last three decades of this century—held a central place in the dominant culture of the United States. Although there has never been a total aesthetic



estrangement between African American and European American cultural texts in the United States, distinct differences in their musical aesthetic have always existed and continue to this day. In this book, I investigate many of the African American intracultural issues that inform a more broadly intertextual use of music in the making of character and theme in fiction by black writers in the United States. I present these music-into-fiction concepts, delineated below, in order to expand the way we read the traditional literary elements of theme and character in African American fictional texts, as conventional close readings of theme and character in fiction are often silent on the historical-sociopolitical discourses that increase our understanding of African American narratives.

## Music into Narrative



Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* is perhaps the earliest published text by a black writer that discusses plantation songs.<sup>8</sup> In this prose account of the dehumanizing effects of slavery on the enslaver and the enslaved, Douglass prefigures an important cultural space for African American songs and verbal expressions as a site of doubleness, which is a form of oppressive psychological fragmentation that W. E. B. Du Bois will articulate as double-consciousness in his 1903 treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*. This doubleness informs a person's consciousness through the awareness that self-perceptions are shaped by both one's own ideas of self and by powerful external ideas that not only differ from the person's own consciousness of self but also contradict that self-consciousness in, at times, degrading and dehumanizing ways.

According to Douglass, the songs "to many would seem jargon, but . . . nevertheless were full of meaning to [the enslaved people] themselves." Douglass describes the Spirituals he heard as deeply meaningful and as expressing "the highest joy and the deepest sadness" as well as the "prayer and complaint" of the captive people. His observations also indicate that the songs were often improvised and profoundly paradoxical: "The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound . . . ; [t]hey would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the

most rapturous tone" (31). Douglass's passage about his experiences with these songs illustrates some of the aesthetic qualities of African American music that have shaped an aesthetic found in fiction by many African American writers: the value of improvisation, which allows reshaping of set forms; the ability to represent in art the idea of paradox as a condition of life; song as a means of recording one's life experiences; and fragmentation and doubleness as artistic techniques. These issues Douglass raises have persisted in African American music from the Spirituals to Blues and Jazz as well as other musical styles associated with African Americans. In literary texts, I find that Douglass's observations about music have moved from autobiographical memory and observation into literary metaphors that comment on life.

Improvisation in music and the term "Jazz" are nearly convertible.<sup>9</sup> In the 1920s, early Jazz musicians such as Kid Ory, King Oliver, and Louis Armstrong—on his Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings—perform in combos that operate from a musical ground that emphasizes collective improvisation. This style of improvisation allows each musician to comment simultaneously on the musical fragment that serves as a jumping-off point. As Jazz expands into the dominant culture during the 1930s in the United States, the locus of musical innovation in Jazz remains in each musician's collective improvisational abilities. Solo improvisation, though, shapes the Jazz sounds of swing and big band styles, which bring Jazz to a national audience. Swing and big band's most innovative adherents include Fletcher Henderson; William "Count" Basie, with Lester Young on tenor saxophone; Benny Goodman, who had the wisdom as well as the courage to hire Teddy Wilson in 1935 and then Lionel Hampton in 1936; and, quintessentially, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, who, frequently in collaboration with Billy Strayhorn, composed Jazz pieces that elegantly poise aspects of classical musical composition and inimitable solo Jazz improvisations.

Jazz's bebop moment in the 1940s and 1950s, which includes musicians Thelonious Monk, Erroll Garner, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and, later, Miles Davis, returns collective improvisation to this music; the concept of Jazz, then, becomes synonymous with spontaneous innovation and extemporaneous musical comment, as collective improvisation interrogates swing's practice of solo improvisation. Later, in John Coltrane's free-form Jazz and Ornette Coleman's experiment with free Jazz—which sets the musician's improvisations free from the melodies and harmonies established by a jumping-off piece—

improvisation, especially collective improvisation, moves into a new musical space.

In addition to his comments on improvisation, Douglass's observations on the contradictions that mark the promises of freedom and democratic governance in the United States can be most succinctly described as paradoxical when viewed within the context of the lived experiences of enslaved, and segregated, black people.<sup>10</sup> Enslaved black people in "a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty is a lie" (Du Bois 151) form a special caste that is exempted from the rights and privileges established in the Bill of Rights. And, while the United States' Constitution stands in the honored position of the oldest written constitution still in effect, we recognize that during the drafting of the Constitution the status of enslaved people becomes a contentious topic; this document establishes a special category that erases native peoples and attempts to dehumanize people of African descent. The Constitution relegates native peoples to the status of outsiders and enslaved Africans to the status of property. The Civil War does not change much in terms of the status of black people; the end of legal slavery and the beginning of segregation only reinforces the status of black people living in paradox as both free and not free in the New Canaan.

The way in which the Spirituals articulate this lived reality is consistent with Douglass's statement that music presents the life—or, in other words, the joys, prayers, and complaints—of black people. Perhaps one of the earliest expressions in the United States of historical discontinuity, alienation, loss, despair, recognition of the incongruity inherent in life, and rejection of societal mythologies and ersatz histories (all fundamental components of modernism) is embodied in the Spirituals of the enslaved Africans. The alienated cry found in lines such as "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" and "I'm a rollin, I'm a rollin / I'm a rollin through an unfriendly world" along with the sense of discontinuity and loss in "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / a long, long way from home" collects in song the social energies that mark the feelings associated with modernity's movement out of an agrarian economy into an alienated, industrial machine economy; paradoxically, though, these songs are located in the enslaved social construct and lived reality of human capital and assembly-line machine in flesh that is written on the dark bodies of enslaved black people.

An implicit articulation of experiences of alienation and fragmentation among enslaved black people also is located in W. E. B. Du Bois's

discussion of the “sorrow songs,” music that serves as a site where double-consciousness is interrogated. That this expression of modern fragmentation is connected to the Spirituals suggests that enslaved black people “in the cotton field had already been confronting and evolving esthetic solutions for the problems of assembly-line regimentation, depersonalization, and collectivization” (Murray, *Omni* 63). This social reality situates the Spirituals within modernity, the larger intellectual and social context that has shaped the United States.

In 1903, just over half a century after Douglass writes the music of African Americans into literature, W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* is published. In this multigenre text, Du Bois both enacts some of the aesthetic qualities anticipated in Douglass’s description of plantation songs and includes his own study of these songs and their postbellum counterparts. He also includes an analysis of one of the ways self-consciousness is shaped in formerly enslaved black people. Du Bois’s analysis of the way identity is shaped in African Americans results in his appellation “double-consciousness,” a type of fragmentation that he describes as “yield[ing] . . . [black people] no true self-consciousness” because there always is a sense of “two-ness”: “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (8–9). It is Du Bois’s concept of “dogged strength,” both intellectual and psychological, that, in fact, informs the expressive technique and way of experiencing the world that Douglass observes in the music of enslaved Africans who were aware that they were expressing double ideas through words that conceal their perspectives on their lives; these perspectives are in stark contrast to the views of their enslavers, yet captive black people took care to make it appear that their views were consistent with those of their enslavers.

Many African captives were aware that the dominant and apparently prevailing social discourse about them was contrary to their own constructions of self, yet the power of the dominant discourse put into question their self-perceptions, causing, for some, a struggle with developing an idea of self devoid of inferiority. For others, such as the makers of the Spirituals, there was a constant awareness that the dominant society’s perception of African Americans was erroneous; thus, enslaved black people developed ways of living in this contradiction. These views on life are illustrated in the philosophy of the Spirituals.

Double-consciousness may not be as prevalent today as it was in earlier African American history, but its psychological and philosophical

strategies for living in fragmentation have proved useful for many varieties of societal alienation experienced by African Americans. And, more recently, the insights of double-consciousness—a socially imposed split in one's psyche, as articulated by Du Bois—have come to inform the ideas of feminist thinkers as well as poststructuralist theories. Du Bois employs double-consciousness himself in the structure of *The Souls of Black Folk* when he contrasts the words of Europeans and European Americans such as George Byron, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Tennyson, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and others who are within Western tradition—with which many black people have had a tenuous relationship—and bars of music from the anonymous “sorrow songs.” Du Bois, for instance, opens section 2 with a poem by James Russell Lowell. In this poem Lowell comments on the role God has in bringing about impending freedom and shows that life is a mixture of “Truth” and “Wrong.” The centrality of Lowell’s voice within Western culture—former Harvard professor, first editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, editor of the *North American Review*, and ambassador to Spain and Britain—affirms Lowell’s and his poem’s privileged social position within the culture of the United States.

Du Bois juxtaposes a marginalized and anonymous Spiritual, “My Lord, What a Mourning! When the Stars Begin to Fall,” and Lowell’s poem. The words and composer of the Spiritual are not reproduced; thus Du Bois illustrates the unarticulated voice and invisible social position of its maker(s) within his or her culture, yet he inserts this black voice into a fracturing cultural space located in an early-twentieth-century moment of burgeoning modernity with its social fragmentation and personal alienation. This cultural space that later is located in Blues operates in a homological relation to modernism, and Jazz will have a similar relation to postmodernism. Blues as a metaphor in African American fiction, however, is not literary modernism; and similarly, Jazz in fiction is not postmodernism. While there are conterminous aspects between music as a metaphor in African American fiction and literary modernism and postmodernism, black writers as well as other marginalized writers have constructed new shapes for these intellectual concepts.<sup>11</sup>

Du Bois’s positioning of a text from the dominant culture and one from African American culture discloses the similar ideas that both convey, especially when the title of the Spiritual is known. His juxtapositioning of the texts also demonstrates their social positioning—a privileged text and a marginal text; this strategy suggests that both are

ying for primacy as viable expressions of change. Du Bois's pattern of representing a privileged text and then a marginal text reveals the dominant values that establish a social policy that permits Lowell to speak and to define social change for black people, yet black people have no public voice of their own. Their voices are represented through the most abstract form of expression—music; so their self-definitions and ideas for change are barely articulated in the social discourse. Du Bois reveals the tension of double-consciousness because both the poem and the Spiritual occupy the same space and vie for the same position: the voice to define and to articulate change. Lowell's poem represents a dominant and external definition for change in the condition of black people. And the Spiritual—through subtle signifying nuances—speaks to the paradox of being enslaved people in a land that was established on and engages in a discourse of freedom. Yet emancipation at the end of the Civil War along with postwar Reconstruction does not alter significantly the lived reality of black people in the United States. The paradoxical qualities of African American life are continued even after emancipation.<sup>12</sup>

Du Bois also enacts in literature aspects suggested by Douglass's descriptions of the plantation songs when he organizes *The Souls* as an improvisation on traditional written genres; Du Bois's study breaks the boundaries of genre yet produces a rich and satisfying text. Also in these essays, studies, story, and analyses of black life, one finds prototypes of experiences from the lives of black people as well as examples that illustrate the way paradox has become a part of how life has been written into much of the artistic expression by black people in the United States during most of the twentieth century.

Sections 6 and 7 of *The Souls* as well as the essay in chapter 9, "Of the Sons of Master and Man," depict the paradox of being both part of and not part of the United States, or of being absent while present. This lived contradiction is repeated in African American literature, most notably in Ralph Ellison's metaphor of invisibility.<sup>13</sup> In the story "Of the Coming of John," Du Bois illustrates the contradiction of being seen and not seen as well as that of being absent while present. He illustrates the contradiction of being absent while present through his depiction of the parallel, yet disparate, lives of the two Johns from Altamaha, Georgia. John Jones, despite his education, "must remain subordinate, and can never expect to be the equal of white men." Thus his selfhood is absent and he is barred from full participation in the society where he is a paradoxically invisible presence. Through Du Bois's portrayal of Judge



Henderson, father of the other John, this writer also conveys the racialized and specious idea that suggests John Jones's subordinate position in society is established by "nature" (175). As a result of such ideas, John Jones's intelligence, pain, and anger, as well as his other basic human qualities, are never seen; that is, John Jones's socially defined body is the only thing the dominant society of Altamaha perceives, making him an invisible presence that is seen in his physicality—for his use value—yet unseen in his humanity.

Certainly Du Bois's musical bars—in addition to exhibiting the fragmentation of double-consciousness when contrasted with the words with which they are paired—also convey paradox when one views the Spirituals as a form of art that employs a method of saying and not saying. A seemingly empty space between words and meanings in the Spirituals (Douglass's distinction between jargon and meaning) allows multiple meanings for what is said, yet also allows a space for what is not said—yet said—to be filled with unspoken, and at times unspeakable, ideas that often are not apparent in cursory examinations of this gap. Without, for instance, the words that illustrate ideas or experiences from the Spirituals, Du Bois's anonymous and untitled bars of music have the semblance of meaninglessness in relation to literature and intellectual ideas, especially when the musical bars from the Spirituals are juxtaposed with the words (ideas) of the poets he quotes and names. Yet all this apparent emptiness is actually a space for what is not permitted in speech. This gap in meaning stands as a method of saying and not saying that can "provide a way of contemplating chaos and civilization . . . [as well as provide] a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" (Morrison, *Playing* 7).

Through the double meanings of songs such as "Steal Away," which is placed in chapter 10, and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," which follows Tennyson's poem in chapter 12, Du Bois illuminates the chaotic potential of selective freedom, a potential that is demonstrated through the words in songs that suggest acquiescence while calling for covert action. His inscribing of paradox is deepened if we discern the conundrum of being absent while present in his juxtaposition of bars from sorrow songs by enslaved people—whose texts were relegated to the margin of tradition—next to texts of writers who have a place in or near the center of the dominant nineteenth-century Western tradition.

Du Bois's organizational structure of *The Souls* calls for a parallel place for black people within Western tradition (in which he was clearly

well versed). He also opens a space for a formal place for music as a vital trope in African American literature. His juxtaposition of centric and ex-centric (Hutcheon 57–73) texts demonstrates, early in the twentieth century, the inside-outside paradox of marginalization. People who are in bondage and on the outside of the social center feel less of the weight of the dominant cultural ideas about rules, including artistic rules. As long as music and literature by African Americans during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century do not overtly traverse the established racial discourse, they are able to express ideas that, in fact, are marginalized yet speak to intracultural concerns, including freedom and resistance. As the intertextuality between Douglass's and Du Bois's texts suggests, these two writers' observations about music and black life offer music as a viable location for African American aesthetic ideas. Music, then, is expanded and made an important means through which political-social-historical-cultural ideas are expressed by African American artists, including writers.

Douglass's and Du Bois's texts offer possibilities for the use of music as a metaphor in African American literary expression. Douglass reads the musical, social, and historical texts of the events in his society and writes them into his *Narrative*; and, through the influences of memory and history, Du Bois inserts Douglass into *The Souls* by extending and rewriting the experiences and history in Douglass's text. This dialogism or intertextual process of absorption and reshaping also is part of black musical practice. Douglass's *Narrative* need not be situated as an acknowledged source or origin in order to function as an intertext in Du Bois's *Souls*. Intertextuality obtains through implicit as well as explicit traces (Worton and Still 22) in texts. This musical practice entails reading the texts of events in contemporary society, reading the texts of other music and the texts<sup>14</sup> of history, and then rewriting them in contemporary song. There are life stories in African American music that present double meanings, freedom trains, the multifaced trickster hero, indomitability of spirit, and a personal and personified spirit God. These aspects of black music begin to find a place in literature through poems such as Paul Laurence Dunbar's "When Malindy Sings," which gestures toward later developments in the literary uses of music among African American writers.

Within twenty years of the publication of Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, black music is influencing the form of and meaning in African American poetry. Langston Hughes's title poem in his *Weary Blues* along with poems such as "Jazzonia," most of his poems in *Fine Clothes to the*

*Jew*, and numerous other later poems, including “Trumpet Player” and the long poem *Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz*, are situated explicitly within a Blues-Jazz site of social-cultural-historical energies. Joining Hughes as an early writer who uses music in African American poetry is Sterling Brown with “Ma Rainey,” “Memphis Blues,” “Strong Men,” and other poems that draw on the resources of Blues and Jazz music.

Within two generations of the publication of *The Souls*, scholars and writers of twentieth-century African American fiction are situating this literature within the historical-social-political and aesthetic energies of Blues and Jazz music and demonstrating the intracultural influences of the music on the literature.<sup>15</sup> African American writers, in the titles of their narratives, frequently make direct references to as well as allude to Spirituals, Blues, and Jazz. A brief tour through the titles of African American short stories and novels illustrates the significance of music to many black writers in the United States. In this study Wallace Thurman’s novel *The Blacker the Berry . . . : A Novel of Negro Life*, Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*, John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent for You Yesterday*, and James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” (along with numerous other titles by Baldwin)<sup>16</sup> make such allusions or references.

One, however, can easily note other similarly allusive/referential titles among African American writers: Sherley Anne Williams’s “Tell Martha Not to Moan,” Langston Hughes’s “Blues I’m Playing,” Richard Wright’s “Bright and Morning Star,” Sylvester Leaks’s “Blues Begins,” and Clarence Major’s “Scat,” along with contemporary novel titles, including Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, and mass-market novelists E. Lynn Harris’s *If This World Were Mine* and Valerie Wilson Wesley’s *Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do*. Additionally, a similar allusiveness/referentiality to musicians, song titles, and lines from Spirituals, Blues, and Jazz informs Toni Cade Bambara’s “Medley,” which includes numerous allusions and references to Blues and Jazz music and musicians.<sup>17</sup>

Musicians or singers as important characters and settings in musical venues also are frequently located in African American fictional narratives. Rudolph Fisher’s “Common Meter” takes place in a Jazz venue—the Arcadia Club. And in this study Paul Laurence Dunbar’s novel *The Sport of the Gods*, Thurman’s *Blacker the Berry*, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*, John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent for You Yesterday*, and Ann Petry’s novel *The Street*, have important scenes situated in a black musical performance venue. Moreover, among the numerous

singers and musicians in African American fiction are Ann Petry's drummer Kid Jones in "Solo on Drums," Langston Hughes's Blues guitarist Jimboy and Blues singer Harrietta in *Not Without Laughter*, Gayl Jones's Blues singer Ursa in *Corregidora*, Al Young's supposed sax man, Chicken Hawk, in "Chicken Hawk's Dream," Bebe Moore Campbell's hors de combat Jazz singer Lindy (Malindy) Walker in *Singing in the Comeback Choir*, and Clarence Major's dipsomaniac Manfred Banks in *Dirty Bird Blues* as well as the musician characters in the novels in this study. These fictional narratives point to music as a salient feature in twentieth-century African American prose.

Further, between the 1845 publication of Douglass's *Narrative*, which includes his observations on the music of black people, and the 1903 publication of Du Bois's studies on black life and music in *The Souls of Black Folk*, there are African American writers who use the resources of music and vernacular material in their poetry and fiction. Charles Chesnutt is one such writer whose texts inscribe the language and musical rhythms of black people in the United States. "The Goophered Grapevine" is Chesnutt's first published story, appearing in 1887 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. When editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich published Chesnutt's story, he, along with the readers of this influential magazine, likely was not aware of the writer's African ancestry.<sup>18</sup>

Chesnutt's "Goophered Grapevine," however, marks a use of music in literature that is rare among black writers. Through his unique employment of irony, Chesnutt enacts minstrelsy. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker, who also discusses Chesnutt's use of minstrelsy in fiction, says that minstrelsy in African American literature is "mastery of form"—a mocking minstrel perfection of white literary models that at the same time creates space for a black voice (15–81). Chesnutt's use of music is not the focus of this book, as it is not an expression of Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, or Jazz, and, moreover, Chesnutt's story was published in the nineteenth century and is thus outside the scope of this study. Yet I still find that his narrative technique is worth a brief discussion, as aspects of minstrelsy are present in the novels of Dunbar, Thurman, Larsen, and Ellison that I read later in this study.

"The Goophered Grapevine" is a double enactment of literary minstrelsy. Chesnutt, the black man, takes on the mask of whiteness in the form of a writer who presents a story about southern life in the *Atlantic*. In 1887 the failures of Reconstruction are clearly apparent to black people and have been for a full ten years. Chesnutt, the unreconstructed black

man, becomes the man of letters (which at the time was presumed to be a white man). He then mocks tradition with a perfected and exact replica of the white writer presenting a slice of southern life from the perspective of the triumphant North. Unlike blackface minstrelsy, which was a deliberate, degenerate aberration, Chesnutt's minstrel irony mocks through this writer's perfection of form and the clever—not idiotic—wit displayed by Chesnutt's character Julius; thus minstrelsy is exemplified in Chesnutt's publishing of his story as well as in the art of his story. Chesnutt's minstrel irony, then, is shown in the depth and complexity of his artistry, including his characterization of Julius and in his perfection of the local color genre in fiction, which in its plantation school variety typically includes stories about plantation life by white writers. Yet Chesnutt's most complex mockery in "The Goophered Grapevine" is found in his perfection and reversal of the form of minstrelsy.

Chesnutt, as the black man in white face, depicts the white straight man of minstrelsy, Mr. Interlocutor, in his character who is the vintner from Ohio. He also depicts the black character of the minstrel theater in his characterization of Julius, who in the tradition of minstrelsy would probably be called Mr. Vines, as the custom of minstrelsy was to give the blackface character a name derived from an object with which he is associated, thus through metonymy reducing him to the status of a thing. Chesnutt, however, gives the black character a name and leaves the white character nameless.<sup>19</sup> Instead of demeaning the intelligence of the black character and making his behavior the source of ridicule, Chesnutt imbues Julius with a sense of irony and other forms of indirection that result in a wry intelligence that illuminates the vintner's smug attitude and illustrates the white character's ignorance before the sophistication of Julius's verbal play.

So as Chesnutt's grape grower and his former enslaved captive are subtly and subversively reversed intellectually while reenacting through literature the song and dance of the minstrel show, Chesnutt simultaneously acts out his own mockery as the black writer of the putative plantation tradition story. Chesnutt goes on to triple the minstrel irony through his presentation of dialect. For readers of the *Atlantic*, Julius's dialect is blackface minstrelsy, a corked-up white man representing the language of the plantation for the entertainment of whites. Chesnutt was, in fact, a corked-up black man, in the tradition of Bert Williams,<sup>20</sup> representing the language of minstrelsy for the entertainment of whites while mocking them in art and in life.

One of the earliest attempts in fiction to filter through the issues of dialect, minstrelsy, and close transcriptions of folk matter and to present the ideas that are embedded in the music, lives, and philosophy of African Americans is found in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a lyrical multigenre text in which the music of black people is written into twentieth-century American literature. Toomer maintains that *Cane*, which was published in 1923 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, is a "song of an end" to a "folk spirit" that was beautiful. Certainly Toomer perceives that black folk culture in the United States is dying as the modernism of an urban, machine culture changes the expressive lives of African Americans from a deep and complex resonance of emotions found in the paradox of the Spirituals to a deep yet fragmented, many-layered, complex Jazz expressive attitude that confronted the contradictions of African American life with a musical boldness that slavery had limited but not eliminated.<sup>21</sup>

In *Cane*, Toomer clearly does not present a voice that speaks from within the "peasant life" he depicts. The novel's narrator engages in a ritual journey into the South, but this journey does not reveal to him that he is the "bone of the bone" nor the "flesh of the flesh" of the people he observes. Stepto refers to this Du Boisian type of southern journey as an immersion ritual (*Behind the Veil* 164–67). Toomer's narrator fails in his immersion ritual; he is unlike Du Bois, who asserts his position as one with the people "within the veil" (4).

The distance that Toomer places between the narrator, the people in this text, and their musicality problematizes Toomer's intracultural uses of music in his multigenre text. The narrative stance in *Cane* is that of a fascinated outsider who is "perceptive" and sensitive to the life, horror, and pain expressed in the language and music of the black people who move along the Dixie Pike. This narrator also at times is titillated and repulsed by the Jazz environment of Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Toomer's poems and stories seem more in the tradition of the plantation school variety of local color—without Chesnutt's ironic subversiveness—than within a Blues or Jazz tradition in African American fiction.<sup>22</sup> In *Cane* the folk spirit to which Toomer refers is alienated from the narrative voice that presents this spirit. There are moments when a feeling of loss is illustrated, yet that loss can be read as the personal loss of the impact of this folk spirit on the narrator as well as the loss of this spirit within society.<sup>23</sup>

Toomer takes great care presenting the details of the environment that he depicts. His descriptions of the variety of colors among black



people are sensitive and varied: “yellow flower,” “creamy brown,” “white looking,” “color of oak leaves,” “black skinned,” “flush ginger” (10, 14, 20, 28, 50, 58). And his poem “Cotton Song” expresses some of the philosophy in the Spirituals as well as recalls the resistant spirit of these songs, which is illustrated through the poet’s reworking of a line from the Spirituals into his formal rhymed quatrains: “We ain’t agwine t wait until th Judgment Day” (9). Yet despite these folk elements, the persona in Toomer’s “Cotton Song” seems to stand outside the experiences of those who sing the Spirituals. In “Cotton Song,” Toomer establishes familiarity by his use of the word “brother,” a common term of inclusion. But in this poem Toomer’s poetic persona clearly has entered into the community of those who sing the Spirituals and attempts to establish a relationship with them. Also missing in “Cotton Song” is the internalized knowledge that one need not wait for Judgment Day. This idea is crucial to the philosophical perspective expressed in most Spirituals and Blues. In “Cotton Song,” however, the persona seems to bring this basic Spiritual and Blues knowledge to the others in the poem.

There are additional instances of such distancing in *Cane*. The narrator in “Carma,” for instance, says, “The sun . . . shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face.” To view something as primitive the observer must be distanced from it. Whether one reads primitive as first and foundational or as less socially evolved yet mysteriously attractive, there is distance and difference in this image; and Toomer’s sharp contrast between “primitive” and “rocket” reinforces the image of Carma as less developed than the narrator who has the words to describe her thusly. And, as in “Kabnis,” the “sad strong song” is “far away” (10). Also in *Cane*, the Jazz music of the North, even though it is dangerous for the “white and whitewashed wood of Washington,” is associated with “nigger life” and “nigger alleys” that would make God “duck his head in shame” (50, 39).

There are, however, a few instances in Toomer’s text when the narrator seems to identify with his subjects. One of those instances is in “Bona and Paul.” Toomer’s most evocative depiction of black southern life, however, is in “Kabnis,” yet even in this story the main character, Ralph Kabnis, is separated a priori from the “white South [that] weighs down upon him” (100), and by disposition Kabnis is alienated from the other black people in the story.

Still, “Kabnis” is Toomer’s most sympathetic portrayal of the Georgia folk. In this short story he uses vernacular language to illustrate each

character's social status. There remains, though, distance and alienation in Kabnis as the Sunday church music is separated from him and the other men who hear it from their small cabin (88–91). Toomer's separation of Kabnis from his environment also is depicted through this central character's alienation from the beauty of the blackness he encounters in the South. Kabnis expresses this when he says, "Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is radiant beauty in the night that touches me and . . . tortures me" (83). Again, at Halsey's workshop, where Kabnis is more closely associated with the daily life in this Georgia town, his feelings of not belonging are illustrated when we are told that he is "awkward and ludicrous, like a schoolboy in his big brother's new overalls" (98). These and numerous other examples in *Cane* demonstrate that Toomer uses folk materials, including African American music, in ways that suggest their otherness. Rather than presenting folk materials as emerging from the daily lives of the folk, he most often presents these materials through the eyes of an outside observer.

James Weldon Johnson, conversely, tries to rid vernacular speech of the limitations—of strangeness and of weak artistic ingenuity—that have been imposed on the folk expression of "Aframericans." These limitations were not "due to any defect of the dialect as dialect, but to the mould of conventions in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set, [and] to the fixing effects of its long association with the Negro only as a happy-go-lucky or forlorn figure." In *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927) Johnson begins the transformation of folk material into literary art, a process that, within Western tradition, is demonstrated in Chaucer, Shakespeare, James Joyce, Wilhelm Richard Wagner, and, for Johnson, John Millington Synge (7–8).

In 1926 Langston Hughes titled his first collection of poems *The Weary Blues*. His title and the style he employs in his poems demonstrate a conscious association between African American Blues and Jazz and African American literature. Hughes's title recalls either Robert Nathaniel Dett's composition "Don't Be Weary, Traveler" (Southern, *The Music* 274) or a recording of "Weary Blues," by either Clarence Williams, Johnny Dodds, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings with Jelly Roll Morton, or Louis Armstrong, all of whom recorded or performed this tune in the early 1920s. Armstrong's recording (which is upbeat and energetic, making the tune an ironic reversal of its title) is the most likely choice. In 1930 at the decline of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes published his

first<sup>24</sup> novel, *Not Without Laughter*. In this novel, Hughes—as was the case in novels by Harlem Renaissance writers Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, and Wallace Thurman—makes music prominent. Sandy, Hughes's main character, has a father and aunt who are Blues musicians. Jimboy is a less-than-successful Blues guitarist, while his sister-in-law Harrietta Williams triumphs over life's difficulties and becomes "Princess of the Blues." Harrietta exemplifies a Blues singularity that is informed by the group philosophy—elaborating on a basic form—as she encourages Sandy to continue his education with her financial support. She recognizes that Sandy's education promises to expose him to fewer hardships than those experienced by his father, and she hopes education will bring Sandy a less troubled path to success than she has had. Hughes's Blues-based novel and the story it presents could easily substitute for Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* in chapter 4 of this book.

African American writers from Dunbar and Chesnutt—ending the nineteenth century and opening the twentieth century—to Harlem Renaissance writers, as well as Willard Motley, a purportedly "raceless" writer in the 1940s and 1950s who uses Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo" to suggest Blues-like conditions in the lives of his white characters in *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (1958), and numerous musically allusive contemporary writers, such as Bebe Moore Campbell and Clarence Major, have negotiated the terrain of a music-into-fiction discourse. Blues is the prevalent musical aesthetic philosophy that informs African American fictional characters and themes. In the texts that I will read and in African American literature in general, Jazz is and has been less frequently textualized in fiction. Increasingly, this is changing. Spiritual-Gospel philosophy, however, finds a consistent place in African American literature.

In the first chapter of this study, I delineate the characteristics of a music-into-literature discourse that I find in a number of African American literary texts. For the purposes of this study, literary uses of music point to an intersection of Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz located within the historical, social, political, and cultural environment in which African American life and music have combined. In the ten literary texts that I read in the following chapters, I find that music has a plethora of expressions of its intertextual relation to character and theme. I begin each chapter by situating the literary texts within a broad social, historical, political, and cultural context. By highlighting historical and cultural moments that lack currency in scholarly as well as general discussions of

history and culture in the United States, I attempt to refocus, expand, and redefine discussions of African American literary and musical culture. I do not purport to be comprehensive in my use of historical and cultural markers; they are, I admit, summary and provocative gestures toward my readings of the fictional texts that are situated in the same historical moment and share connective social energies that are similarly marginalized in the dominant discourse. These energies, however, are crucial to the intracultural discourse of music as a metaphor that moves into African American literature.

Early-twentieth-century novels such as Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods*, Larsen's *Quicksand*, and Thurman's *Blacker the Berry* demonstrate the subtle influence of music on theme and character in African American fiction. In Dunbar's novel, the emerging influence of Blues and Jazz—and its increasing association with northern, urban cities such as Dunbar's New York—in African American cultural life is rejected, while an idealized southern Spiritual-Gospel life in Alabama is supported.<sup>25</sup> Larsen, by contrast, presents a female critique of southern Spiritual-Gospel life and its restrictions on the construction of her protagonist's, Helga Crane's, identity, yet this biracial character also is unable to situate herself comfortably among the middle-class, northern and urban Blues People<sup>26</sup> she encounters because she is repulsed by their affected posture of race-consciousness. Helga also rejects the exotic primitivism that she endures when she visits her relatives in Denmark. She is a Blues character who cannot find a Blues space that allows her the racial as well as the gender freedom she desires.

As Daphne Duval Harrison states in relation to female Blues singers, one also can say in relation to Larsen's Helga: they lived in "a world that did not protect the sanctity of black womanhood as espoused in the bourgeois ideology" (64). Yet sometimes black women are enmeshed within the power of that ideology, as was the case for Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Wallace Thurman's female protagonist, as with Larsen's, is on a quest for identity. For Emma Lou Morgan in *The Blacker the Berry*, this quest is situated within the problematic African American class and color issues that propel Thurman's main character from one Blues environment to another in search of people whose color and class she finds acceptable. Emma Lou's problem, unlike Helga's, is not that she doesn't locate the "right sort of people"; her problem is that when she finds them, they reject her. Thurman's protagonist struggles not with external

Blues-making aspects of racial rejection but with the doubling of these Blues experiences within an intracultural problematic of color distinctions.

Hurston, Petry, and Ellison portray important Blues and Jazz characters prominently in their novels. Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* depicts Tea Cake as a traveling bluesman, and her main character Janie lives a Blues life. Janie, however, begins to rework the Blues environment of Eatonville, Florida, in order to reposition women within a Blues philosophy that is losing its efficacy as the town models itself on the values of the dominant society. Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an early example in literature of a particularly female positioning within Blues philosophy. What is important, though, is that both Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand* and Hurston's Janie recognize the "lie the image of the lady represents" (Christian 236–37). Lutie Johnson, Petry's main character in *The Street*, recognizes the problematic nature of gender and race too late. She is a single parent who lives in an urban Blues environment; she aspires to move away from this environment because she is familiar with and believes in the dominant discourse that promotes the idea that hard work merits success. Lutie believes her talent as a Blues singer may be one way to gain success through hard work. Petry demonstrates the duplicity in the dominant discourse that erects invisible barriers and pitfalls and that creates Blues People such as Lutie. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is filled with folk, Blues, and Jazz elements that use African American experiences as a starting point for interrogating issues of modernity and identity.

Contemporary fiction by black writers includes characters and themes that have been made by writers who view music as an aspect of their aesthetic and their literary strategies. Toni Morrison explores issues of gender and friendship in her characterization of Nel Wright Greene as a Blues character and of Sula Peace as a Jazz character in her novel *Sula*, which is set in the Blues neighborhood referred to as the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio. Morrison's characters convey to readers the beauty of understanding the interconnectedness of Blues and Jazz, the music that comes to represent the connection between the friends, Nel and Sula, in the novel. Albert Murray and John Edgar Wideman illustrate the development of youthful protagonists. For Murray's Scooter in *Train Whistle Guitar*, Blues aesthetics and philosophy in his Gasoline Point, Alabama, neighborhood allow him to encounter the harsh realities of life within his environment and prepare him for maturity and success in the larger world. Gasoline Point is filled with bluesmen, with whom he can

interact, and with Blues records as well as a Spiritual-Gospel environment in Scooter's home—making Gasoline Point a location that surrounds Scooter with love and protection. Finally, Wideman's musical novel *Sent for You Yesterday* interrogates the notion of historical continuity and uses music as an intertextual locus from which his youthful narrator Doot constructs a position for himself within the changing Blues community of Homewood, Pennsylvania. I end this study of music and African American characters and themes with an essay on James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," a classic short story that provides access to conveniently well-constructed examples of a Blues theme as well as Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz characters.

The premise of this book is that if music is as influential in the lives and artistic expressions of African Americans as some scholars and cultural analysts suggest, one would expect that it would have an impact on the fiction of black people in the United States, just as it has on the poetry. Noted cultural critics and writers Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin have commented on the literary uses of music in fiction; they view music as a metaphor that collects lived experiences among black people. Baldwin, in fact, calls for critical articulation—such as the undertaking in this study—of this tradition of song in story ("Many Thousands" 597–98).<sup>27</sup>

Baldwin's charge has been taken up by scholars including Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*, Houston Baker in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, and Hazel Carby in "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime." The work of these scholars, among others, informs this study and challenges me to expand the discourse on music in African American fiction. My positioning of this scholarly discourse—as in the literary texts that I read—involves formal revision as an act of expansion "rather than ritual slaying" (Gates, *Signifying* xxviii).

While my premise is that music figures importantly in the fiction of many African American writers, music is not all that there is in African American fiction, and it is not always in these texts.



# THESE (BLACKNESS OF BLACKNESS) BLUES



In the 1940s and 1950s, black writers in the United States find that Blues-making events continue to inform their lived experiences. Many of these writers persist in situating their narratives within the unsettling racialized discourse of the United States and in responding to the strictures of this discourse. William Attaway in *Blood on the Forge* (1941) employs both a migration theme as well as music as he aligns migrant sharecropper Melody Moss with Jazz. This character is a guitar player whose mother changes his name to Melody so that his name would match his personality. The Moss Boys, Melody and his brothers Big Mat and Chinatown, leave Kentucky sharecropping for the mills of Pennsylvania. Other writers, such as Willard Motley, brother of Harlem Renaissance painter Archibald Motley, enter the market as so-called raceless writers in the 1940s; these writers focus on white characters in their novels. This is the case in Motley's novels *Knock on Any Door* (1947), *We Fished All Night* (1951), and *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (1958). Yet Motley consistently employs music in these novels. Often he reinforces his setting with popular

songs from the dominant social milieus as well as with Blues or Jazz tunes, such as Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo," which he uses in *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*. These black writers, along with others, join Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellison in their uses of music in African American fiction. Yet black writers in the 1940s are prompted to abandon the question of racial inequality and to write on purportedly universal topics, as the publishing houses and reviewers for prominent publications encourage them to produce what the publishing industry views as "raceless" writing.<sup>1</sup>

The 1940s are turbulent years in terms of race relations in the United States. Black people boycott the New York City bus system in 1941, returning after one month, when their demands for black bus drivers and mechanics are met. There are riots in North Carolina and Detroit in 1941 and 1942, respectively. Also in 1942, white students stage a walk-out in Gary, Indiana, to protest desegregation of Gary's public schools. And until President Franklin D. Roosevelt issues Executive Order 8802, which disallows discrimination in war and government industries and establishes the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), labor leader A. Philip Randolph continues to organize the first march on Washington in 1941 and ignores FDR's requests to call off the march.

The war years bring an increase in racial controversies to the country. In 1943 black people are admitted into the United States military on a quota system to control the numbers of African Americans in military service. This year there are uprisings in Mobile, Alabama; Beaumont, Texas; Los Angeles; Detroit; and Harlem. Civil unrest also occurs this year in Harlem after an altercation between a black serviceman and a police officer results in the serviceman being shot. Ralph Ellison depicts this event in the surreal riot scene at the end of *Invisible Man*, as does Ann Petry in her short novel *In Darkness and Confusion* (1947). During the war, much of the civil unrest is sparked by attacks on black servicemen by white servicemen or by white civilians. These injustices result in the call for a Double V campaign<sup>2</sup> among politically conscious African Americans: victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. The campaign mediates the schism that many black people feel as a result of finding themselves or their family members rallying to end tyranny and oppression abroad while continuing to experience it at home. For these reasons, Petry's character Boots Smith in her novel *The Street* actively resists military service.<sup>3</sup>

As black veterans in the 1940s demand their rights, there also is an increase in organized efforts to bring the United States to fulfill its promise of democratic freedoms for all. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organizes its first sit-in at a Chicago restaurant in 1943, and its first freedom rides challenging segregated interstate bus travel are organized in 1947. By the end of the war, black veterans, repeating the postwar civil disruption that occurred among black veterans in 1919, demand the same political and social justice as well as freedom from tyranny that they fought for others to have, causing unrest in 1946 in a number of cities, including Philadelphia; Columbia, Tennessee; and Athens, Alabama. President Harry Truman responds by forming the Commission on Civil Rights.

By the 1950s, black people in the United States are primed for moving this country into a new era of equality, as the battles of the 1940s fatigue the nation while shaking its racial assumptions. The calm of the early fifties seems beneficent and hopeful to many black people. This moment of quiet lulls many Americans, black and white, into a false confidence in the surety of impending and rapid change in the racial policies of the United States.<sup>4</sup> In 1952, Tuskegee Institute, which had by then collected data on lynching for seventy-one years, finds that there are no reports of lynching for that year. Yet in 1951, white people in Cicero, Illinois, riot in response to a black family's plans to move into the town. In Chicago, there are riots and civil disruption from 1953 to 1956 in protest against black families that are scheduled to move into a public housing project in this major midwestern city. And continuing in the tradition of politicized religious organizations of previous decades, in 1953 Albert Cleage Jr. (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman) establishes the Shrine of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church in Detroit, Michigan. This faith-based organization, as is the case with its many predecessors, is situated in a discourse of African American spiritual, economic, personal, and collective empowerment that proactively resists a racialized social policy of exclusion and white privilege.

The momentary sense of calm and affirmation that welcomes the 1950s is veritably upset when Joseph McCarthy imagines that there are Communists proliferating throughout the United States and his House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) questions the loyalty and patriotism of many U.S. citizens—both black and white—including Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes. The hopefulness for

calm in race relations also departs, as the White Citizens' Council is organized in Indianola, Mississippi, in 1954. And the following year, a fourteen-year-old boy named Emmett Till is kidnapped and lynched in Money, Mississippi, for purportedly admiring a white woman. Emmett Till's murder occurs just three months after the landmark "Brown II" decision that orders the immediate desegregation of public schools. Shortly after Till's murder, a black woman in Montgomery, Alabama, named Rosa Parks refuses to play her putative role in the racial drama of the United States. Her actions spark the successful one-year-long (from 1955 to 1956) Montgomery bus boycott. The NAACP's aggressive legal strategies for civil rights gain a landmark victory in the 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* case, which establishes the unconstitutionality of separate schools and breaks the stranglehold of fifty-eight years that the *Plessy v. Ferguson*—separate but equal—Supreme Court decision had on the social policy of this nation. At the middle of the century, these events set in motion the possibility for even more change and for more vigorous initiatives toward that change.

Films in the 1940s still include black musicians in limited as well as limiting roles, but these films also begin to raise with increased vigor the question of the United States' racialized social policies in what are termed "problem pictures."<sup>5</sup> In 1943 Jelly Roll Morton (Ferdinand Joseph La Menthe) and Lena Horne appear in *Stormy Weather*. Lena Horne also appears in the role of Georgia Brown in the 1942 musical *Cabin in the Sky*. Black actress Hazel Scott's debut in *Something to Shout About* brings her acclaim and leads to her appearance in a number of films during the 1940s, including *Rhapsody in Blue*, a film biography of George Gershwin. The problem of "passing" as a concern in films continues as the 1949 film *Pinky*, based on the novel *Quality* by Cid Ricketts Sumner, reprises the 1930s story line of the book-based film *Imitation of Life*. In *Pinky*, white actress Jeanne Crain—Pinky—performs the title role as the biracial grandchild child of Dicey Johnson, played by Ethel Waters. This film expands the problematical concerns found in its 1930s predecessor by depicting an interracial romance on the big screen. And *Pinky*, in contrast to Peola in *Imitation of Life*, decides to situate herself in the southern town where she was born; she also, before it is too late, abandons her previous thoughts of passing.

In the arts, African Americans continue the socio-cultural and political strand that influences the art of black people through very recent times in the United States. Jacob Lawrence begins the 1940s with his

Migration of the Negro series (1940–41), which brought him acclaim and escalated Lawrence's artistic career into a period of over fifty years of success. In 1957, John Biggers's painting *Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival* looks back to the 1920s Harlem Renaissance artistic ideas, which locate an intertextual relation between African American and continental African cultural expression. Charles Alston's paintings during the 1950s and 1960s record his concern with social history; he terms a number of these pieces "protest paintings." One such piece, *You Never Really Meant It, Did You, Mr. Charlie?* depicts the 1957 integration of public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. And Alston's 1955 painting titled *Walking* is inspired by the Montgomery bus boycott. This era also finds sculptor Elizabeth Catlett so discomfited by the racial and political conditions in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s that she moves to Mexico. As was the case for music produced during the Harlem Renaissance, in the 1940s and 1950s music continues as an inspiration for African American artists. Charles Alston's sketches of Jazz and Blues musicians, including his well-known portrait of Bessie Smith, endear him to the musicians whose art he admires. Elizabeth Catlett's bronze portrait sculpture of Louis Armstrong still stands in the New Orleans park named for this Jazz musician. Norman Lewis continues a music-into-other-arts intertext in his 1948 painting *Jazz Musicians*; this piece moves away from direct representation and renders Jazz music in free abstract form.

By the end of the 1930s the movement of white bands into the swing arena displaces a number of black musicians, as the enlivened orchestrated sound of swing no longer represents to white audiences a view of the other or a journey into the mysterious and unattainable unknown. With compositions such as William Grant Still's "Blues," white swing bands such as Artie Shaw's continue the tradition established by Harry T. Burleigh and Antonín Dvořák of combining African American music and classical music. These later compositions emphasize the music of the Blues and Spirituals rather than the classical sounds that dominated early compositions.

Swing's peak years, 1935 to 1945, find black musicians struggling to maintain a broad-based audience. The situation, ironically, is worsened in the 1940s as a result of local civil rights legislation in northern states. Booking agents, fearing lawsuits by African Americans who might attempt to attend concerts by black performers at venues that traditionally entertain white customers, simply refuse to hire black bands.<sup>6</sup> African American musicians encounter further difficulties during the

war years as wartime rationing of gas, the youthfulness of many musicians (which qualified them for the draft), and disruptions in bus and train travel make the former 1930s one-nighters difficult if not impossible for most black musicians. In the 1930s many black musicians earned their living traveling along the East Coast and throughout the South, but this changes during the war years as factors related to the war along with racialized social policies and social upheavals, among other factors, result in their move back to small combos and infrequent travel, as well as their move from Harlem to Fifty-second Street in midtown Manhattan. Another change the war years bring is an increase in the number of women musicians and their success as performers on the national scene. The multiethnic International Sweethearts of Rhythm is one such group that plays to enthusiastic crowds throughout the 1940s.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1940s, among African Americans, Jazz music has moved through Louis Armstrong's Jazz age and Duke Ellington's swing era and now is preparing for Charlie Parker's and Dizzy Gillespie's bebop revolution in Jazz. As established Jazz musicians—Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins—draped in the elegant robes of swing encounter newer Jazz musicians outfitted in the hip or nonchalant as well as resistant style of bebop (not to be confused with the romanticized self-alienation of bohemian artists of the era, who set themselves up as dichotomous outsiders to established orthodoxies), the older musicians find that swing's cohering harmonic continuities and rhythmic extensions are interrogated by the contrapuntal ruptures of harmony and rhythmic dissonance found in the bebop of Parker, Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk. Still, there is no clear break between swing and bebop, as—early on—Parker, Gillespie, “Prez” Lester Young, and other proponents of the new sound play in the bands and combos of Count Basie, William Clarence “Billy” Eckstine, Earl “Fatha” Hines, Jay “Hootie” McShann, and Coleman Hawkins. From, for instance, 1942 to 1943, Hines's band includes Sarah Vaughan but also Billy Eckstine, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker. And Mary Lou Williams swings the band for Andy Kirk throughout the 1930s as an arranger and a pianist and then investigates the new sound as a result of her contact with Thelonious Monk.

In 1943, Dizzy Gillespie and his band are playing bebop at the Onyx Club on New York City's Fifty-second Street. His band includes Oscar Pettiford on bass; George Wallingford (occasionally Thelonious Monk) on piano; Lester Young—as Gillespie is unable to locate the often



enigmatic Charlie Parker—on tenor sax (until Young returns to Count Basie's band following the firing of Don Byas, who then plays tenor sax in Gillespie's band); and Max Roach on drums, as Kenny Clarke (Klook/Klook-Mop) is in the military. The band's performance is among the earliest efforts to bring the new small-combo sound to an audience. Later, Charlie Parker's quintet brings in new sounds while also returning Jazz—which had moved to a big band and orchestral sound in the 1930s—to its small-group and Blues heritage; this new sound, as did Jazz, later embraces and revises its disparaging appellation—bebop.

During the 1940s, wartime as well as the postwar migration of black and white southerners increases racial tensions in West Coast cities such as Los Angeles. Wartime labor shortages result in virtually full employment across gender lines, for people of color as well as for white people, in war industries located in the Los Angeles area. After the war, however, women along with black employees lose their jobs. By the 1940s, black migrants to Los Angeles join the Chinese, an exiguous number of Japanese, and the already existing Mexican American and other populations that locate their heritage in the Spanish speaking Americas. The presence of people of color appears to precipitate racial animus in white people, resulting in the notorious attacks on people of Spanish-speaking heritage in the Los Angeles zoot suit riots in 1943.<sup>8</sup>

The increase in the number of African Americans in the Los Angeles area results in the development of a vibrant nightlife along Central Avenue. The shifting cultural terrain in Los Angeles, and the resulting racial tensions, prompt Norman Granz to organize a number of jam sessions in Hollywood nightclubs; he insists that these performances will be open to black customers. In Culver City, California, at Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club, for instance, just as in the New York club with the same name, black musicians perform for white audiences. Granz's success in the Hollywood clubs prompts him to produce a Jazz concert at the Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium in 1944. He names these concerts Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP). For these performances, Granz again insists that paying customers of all ethnic designations will be admitted. In 1945, trumpeter Howard McGee brings the bebop sound to Los Angeles' Central Avenue. And by 1949, when Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie, along with Oscar Peterson in a surprise United States debut performance, appear together in their famous JATP performance at Carnegie Hall, Granz's concerts have become touring shows.

During the early 1940s bebop musicians are testing and formulating their new Jazz sound at a few clubs in Harlem as well as at the more recently established clubs midtown on Fifty-second Street. In 1940, though, New York's Cotton Club closes—five years after its move to Fifty-second Street; Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club in California also encounters a similar fate. And in 1943 the Savoy loses its license. In 1938 Henry Minton opened Minton's Playhouse in New York City; the club flourishes through the 1940s and becomes the site where bebop musicians gather for jam sessions that will shape the musical innovations they are investigating and where, in the late 1940s, Carmen McRae (whose teenaged composition "Dream of Life" was recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939) performs on piano and sings during intermissions. Henry Minton—an African American tenor sax player—strictly follows the legally established 4:30 A.M. curfew in his club. This practice moves many musicians to after-hours venues such as Clark Monroe's Uptown House, which thrives in the 1940s. A similarly flourishing music scene in the 1940s and 1950s is located at the Down Beat Room and the Club Alabam on Central Avenue in Los Angeles. The Club Alabam, an important venue for African American music, opens in 1931 and survives the Depression, Prohibition's (1920–33) last years, and the war years.

In 1942, the American Federation of Musicians calls a strike against recording; in 1944 this ban is lifted completely. Yet there are few indicators suggesting that the innovators of bebop are ready to record the new music in its desired small-combo format prior to their first record in 1945. By the middle of the decade, though, bebop musicians have established a repertoire of standards that include Dizzy Gillespie's "Bebop," "Blue 'n' Boogie," "A Night in Tunisia," and "Dizzy Atmosphere" as well as Thelonious Monk's tunes that he writes for the competitive environment at Minton's: "Round Midnight," "Epistrophy," "Well You Needn't." In 1944, Charlie Parker's combo officially heralds the bebop sound in a performance at the Three Deuces Club on New York's Fifty-second Street.

Bebop is, for record producers, the new postwar race music. A few recordings of bebop pioneers preserve this music's formative years in the early 1940s. Charlie Parker's first commercial recordings are cut in 1941 while he is with the Kansas City-based swing band led by Jay McShann. Jerry Newman—a white Jazz aficionado—may have recorded the earliest example of the new bebop sound on a portable disc recorder in 1941. Drummer Kenny Clarke's and guitarist Charlie Christian's jam session

performance of "Topsy" ("Swing to Bop" is the title under which the tune is recorded commercially) at Minton's also is preserved for history on Newman's recording. During 1943, while Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Oscar Pettiford are in the Earl Hines band, they record, in a Chicago hotel room, a bebop version of "Sweet Georgia Brown," providing perhaps another recorded sample of bebop in the making. These informal recordings provide the best source of information about pioneering bebop efforts, as the 1942 recording ban occurs in the midst of bebop's developmental stage.

Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Johnson, Max Roach, Clyde Hart, and Oscar Pettiford provide an early sample of the potential for the new bebop sound while playing in Coleman Hawkins's band. In 1944 these musicians record bebop-influenced music in Hawkins's large-band format. Bebop's most complimentary format, though, is still the small combo. Charlie Parker's first important recordings are with the four-string guitar player Lloyd "Tiny" Grimes for Savoy in 1944. These recordings demonstrate Parker's crossroads consciousness—his impulse to connect older Blues to modern Jazz. By 1945 Parker and Gillespie bring bebop to listeners in its most salient form in their Savoy recordings of "Blue 'n' Boogie," "Groovin' High," "Koko," "Now's the Time," "A Night in Tunisia," "Dizzy Atmosphere," and "Be-Bop." During the early decades of this century, musicians make records for the purpose of enticing listeners to attend live performances; at this time, recordings of music are not profitable for the musicians. By 1949 bebop's status as an art form as well as a profitable vehicle for live performances is demonstrated by Charlie Parker's opening-night performance at Morris Levy's Birdland (named in Parker's honor) in 1949.

Around 1949 race records are designated "rhythm and blues," and the first black-owned radio station, WERD, begins broadcasting from Atlanta, Georgia. Mahalia Jackson first records her gospel songs in 1943, and by 1946 Jackson's recording of Herbert Brewster's composition "Move on Up a Little Higher" sells one million copies. Jazz vocalist Sarah Vaughan, already an established talent with Earl Hines's band, wins amateur night at the Apollo in 1943, and the recordings that follow land her the title the Divine One.

Swing's symphonic sounds in the 1930s and 1940s—with releases such as Duke Ellington's Jazz suite "Black, Brown, and Beige" in 1945—along with cool Jazz's measured Europeanized sounds in the 1950s all situate Jazz in a comfortable space within the dominant culture,<sup>9</sup> yet

Blues is still an incontestable favorite among African American people in the 1940s and 1950s, with the electrified Blues sound gaining prominence. During the 1940s the popularity of down-home Blues musicians shrinks considerably among African Americans, as the faster rhythms of urban Blues gain influence. This new urban Blues sound includes electric instruments and raucous rhythms in both the sound of the music and the style of the vocals. It can be found in the 1940s and 1950s Blues sounds of, among others, Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) on "Mannish Boy" and "Rolling Stone" (after he moved from Mississippi to Chicago in 1943 and later abandoned his acoustic guitar); Aaron Thibaux "T-Bone" Walker on "Stormy Monday Blues" (Walker's Blues sound gained prominence after his 1939 performance at the Cotton Club in New York made his electric Blues guitar performance of "T-Bone Blues" a standing favorite); Howlin' Wolf (Chester Arthur Burnett) on "Moaning at Midnight"; Peetie Wheatstraw (William Bunch) on "The Devil's Son-in-Law" and "The High Sheriff of Hell" (until his death in 1941, Wheatstraw enjoyed immense success among black Blues fans with clever and witty songs); and Marion "Little" Walter Jacobs on "Off the Wall."

Down-home Blues musicians continue to record in the 1940s, even though the electrified Blues sound has gained prominence. In 1941 both Booker T. Washington "Bukka" White and Sonny Boy Williamson record important down-home Blues tunes that convey serious commentary on the racialized social policy of the United States. White's "Parchman Farm" refers to the neo-plantation environment of the Mississippi prison with that name, and Williamson's "My Black Name," ostensibly about the loss of love, critiques the position of "blackness" in the United States. Williamson's music serves as a transitional point in Blues. In the early 1940s he electrifies his harp while still keeping a rough down-home edge. His favored position among the electrified Blues musicians finds his tunes, such as "My Black Name," covered by John Lee Hooker as well as fellow down-home Blues musicians Lightnin' Hopkins and Big Joe Williams. At the end of the decade, in 1949, Big Bill Broonzy augments the efforts of his fellow down-home bluesmen with his politicized Blues tune "Black, Brown, White," which makes critical comment on the racial divide of the United States.

Jazz rhythms of the 1940s and 1950s, such as those found in the music of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, persist in the move to maintain a Blues basis and social context that will keep some form of Jazz situated

within a broad-based African American cultural milieu. Among the many distinguished alumni of Blakey's Jazz Messengers is Lee Morgan, whose 1957 recording of "Sidewinder," which later becomes the title tune from Morgan's best-known album,<sup>10</sup> combines Jazz and Blues sounds in an accessible style. Blakey and Morgan's sound often is termed "hard bop." There is, however, even more on the music horizon. In 1956 James Brown and the Fabulous Flames release their hit record "Please, Please, Please." In Brown, African American music gets something new: soul. Brown becomes Soul Brother Number One and the Godfather of Soul, and later Aretha Franklin becomes the Queen of Soul. In terms of Spiritual-Gospel innovations, the 1950s and 1960s mark the era of the freedom songs, which are primarily part of the southern civil rights movement, a movement that finds significant numbers of black people, along with their white supporters, employing transformed versions of black church—and sometimes popular—music in protest against Jim Crow racial exclusion and tyranny in the United States.

In 1954 the first Newport Jazz Festival organizers convince the residents of Newport, Rhode Island, to allow them to bring Jazz music to the area. The residents fear the music, perceiving it as a vehicle for violence and lascivious activity in their community. In 1960, though, crowds of mostly white males storm the filled-to-capacity festival and cause it to close early. Langston Hughes and Muddy Waters compose a Blues song on the spot to memorialize the moment—"Goodbye Newport Blues." In 1959 an enterprising black man in Detroit by the name of Berry Gordy establishes Hitsville, USA—Motown Records—and expands black music in the United States with another new sound. Blues experiences, however, still dominate in African American lived culture and fiction.

The high point of the Harlem Renaissance is in the past, yet in 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks makes history as the first African American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize. Her prize-winning book of poems *Annie Allen* provides an enlightening perspective on postwar life among black people in the United States, including some of the sentiments of war-time veterans who do not live the lives they fought for others to have. Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award, also portrays postwar black veterans in their disappointment and anger. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, about a black family moving into a white neighborhood, becomes a successful non-musical Broadway hit.

Post-Harlem Renaissance production among black writers in the United States demonstrates the persistence of music in African American fiction, even though the dominant cultural emphasis of this period shifts away from placing value on the presumably invigorating potential of folk materials in literature. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is written after the height of activity during the Harlem Renaissance and is set in an indeterminate post-Civil War period, probably during the post-Reconstruction era, when a number of independent black towns such as Boley, Oklahoma—the town on which Toni Morrison bases her novel *Paradise*—are established. Ann Petry's World War II era novel *The Street* examines the struggles of Lutie Johnson, a single mother, as she seeks to improve her life while encountering the difficulties that both color and gender impose on her. Ralph Ellison situates his *Invisible Man* within the contemporaneous setting of the tumultuous 1940s; this novel is published during the seemingly calm interlude that precedes the formative years of the mass-based organizing of the 1950s civil rights era. All of these novels portray, at the center of their texts, characters based in a Blues aesthetics and philosophy.

The Blues philosophy characters in these novels are situated in or have a desire to be part of a base of support with which they have similar ideas. Yet they also speak from or learn to speak from their base of support with singular voices; that is, they find solutions to spirit-crushing experiences in their lives by using singular approaches to shape the group philosophy to which they are linked. Hurston and Ellison also depict in their novels characters located in a Jazz aesthetics and philosophy. These Jazz characters exemplify distinct voices that contain fragments from a number of larger groups. Jazz characters, however, do not ground themselves in the philosophy of any particular narrative; they move at will among the discourses from which they are fragmented, thus making collective improvisation an important aspect of Jazz style. Jazz collective improvisation in fiction permits different and differing voices to occupy the same space without engaging in destructive contention. This Jazz space is a site that is occupied by the uncontained. In their novels, Hurston and Ellison investigate Jazz philosophy, even though the lifestyles of their Jazz characters are ultimately rejected and their Jazz characters are marginalized.

Hurston's Jazz character Tea Cake is killed. Janie, the main character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, abandons Tea Cake's Jazz life and returns to her Blues life in Eatonville. But Janie, Hurston's female Blues

character, returns to Eatonville with new ideas culled from a Jazz existence on the muck<sup>11</sup> with Tea Cake. Ellison's Jazz character Rinehart also is marginalized. The Blues narrator in Ellison's novel considers Rinehart's approach to life and rejects it as cynical and exploitative as well as frighteningly free. Among the three writers in this section, Ellison's and Hurston's uses of Blues as shaping aspects of their art are more apparent than Petry's. Ellison combines elements of the picaresque and the Bildungsroman along with the Blues in order to make what he terms his "blues toned" narrator. Unlike Hurston and Ellison, though, Petry has no Jazz characters, but she does employ Jazz riffs throughout her novel. Petry's novel, however, is filled with Blues characters that point to a broad spectrum of Blues responses to life.

### Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*



In her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston brings the transforming effects of the novelist's art to the folkloric material she gathered as an ethnographer. In the essay "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," Hurston finds that African American music is a container of historical, cultural, and philosophical experiences. Hurston brings that knowledge to her writing as she comments on Blues in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and other fictional texts, including *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Hurston's ironic counterpoint to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which focuses on two white characters, Jim and Arvay Meserve. In this novel Hurston's bluesman, Joe Kelsy, serenades Jim and Arvay and teaches their son Kenny how to play Blues guitar.

As several scholars have recognized, Hurston uses Blues aesthetics and philosophy in her characterization of Janie Crawford. In *Behind the Veil*, Robert Stepto discusses Janie's experiences with Tea Cake on the muck as an immersion ritual (164–65). Houston Baker, in *Blues Ideology*, states that Janie returns from the muck as a Blues singer (59). Alice Walker, Hurston's most vocal champion, situates this writer with Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith as women who "form a sort of unholy trinity." For Walker, Hurston "belongs in the tradition of black women singers"

(xvii). Lorraine Bethel concurs with Walker's recognition of a womanist aspect in Hurston's literary Blues, pointing out that "Janie's narrative . . . reflects the black female blues aesthetic" (180). Likewise, for Cheryl Wall, Janie is "a literary counterpart of the blues" and Hurston "was the one literary woman who was free to embrace Bessie Smith's art [and] who was also heir to the legacy evoked in the blues" (140).

Hurston's Eatonville is a Blues environment. In this small, newly formed town governed by black people, Hurston's characters are situated in a group philosophy that informs the communal life of the town. The residents of Eatonville, except Janie—after her husband Joe Starks dies—do not deviate far from their shared ideas. Hurston illustrates the communal group behavior of the people in Eatonville when Tony Taylor welcomes Joe and Janie to the town. The Eatonville community has set in place a certain iterable model,<sup>12</sup> which they expect will be enacted by Tony. This model operates as a repetition of a performance; such repetition allows each instance of the performance event to operate in its own unique way. Events or performances such as plays or even a signature operate in this way; there are certain expectations as to the general mode of presentation of the event, yet each performance—each production of a play or each time a person's signature occurs—is its own unique repetition. In Tony's welcome, however, he fails to refer to "Isaac and Rebecca at the well," even though making such a reference in a welcome speech is an Eatonville custom. As a result of this error, Lige Moss asserts that Tony is "way outa . . . [his] jurisdiction." And all of the other residents supported Lige's assertion. For them, "It was sort of pitiful for Tony not to know he couldn't make a speech without saying that" (68). In this passage, Hurston exemplifies the established pattern, the discursive formation from which the people in Eatonville operate. And Tony demonstrates his ignorance of appropriate behavior when he does not employ the right rhetorical structure in his welcome speech.

As residents in an all-black town, the relative distance—though not complete isolation—that the people of Eatonville sometimes have from the racial discourse of the dominant society allows them to function as a site of a communal (as was the case in pre-Civil War Spirituals) instead of a community philosophy, which is the typical environment of Blues People. Eatonville's communal life is informed by the racial discourse that makes the town possible, but the town's internal workings are not shaped by the racialized discourse of the United States, even



though some of the dominant society's values are reshaped for life in Eatonville. This semi-autonomous condition makes the residents of Eatonville more cohesive than black people who do not have the same level of distance from the racialized discourse of the dominant group.

Another aspect of Blues life in Eatonville is the material conditions of life there for most of the residents. With the exception of Joe, people in Eatonville live in houses that resemble slave quarters (75), and some of them were reared on turpentine stills and others on a saw-mill camp (64). The life of the people in Eatonville includes hardships and demoralizing conditions. Yet Hurston, along with all of the conformity and the difficulties she exemplifies in the people of Eatonville, also depicts her characters' singularity. When her communal Blues characters encounter dispiriting situations, they—similar to their community-based counterparts—employ group-informed solutions that are particular to their own dispositions. Hurston demonstrates most clearly in Janie that Blues singularity is crucial among Blues People. She uses specific references to Spiritual-Gospel songs among the residents of Eatonville but not explicit references to Blues, thus demonstrating Eatonville's transitional position as the residents move from a communal philosophy to a Blues community philosophy. Hurston, however, does use verbal riffs from Blues songs, which she associates with her Jazz character Vergible Woods, or Tea Cake, and with Janie after she meets Tea Cake and decides to marry him.

Hurston situates Eatonville within the context of its residents' transition into a Blues philosophy not only through her illustration of their lifestyle but also through her specific references to music. She uses Spiritual-Gospel songs in ways that recall the antebellum Spiritual makers whose music was not divided into categories of secular and religious. The Spiritual-Gospel music in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* supports a Blues environment. Even though Hurston's title refers to the eyes of the survivors peering into the darkness of the storm on the muck and to the heaven-ward glance of those who have died on the muck, her novel still interrogates the life possibilities available to Blues People. Her first specific reference to music is at the lamp lighting, when Mrs. Bogle sings "Walk in the Light." This song follows a verbal riff by Joe Starks, whose speech includes the phrase "Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine," a phrase Hurston takes from the song "This Little Light of Mine" (73). Her next significant use of this music comes during Joe Starks's funeral

march: Eatonville's residents sing "Safe in the Arms of Jesus" for Janie's despotic second husband (136). Hurston's use of this song helps readers place Joe in perspective, within the context of the Blues environment in Eatonville. In an independent black town such as Eatonville and among early-twentieth-century Blues People, "Safe in the Arms of Jesus" is a typical funeral song. Hurston's Eatonville residents, then, are consistent in their Blues philosophy when they sing this Spiritual-Gospel song. In this funeral passage, Hurston also makes it clear that Janie is not at all grieved by Joe's death. Janie recognizes that "life had mishandled him too," so she pities Joe (134). Hurston's use of this funeral song conveys the idea that Joe's Blues life finally leads to heavenly protection from harm and relief from suffering, even though he doesn't rely on this. Janie's sympathetic perspective on Joe's tyrannical attitude also is shared among the residents of Eatonville. They do not like his attitude, but they understand that Joe found for himself a response to societal barriers that worked for him. They understand his hardships and accept his failings.

Hurston's specific reference to Spiritual-Gospel music in connection with Tea Cake occurs when he spends Janie's money without consulting her. Tea Cake returns home singing "Ring de bells of mercy. Call de sinner man home" (180). Hurston, again, uses music to request mercy for Janie's errant partner. Tea Cake recognizes that he has hurt Janie, so he employs the Spiritual-Gospel signifying practice of double meanings when he sings this song as a plea for mercy and a call for Janie to allow him back into their home instead of as a reference to God's mercy and a call to a heavenly home. In this song Hurston includes an analysis of Tea Cake that is similar to the analysis of Joe located in the Spiritual-Gospel song that the residents of Eatonville sing at Joe's funeral. Janie reads Tea Cake's actions—just as she read Joe's—within the context of his life and of the world in which they live. So the music that Tea Cake plays and the music at Joe's funeral become the vehicle through which Hurston helps readers understand these two characters.

Tea Cake lives a fragmented Jazz life. In order to triumph over the marginalized position that the dominant society reserves for him, he moves from town to town and absorbs the fragments of experience that he gains in his travels. He lives each moment as it comes, and he makes his own rules. Consequently, his actions often may present a contrast to notions of right among the people in towns, such as Eatonville, that he passes through. The group-oriented people in these towns might define Tea Cake as a sinner in need of mercy. Although Tea Cake's actions are

not excused by the people in these towns, his behavior elicits sympathy and forgiveness.

Tea Cake also is a Blues musician, playing both piano and guitar. Early in Janie and Tea Cake's courtship, he plays Blues for Janie. The music accompanies the first moments of intimacy between Janie and Tea Cake: "The sounds [of the Blues music] lulled Janie to soft slumber and she woke up with Tea Cake combing her hair" (156). In this intimate encounter, Hurston uses music to connect Janie to a Blues life, from which she is alienated because of the life she has been socialized to live. Hurston, then, depicts Janie as a young, repressed Blues character who later—as a mature woman—returns to Eatonville and establishes Blues ties. Janie's Blues life is repressed early in the novel as a result of her socialization by Nanny, her grandmother, who was formerly enslaved; Nanny taught Janie to distance herself from Blues life. Nanny rightfully believes that the best life for Janie is a life without the hardship, suffering, oppression, and pain that comprise the old woman's life. Bethel associates Nanny with "the Black religious folk tradition embodied by spirituals" and positions Janie within "the black female folk aesthetic contained in the blues" (181). Because Nanny is active in ordering the events in Janie's life and does not rely solely on the will of God or attribute her own actions to God's designs, she is not a literary Spiritual-Gospel character. When she says that God will provide a husband for Janie, Nanny is clearly working out of the knowledge that Logan Killicks already is interested in Janie, and she works to make Killicks's interest coincide with hers. Nanny is a Blues character with a spiritual basis; she wants to preach a message but never does. And it is not until Nanny recognizes that her own death is imminent that she releases Janie—who has no one else—into the hands of God. Nanny fears that Janie's earthly protection, Logan Killicks, may not be suitable after the old woman's impending death.

After Nanny is no longer enslaved, her life is still a constant struggle to remain just a few steps away from her formerly enslaved condition. Thus, her model for the best life for Janie is the life she perceives among more privileged white women. Nanny's perception of white women, however, is that the spirit-shattering conditions that make her a "cracked plate" (37) are dispelled by the "protection" (30) white women receive from white men, who provide them the leisure to sit on porches. Janie, ironically, finds that she is banished from the porch she finally obtains. Even though Joe promises Janie a porch that resembles the one in Nanny's sermon: "A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit

on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (49). Among the black people of Eatonville, the porch is not the site of stasis suggested by Nanny's leisurely porch modeled on the examples of white women. Janie's porch in Eatonville is lively and active. Still, as Wall observes, the Starks' porch<sup>13</sup> does not give women as much "personal freedom and power" as the Blues does: "Free of the constraints of ladyhood, the bonds of traditional marriage, and the authority of the church, [blues]women improvised new identities for themselves" (166). Hurston will demonstrate this female Blues empowerment in Janie after she returns from the muck informed by her Blues experiences there.

To Janie's grandmother, the lives of white women "looked lak uh mighty fine thing." As an enslaved woman, Nanny could not control her life in simple ways, such as being able to sit down when she was tired (172) or living her own "dreams of whut a woman outghta be" (31). Yet Nanny's distance from the inner life of privileged white women does not allow her to see the impediments on the spirit that their lifestyle produces. Her limited viewpoint causes her to "mis-love" (138) Janie. Janie's friend Phoeby, though never enslaved, also exhibits Nanny's view on the ideal position for women. Phoeby tells Janie that she would love to have the experience of "sittin' on porches lak de white madam" for just one year. And likewise Janie's Nanny directs her granddaughter's life toward an imitation of the models of womanhood that "look lak heben" to women such as Phoeby and Nanny, who have significantly less comfortable lives. Yet Janie "nearly languished tuh death up dere" because of the alienation from other people and the idleness that Nanny's model of sitting "on de high stool" portends (172).<sup>14</sup>

Through Janie, Hurston demonstrates that women within the racialized discourse of a Blues environment find that they must surmount the minimizing discourse of gender and the complexities that race brings to gender. Janie's grandmother teaches her granddaughter this lesson early in the novel when she says that the "white man throw down de load and tell the nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (29). Nanny doesn't want Janie to be a mule, so she encourages her granddaughter to protect herself by marrying a man who can provide her a measure of ease. Early on Nanny says that she wants to "preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high," as she believes she has

seen white women do, but there "wasn't no pulpit" for this formerly enslaved woman. Nanny "save[s] the text for" Janie (31–32).

Later, when Janie takes-up Nanny's text, she preaches it in the manner that Michelle Russell uses to describe the preaching of Bessie Smith. The blueswoman Bessie Smith "preached a spiritual lesson," Russell says, "but she took it from the Blues Book, chapter nine" (131).<sup>15</sup> Janie, then, is socialized to remain among Blues People and to make the choices that will approximate for her the lifestyle of bourgeois white women. This is what Janie does in her first two marriages. When, however, Logan Killicks, Janie's first husband, makes suggestions that indicate his willingness to use Janie as though she is a mule, Janie leaves him and marries Joe Starks. In her marriages to both Joe and Logan, Janie does not reject Nanny's solution for resisting hardships—seeking male protection—but through Janie's marriage to Joe, Hurston demonstrates how Nanny's solution fails Janie.

At Janie and Joe's first meeting, Hurston shows that Janie, reared as a Blues child, has Jazz desires. Janie wants the freedom to meet the world on her own terms, especially within the context of her desire for sexual fulfillment: "Janie pulled back a long time because he [Joe] did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance. Still she [Janie] hung back. The memory of Nanny was still powerful and strong" (50). Janie's first inclination is toward sexual freedom, which Hurston metaphorically depicts as "pollen and blooming trees." Janie does not wait for what she actually wants, and until she is encouraged by Tea Cake to pursue her own desires, she is unhappy. My reading of Janie as well as Houston Baker's assessment of Janie as a literary Blues singer when she returns to Eatonville (59), along with Angela Davis's view of the blueswoman as a symbol of female sexual freedom, all situate Janie within a particularly female literary Blues philosophy. Davis observes that "the freedom to choose sexual partners was one of the most powerful distinctions between the condition of slavery and the post-emancipation status of African Americans" (131).

Joe Starks offers Janie an ideal marriage according to Nanny's standards. He exposes Janie to the possibilities available to a man who refuses to acquiesce to the barriers in his life. For Janie, though, marriage to Joe deadens her spirit. Because Janie is Joe's wife, she is not permitted to be a woman in the world, a person with complex feelings and thoughts of her own. The set pattern in life that both Nanny and Joe want for Janie is onerous. On the one hand, Hurston's protagonist is

influenced by Nanny, who wants her granddaughter to have the model of female comfort that she sees among financially privileged white women; on the other hand, when Janie gets the model of female comfort that Nanny posits, she finds that her husband Joe employs a tyrannical model of power and authority with which he is familiar and under which he too lives. Joe believes “[s]omebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows” (110), and that somebody is men. Joe speaks feelingly yet with trepidation as to the certainty of his position, as we find later that he recognizes Janie’s potential to stand outside this bourgeois model of marriage in which he operates. Hurston demonstrates Joe’s instability within the bourgeois narrative through his unjust supposition that Janie is using conjure to incapacitate him (127).

Life with Joe alienates Janie from other people. Joe does not allow Janie to socialize with the people of Eatonville. Her joys in life, as Joe views them, come through him. Joe tells Janie, “. . . Ah aimed tuh be a big voice. You oughta be glad ’cause dat makes uh big woman outa you.” This view of marriage also is present in Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*. Marriage squeezes Morrison’s character Nel Wright Greene into an expanded version of her husband Jude. Hurston illustrates how Joe’s words affect Janie and cause her to feel disconnected and distanced from the flow of life in Eatonville: “A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely” (74). After Joe dies, Janie begins to consider possibilities for her own philosophy about life. She is unable to live in Nanny’s life narrative, in which, as Joe becomes a big voice, her voice is silenced. By the end of the novel Janie finds her voice; it is a self-reflexive and self-empowering Blues voice.

Janie’s marriage to Joe Starks is a union that provides Nanny’s granddaughter a “protected” life. Even though Nanny is not alive when Janie marries Joe, Janie acts out Nanny’s script. Janie is miserable in Eatonville because she wants to be part of the Blues People who sit on the porch of their store and use “a side of the world for a canvas” (85). On the high stool, where Joe has separated her from others, Janie’s existence is empty; there is no activity, no life. It is an existence of quietism. (169). Janie’s quiet life is in direct contrast with the lives of the exuberant, active people of Eatonville. Janie yearns to join the Blues philosophers—on her porch—who boldly assert that nature is the “onliest thing God ever made” (101). She also admires the verbal seduction enacted by the Blues tricksters of Eatonville, whose love exceeds human ability: “Ah’ll take uh job cleanin’ out de Atlantic Ocean fuh you any time you say

you so desire" (108). To Janie, this Blues world represents "crayon enlargements of life" (81) where there are profound discussions on nature and nurture as well as a playful enactment of a mundane courtship rituals. Janie's longing for these Blues aspects of life evinces her dissatisfaction with the life that Joe provides. She wants to be part of the signifying Blues world of the Starkses' porch, which operates in a fashion similar to the briarpatch in Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* and John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday*. The porch is a public version of the submerged briarpatch. Hurston's porch is a safe as well as "sacred space" (Hubbard 55), removed from overt influence by or concern with the racialized social policies of the United States.

This Blues world of lying and signifying that Janie longs for is explained by Henry Louis Gates, who takes Hurston's novel as the first instance of a speakerly text in African American literary tradition. A speakerly text is a literary text that pays homage to signifying, or verbal word play, in African American folk culture; or, in Gates's words, it is a literary text that employs a "rhetorical strategy designed to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the 'illusion of narration.'" Speakerly texts value the qualities found in the spoken word. In speakerly texts, "certain rhetorical structures seem to exist primarily as representations of oral narration, rather than as integral aspects of plot or character development. These verbal rituals signify the sheer play of black language, which *Their Eyes* seems to celebrate." Hurston's passages on the Starkses' porch clearly exemplify an assenting nod to the cultural value of verbal play among Hurston's Blues People. Hurston's novel, as Gates discusses it, "cleared a rhetorical space for the narrative strategies that Ralph Ellison would render so deftly in *Invisible Man*" ("Hurston and the Speakerly" 165, 178).

Janie's marriage to Tea Cake takes her off of the high stool and brings her onto the porch and beyond it to a Blues-Jazz world exemplified by the muck and her third husband Tea Cake, who is significantly younger than she is. When Janie and Tea Cake decide to marry, Hurston's main character asserts that she has "lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (171). Hurston not only uses the Blues music that Tea Cake plays for Janie to bring her into the Blues world that she desires but also introduces Janie into the Blues world through Tea Cake's use of the same signifying train and ship love ritual that is used on Janie and Joe's porch by Jim and Dave as they playfully try to win Daisy's affections (107-8). To win Janie, Tea Cake asks her if she wants a battleship or a

passenger train.<sup>16</sup> Janie seeks stability and chooses the train. "If it blow up Ah'll still be on land," she says. Tea Cake encourages Janie to be true to her own feelings instead of being true to the rules that Nanny and Joe Starks have established for her. He tells Janie, "Choose de battleship if dat's whut you really want" (153).

Hurston's portrayal of Tea Cake situates him within Jazz aesthetics and philosophy. He plays Blues guitar and piano, and he is not grounded in any particular place or tied to any authority, except his own. Tea Cake lives from place to place, and he boasts that there is no gambler better than he is (187). He takes chances by moving outside structured narratives such as Blues. Illustrating his Jazz adeptness, he moves between places such as the muck and Eatonville with little difficulty. Hurston clearly depicts Tea Cake's Jazz style through her use of Blues philosophy during the first meeting between Janie and Tea Cake. When Tea Cake tells Janie that he lives seven miles from Eatonville, she wonders how he will get home. Janie suggests a train; Tea Cake, however, says he will walk, and, through a verbal riff, he lets Janie know he is a jazzman who can completely locate himself in the bluesman's life of hopping trains. Tea Cake's response to Janie suggests a Blues traveling phrase that could be found in numerous freight train or traveling Blues tunes: "When Ah takes uh notion Ah rides anyhow—money or no money" (148). Hurston employs another verbal riff through Tea Cake when he comments on Janie's beauty; as he combs her hair, he riffs a line from Alberta Hunter's "Down Hearted Blues": "Youse got de world in uh jug<sup>17</sup> and make out you don't know it" (157).

Through Janie's exposure to Tea Cake's ideas about freedom and his rejection of authority, Janie begins to break the restrictive pattern in which she has lived her life. She returns to the philosophy of "de old folks" who do not try to imitate the life-style of the dominant society that rejects them. Janie changes the set pattern in her life and accepts indeterminacy. Hurston shows this change in her protagonist through the response Janie gives to Tea Cake's query about whether she would gamble: "Ah'm born but Ah ain't dead. No tellin whut Ah'm liable tuh do yet" (160). As Tea Cake's wife, Janie is willing to accept the idea that "new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said" (173). Hurston demonstrates the Blues basis of Janie's decision to think new thoughts and Janie's closer alignment with Tea Cake's Blues life as she depicts clothing, including a blue satin wedding dress. Thus, Janie's awakening into her Blues life, which has been repressed, comes through Tea Cake, a Jazz



character whose love for Janie as well as his Jazz personality allows him to create an environment that nurtures Janie's Blues life. As Cheryl Wall explains, Tea Cake is Janie's Blues philosopher or advisor or "cultural guide" (88). Sadness Williams has a similar function in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods*, as does Uncle Joe in Wallace Thurman's *Blacker the Berry* and Peter Wheatstraw in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. When, in fact, Janie's decision to marry Tea Cake is settled in her mind, Janie's best friend Phoeby is unable to alter this decision. Hurston's use of a verbal riff, which ends Phoeby and Janie's conversation about the viability of Janie's marriage to a man who is younger and less economically stable, illustrates Janie's newly awakened Blues aesthetic. Janie's words repeat a Blues tune and recurrent Blues idea as she riffs a line from "Going Away Blues": "Some of dese mornin's and it won't be long, you gointuh wake up callin' me and Ah'll be gone" (173).

Hurston's strongest Blues character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Janie; Tea Cake is her most clearly drawn Jazz character. Janie remains a Blues character throughout the novel, even though she goes to the muck with Tea Cake. Life with Tea Cake provides Janie an opportunity to rewrite the narrative into which she has been socialized. Janie, however, does not abandon all of the ideas from her previous life in Eatonville to become a free floating Jazz subject with Tea Cake on the muck. She is a dynamic character who grows in knowledge as a result of her experiences with Tea Cake, but she does not completely embrace Tea Cake's Jazz life. Janie's love for Tea Cake allows her to live with him on the muck and to be a part of everything that is part of his life (186); Tea Cake's love for Janie does not really change his Jazz lifestyle, but she changes him emotionally, as she is the only woman who is capable of holding him (181); in fact, there is nothing else that can influence Tea Cake besides Janie. Her hold on him, however, is his choice.

While under the influence of Hurston's Jazz character, Vergible Woods/Tea Cake, Janie sees the world differently, but she does not completely break away from Blues life while she is married to Tea Cake. He is, though, the person who shows Janie that she must free herself and find her own singular solutions to life's difficulties, instead of accepting preset solutions. Hurston establishes that Tea Cake's life is among "hopeful humanity," people who make and use Blues "right on the spot"; this is the case during the talks on the porch on the muck. For them, "[n]ext month and next year were other times. No need to mix them up with the present" (196-97). In Tea Cake's world, people organize their lives for

the moment. Hurston's Janie does not choose to live this way after Tea Cake's death, but Janie's third husband shows her that she has choices.

Through her experiences on the muck with Tea Cake, Janie realizes that the possibilities available to a woman with no limits or boundaries allow her to destabilize the hierarchies into which she has been socialized and to insert herself into a Blues life in Eatonville, the town from which she had been alienated because Joe Starks cut her off from the common people in the town. Joe denies Janie a quotidian life among the people of Eatonville because he believes that succeeding economically and gaining power are associated with attaining a bourgeois lifestyle modeled on the dominant discourse, a lifestyle that is difficult for most of Eatonville's residents to attain. After Joe's death, Hurston depicts Janie's subversion of Joe's bourgeois attitudes as well as her rejection of the dominant social values that he mimics. Janie connects herself with the Blues People of Eatonville as a woman who is free, autonomous, and who has loved and been loved by Tea Cake. In *Blues Legacies*, Angela Davis also discusses blueswomen as people who disrupt supposed stable categories, especially gender categories. Blueswomen present an image of women "free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed" (13). Blues "helped construct an aesthetic community that affirmed women's capacities in domains assumed to be the prerogatives of males, . . . [including] sexuality and travel" (120).

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston demonstrates that Blues philosophy for Janie, particularly as a married woman whose life (during her marriage to Joe) is somewhat privileged, is complicated by a socialization process that conflates her voice into her male companion's voice. Janie tells a dying Joe, "[Y]ou wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me" (133). Hurston rejects this silencing process and returns Janie to the suffering Blues People on the muck, so that she can gain an understanding of the spirit of triumph that sustains life in people who are considered "[u]gly from ignorance and broken from being poor" (196). The dominant society in the United States, the church, and some middle-class African Americans—because they locate themselves in the dominant discourse—tend to situate Blues (especially the type on the muck) in an outsider position. This is in contrast to "the masses of black people," especially during the first eight decades of the twentieth century, who view Blues singers as their "most intimate insider"

(A. Davis 125). Janie brings this spirit of success and triumph into the developing town of Eatonville, where the dominant society's ideas about life threaten Blues philosophy.

Janie and Tea Cake's marriage breaks the bourgeois model for the female's role in society. And when Janie returns to Eatonville, she suggests that women in this town also should break the boundaries of their gender relations. Before Janie's return to Eatonville, Hurston indicates that the women there have a voice, but it is a choral voice that is lacking examination, reflection, and discipline. The women in Eatonville are not masters of the words they voice. "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. . . . Words walking without masters, walking altogether like harmony in a song" (10). The women have not used the basic Blues chords as a back beat on which they inscribe their own narrative in the foreground. Thus, Janie's experiences become an exemplar of the necessity and the possibility for a woman's singular voice.

Janie does not want to be part of Eatonville's harmonized female voices—which most often speak against themselves as they speak in support of established ideas—nor does she want her tongue excised by the paralysis of the dominant society's gender roles. When Janie gains control of her tongue, she avoids the distortions of a harmonized and a silenced voice by choosing the person to whom she will give her tongue/voice/words: "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (17).<sup>18</sup> Janie, then, has her own story, which is told in a voice that is apart from the group to which she is gladly associated. The words Janie gives Phoeby tell Janie's Blues story and warn against accepting a dominant discourse that seems to be heaven but actually results in spiritual hell. Phoeby is immediately influenced by Janie's story. As Janie's friend prepares to go home, she says Janie's words have made her grow ten feet just because she heard them. And, as a result, Phoeby asserts, "Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishing wid him after this" (284).<sup>19</sup>

Hurston's description of the black people in the courtroom at Janie's trial also resounds Hurston's conception of the way that completely harmonized voices distort and destroy. The black people—Hurston's "anonymous herd"—in the courtroom "were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapons left to weak folks. . . . [A]

tongue storm struck the Negroes like a wind among palm trees. They talked all of a sudden and all together like a choir and the top part of their bodies moved on the rhythm of it" (275–77). Such blending of voices does not allow people to "find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (285). Blended voices limit Blues People and result in an unnecessarily proscribed Blues community.

Hurston ends *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by making Janie's story of love and mutual respect a simultaneous story of Janie's return to a Blues life. She evinces a Blues rejection of the stasis implied by the dominant discourse on black life, and she brings to the women of Eatonville a blueswoman's perspective on gender. Janie now is situated within a Blues philosophy that allows people to change and that encourages their singular voices to speak of ideas and solutions that go beyond the traditional chords while remaining connected to the Blues song.

### Ann Petry: *The Street*



Ann Petry, in her sizable novel *The Street* (1946), depicts a World War II era 116th Street in New York City filled with urban Blues characters. Through characters such as Min, Mrs. Hedges, and Boots Smith, Petry illustrates how seemingly interminable social and economic barriers create a survivalist environment in which her characters' responses demonstrate their paradoxical condition of oppression in a supposedly free society. Many of Petry's characters—Mrs. Hedges, Min, Boots Smith—surmount, to some extent, their conditions by living outside of the dominant society's values. Yet Lutie Johnson, Petry's main character, accepts these values and struggles against living the lifestyle that others who are on or from the street live.

Lutie, however, is still a Blues character. She is implacable as she attempts to find her own solutions to the economic, racial, and gender impediments that connect her to the people on the street. Because Lutie's singular solution to these dispiriting conditions is naïvely unreal, Petry depicts her protagonist as being on a collision course with disaster. Petry's Blues character, surprisingly, is not destroyed. Unlike some of the other characters in the novel, though, Lutie tries to live by the

rules. Her singular approach to difficulty places faith in the principles espoused by the dominant society. Because of Lutie's ingenuity and thrift, Petry depicts this character—early in the novel—as someone who supposes herself akin to Benjamin Franklin. Lutie ascribes to the values of hand work and virtue as well as conformity to the established rules of society; thus, Lutie uses Franklin as her model for success (63, 72). Many of Petry's other characters, however, do not ascribe to Lutie's ideas about gaining success based on merit and hard work. In the 1940s, on 116th Street, where Lutie lives, such ideas as Lutie has are truly singular. Petry demonstrates that Lutie, unlike some on the street, does not wait on God to vindicate her suffering after she dies, and she refuses to cross moral and ethical lines that others on the street easily transgress. Hence, Petry's main character accepts, without question, the dominant society's ideas about success, whereas most others on the street do not.

Min, another Blues character, is Petry's representative of many of the women in the Blues environment on 116th Street. A domestic worker, Min is physically broken because on the street "women have to work until they become drudges . . ." (186), an idea that restates Nanny in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when she observes that black women are the mules of the world (29). Petry shows that Min also has no willpower, and unless she strengthens herself from within and depends less on external solutions, her future seems limited to that of an itinerant wife/woman of various men on the street. Petry's Min operates within the same social narrative as Hurston's character Nanny; she seeks male protection. Min's term in each relationship, as with the other women on the street, is determined by the man with whom she lives. In fact, Mrs. Hedges says, a number of the women on the street are separated from their men (76). Petry illustrates Min's Blues qualities through this character's seemingly permanent status as a resident on the street or a similar neighborhood; thus, she is tightly bound to the life of the group. Petry also illustrates Min's Blues approach to life through her willingness to seek her own singular solutions to difficult problems instead of depending on a set response.

Min, for instance, determines that the church has no satisfactory answer that would solve the problems she has in her relationship with William Jones. Min believes that "even the preacher must know there were some things the church couldn't handle, had no resources for handling. This was one of them—a situation where prayer couldn't possibly help" (122–23). Min's solution is a root doctor, David the Prophet, a

spiritual source that is not sanctioned by the dominant society. But there is a growing spirit of personal triumph in Min because this “was the first defiant gesture she had ever made. Up to now she had always accepted whatever happened to her without making any effort to avoid a situation or to change one. . . . And here she was sitting waiting to see the Prophet David—committing an open act of defiance for the first time in her life” (126–27). Later in the novel Petry develops Min even further, so that over time this character garners her own internal resources and transforms her condition instead of depending on external resources. Min begins to change when her values change. She begins to value “room to breathe in” instead of a man to pay her rent (362). This change gives Min the strength to decide that she will leave Jones, yet I wonder if she has just moved her problems to another street. Marjorie Pryse believes that Min’s move does not take her to another street similar to 116th. Pryse also views Min as a possible model, for Lutie, providing her—in her visit to Prophet David—an alternative strategy for surviving the street (125–27). Petry’s characterization of Min illustrates Blues philosophy as it is lived in day-to-day life on the street. Min’s concerns are mundane yet important to her; her Blues solutions, though, take her successfully through daily life.

Petry’s portrayal of Mrs. Hedges illustrates another instance of a Blues character whose survival depends on working outside the dominant discourse concerning values. Mrs. Hedges depends on her own intelligence and will to create a satisfactory life for herself. She experiences adversities that both strengthen and harden her, but also develop in her a Blues philosophy that is unquelled. In Mrs. Hedges, Petry presents a sympathetic portrait of a transgressive female Blues character; Petry’s character is in contrast to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Hattie Sterling, a far less sympathetic transgressive female Blues character in *The Sport of the Gods* and Petry’s own Mamie Powther in *The Narrows*.

During the war years, another migratory movement of black people out of the South into northern cities takes place. Military service and a broader perspective on the world following their wartime experiences encourage men to relocate. Some women make similar moves seeking a better life or seeking family members, including migrating spouses. Mrs. Hedges leaves Georgia and travels to the North seeking a better life. In New York, however, Mrs. Hedges becomes homeless. While homeless she suffers from persistent hunger, wears only thin and tattered clothing and men’s shoes that she finds on the street (241–42). She even survives a

fire that leaves her body terribly scarred. But it is as a business partner and the brains behind Junto—a white man who eventually owns everything on the street—that Mrs. Hedges develops economic security.

The name Junto is another allusion to Benjamin Franklin; it is the name of a club he established to engage in inquiry on questions of morality and politics (Franklin 72). Thus, Petry's character Junto requires readers to confront the issue of race, particularly the racial attitudes of individuals, and consider how it—race—contributes to the conditions on the street. Through her characterization of Junto, Petry suggests that racial impediments transcend individual attitudes and are complicated by economic concerns.<sup>20</sup>

When Junto meets Mrs. Hedges, he is earning his living as a junk man, and she provides Junto with a business plan that leads to his success. She also helps him develop his first piece of real estate so that he can increase his profits. Mrs. Hedges's advice does not benefit only Junto. As a result of her suggestions to Junto, she realizes increased profits (243). Now, on the street, if a person "wanted to sleep, they paid . . . [Junto]; if they wanted to drink, they paid him; if they wanted to dance, they paid him, and never even knew it" (275). Mrs. Hedges also develops an economic plan and eventually begins her own business, a house of prostitution that provides women only for black men—"men who had to find escape from their hopes and fears, even if it was just a little while. She would provide them with a means of escape in exchange for a few dollars" (250).

Petry establishes that Mrs. Hedges confronts hardships yet is not defeated. Even Junto says Mrs. Hedges's strength of will is amazing, matching only his own (245). Petry demonstrates Mrs. Hedges's Blues philosophy through this character's determination to empower herself through her own singular solutions, despite the many hardships she has experienced. Mrs. Hedges, however, also is committed to her life among the people on the street, so she maintains her connection with them and refuses to move, even when Junto provides her with the opportunity. Thus, Petry further confirms Mrs. Hedges's Blues life by illustrating her desire to maintain her connection to the Blues People on the street. And as Hilary Holladay suggests, Petry presents Mrs. Hedges as "the Street personified" (50–53).

Petry's Boots Smith is also a character who lives on the edge of the societal rules that limit his life. As a club musician, Boots lives well. His economic situation is relatively good because of his position as a piano

player in Junto's Casino Club. Although Boots does not live on 116th Street, he does not escape all of the demoralization that the residents of the street experience. There is one caveat: Boots is Junto's man. Thus, Boots maintains his lifestyle by acting on behalf of Junto, the white man who owns both the apartments the people live in on the street and the social outlets they frequent. Petry elucidates Boots Smith's demoralization—despite his improved economic conditions—through her illustration of the relationship between Boots and Junto. Junto tells Boots, "I made you. If I were you, I wouldn't overlook the fact that whoever makes a man can also break him" (263–64). Boots understands what his life will be if Junto fires him. He once was a porter and lived in a neighborhood such as 116th Street; now he lives to avoid that life at all costs. Boots subordinates his own concerns to those of Junto and thus does not break away from the established pattern that society has set for his life; he just moves up a rung on the stepladder of economic uplift. Boots will not give up his success, as limited as it is, because he knows that his options are few. But he still does not break the pattern of life that the dominant society establishes for him.

Petry's portrayal of Boots Smith's experiences as a Porter—his nameless, de-individualized condition—is a precursor of Ralph Ellison's portrayal, in *Invisible Man*, of invisibility as the modern condition as well as the ironical state of the Blues of blackness in the United States. Boots has vivid memories of his life before he worked for Junto: "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 nameless like that. No Name, black my shoes. No Name, brush me off. . . . No Name. No Name. . . . 'Here boy,' 'You boy,' 'Go boy,' 'Run boy,' 'Stop boy.' . . . 'Yes, sir.' 'No, sir.' 'Of course, sir.'" Boots, then, is paradoxically seen and not unseen; he is seen only as an object whose function is to serve others. As a person with feelings, thoughts, and ideas, however, he is invisible. Through Boots's memories of the hardships he has encountered in life, Petry illustrates his Blues determination to maintain his small measure of success. When Boots considers what he would do to avoid being a porter again, Petry demonstrates that Boots's solutions are self-interested and singular. Few people really would consider what Boots considers. He will transgress even the most fundamental of social rules if in so doing he retains his own position of relative security: "You'd sell your old grandmother if you had one, he told himself. Yes, I'd sell anything I've got without stopping to think



about it twice, because I don't intend to learn how to crawl again for anybody" (264-67).

Petry depicts Boots as a character whose connection to Junto is similar to those of the people on the street. Even though Boots does not live on the street, he lives his life within the same restrictions found there. He lives under the control of Junto, only Boots is somewhat more economically privileged than the residents on 116th Street. Yet the dominant society's power relations are still in place. All of Petry's aforementioned Blues characters live their lives at the edge of the dominant discourse and the values it constructs. Their victories seem lessened by irrationality and criminality. Petry's novel, actually, shows how oppressive social policies sometimes make Blues triumphs a subversive victory, a victory of mere survival that leaves its victors—such as Mrs. Hedges—strengthened by their scars.

Lutie Johnson, however, battles against transgressing the values of the dominant discourse but fails. Yet she too remains unvanquished by the dispiriting effects of the street. Lutie is a gifted Blues singer who is trying for herself and her son Bub to make their lives different from the lives of other people on the street. Lutie, who knows that the street is "an evil father and a vicious mother" to the children who live on it, wants to give Bub a better life (407). Petry's descriptions of the frigid cold weather on the street illustrate the oppressive conditions that Lutie encounters, the cold weather metaphorically connecting the city and the street to a wintry hell through which Lutie and Bub must live.

The apartment that Lutie finally rents is located on the fifth floor, at the top of a steep staircase. Lutie's ascent up the stairs is analogous to the conditions on the street outside: "The farther up they [Lutie and the building Superintendent] went, the colder it got. And in summer she supposed it would get hotter and hotter as you went up until when you reached the top floor your breath would be cut off completely" (12). Similarly, on the street outside, the harder Lutie tries to improve her life, the more difficulty she finds. In this novel, Petry demonstrates that in the environment where Lutie lives one is likely to find "a newer and more intricate—a much-involved and perfected kind of hell" (6). Such descriptions indicate that the street represents a paralyzing, Dantesque hell for Lutie, yet at the same time the street gives her a group connection that both affirms her and foreshadows the impediments she will encounter later. As Lutie rides home on the subway, she "never felt really human until she reached Harlem. . . . These other

folks feel the same way, she thought—. . . once they are freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals. Up here [in Harlem] they are no longer creatures labeled simply 'colored' and therefore all alike" (57).

Lutie is part of the Blues life on the street, but she is unable to negotiate the maze of options to which she is limited. She believes that she can live by the same rules by which people from the dominant society live, and she wants to emulate the media images that parallel the life-style in the homes of her rich employers, for whom she is a maid and nanny. An advertisement on a subway train reminds Lutie of her goals: "a sink whose white porcelain surface gleamed under the train lights. The faucets looked like silver. The linoleum floor of the kitchen was a crisp black-and-white pattern that pointed up the sparkle of the room. Casement windows. Red geraniums in yellow pots. It was, she thought, a miracle of a kitchen. Completely different from the kitchen of the 116th Street apartment she had moved into just two weeks ago" (28).

Petry's contrast of Lutie's real life with a fictional image suggests that this character has unreal—media-influenced—expectations about life. But she also depicts Lutie in the environment of wealthy people who have the material objects that Lutie desires. Petry shows that the image of material wealth is fictional for Lutie, but not for some others who are located in the dominant society. Petry's depiction of the Chandlers, Lutie's employers before she moves to 116th Street, establishes their material wealth along with their spiritual dearth. Mrs. Chandler is not attentive to her son, or to her husband, and Mr. Chandler is an alcoholic. For Lutie, the life-style of the Chandlers "was, she discovered slowly, a very strange world that she had entered. With an entirely different set of values. It made her feel that she was looking through a hole in a wall at some enchanted garden. She could see, she could hear, she spoke the language of the people in the garden, but she couldn't get past the wall. . . . [T]here was this wall in between which prevented them from mingling on an equal footing. The people on the other side of the wall knew less about her than she knew about them." In the Chandler home Lutie is demeaningly categorized in ways that not only limit her options in society because she is black but also mark her as promiscuous (39–42). As Cheryl Wall observes, black women, especially during the early decades of this century, live in "a society reluctant to recognize sexuality in most women, [yet] black women were burdened with an almost exclusively sexual identity" (14).

Despite this, Lutie still absorbs the mainstream values that the Chandlers profess: “the belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough” (43). Their values are the ones Lutie tries to employ in her own behalf as she attempts to improve her life. When this approach proves unsuccessful, she is not completely deterred. As a Blues character, Lutie reshapes her approach to change. She tries other options, even after Jim, her husband, leaves and she moves to 116th Street.

Lutie, in fact, is not completely a product of the street. Her youth, as it is constructed in the novel, is lived very likely at a time when 116th Street in New York is transforming from a lively burgeoning neighborhood of hopeful black migrants living in comfortable homes to a Depression era neighborhood of economically and racially dispossessed black people. The death of Lutie’s mother is a signal of the neighborhood’s transformation into the street. After her mother dies, Lutie is reared by her grandmother. Petry introduces Lutie’s Granny—a character similar to Janie’s Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but without the “mislove”—as a stabilizing force in Lutie’s life and as an example of a Spiritual-Gospel philosophy that shapes Lutie’s life as a child. Lutie’s greatest struggle is her determination to rear Bub without destroying his spirit. Lutie realizes, however, that she survived because of Granny. Unlike Bub, Lutie was not alone and afraid at home because Granny was always there to comfort her granddaughter by singing, “Sleepin’, Sleepin’, Sleepin’, in arms of the Lord” (404). Petry’s use of Spiritual-Gospel music here situates her main character in an established base of support that gives her a feeling of security, not only with her grandmother but also with God. Lutie’s home life is a nurturing and loving one when she is growing up. Even though she has very few material comforts as a child, she has a bountiful spiritual reserve in her grandmother. Petry’s portrayal of Lutie’s childhood directly contrasts with her portrayal of life in the Chandlers’ home. Lutie, however, is unable to give Bub the same nurturing environment that she has had because her husband Jim has left her and Lutie’s mother has died from the dangers that have begun to permeate the street and have transformed the comforting place where Lutie was reared. Bub, then, does not have his grandmother; and his grandfather, Grant, has succumbed to the influences of the street—since the death of his wife—and has become a conniving drunk (56). Thus, Lutie’s need to work leaves Bub to the destructive parenting of the street, which in the words of Hilary

Holladay, situates Bub as a “Bigger Thomas in the making” (60). Bub also provides Petry’s Blues character Lutie her most difficult challenge.

Lutie does not retain the spiritual beliefs of her grandmother, but Petry connects Lutie to the strength that Granny’s Spiritual-Gospel philosophy represents when Lutie hums a song that her grandmother used to sing: “Ain’t no restin’ place for a sinner like me” (17). According to Pryse, Petry demonstrates the potential that Lutie’s grandmother has as a wise counsel for Lutie (124). With these songs Petry recalls the Spirituals of the pre-Civil War era, which were not purely religious and often conveyed double meanings. These songs did not separate spiritual and secular concerns and often expressed both secular and spiritual ideas at once. Thus Granny’s song signifies on the puritanical concept of a sinner as someone who is born in sin and is in a lifelong battle against succumbing to it. At the same time, the song conveys the idea of the sinner as the resistant, rule-breaking individual whose struggles are formidable yet whose solutions often are justified, even if they deviate from established but flawed rules of society. Granny’s song suggests that the sinner’s struggles are not unconquerable and must be confronted because there is no way to avoid them; in other words, there is “no restin’ place.” This song reminds Lutie that the hell-like conditions that she encounters on 116th Street are shared experiences among people on the street.

Petry illustrates how Lutie’s Blues philosophy—shaped by her singular combination of internal drive and faith in the success narrative situated in the dominant discourse—influences her to work hard and pass the civil service examination; Lutie’s progress still is very slow. She experiences a turn in her fortunes when she meets Boots Smith in Junto’s Bar and Grill, where Lutie goes to relax one evening. Boots suggests to Lutie that she might make money singing, thus causing Lutie to hope that things will change for her. At Junto’s Bar and Grill, Petry establishes a direct connection between Lutie and a Blues aesthetic through Lutie’s response to the music. The jukebox in the bar is playing “Swing It Sister,” and Lutie “hummed as she listened to it, not really aware that she was humming or why, knowing only that she felt free here where there was so much space” (146). Lutie’s receptivity to the music as well as its effect on her spirit demonstrates that a Blues aesthetic suits her.

Boots Smith, however, wants to expose Lutie to another aspect of Blues life when he hears Lutie sing—in Blues tones that Petry describes as “a thin thread of sadness running through . . . [her voice] 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 [in the bar] knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died" (148). Boots suggests to Lutie that singing professionally might be a way that she can add to the story in her voice by prevailing over some of the despair and frustration the music of her voice conveys.

Boots Smith's business proposition to Lutie eventually causes her to encounter the obstacle in her life that she has failed to scrutinize adequately: Junto. Throughout the novel Lutie uses the strength that she gained through her grandmother's faith, and she follows the guidelines for success that have been established by the dominant society. Lutie brings her own singular solution to her spirit-crushing conditions. But things do not change for her because she does not analyze her circumstances sufficiently. Petry's narrator points out that Lutie has naïvely "built up a fantastic structure made from the soft nebulous, cloudy stuff of dreams. There Hadn't been a solid practical brick in it, not even a foundation. She had built it up of air and vapor and moved right in. So of course it had collapsed. It had never existed anywhere but in her mind" (307–8).<sup>21</sup>

Junto embodies the characteristics of tyrannical oppression, ruthless power, and privilege. Mrs. Hedges, in fact, is the only person on the street for whom Junto has any serious regard. All others seem to be a means of income or are subjected to his will because of his control of most everything on the street. Petry employs a Jazz riff to establish Junto's control; she subtly riffs examples of his power throughout the novel until he looms large as a representative of tyranny and injustice. These internal echoes in the novel foreshadow Junto's many avenues of control over Lutie. Petry introduces Junto as a riff in her novel when Mrs. Hedges states that "a nice white gentleman" is interested in Lutie and can help her make a little money (84). Petry resounds Junto's control on the street when Mrs. Hedges tells William Jones, the superintendent of Junto's apartment building where Lutie lives, "Ain't no point in you lickin' your chops, dearie. . . . There's others who are interested" in Lutie (90). Petry's Jazz riff illustrates Junto's control over both Jones and Lutie when Mrs. Hedges finally tells Jones, "I just wanted to tell you for your own good, dearie, that it's Mr. Junto who's interested in Mis' Johnson" (238). Yet Junto's claims on Lutie are made without any regard for what Lutie wishes to happen.

Among Petry's other Jazz riffs that indicate that Junto is an unseen power on the street is his power over Boots Smith. Boots's upscale apartment has all of the requisite accoutrements of life off the street—cavernous ceilings, lush greenery, a doorman in uniform, and an elevator attendant—but Junto controls Boots's success. Both Boots and Junto realize that Junto's control could easily end Boots's music career from coast to coast. Boots recognizes that a number of venues for his music have begun selecting bands comprised of white performers and that wartime restrictions have decreased travel, thereby limiting road trips for all bands. He also is profoundly aware that the racialized social policy in the United States during the 1940s makes Junto almost a necessary conduit for any success that Boots attains, unless that success remains negligible. Boots is attracted to Lutie, but he decides that as Junto's "right hand man" he will subordinate his own desires and will act in behalf of his boss. Because Junto wants Lutie indebted to him (264), he organizes conditions on the street so that she will come to him for help. He refuses, for instance, to allow Boots to hire Lutie to sing at the Casino Club. Junto is well aware of the conditions on the street; he bides his time until Lutie is forced to accept help from him. But Lutie does not recognize the reality of the street in the way that most others who live there do. She does not realize that more than her air-filled dreams have been a stumbling block for her (307–8).

Throughout *The Street*, Petry re-articulates Junto's power as a riff that evinces his pervasive control of the street, yet at the same time she uses other characters to critique the exclusionary discourse, based in skin color, that supports Junto's power and privileges him with control. Mrs. Hedges and Boots both work closely with Junto, yet they separate him from the social policy that privileges him. And their malevolence toward this social policy of exclusion is what connects Lutie, Mrs. Hedges, and Boots Smith. Mrs. Hedges says Junto doesn't "ever stop to think whether folks are white or black and . . . [he does not] really care. That sort of takes . . . [Junto] out of the white folk class" (250). Similarly, as a result of Boots's relationship with the owner of most everything on the street, Petry's bluesman distinguishes his employer from the privilege that Junto uses to empower himself. Junto gains this power through a racialized discourse of privilege within the dominant society. Boots "didn't feel the same toward him as he did toward most white men. There was never anything in Junto's manner, no intonation in his voice, no expression that crept into his eyes, . . . nothing that he

had ever said or done that indicated he was aware that Boots was a black man. . . . Junto was always the same, and he treated the white men who worked for him exactly the same way he treated the black ones" (263).

Petry makes it clear that on a personal level any conflict that Boots and Junto have is not based in color distinctions. It is a personal conflict based in sex and power. That a racialized discourse allows Junto to have power over Boots or shapes his sexual desire for Lutie is incidental to Petry's symbolic use of Junto as self-interested, avaricious power. Junto ruthlessly uses his power to his own advantage and for his own pleasure. Neither Boots nor Mrs. Hedges blames Junto for taking advantage of the skin-color privileges to which he has access; they, in fact, would do the same thing if their lives were not limited by a racialized dominant discourse. Both Mrs. Hedges, who "has no use for white folks" (251), and Boots, who has a deep anger toward white men (263), express rage at their own exclusion from the resources to which Junto has access. While Boots and Mrs. Hedges, then, are wise beyond Lutie's idealism, all three of them eventually confirm the color-based construct of many of the hardships they encounter in life.

Lutie finally acknowledges that some of the effectiveness of her hard-work-and-strong-values attitude is limited when Junto refuses to pay her for singing at the Casino. For Lutie, now her "bitterness and the hardness increased. In every direction, anywhere one turned, there was always the implacable figure of a white man blocking the way, so that it was impossible to escape" (315). In this passage, Petry reinforces Lutie's Blues philosophy as Lutie increases her determination to get off the street. Lutie does not disdain the people on the street with whom she is connected through their shared social and economic barriers. Instead, she disdains the dominant discourse that constructs neighborhoods such as the street; this discourse makes people small and withdrawn when they are in the world away from the street. "The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform, suddenly grew so large" as they moved toward the street (57-58). As Petry exemplifies further through her portrayal of Junto, the same racialized discourse that constructs the street also limits the power of Blues People, even on the street where they live. Petry further depicts Lutie's Blues philosophy through this character's recognition that a Blues life of hardship and degradation is a shared condition. Not only Lutie and not only people on 116th Street in New York experience the effects of the street. "Streets like the one she [Lutie] lived on were no

accident. They were the North's lynch mob, . . . the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place" (323). The street is broader than Lutie's little world.

Petry's use of Junto as a metaphor that illustrates injustice and ruthless power helps Lutie understand more clearly why people on the street make some of their choices. Lutie "began thinking about Junto: . . . Junto hadn't wanted her paid for singing, Mrs. Hedges knew Junto. Boots Smith worked for Junto" (417). And now she, Lutie, is beginning to realize that the "creeping, silent, thing," the "formless, shapeless, . . . fluid moving mass—something disembodied that she couldn't see, could only sense," is Junto, or that which Petry limns through her portrayal of Junto—a racialized social policy that empowers Junto and impedes Lutie. Lutie, with this knowledge, despises the way Junto's power oppresses others, so her Blues strength of will allows her to use her knowledge of Junto's power to compel her to attempt to bypass him, even when she thinks she needs money to get Bub out of the children's shelter. Instead of going to Junto, Lutie goes to Boots, because she does not recognize the extent of Junto's control over life on the street, including Boots Smith's life (315).

Petry illustrates Lutie's final and strongest expression of Blues philosophy through this character's confrontation with Boots. Lutie is a time-bomb after she finds that Junto also is at Boots Smith's apartment building when she arrives to borrow money from Boots. Lutie "halfway hope[s] Boots will say something or do something that will give [her] . . . an excuse to blow up in a thousand pieces." The following comment from Boots does just that: "Let him [Junto] get his afterward. I'll have mine first." Boots Smith's spontaneous decision to act against established narratives of power and his slaps to Lutie's face cause him to become the object on which Lutie vents her pent-up rage and frustration: "The anger surging through her wasn't directed solely at him. He was there at hand. . . . He happened to be within easy range at the moment he set off the dangerous accumulation of rage" (425–29). Petry describes Lutie's disposition very carefully so that readers can understand that Lutie is striking out against the racialized discourse that limits her life, not at Boots Smith's insult and physical attack on her. Boots, unfortunately, is killed, because he is Junto's mediator. Petry makes a deft distinction between Boots the character whom Lutie kills and Boots the intermediary who increases Lutie's hardships by acting in behalf of Junto. Lutie doesn't necessarily want to kill Boots. She want to crush his sexist ideol-



ogy, which authorizes him to believe that her body is Junto's playground and, by extension, within the social discourse of male authority, his. Lutie further wants to destroy the racial construct that he upholds—even against himself—as a mediator for actions that perpetuate Junto's power and privilege.

This same type of distinction is made between Junto the character who has no racist feelings and Junto the white man whose use of his social privilege oppresses others. Petry's distinctions between her characters and the larger ideas that they embody illustrate the difficulty Lutie encounters when she tries to surmount her problems. Since the source of Lutie's barriers is shapeless, silent, and illusive, she—as any Blues character would—seeks a singular option that will enable her to negotiate the small territory available to her. But peculiar to Petry's portrayal of Lutie as a Blues character is this striving young woman's inability to accurately analyze her situation until late in the novel. Lutie is closed to a number of options that may prove successful for her. Such options, though, would place her in the transgressive category of Boots Smith and Mrs. Hedges. Both of these characters are in a category that Lutie has battled throughout the novel to avoid (426); she wants to stay within the social values of the dominant discourse. Boots and Mrs. Hedges exemplify collaboration, criminality, and the lack of feeling that the street creates in people. Lutie's frustration eventually causes her to take extreme action that situates her within the outlaw trickster tradition of the Blues, a position that takes a pragmatic view on circumstances and toward solutions. The outlaw trickster subverts and undermines, often in transgressive ways, traditional value systems when such systems construct an unjust society. For Lutie, taking a life is wrong. She does not have criminal intentions, yet the situation that brought her to kill Boots and the injustice that she is likely to encounter as a result of her racialized and gendered position in society—which does not protect the sanctity of her body—allow Lutie to take Boots's money and leave town after he assaults her.

In a rage Lutie kills Boots Smith. This action, however, does not bring Lutie to suicide, endless despair, insanity, or any other tragic posture. Killing boots situates Lutie in an even more transgressive position than the one that she has been trying to avoid, yet cannot do so, throughout the novel. In this moment of rage, Lutie recognizes herself as a resident of the street; she perceives within herself the Blues philosophy of other residents on the street, which she believed she could

transcend. Petry most powerfully depicts Lutie's use of Blues philosophy when Lutie removes the money in Boots Smith's wallet and leaves for Chicago (Petry's nod to Richard Wright),<sup>22</sup> after she quickly analyzes her situation and assesses her usefulness to Bub. Lutie finally decides that in her current situation she doesn't have enough to offer Bub. She also decides that her suffering will not crush her. Lutie's Blues philosophy informs her decision to revise the narration of her life. In the essay "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," Michele Russell explains that the Blues of Bessie Smith is situated in a philosophy that asserts "since the apocalypse was a condition of everyday life, our resurrection had to be too" (131). Petry's Blues character, Lutie Johnson, acts within this philosophy as she decides to remake her life. Lutie chooses to move on. She likely will have little choice except to live, perhaps, on another street. Petry chooses the city where Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas once lived on one of America's streets: Chicago (435).

### Ralph Ellison: *Invisible Man*



Ralph Ellison permeates his landmark 1952 novel *Invisible Man* with folkloric and musical tropes and ideas. In Ellison's 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, he makes clear the musical basis of his protagonist when he identifies the speaking voice in this novel as "blues toned" (xiii). Houston Baker and Larry Neal both point out that Ellison emphasizes the literary aspects of his own writing as well as that of other black writers such as Richard Wright while also recognizing his debt to vernacular culture (Baker 174, 197). Neal observes that Ellison "thought enough of the concept of hidden cultural compulsives in Black American life to *translate* them into art [even though Ellison clearly] locates his cultural, philosophical, and literary sentiment in the West" (69–70). Ellison, as well as Albert Murray and James Baldwin, has commented extensively on the influence of music in African American literature. His views on this subject are collected in *Shadow and Act* and in *Going to the Territory*. In the essay "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison provides a definition of Blues that supports his theme and characters in *Invisible Man*, yet Ellison's definition also is an eloquent statement of Blues philosophy:

"The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in One's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (*Shadow* 78).

Invisible Man, the first-person narrative voice in the novel, is in turn and often at once ironic, naïve, philosophical, and satirical. As a voice from the "lower frequencies" (568), Ellison's invisible narrator also resonates pain, disappointment, degradation, implacability, determination, and indomitable resilience. Thus Ellison's dominant musical aesthetic and philosophy in *Invisible Man* is Blues. Neal perceptively refers to the novel as "one long blues solo" because Louis Armstrong's music "forms the over-all structure for the novel" (71). Yet among Ellison's plethora of musical allusions, specific references to songs, and characterizations, he also employs Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz as metaphors to express his complex and arguably existential ideas on the myriad possibilities available through human potential. Ellison's novel is a complex text with many paths that warrant investigation, as Robert O'Meally in his rich reading of this novel observes: "No one formula . . . can explain the capacious novel" ("*Invisible Man*: Black and Blue" 78). And no one approach to music in literature will contain the fullness of Ellison's uses of music in *Invisible Man*. As Albert Murray explains, this novel is "the literary extension of the blues."<sup>23</sup> It was as if Ellison had taken an everyday twelve bar blues tune . . . and scored it for full orchestra" (*Omni* 167).

Over a period of approximately five years, Ellison's Invisible Man moves from a naïve young man who fails to understand the ironies in his own life into a Blues philosophical man, or Ellison's "thinker tinker" (7), who recognizes and accepts the paradoxical aspects of his life. This growth occurs as a result of Invisible Man's recognizing that within the society of his birth he is seen yet unseen; he is "an invisible man . . . because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom [he] . . . come[s] in contact" (3). Ellison's Invisible Man observes, ". . . I was and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen" (496). Through this trope of invisibility Ellison illustrates the setting of his novel, which is the United States in the 1940s, a place and time that allow no visibility for a black adult male because a racialized social policy supports a discourse that says being black and a man—who is visible in society—is a paradoxical idea. Yet by the end of Ellison's novel, Invisible Man is a man—not because he is seen as one by others, but because he has looked around the corners of his psyche and removed

the impediments that both he and society have erected. Thus, he made himself from himself; that is, he made himself from his own shaping of the experiences in his life.

Early in *Invisible Man*, Ellison illustrates that Spiritual-Gospel music once contained powerful philosophical ideas, but now it is employed in a confused and disoriented manner. In Ellison's prologue to *Invisible Man*, where—because “[t]he end was in the beginning” (558)—he places his final ideas about identity and selfhood, his Blues character Invisible Man enters one of the breaks in a Louis Armstrong tune and investigates it. He “not only entered the music but also descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath* the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave.” In this passage, Ellison illustrates Blues' intertextual expansion of Spiritual-Gospel. He goes further and demonstrates even more poignantly the intertextual relationship between Spiritual-Gospel and Blues with his image of the old woman and the girl. Directly in and below Armstrong's Blues there is an old woman who sings Spirituals; on an even lower level is a naked girl who is being sold to a group of enslavers; and even further down there is a preacher who delivers his sermon—an explication of the “Blackness of blackness”—in the antiphonal style of African American sermonics. Ellison uses these images of pre-Blues experiences—Spirituals, captivity, invisible church—to point out how Armstrong's Blues is informed by these dispiriting experiences and the methods for surviving them (8–9). At the same time, Armstrong's up-tempo music expresses a sense of triumph or exuberance that may cause some people to miss the plenitude in the breaks or silences in the music—the pain in the laughter or in other instances the laughter in the sadness.

Ellison places a seemingly nonsensical sermon at the lowest level in Armstrong's Blues. This sermon illustrates life lived in paradox, a life lived in a material body, yet a life lived unseen. Such a life is not easy. It is “Bloody”; thus, it is difficult and filled with suffering and hardship because invisible people are subjected to being violated because so many “visible” people are blinded by their own inability to see that someone is there. But this is how life is in Ellison's novel; black is invisible. For Ellison's blackness of blackness preacher, however, if a person views skin color as the sole determinant of her or his possibilities, then “Black will git you,” but if one sees around the corner of life, then “Black won't” become a deterrent to achieving one's possibilities. This knowledge, however, does not preclude black from landing a person in the “WHALE'S

BELLY." Ellison is using Herman Melville's whale and blackness metaphors to represent the deepest and most unexplored parts of the dominant psychological mind-set in the United States. There is blackness—a black voice, a black presence, a black body—that is hidden deep within the great white whale—the United States. For Ellison, then, true blackness within—the great white whale—is underground and unseen; it is the humanity of his invisible man.

The unseen blackness that Ellison's preacher elucidates manifests itself as potential freedom because, of course, all options are open when one is not seen. Thus, people who are unseen can investigate the unexplored crevices of their own minds and become empowered to "tempt . . . Old Aunt Nelly!" (10). In other words, one can transgress the established limits and behave in ways that are prohibited, such as becoming visible by revealing one's invisibility—as Ellison does in *Invisible Man*. In order to place emphasis on the impact people have when they resist oppressive prohibitions, Ellison employs extreme metaphors that depict prohibitive behavior. Thus, he equates the impact of *Invisible Man*'s eventual resistance as equivalent to tempting one's old aunt. He presents this transgressive theme again in the Trueblood passage.

In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, Ellison also contrasts the old woman who sings a Spiritual, the young female who is being sold, and the preacher in order to illustrate the idea that the deeper one goes into Blues music, the more profound the ideas in the music are. The preacher's Blues philosophy blackness of blackness sermon—which elucidates the always, already-there status of his humanity—informs the slavery scene, which in turn informs the Spiritual that the old woman sings, which finally informs Armstrong's tune. However, between the preacher's sermon and Armstrong's music, which makes "poetry out of being invisible," something is lost. The old woman "done forgot" what the freedom that she sings about really means. Freedom, according to George Kent, is the fundamental thematic concern in Ellison's novel. Kent argues that the woman and her sons define freedom as "the ability to articulate the self, and as a question that can be answered only by each individual's confrontation with the self. Louis Armstrong and his Jazz reflect both an articulated self and a mode of breaking through the ordinary categories of Western clock time" (163). Armstrong, however, is "unaware that he is invisible" (Ellison 8–11). More precisely, because Armstrong is at least twice removed from the blackness of blackness sermon, his perception that he is visible to his audience is part of his

inheritance; that is, everyone forgot to tell him that he really cannot be seen. Thus, Ellison's novel questions whether Armstrong's musical critique of his audience really is being heard and whether the audience that Armstrong critiques in his song really knows what is at the bottom of his music. Yet Armstrong continues to ask the question that O'Meally recognizes as an important theme of this novel, a question expressed in the Andy Razaf and Fats Waller tune: "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue" (86).

Through Invisible Man's journey into Blues music, he learns that what has been lost or forgotten—freedom—must be remembered; the prohibited blackness of blackness must be examined so that the even more invisible "darkness of lightness" is seen and the interconnectedness of both is understood. Ellison establishes the danger in Invisible Man's knowing about the blackness of blackness when "a voice of trombone timbre screamed . . . 'Git out of here, you, fool! Is you ready to commit treason?'" Invisible Man has come too close to the truths in the music into which he has fallen. This is a dangerous and chaotic space, and Ellison uses the old woman to illustrate this point. This old woman imbues the advice of Job's wife with double meaning when she tells Invisible Man, "Go curse your God boy and die" (6–10). While the old woman in Ellison's novel recognizes the viability of Invisible Man's ridding himself of the god to which she refers, she, herself, is unable to do so because she both loves and hates the god she tells Invisible Man to curse.

Ellison makes clear that the god of both Invisible Man and of the old woman is the deified view of whiteness that is lodged in the psyche of black people who believe in white omnipotence. The old woman knows that this is a false god and it must be abolished, but she also realizes the difficulty and danger involved in challenging a powerful force; one of the risks is death, but another consequence also might be triumph, since a false god, even if it is a powerful force, is always vulnerable to being vanquished. In this instance Ellison indicates that the death Invisible Man will experience if he follows the old woman's advice is the death of that enslaved aspect in his psyche that is loyal to the dominant discourse that limits him.

Ellison also shows that the post-emancipation old woman has very limited ideas about freedom. Her Spiritual has lost the black that "do" (9), the black that is defined by the "lessons of [one's] . . . own life" (559), not by social policy. The old woman's ideas are well within the philosophy of an antebellum Spiritual until she considers freedom. She knows

that the power in her society that limits her is not a god and that such an idea—that man-made power is omnipotent—needs to be destroyed. Yet she is unable to encounter the idea of freedom except in terms of its definition in relation to the man-made laws of society, which she helps destroy. In order to avoid the blood bath that would occur if her poorly armed yet angry sons attack their enslaver—also their father—with knives made by their own hands, the old woman gives their enslaver the poison that withers him and takes his life.<sup>24</sup>

Now that there are no longer laws that legally enslave the old woman, the meaning of freedom confuses her and causes a fever in her brain. She is not able to free her mind of the “mental slavery” (Marley) that shackles her to the racialized discourse of the United States. She no longer understands existential freedom, which Ellison’s preacher discusses in his blackness of blackness sermon and which is contained in her Spirituals. For Ellison’s “old singer of spirituals,” the idea of psychological transcendence has become alienated from as well as confused with the idea of physical freedom. Thus, Invisible Man’s questions about freedom make the woman reply in frustration, “Leave me ’lone, boy; my head aches!” (11).

Ellison’s other uses of Spiritual-Gospel music as a metaphor also support the idea that the Spirituals once contained a life philosophy that is now fractured, fragmented, and dispersed. Invisible Man distances himself from these songs even as he finds that he feels some connection to them. At Invisible Man’s college—modeled on Tuskegee Institute, which Ellison attended—it is obligatory for the students to perform Spirituals or for a “country quartet” made up of local farmers to perform when white visitors are on campus (46). For the white founders of the college who are in the audience, the Spirituals reinforce their feelings of paternal power as they are reminded of their control over the lives of the people who inherited Spirituals, which were developed in response to the control their forefathers had over the lives of the makers of the Spirituals and which, to the white founders, express the singers’ satisfaction with earthly life and ultimate rewards in heaven. Ellison’s Invisible Man observes how the founders were “not merely acting out the myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority in cardboard masks, but themselves [in flesh] these virtues concretely!” (109).

On the occasions when the Spirituals are sung at the college, Invisible Man points out that the songs are “[a]n ultimatum accepted and ritualized,

an allegiance recited for the peace it imparted, and for that perhaps loved. Loved as the defeated come to love the symbols of their conquerors. A gesture of acceptance of terms laid down and reluctantly approved" (109). Within this context, Ellison demonstrates how the Spirituals impart fear in the black people in the audience, who feel as though they are moving away from the era that caused them to create Spirituals. Yet an obligatory performance of these songs at the behest of the white founders of the college drains the songs of their philosophical impact, which the founders probably do not hear, and reenacts the previous power relations, which the black people, perhaps naïvely, believe are ending.

For the black college officials who organize the school chorus as well as the Blues quartet in which Trueblood sings, a performance of Spirituals functions as an offering of appeasement, given to ward off people such as the founders, who are associated with the hardships and degradation that caused the songs to be made at all. Invisible Man says, "[W]e were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet" (46–47). The students and officials of the college fear the idea that they, too, may have been or could become a Trueblood. Thus, they want to distance themselves from the suffering that he, Trueblood, and Spirituals represent. Jim Trueblood, whom Ellison depicts as being abysmally degraded since he impregnated his own daughter, represents how one survives the lowest type of degraded conditions, a degradation from which Trueblood is unable to absolve himself completely, even though he is asleep when it occurs. Jim Trueblood is Ellison's metaphor illustrating the condition of black people who were enslaved and later segregated and made invisible. For Ellison's formerly enslaved people, "such problems as good and evil,<sup>25</sup> honesty and dishonesty [are] of such shifting shapes that . . . [they] confuse one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through . . . [them] at the time" (559).<sup>26</sup>

When Trueblood awakens to find that he has degraded himself and abused his daughter in his sleep—a sleep that Ellison uses to symbolize the state of consciousness of formerly enslaved black people—the sharecropper says, ". . . I can't move 'cause I figures if I moved it would be a sin. And I figures too that if I don't move it maybe ain't no sin 'cause it happened when I was asleep." Trueblood's paradox is to find a way to "git myself out of the fix I'm in without sinnin' . . . There I was tryin' to git away with all my might, yet having to move *without* movin' . . . I done



thought 'bout it since a heap, and when you think right hard you see that that's the way things is always been with me." Ellison employs this grotesque and complex image in order to make clear the immense horror and complexity of enslaved and segregated black life, to illustrate how the choices that enslaved and segregated black people have for changing their circumstances often induce moral dilemmas that keep them where they are—which is wretched—or pose options that are equally chaotic. One option Trueblood considers is severing his penis, but he decides that is "too much to pay to keep from sinnin'" (59). Ellison illustrates, then, that the paradoxical conditions of enslaved and segregated life create terrifying choices. Trueblood, consequently, perceives that his choices are to stay in a degrading situation or to mutilate himself in the process of leaving.<sup>27</sup> He thinks "'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty" (65). Through Trueblood's degradation Ellison depicts the state of enslaved and segregated consciousness that one might find among African Americans—a consciousness that is asleep; Trueblood's is a mind that is psychologically anesthetized. Ellison also shows the paradoxical life that helps shape that consciousness.

Again, as with the old woman singing Spirituals in the prologue, Ellison turns the confusion that is generated from Trueblood's transitional Spiritual-Gospel philosophy into a resonant Blues tune. Trueblood says he "*ends up* singin' the blues. I sings some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singing them blues I make up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself. . . . [And] I'm still a man" (66). Trueblood's indomitable spirit allows him to triumph through, rather than succumb to, destruction (51). Ellison establishes that Trueblood now is a fully self-conscious Blues character who has transformed the confusion that causes some people to misdirect Spiritual-Gospel philosophy and insist on waiting for God's intervention. O'Meally refers to the language in Ellison's Trueblood passage as having achieved "a kind of blues cadence; [s]omehow the blues provide just the vehicle for coming to terms with the twisted and painful details of Trueblood's situation" (86–87). Through Trueblood, Ellison illustrates the paradoxical life that the makers of Spirituals survived, and he demonstrates that it is the same life that the students and officials at the college fear.

Invisible Man is a Blues character because he wants to retain a group connection while seeking singular solutions to complex questions about life. Ellison's passage on the old woman, however, demonstrates that his narrator/protagonist has difficulty finding solutions within a

group construct because he is unable to discern the ideas that inform the group—particularly Spiritual-Gospel philosophy. After Invisible Man has frustrated the old woman to tears with his questions on freedom, one of the old woman's sons attacks Invisible Man and tells him, "[N]ext time you got questions like that, ask yourself!" (12). As black people move out of enslavement, Ellison indicates, the question of freedom is answered singularly and is not attained solely through membership in a marginal group.

Invisible Man ascends from the underground world and hears Louis Armstrong innocently asking, what he has done to be so black and blue. In Armstrong's music Invisible Man "had discovered unrecognized compulsions of . . . [his own] being—even though . . . [he] could not answer yes to their prompting." Invisible Man's inability to answer yes to the "promptings" within him indicates his fear of breaking group connections and his fear of operating from his own mind—even a mind connected to a group (13). To really respond to Armstrong's song Invisible Man must address those "unrecognized compulsions" that take him beyond the surface, thus beyond the words of the song and into the breaks and silences where Invisible Man perceives the social critique woven into the deceptively melancholy lyrics. Ellison, of course, suggests that Armstrong knows what is at the lower frequencies of his music, but Armstrong does not recognize how profoundly limited his audience's access to that knowledge is.

As a Blues character, Ellison's invisible narrator/protagonist moves beyond the confusion and frustration of the old woman who sings Spirituals. He determines—as Ellison states later—that "the true darkness lies within . . . [his] own mind" (566). Ellison, here, employs signifying practice through his double-meaning words. The darkness to which he refers is Invisible Man's construction of his own life as well as the dearth of self-knowledge that would create a void in his consciousness. Ellison also gives the word "lies" double meanings because "true darkness" both resides in Invisible Man's mind—that is, true knowledge of himself resides there—and "true darkness" fabricates ideas in Invisible Man's mind when he fears delving deeply into darkness by looking around corners.

The music with which the youthful Invisible Man identifies himself is not the obligatory Spirituals the visitors want to hear but the more reserved a cappella singing of "a thin brown girl" in whose music Invisible Man perceives a "controlled and sublimated anguish" that he, at this point

in the novel, misses in Trueblood's country quartet or in the Spirituals that are sung on campus. Because Invisible Man "couldn't understand the words, but only the mood, sorrowful, vague, and ethereal" of the brown girl's song, perhaps the girl is singing an operatic aria or perhaps a cadenza from European Western tradition. Yet her voice fills the song with its own force, and the force in her voice "sought to enter her, to violate her, shaking her rhythmically" (114–15). Robert O'Meally takes another position on this passage. For him, the thin brown girl's song is a Spiritual (94). Following the logic of Ellison's novel, this does not seem to be the case. At this point in his development, Invisible Man is unable to appreciate the beauty of the Spirituals and the Blues; moreover, his inability to recognize the words in the song also points to the likelihood that the girl is singing in a language other than English.

The girl's performance brings an intense silence upon the audience. Her rendition confounds the expectations of the white founders of the school, who smile with approval at her song, which they perceive as bringing her closer to their ideal and making her more like them. Ellison reinforces this idea by having the audience of black students, staff, and faculty follow the girl's song by singing, "*Lead me, lead me to a rock that is higher than I am.*" Invisible Man says the sound of this congregational hymn "contained some force more impervious than the image of the scene of which it was the living connective tissue" (115). Ellison uses this hymn to reinforce the ideas that inform the atmosphere of uplift in which the song is presented. He also reveals that in the sound of the hymn and beneath its words there is a more powerful idea that is often missed, yet this idea persists in the music through its traces, which "few really listen to" (12).

Ellison also indicates that the "force" in the girl's song contains ideas that are missed. His suggestion in this passage is that Spiritual-Gospel brings something to music—Blues, classical, and so on—that transforms it in some way. When fully understood, a Spiritual philosophy proves beneficial because it is situated in a life philosophy, not organized religion. Ellison also indicates that even when Spirituals are hidden under the "dominant theme" of Western classical music, such as in Dvořák's symphony *From the New World*, Invisible Man perceptively "kept hearing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' . . . [his] mother's and grandfather's favorite spiritual" (132). Invisible Man, then, is unable to escape the cultural forms that have emerged from black life in the United States, even when he is absorbed in dominant culture. The dominant culture of the United

States is so tightly engaged by the influence of the African in this country that often it is difficult to disconnect the parts of one from the other, although there are some clear disjunctions.

Ellison's elucidation of the complexity of Spirituals as well as the ramifications involved in the obligatory performance for the visitors is resounded in *Invisible Man* even after Ellison's invisible narrator/protagonist leaves the South. In New York, after *Invisible Man* is made an official member of the Brotherhood, a drunken white member asks him to sing a Spiritual or perhaps "one of those real good ole Negro work songs" (304). Ellison uses this passage to illustrate a morass of issues that surround the performance of Spirituals by black people. The other people at this gathering are singing folk songs, from their own traditions, loudly and off key, but the drunken member's request and his declaration that he is "for the rights of the colored brother to sing!" embarrass the other Brotherhood members at the gathering, all of whom, except *Invisible Man*, are white. This incident makes *Invisible Man* consider the real meaning of brotherhood. He wonders, "Shouldn't there be some way for us to be asked to sing? Shouldn't the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious?" (307).

Through Ellison's contrast between the obligatory singing of Spirituals and the drunken request for *Invisible Man* to sing, Ellison exemplifies the gap that separates *Invisible Man* from those who represent the dominant society in this novel. *Invisible Man* is not a brother to the whites in the apartment at the Chthonian just because they enunciate the word; he is a brother when he is no longer a special case (292). Ellison also uses *Invisible Man*'s encounters with the Spirituals to connect his main character to the "lower frequencies" when he is in the North. Brother Tarp, a former section gang laborer who is now a member of the Brotherhood, connects *Invisible Man* to traces of Spiritual-Gospel through his gift of a leg chain that he wore while on the section gang. *Invisible Man* does not want to accept Tarp's gift. He also doesn't know what to do with it, yet he "felt that Brother Tarp's gesture in offering it was of some deeply felt significance which . . . [*Invisible Man*] was compelled to respect." Tarp's gift is akin to *Invisible Man*'s receiving his inheritance; it "at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future" (380).

Ellison connects *Invisible Man* to Tarp through the leg chain and makes clear Tarp's connection to traces in Spirituals by introducing the

“throaty voice singing with a mixture of laughter and solemnity” that Invisible Man hears outside his window after he receives the chain. The words to the song that Invisible Man hears are “Don’t come early in the morning . . .”; they recall a double-voiced Spiritual that contains words suggesting redemption while conveying a message of escape. Ellison uses this song to convey double meanings in *Invisible Man*, but his narrator/protagonist does not really hear the song. Invisible Man has “no time for memory, for all its images were of time passed” (381). Thus, he does not really listen to Brother Tarp’s message or the message in the Spiritual outside his window. These are messages that Invisible Man does not understand, and thus he believes he would rather forget them. Yet he is unable to avoid the efficacy of the ideas ingrained in Spirituals. Fragments of these ideas recur throughout Ellison’s novel.

At Tod Clifton’s funeral, for instance, an old, dolorous male voice sings the traditional Spiritual “Many Thousands Gone”; he is accompanied by another man on a euphonium. Soon other mourners join in, and Invisible Man “felt a wonder at the singing mass. It was as though the song had been there all the time and he [the old man] knew it and aroused it; and I knew that I had known it too and had failed to release it out of a vague nameless shame or fear. But he had known it and aroused it.” The old man and the man with the horn “had touched upon something deeper than protest or religion. . . . It was not the words for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though [the old man had] changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above” (441–42). At this emotional moment, Invisible Man recognizes something of the philosophy in Spirituals, yet he does not really connect himself to the music or to this philosophy located in the music.

Ellison again introduces traces of Spiritual-Gospel philosophy when Invisible Man is dressed as the multifaced Rinehart. Ellison does not associate Rinehart’s exploitative Holy Way Station with Spirituals. But he connects traces of a Spiritual-Gospel philosophy to an old woman on the street who believes Invisible Man is “Rine the runner” and wants to know what the numbers for the day are. Invisible Man associates this woman with the traditional Spiritual “Old Ship of Zion,” which Thomas Dorsey arranged into gospel form. Ellison ties the old woman more closely to fragments of a Spiritual-Gospel music when she analyzes Invisible Man’s shoes: “If I’d looked at your shoes I woulda known” (that Invisible Man is not Rine the runner) (480–81). Everyone has been misreading Invisible

Man because of his dark glasses and hat, but the old woman analyzes the bottom—his shoes—not just the top. She investigates the lower frequencies, where the Spirituals are located, and realizes that Invisible Man could not be Rinehart. Ellison establishes that the old woman observes the small traces that most people fail to investigate; there are other similar traces of Spiritual-Gospel that Invisible Man is unable to escape, since Ellison indicates that Invisible Man perceives of the woman as an Old Ship of Zion. Invisible Man is a Blues character, yet Ellison demonstrates this character's Spiritual-Gospel intertextual traces.<sup>28</sup>

Invisible Man is a Blues character who recognizes that he is alienated from the dominant society in the United States and that his access to full rights and privileges in that society is severely limited. He observes this incongruity and attempts to surmount the dispiriting impediments that he encounters. He does not attempt to take action solely in his own behalf. He perceives of himself as a leader, and through the philosophy of uplift he attempts to address the concerns of others with whom he shares experiences of loss, despair, and hardship; thus, he employs a Blues philosophy and tries to retain his connection to a larger group that he believes is a stable foundation. Ellison's Invisible Man also is naïve. He believes that there is one-right-plan for change. Ellison, consequently, reveals how this aspect of Invisible Man's youthful innocence causes him to misread the Blues responses of his grandfather, Bledsoe, the vet, and other Blues characters in *Invisible Man*. Invisible Man does not recognize the Blues shaping and reshaping, the singularity, the "changing same" (Baraka, *Black Music* 180) in the aforementioned characters.

Ellison most clearly depicts Invisible Man's static thought processes through his encounter with the Blues-singing cartman Peter Wheatstraw, who also is named Blue (Ellison takes Wheatstraw's name from the stage name of bluesman William Bunch, who was well known for his Blues versions of High John the Conqueror legends [Garon 136]). Ellison associates Wheatstraw with Blues philosophy and the concept of blue in a number of ways: this character sings a Blues-influenced tune associated with Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing—"Boogie Woogie Blues" (O'Meally 88); Invisible Man meets Peter Wheatstraw when the sky is "morning-blue"; Wheatstraw's cart is "piled high with rolls of blue paper, [blueprints], and . . . [Invisible Man] heard him singing in a clear ringing voice. It was a blues . . ." (169). Thus Ellison signals a direct confrontation between Invisible Man and the Blues. Peter Wheatstraw is a piano player who volunteers to teach Invisible Man "some good bad

habits" (173). Statements such as this make Wheatstraw appear an anomaly to Ellison's naïve Invisible Man, who is newly arrived in New York when he meets the cartman and is still optimistic about his possibilities as a leader and a student. Ellison uses Wheatstraw to prepare Invisible Man for the possibilities of change and the necessity for variety. This type of Blues education, which comes through a Blues philosopher or advisor, also is present in the novels of Thurman, Dunbar, and Hurston. Uncle Joe tries to educate Thurman's Emma Lou, Dunbar's Sadness Williams tries to impart Blues wisdom to Joe Hamilton, and Tea Cake guides Janie through her Blues awakening.

Wheatstraw is a cartman who collects blueprints; the word "blueprint" is a double-meaning metaphor that both elucidates the idea of a plan or an outline and limns Blues philosophy. Ellison signifies on the word "print," which denotes a copy (thus more than one) but still not the final project; therefore, plans are part of a kinetic process. Ellison also stretches the meaning of the word "blue" beyond the color of the paper on which the plans are written; he expands it to include a Blues philosophical process that is a constantly changing plan resulting from adversity, suffering, demoralization, disappointment, mistreatment, and other dispiriting conditions. Wheatstraw, himself, does not have just one plan for the way he lives life. He is "a piano player and a rounder, a whiskey drinker and a pavement pounder" whose different names—Peter Wheatstraw and Blue—and rhyming spiel resound childhood memories in *Invisible Man*, yet the more profound messages in those childish rhymes are lost on Ellison's narrator.

Through Invisible Man's conversation with the cartman, Ellison makes clear Wheatstraw's function as a Blues philosopher or advisor in the novel. Wheatstraw tells Invisible Man that people always change their plans. Ellison indicates Invisible Man's immature Blues qualities through the response his narrator gives to Peter Wheatstraw, which reveals that Invisible Man has not grasped some fundamental Blues ideas that one gains through childhood games. Invisible Man says, "Yes, that's right, . . . but that's a mistake. You have to stick to the plan." Wheatstraw's response to Invisible Man confirms Ellison's presentation of this character as one that is lacking a fundamental Blues understanding of his world. Wheatstraw looks "suddenly grave" and tells Invisible Man, "You kinda young daddy-o" (172).

Ellison establishes Peter Wheatstraw's efficacy as a character with insight, despite his playfulness, through Wheatstraw's description of himself

as one who has deeper knowledge, according to folk belief. Wheatstraw's status as the seventh son of a seventh son, his special qualities as someone born with a caul, or his birth sac, intact, and his connection to aspects of conjure such as black-cat bones and high John the conqueror root give him four connections to knowledge that goes beyond the simple appearance of things. Invisible Man, however, is baffled by even the most basic Blues ideas that Wheatstraw tells him, so the cartman's more complex Blues tune "*She's got feet like a monkee. / Legs / Legs, Legs like a maaad / Bulldog. . .*" leaves Invisible Man perplexed. These are words that he has heard all of his life, yet he is unable to discern if this strange phrase is "about a woman or about some strange sphinxlike animal." (173). Through this seemingly lighthearted Blues song, which ostensibly is about an unattractive love interest, Ellison exemplifies a grotesque repulsion-love relationship between Blues People and the United States.

Peter Wheatstraw's singing causes Invisible Man to bypass his recent experience with Blues singing on the college campus, where he last heard a Blues tune after Bledsoe dismissed him from the school, because the cartman's music takes him further back to life memories that Invisible Man had blocked from his mind (169–70). Throughout the novel, Ellison's invisible narrator/protagonist never finds any value in folk-centered concepts such as those Wheatstraw advances, but as the cartman departs, Invisible Man "strode along, hearing the cartman's song become a lonesome broad-toned whistle . . . that flowered at the end of each phrase into a tremulous blue-toned chord." Invisible Man is struck by the beauty of the tune and the versatility of Wheatstraw, who "could whistle a three-toned chord." Invisible Man's life goal, however, has been to distance himself from the Blues People from which he comes and to establish a new construct to which he will lead people such as Peter Wheatstraw. Thus, he responds to Wheatstraw as a fascinated onlooker when he says, "They're a hell of a people!" But Invisible Man finds that Wheatstraw and his music confound him with feelings that Invisible Man associates with both pride and repugnance.<sup>29</sup> Through Peter Wheatstraw, Ellison's Invisible Man encounters a Blues philosophy that challenges his ideals of uplift and makes change a matter of "a little shit, grit, and mother-wit" (172–74).

Invisible Man's illusions are finally destroyed during his visit to Mr. Emerson's office—after his encounter with Wheatstraw. Before long, Ellison's protagonist/narrator is alone in New York. But he is unable to survive apart from group ties; thus, Ellison reconnects Invisible Man's



group ties through Mary Rambo, a Blues character. At Mary's house, Invisible Man is suffering from the effects of his experiences in the factory hospital. By the time he arrives, even more of his innocence is lost, and he is now able to hear the various voices that resonate from a base of shared Blues experiences. Yet he has not found his own voice to add to the many songs he hears; Invisible Man, in fact, is unnerved by the diversity. He says, "If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale" (253). Invisible Man still is not a mature Blues character. Ellison's portrayal of Invisible Man at Mary Rambo's apartment places him in nurturing surroundings that recall the protective environment of his childhood home—of which Wheatstraw's song also reminds him. There is a lot of love accompanying the Blues struggles that occur in Mary's apartment, demonstrated, for instance, through the Blues traveling phrase she sings to soothe Invisible Man. O'Meally observes that Ellison does not have Mary sing the subsequent line of this Blues phrase that she greets Invisible Man with, but it is that line that soothes and comforts Ellison's narrator. As O'Meally notes, Ellison uses the participatory process of call and response in his presentation of this Blues traveling phrase. Mary calls the first line of the song—"If I don't think I'm sinking, look what hole I'm in"—and a knowing Blues People can make the appropriate response, which is the unmentioned second line of the Blues phrase (88–89). Invisible Man, does not acknowledge his Blues connections right away, but he eventually replies to Mary's call when, toward the end of the novel, he says that he has come to know "the hole I was in" (559).<sup>30</sup>

Mary creates an environment of interdependence in her apartment. She does not evict Invisible Man when he has no money to pay rent, even though she, too, has very little and is encountering hardships. Ellison parallels Invisible Man's southern, folk, and Blues experiences and his Blues life with Mary, who transplants rural Blues ideas of collective responsibility into an urban context. Ellison does not allow Invisible Man to escape his Blues ties. And through Mary, he makes Invisible Man express a sense of obligation (290) that extends to his Blues ties. Ellison affirms Mary's link to Blues and Invisible Man's ongoing growth into a more mature Blues character through this southern woman's singing of a Blues song. When Invisible Man hears Mary singing the Bessie Smith tune "Back Water Blues" in a "clear and untroubled voice, though she sang a troubled song," he is reminded of how much he owes her. So,

through Ellison's metaphorical uses of Blues music as a place where ideas, emotions, and experiences from African American life collect and his use of Mary as an embodiment of Blues philosophy with strong Spiritual-Gospel influences—including Mary Rambo's allusions to Mahalia Jackson's signature gospel song by Herbert Brewster, "Move on Up a Little Higher"—he establishes Invisible Man's conflicting feelings about his dream of uplift and about his Blues background. These feelings of indebtedness prompt him to gain employment with the Brotherhood and move out of Mary's apartment. As Invisible Man leaves, he hears Mary sing a Blues tune (319), which emphasizes his continued link to the Blues philosophy from which he severs himself when he joins the Brotherhood. Ellison, though, poignantly attaches Invisible Man to this Blues philosophy through his idealistic notion of uplift.

As a member of the Brotherhood, Invisible Man loses sight of the Blues philosophy to which he was exposed earlier, but the murder of Tod Clifton allows him to see things differently and to consider his views in light of the people whom he wants to uplift. These people "speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dream." These people are near at hand to Invisible Man all along, yet he too had not seen them because they were "outside the groove of history." Ellison's *Invisible Man* considers whether black people such as Frederick Douglass, someone who manages to get into the "groove of history," was an anomaly. Perhaps, Invisible Man speculates, someone such as himself or Frederick Douglass finds a propitious moment every hundred years or so, even though the flow of history indicates that charismatic leadership, to which Invisible Man aspires, was losing its force during the first half of the nineteenth century (430–32). Through his narrator's speculations on charismatic leadership, Ellison demonstrates a social-political reality in this novel, a reality in which an emergent Jazz philosophy is situated as a transition from Blues—which anchors people in group-informed concepts that can support a charismatic leader—to a more disperse Jazz philosophy. Ellison's invisible narrator/protagonist is somehow caught between both; he is immature in his Blues philosophy and is unable to engage Jazz philosophy and aesthetics.

Ellison inscribes modernity into Invisible Man's perceptions of "a languid [urban] blues" when his narrator/protagonist finally notices the music that surrounds him. Ellison illustrates how the modern presentation of

urban Blues music on records marks a process of fragmentation that will take many forms in the people and in the music as it expands into Jazz. This urban Blues is not voiced by someone such as Mary Rambo or Peter Wheatstraw but is mediated through the modern recordings that local record shops amplify onto the street in order to draw pedestrians. Blues singers are fewer. Blues life is changing, and Invisible Man questions whether Blues philosophy goes far enough: "Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid inadequate words?" Invisible Man's disdain for Blues music allows Ellison to comment on the prevailing misunderstanding of Blues music as sad and lacking social critique, a misunderstanding that is supported by his narrator/protagonist's indoctrination in the Brotherhood.<sup>31</sup> This indoctrination does not permit Invisible Man to listen to the lower frequencies in the music because he has "been asleep, dreaming" (433).

In Ellison's epilogue to *Invisible Man* his protagonist awakens from his dazed state and moves toward a deeper knowledge of Blues. He now has matured in his understanding of this music. Invisible Man accepts the idea that we are unable to escape the "chaos" that shapes the Blues and the idea that it is one's own singular voice that shapes one's life, as there is no established plan that fits every life. He now understands that in the self one finds the material for transforming the chaos that disrupts life's supposed certainties. As Invisible Man emerges from his underground hibernation, he *listens* to Armstrong's Blues music instead of just *hearing* the surface, the words of Armstrong's rendition of Jelly Roll Morton's "Buddy Bolden's Blues." He listens to the music, which is in contrast to the words to this song, words that exhort listeners to "throw the bad air out." Armstrong's jazzy Blues version juxtaposes the conflicting ideas that are located in the words to this tune and that reside in his inimitable trumpet style. When Ellison's narrator finally perceives the joke, he realizes that Armstrong "wouldn't have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance" (568).

Ellison establishes Invisible Man's mature Blues philosophy through this character's comments on Armstrong's playing of Morton's "Buddy Bolden's Blues." Legendary New Orleans cornet player Charles "Buddy" Bolden stands as a superb musician among musicians. His talent was uncontested among fellow musicians who heard him play. Bolden's talent, unfortunately, is not preserved on record, as he suffered psychological difficulties prior to the period of early music recordings

and never recovered sufficiently to resume his musical career.<sup>32</sup> Ellison suggests here that Invisible Man cannot escape hardships and difficulties of life, nor can he abandon the troubles he has lived. Both will remain a part of him, become part of his own dance of life. Now that Invisible Man is anchored in Blues philosophy, he realizes that he cannot live the illusion found in monolithic and totalized thought; there must be room for a separate self (563–68).

Ellison inculcates his novel with both Spiritual-Gospel and Blues philosophy, allusions, references and characters. He depicts one Jazz character—Rinehart, whose name echoes a reference in a tune that Ellison may associate with Jimmy Rushing, whom Ellison remembers was a local musician in Oklahoma City before Rushing became nationally known as a vocalist with the Count Basie Band.<sup>33</sup> Ellison also utilizes a potent Jazz riff through his portrayal of Invisible Man's grandfather. In addition to the dominant Blues philosophy he employs and the Blues aesthetic environment in which he situates his characters, Ellison brings Jazz philosophy into *Invisible Man*. Through Rinehart and Invisible Man's grandfather, Ellison portrays literary Jazz. Rinehart is a shifting, chameleon-like personality that develops from Invisible Man's "blues-toned" experiences. Invisible Man, however, resists the infinite options of Rinehart's innovative Jazz style, which is pressing in on Invisible Man's Blues life. Rinehart is the rine (rind), or tough, insensate protective outer layer as well as the hart (heart), or inner core, where feelings, vulnerabilities, and desires, as well as ruthlessness, cruelty, and opportunism, reside. How does one know which quality is at the heart of Rine? Thus, he is ambiguous. When Invisible Man takes on the image of Rinehart, this Jazz character articulates contradiction. Beneath the outer image of Rinehart's dark glasses and hat is Invisible Man, who wonders about the paradox of being both "rind and heart" (487).

Ellison portrays Rinehart as a character who embraces his invisibility as freedom. His heart is unseen, and this gives him access to options that a group connection might disallow. Rine is a free actor on the stage of life. He is at once a preacher, pimp, numbers runner, gambler, briber, lover. "His world was possibility and he knew it." As Tony Tanner explains, "Rinehart is not a man to be met so much as a strategy to be made aware of" (87). Rinehart, Ellison's Jazz character, is years ahead of his Blues character, Invisible Man, because Rinehart knows that the "world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity." While Ellison's Invisible Man realizes the freedom

that Rinehart's Jazz personality represents, Invisible Man is unable to embrace the shifting sands of Rinehartism. To be Rinehart requires having "a smooth tongue," which Invisible Man has, but Ellison's Rinehartism also involves having a "heartless heart and be[ing] ready to do anything," a philosophy Invisible Man rejects (482–87).

Another view of Ellison's portrayal of Rinehart is given by O'Meally, who refers to Rinehart as Ellison's "blues villain" (90). While I do not see that Ellison actually situates Rinehart in a good-bad binary that would firmly define him as a villain, I recognize that Rinehartism is rejected by Ellison's narrator. This rejection, as I see it, is similar to Lutie Johnson's failed attempt to reject the Boots Smith and Mrs. Hedges types on the street in Ann Petry's novel *The Street*. Characters such as Rinehart as well those mentioned in Petry's novel are more complex than villain and hero categories can contain. In the essay "Ellison's Zoot Suit," Larry Neal makes the important point that the Blues world in *Invisible Man* "[i]s non dialectical. The novel attempts to construct its own imperatives, the central one being the shaping of a personal vision, as in the blues . . ." (70). In music, when this vision is expanded and pushed beyond its boundaries, it is the sound of John Coltrane, Pharaoh Sanders, Ornette Coleman, or Leon Thomas, a sound that is "a synthesis and rejection of Western musical theory all at the same time" (77). Neal's perceptive view of Rinehart demonstrates the complexity of this character in Ellison's novel and explains the logic of Kent's argument that Rinehart is a "symbol of possibility through imagination and masking, [which takes us] back to Western tradition" (Kent 168). Ellison's *Invisible Man* points out that both Rinehart and the Brotherhood feed on mass ignorance, so perhaps people are "as willing to be duped by the Brotherhood as by Rinehart" (491).

Ellison seems to suggest that there are circumstances that lead to Rinehartism, but perhaps those who employ it misdirect their efforts. Invisible Man rewrites Rinehartism. For Invisible Man the target of his Rinehartism is the Brotherhood, which he says is "forcing . . . [him] to Rinehart methods," but he still believes that the least desirable world is one in which Rinehartism finds success; it is a world of ruthless last resort, or, in other words, a world of guerrilla warfare. But Rinehartism not only increases Invisible Man's invisibility in the dominant society, as Rinehart, he also is invisible in Harlem. His true character is inaccessible even to other black people. Through *Invisible Man*'s views on Rinehart methods, Ellison critiques the concept of a Jazz aesthetic

and philosophy that are completely fragmented, even though his character Invisible Man advances Rinehartism as a challenge to the Brotherhood's detached, scientific logic—which makes Invisible Man “[b]oth sacrificer and victim.” Yet Ellison actually demonstrates that in the logic of the Brotherhood there are also the “charlatan” qualities of Rinehart (493–95). Thus Invisible Man is fighting fire with fire when he uses Rinehart methods on the Brotherhood.

Ellison illustrates his narrator's ambiguous attitude about Jazz when, on the one hand, Invisible Man asserts that he does not want Rinehart's freedom, yet, on the other hand, he recognizes that there is something empowering in Rinehart. He represents “infinite possibilities” because if a person is able to stand outside the limited construct of “reality,” as Rinehart does, she or he enters chaos, or the imaginative space that allows new ways of thinking and being (562–63). Rinehart is a principle of chaotic life, which is mastered through shifting—and often exploitative images; and/or he is a principle of transformation, forged through the powers of the mind. Ellison juxtaposes the changing face of Rinehartism against Invisible Man's attempt to adhere to the emotionless dogma of the Brotherhood, which has a predetermined answer to everything, and against the masking humility that he learns from his grandfather.<sup>34</sup> None of these approaches to life work for Invisible Man, so he retreats underground into his own mind.

In addition to his characterization of Rinehart as a Jazz character, Ellison also employs Jazz philosophy in *Invisible Man* through his uses of this invisible narrator/protagonist's grandfather as a Jazz riff throughout the novel. Ellison introduces the grandfather on his death bed, where the old man elucidates the humble mask to his son (Invisible Man's father) and implores him to “[l]earn it to the younguns” (16). Through Invisible Man's grandfather, Ellison reinscribes and revises Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem “We Wear the Mask.” In Dunbar's poem, the “grins and Lies”—Ellison's “grins” and “yesses” (16)—hide the “torn and bleeding hearts” and the “tortured souls” (*Complete Poems* 71) of those who wear the mask. Both Dunbar, through the persona in his poem, and Ellison, through his characterization of Invisible Man's grandfather, affirm the concept of invisibility, or hiding one's soul or spirit from people who want to destroy it.

Ellison's grandfather-character transforms the pain that collects behind the mask. In Ellison's novel the hidden “tears and sighs” of Dunbar's poem become—for Invisible Man's grandfather—a new weapon,

replacing the one he gave up during Reconstruction (16). Invisible Man's grandfather advises that one should employ an appearance of humility to "overcome," "undermine," and bring "death and destruction" upon the injustice in one's life. Thus, Ellison adds radical resistance to Dunbar's earlier theme of patient endurance.

As a revision of Dunbar's poem, Ellison's portrayal of the advice of Invisible Man's grandfather elucidates the distortion that time wrought on masking among African Americans. So, after Invisible Man's grandfather explained the dynamics of masking, his family members dismiss his words as the mad ravings of a dying old man. As a result, Invisible Man is set on a path of patience and endurance that contorts the advice that his Blues philosophy grandfather bequeaths to him. The old man's advice represents a solution that has taken him successfully out of captivity and Reconstruction and into the middle of the twentieth century. And his singular voice commenting on shared experiences has a profound effect on Invisible Man. He internalizes his grandfather's advice more powerfully than he accepts the approaches to group difficulties that he encounters later in the Brotherhood, with Ras, or with Rinehartism. Invisible Man has to decipher and analyze his grandfather's true message for himself, since the prevailing interpretation of humble black masking corrupts the grandfather's Blues philosophy. The words of Invisible Man's grandfather as well as visions of him recur as a Jazz riff at crucial moments throughout the novel.

When, for instance, Invisible Man wins his scholarship, he believes he has escaped his grandfather's "deathbed curse." True to form, Invisible Man's grandfather erupts from Ellison's narrator/protagonist's unconscious in a dream and reveals to him the inadequacy of the world that the men at the smoker have prepared for him. Through this dream, Ellison demonstrates that the acceptable road that the prominent men from the smoker have opened for Invisible Man includes a demeaning racialized circus where he is one of the freaks and the men at the smoker are the ringmasters (32). Invisible Man's circus dream foreshadows his grandfather's wisdom about the school and the ideas it perpetuates.

Ellison, later in the novel, again riffs his invisible narrator/protagonist's grandfather through a dream when Invisible Man is at a low point in New York because none of his prospects for a job have contacted him. Invisible Man's dream joins images of his grandfather with a sense that Bledsoe and Norton were involved in Invisible Man's difficulties finding work. Invisible Man, however, is unable to formulate his feelings into

concrete ideas, and Ellison does not provide the details of his dream because *Invisible Man* is not yet ready to remember the dream and address its message from his grandfather about Bledsoe and Norton. Consequently, the dream merely prompts thoughts that *Invisible Man* can dismiss as preposterous and impatient (167). Ellison uses *Invisible Man*'s grandfather as a Jazz riff throughout most of the novel. With this use of Jazz riffing, Ellison reveals his narrator/protagonist's lack of knowledge and immaturity as well as his inability to read both African American and dominant cultural ideas.

*Invisible Man*'s immense confusion about his grandfather's dying words also adds to his agony about his suspension from college. Ellison, after *Invisible Man*'s suspension, resounds the grandfather and his advice through a Jazz riff. *Invisible Man* wonders, "How had I come to this? I had kept unswerving to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be. . . . And now to drive me wild I felt suddenly that my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning triumphantly out of the dark" (144). He hears his grandfather's words—"yes" them and "grin" them (16)—but he has no idea what they mean. As *Invisible Man* says, "I knew of no other way of living—except to do what powerful people say—nor other forms of success available to such as me" (144). Clearly, *Invisible Man* is profoundly naïve and lacks the basic skills for reading the double meanings in his grandfather's Blues philosophy.

*Invisible Man* eventually embraces and critiques the ideas of his grandfather's era. During, for instance, his fight with Lucius Brockway, the paint factory basement engineer, *Invisible Man* uses his grandfather's approach when he insults Brockway with epithets he remembers his grandfather using: "old-fashioned, slavery-time, mammy-made, handkerchief headed bastard." These insults counteract the mistaken notion that enslaved Africans were acquiescent, caving people such as Brockway. Ellison depicts Brockway's age and toothlessness to emphasize the obsolescence of his ideas; there is no bite in the attitude that he promotes through his behavior. Ellison's Jazz riff of *Invisible Man*'s grandfather-inspired insults and his narrator's comment that the old factory employee "should know better" cause Brockway to retreat (222). *Invisible Man* is now beginning to alter his views on the effect his grandfather's memory has on him. After his confrontation and reconciliation with Brockway, *Invisible Man*'s response to his memories of his grandfather are more positive.

Ellison also uses the grandfather to exemplify *Invisible Man*'s developing awareness of Blues philosophy, which his grandfather's presence



resounds. At, for instance, a Brotherhood gathering, Invisible Man realizes that “white folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they’d done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing.” Invisible Man is reminded, through Ellison’s use of a Jazz riff, of his grandfather’s solution to this dilemma: “be prepared”—which his grandfather was when the older man was required to “quote the entire constitution as a test of his fitness to vote” (307). We again encounter the grandfather on the day of Invisible Man’s first Brotherhood speech. Invisible Man thinks of his grandfather right before the speech while he represses “the dissenting voice, . . . [his] grandfather part . . . the traitor self that always threatens discord” (327). After the speech, Ellison riffs the grandfather in the novel again when Invisible Man questions his own comments about becoming “more human” and then he wonders, “What had an old slave to do with humanity?” (345). Ellison also riffs the grandfather in the novel when Brother Tarp gives Invisible Man a picture of Frederick Douglass and when Invisible Man thinks he sees his grandfather looking through Brother Tarp’s eyes following the narrator’s receipt of an anonymous letter (374, 381).

When Invisible Man finally decides to try his grandfather’s approach on the Brotherhood, he still is not sure that he understands precisely what his grandfather meant, even though Invisible Man is now ready to allow the Brotherhood to “gag on what they refuse to see.” Ellison’s narrator decides that the Brotherhood only required from him “one belch of affirmation . . . heard in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh.” Invisible Man decides to “yea, yea, oui, oui, si, si, and see, see them too. . . . I’d become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions.” He ultimately decides that “somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great potentialities” (497–99). Thus, Ellison makes clear that there are no absolute answers, yet through his portrayal of Invisible Man, he points out that “grandfather had been wrong about yessing them to death and destruction or else things had changed too much since his day” (552). Ellison establishes that Invisible Man’s questions about his grandfather’s advice, by the end of the novel, are less troubling to his narrator, but they are not resolved with conviction. Invisible Man is “still plagued by his deathbed advice. . . . Perhaps he hid his meaning deeper than [Invisible Man] thought, perhaps his anger threw [Invisible Man] off.” Ellison’s narrator is indecisive on this point, but he ventures to posit the idea that his grandfather meant “affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men . . . who did the violence” (560–61).<sup>35</sup>

The grandfather and his advice form a riff that resounds a Blues philosophy throughout the novel. This Blues philosophy subverts all of the other inadequate ideas that Invisible Man encounters as he tries to triumph over his spirit-crushing conditions. His grandfather's advice is less than a plan yet more viable than its simplicity suggests. Ellison reveals its viability when Invisible Man wonders if his grandfather is capable of "thoughts about humanity," and then he realizes that his formerly enslaved grandfather had no need for phrases such as "this and this or this has made me more human. . . . Hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity—that was left to his free offspring. He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle. It was his . . ." (567).

Invisible Man's experiences free him so that he can emerge from his underground hibernation as someone who engages the options that life has to offer. Through Invisible Man's Blues experiences, as well as through Blues philosophy and a Jazz riff of the narrator's grandfather, Ellison elucidates for his readers the necessity for Invisible Man to recognize that he is integral to the process of making his own singular Blues identity.

# JAZZ ME BLUES

## Reading Music in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"



**D**uring the early part of the twentieth century, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, and James Weldon Johnson made conscious efforts to combine literature and music and to discuss the effects of music on the literary production of African American writers. Later, writers such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Albert Murray, and Amiri Baraka add to this discussion concerning the importance of the relationship between music and their writing and the relationship between music and African American literature in general. More recent inquiry into this issue has expanded the discourse on music in African American literature. In her book *Give Birth to Brightness*, Sherley Anne Williams discusses all types of black music as well as black musicians as a unitary entity that is part of a community tradition that has moved into literature. Robert O'Meally examines Blues and Spiritual-Gospel music as crucial retainers of social codes that Ralph Ellison's narrator in the music-infused novel *Invisible Man* must learn to recognize. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker situates his well-known "vernacular theory" of music in African American literature within an "economics of slavery" (3, 26). William J.

Harris and Nathaniel Mackey both examine Jazz in African American literature. Mackey, in his book *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*, presents an intriguing study of Jazz as cross-cultural "dissonance" and "noise." For Mackey, music is the ground of contention through which social issues are worked and through which cultures intersect (24). William J. Harris discusses music in the poetry of Amiri Baraka, situating Baraka's poetry within a Jazz form of expression that is in binary opposition to Western capitalist culture. Within Harris's context, Jazz in literature is a form of "creative destruction" (16–18). For these writers and scholars many of the issues and concepts that inform black music in the United States also inform African American literature.

Black writers, during and since the Harlem Renaissance, have moved a life philosophy found in Blues and Jazz into literature. James Baldwin, though, was reared in a strongly religious Harlem family. In the titles of his books he uses Spiritual-Gospel allusions, philosophy, and aesthetics more consistently, perhaps, than any other major African American writer: *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; *The Fire Next Time*; *One Day, When I Was Lost*; *Just Above My Head*; *The Amen Corner*. As a result of Baldwin's musical inclusiveness, resulting in his use of important references to Spiritual-Gospel, his short story "Sonny's Blues" provides a rare and concise exemplar of the literary uses of Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz music in fictional texts that have been shaped by African American experiences.

Baldwin's title character, Sonny, and his nameless narrator, Sonny's brother, traverse the complexities of life and music simultaneously in an effort to understand each other as well as the world in which they live. Baldwin's combination of critical issues, characters, and literary uses of music illustrates how music operates in some African American fiction and in "Sonny's Blues" through a complex of intertextual relations that point to the ways in which music has become a metaphor that collects important life concepts and ideas as the music moves into literature.

In my interrogation of these life concepts and ideas as they operate in African American fiction, I hope I have presented another way of reading music in narratives that have retained a persistent intertextual connection to the oral forms of signification found in Spiritual-Gospel and Blues. I also want to expand ideas concerning the well-established concept of music as a site where historical as well as social-political-cultural experiences of black life are located. In, for instance, Jazz—as a type of

music that has developed among black people in the United States yet has become dispersed more widely than its predecessors—there still are traces of the forms of signification that link it to both Spiritual-Gospel and Blues, and, in certain forms, to African American literature. I already have presented definitions of Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz as critical categories for reading music in fiction by African American writers. In this concluding chapter, I want to demonstrate one writer's use of Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz as they operate together in one fictional text. James Baldwin's classic short story "Sonny's Blues" incorporates all three literary uses of music. In my reading of this story, I refocus scholarly attention on the complex operations of culture, history, and politics as shaping influences in the music and in this music-infused story.

Among the scholars who discuss Baldwin's uses of Blues in this story is John M. Reilly. Reilly, however, does not address Baldwin's literary uses of Jazz. My definition of literary Blues is consistent with many aspects of Reilly's general view of the music, yet in contrast to my approach to Baldwin's story, Reilly establishes a hierarchy between the narrator and Sonny. This hierarchy privileges Sonny's antibourgeois attitude but does not recognize his Blues qualities as well as the importance of those Blues qualities to Sonny's Jazz ambitions. In Reilly's reading of "Sonny's Blues," he presents a contracted discussion of Baldwin's portrayal of Sonny as a character who, along with his brother, grows in understanding throughout the story. In, for instance, the same way that Sonny helps the narrator understand Jazz music and Jazz life, the oldest character in the story, Creole, helps Sonny understand the Blues qualities in the music that he, Sonny, wants to use to give expression to his life. Reilly also situates his discussion of the story in terms of a black-white binary opposition, which positions the narrator as a conformist to the "white ways" half of this opposition and Sonny on the black Blues culture side. I read "Sonny's Blues" as a story that interrogates the problematical issues related to intragroup—in contrast to a black-white binary—concerns with the complexities of identity and as a story that makes reference to a larger shared concern with racialized social policies in the United States.

In terms of Baldwin's uses of music, the critical focus here departs from Richard Albert's position on Baldwin's use of Ethel Waters, whom Albert views as an inauthentic blueswoman, on Louis Armstrong as a sycophant, and from his views on the character Creole as implicated in group and cultural perfidy. This approach also turns away from Reilly's oppositional hierarchy of proletariat versus bourgeois ideology as well as

from Harris's duel/dualism and Darryl Hattenhauer's ingenuous take on the black/not black theme. I turn toward an understanding of the informing concepts of an African American cultural space that Baldwin mines.

"Sonny's Blues" was first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1957. Music is a pervasive informing metaphor in this short story, as Baldwin permeates his fictional environment with musical images and ideas. He demonstrates his emphasis on musical metaphors through his title as well as through his description early in the story of the "[o]ne boy [who] was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds" (88). As Richard Albert observes, this boy prepares readers for Baldwin's introduction of the new bebop sound, as he compares the boy's whistling to a bird and points to the disjunction and dissonance between the music and the environment in which it is situated (180). In addition, Baldwin's description of the jukebox in the bar, which "was blasting away with something black and bouncy," further prepares readers to probe the importance of music within this story (90). These musical qualities also are evident in Baldwin's characterization of Sonny and the narrator and in the combinative qualities of Creole. Throughout this complex narrative Baldwin incorporates a number of Stephen Henderson's musical "poetic references": "[a]llusion to song titles," "quotations from songs," and "language from Jazz life." Baldwin also depicts with striking efficacy Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz characters as well as a Blues theme in this story, which accumulates in one narrative important aspects of African American literary uses of music described in earlier chapters.

Baldwin's narrator, unlike the younger brother Sonny, follows a path of little resistance in his attempt to find a place of comfort for himself in the face of societal oppression. He joins the military, attends college, marries, and avoids trouble. Sonny, in contradistinction, joins the military and finds that his brother's path in life is not for him. Sonny is unable to move in the direction of the dominant society, and he is unable to make modified success there his triumph, as his older brother does. When Sonny considers the restrictions that society places on him, his approach is not to find a space for himself that resembles what he is denied. Rather, he resists by rejecting those things that are valued by the dominant society and that he must struggle twice as hard to get and maintain. In other words, everything that his brother represents Sonny rejects, including the Blues.

Sonny's penchant for Jazz is representative of his full-scale rejection of what he views as his brother's acceptance of the oppression against which Sonny blindly rebels. Through Creole, Sonny learns that there is something in his brother, and in the Blues, that also is in him, and in Jazz. The narrator also learns the same lesson. The narrator comes to realize his connection to Sonny's Jazz because he recognizes his Blues life within Sonny's music: "It was beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (122). At the end of the story the voices of the brothers are brought together in the song "Am I Blue." In this way the distinctions between the brothers are collapsed as Baldwin emphasizes their Blues similarities, which branch from a Jazz site that includes Blues traces.

"Sonny's Blues" opens with the nameless narrator, a Blues character, meditating on his current disappointment; he has not been able to care for his brother, which he promises his mother he will do. As the narrator considers his own personal failure, he also recognizes that his feeling of oppression and captivity is part of life in a modern, urban, racialized environment where people are "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (86). The narrator, a former military man who is now an algebra teacher, has personally triumphed beyond his troubles in life. But this is not enough for him. Before the narrator's mother dies, she leaves Sonny in his care. Sonny, unfortunately, ends up in jail for being involved in drugs. Part of the narrator's earthly triumph is to help his brother, Sonny, understand that he needs a personal response to difficulty that can be successful instead of self-destructive. Yet in the faces of his algebra students, Baldwin's narrator recognizes Sonny's attitude toward the hostile society in which they live. He understands that "their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" (87) because in those students' voices, in their childhood laughter, he hears the Blues-making disappointments imposed on them by racialized social policies that are deliberately and violently resistant to social justice.

Baldwin's narrator realizes that he, his brother, and his students live in a country that reluctantly mandates equal education for them in the Brown I and II decisions in 1954 and 1955. Within months of the Supreme Court's final decision to desegregate public schools "with all deliberate speed," Emmett Till—fourteen years old—is murdered. His murderers are

acquitted, and they later make a venomous and public confession for which they are paid handsomely, as their account of this murder is published in *Look* magazine. The narrator's students live in a world that attempts to limit them, yet they, as did Emmett Till, seem likely to answer yes when asked whether they are as good as white people. The narrator recognizes that his students, as well as Sonny, while embroiled in "rage," do not discern or refuse to accept the narrator's Blues philosophy. These Blues philosophical principles provide them with a means by which they can navigate, in singular ways, the racial terrain that is imposed on their lives. Sonny's brother, however, implicitly acknowledges that Sonny's new music and his own music connect in crucial ways, as the narrator observes that his students' voices allow him to hear his brother and himself (87–88).

Baldwin's narrator recognizes his Blues connection to Sonny and his students, yet he fails to acknowledge, until later, the viability of Sonny's own musical/philosophical alternative. For Sonny's older brother, success means triumph in the same way that he, the narrator, finds it. Sonny, though, would rather die first. When Sonny rejects his brother's counsel, Baldwin connects the narrator to the Blues by having the narrator whistle a Blues tune that was popularized by Ethel Waters: "You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days" (109). Through this Blues tune Baldwin makes a connection between Jazz and Blues. Sonny's Jazz will need the narrator's Blues in order to thrive. While the narrator painfully realizes this, he does not recognize that he, too, needs to hear Sonny's Jazz. The narrator is rather smug in his approach to Sonny when he is in his younger brother's apartment in Greenwich Village. For the older brother, Sonny's life is chaotic and strange, and Sonny seems disconnected from his actual family/community as he makes what the narrator perceives as new familial connections among diverse Jazz people in the bohemian environment of the Village.

Sonny, throughout most of the story, is blocked within his misunderstanding of Blues, yet he is unable to avoid the Blues he rejects. He encounters Blues-making disappointments daily. For Baldwin's developing Jazz character, however, there is no way that he can move away from Blues to make a Jazz statement about his current life because he will not acknowledge his own Blues experiences. He wants to call them something else—Jazz. Baldwin illustrates Sonny's Blues experiences through his narrator's memories of Sonny when the younger brother was about the age of the narrator's algebra students. Baldwin's narrator remembers that Sonny "had been bright and open." His potential for success, however, is "trapped in the darkness" of his society, which has no place for



Sonny or for boys like Sonny who reject the notion that they should occupy an inferior place in society. Sonny's life, like the narrator's students' lives, is one in which, unfortunately, he perhaps finds that drugs "did more for them than algebra could" (88). Thus, Baldwin demonstrates that Sonny's dashed hopes link him to the Blues—at least as a fragment in his life, if not as a site to which he establishes a group connection. The narrator observes that some "escape the trap, most don't" (95). And his brother Sonny is on the verge of not escaping. Sonny becomes involved in drugs and spends time in jail, but these attitudes do not alter Sonny's perspective on his brother's Blues life. From Sonny's limited viewpoint, his brother's apparent silence and seeming acquiescence are demeaning. Yet in order for Sonny to convey the Jazz qualities he desires, he must recognize its numerous intertexts, Blues being one of its most bountiful connections.

Neither of the brothers recognizes that Jazz has no limit to the variety of voices that it can make its own. When Sonny's brother whistles the Ethel Waters tune outside the apartment where his brother cannot hear him, he demonstrates his own blindness and distance in his relations with Sonny. He, too, cannot recognize how Blues is a part of Sonny's Jazz life. The narrator erroneously sees his singular solution as *the* Blues solution instead of as one among many Blues solutions. At one point in the story Sonny and his brother are discussing suffering, and they agree that everyone suffers. While the narrator suggests that one perhaps should just endure it, since suffering is part of life, Sonny insists, "*Everybody* tries not to [suffer]. You're just hung up on the *way* some people try—it's not *your* way!" (119) Through this exchange Baldwin again demonstrates the contrasting life philosophies—which can be explained through music—of the brothers. Sonny moves toward differing and different solutions, while his brother finds one solution that works and settles on it.

When Sonny finally does need his brother again, there is a wide emotional gulf of contrasting responses to experiences between them. Sonny's drug experiences and his rejection of social values such as work and education provide no context from which he can speak with his brother. Baldwin's narrator does not understand that Sonny cannot fight within as his brother does; Sonny rebels by standing outside that which oppresses him. Sonny's stance is another approach to the potentially spirit-crushing society in which both men live. Through Baldwin's use of music as a metaphor that represents the lives of his two characters, he limns the chasm that separates Sonny and his brother. The narrator rejects Sonny's "goodtime" music, Jazz; and Sonny does not value "that

old-time, down home crap," which Sonny associates with musicians such as Louis Armstrong (103). The musical sound and social commentary of Charlie Parker have more appeal for this aspiring Jazz musician than the sound and image of Louis Armstrong. Again, Sonny misses the connection between Armstrong and Parker; thus he does not see the connection between Jazz and Blues, himself and his brother.

His characterization of Sonny makes clear Baldwin's critique of Sonny's attitude. Baldwin's Sonny seems to respond to the Armstrong who sang Andy Razaf and Fats Waller's "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue." This song troubles many who perceive it as an expression of self-contempt. Combined with Armstrong's performance style, which includes exaggerated—and for some, minstrel-like—facial expressions, Razaf's cuttingly ironic lyrics and Waller's music ostensibly beg for the humanity of black people by use of an old variation, at least dating to the nineteenth century, on the good-bad/black-white binary that suggests that black people can be white inside. Another reading of this tune would demonstrate, however, a dramatic use of irony by Armstrong, Waller, and Razaf, especially if the seeming minstrel effect of Armstrong's facial expression is contrasted with the signifying effect of the words in the song. Rather than focusing on the black-white color imagery, one might focus on the black-blue color imagery to discern how the words to this jazzy Blues tune are a subtle social critique. The up-tempo, rhythmic music, which is in contrast with the lyrics, expresses these musicians' real ideas on the potentialities one can find even while black and blue.

In Armstrong's rendition of "Black and Blue" there is triumph and indomitability, which augment Razaf and Waller's ironic lyrics and music. Armstrong acquired a large white audience after his music became more commercial during the swing era, so this song has more to say to that white audience than to black people or to Armstrong himself. Even Razaf's writing of "Black and Blue," which was a last-minute addition to the Broadway version of the musical revue *Connie's Hot Chocolates*, is embroiled in the lyricist's canny attempt to critique the racial environment that, in 1929, permeated New York's music and theater scene. The more convincing argument in Armstrong's favor, however, is his earlier musical work, which is within the general tradition of Blues music. His repertoire includes well-crafted tunes based in a traditional Blues idea of an internalized sense of joy in one's self, despite limitations. Blues tunes that Armstrong recorded in 1925 as part of the Hot Five group illustrate this side of Armstrong's music: "(Yes!) I'm in the Barrel" and "Gut Bucket

Blues." Yet Sonny does not seem to acknowledge this part of Armstrong's musical repertoire when he dismisses Armstrong as a musician and disparages Armstrong's use of the signifying practice that is an intertext of Jazz music and that beboppers such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, or Miles Davis use in resistant transformations—such as playing with their backs to the audience—during their performances.

Baldwin's critique of Sonny's misunderstanding of Jazz is even deeper if Sonny is aware of Armstrong's earlier music, and if it is that music to which Sonny refers. Either way, Baldwin demonstrates that Sonny must evince a more comprehensive conception of Jazz aesthetics. Sonny needs to understand not only the significance of Blues to Jazz but also the signifying in Blues as well as in Jazz.<sup>1</sup> Pancho Savery positions Sonny's perspective on Louis Armstrong within Jazz, but the words that Baldwin puts in Sonny's mouth, I believe, challenge this view. Despite our current understanding of Armstrong, Sonny's perspective is that Armstrong represents the old and the blue, a notion that, I argue, Baldwin's story rightly critiques.

Much of the music of Sonny's musical master, Charlie Parker, in contrast to Sonny's assessment, is Blues-based. Parker's music extends and expands other music in his environment, including Blues, popular music, Broadway theater music, and concert hall music. One cannot speak with clarity about Charlie Parker's music without acknowledging the aforementioned musical influences, which were at the core of his innovations and improvisations. Parker and the musicians in his bands rework George and Ira Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm"<sup>2</sup> on a variety of tunes: "Moose the Mooche," "Max Is Making Wax," "Bird's Nest," and "Dexterity." Parker's version of "Embraceable You" is his own interpretation of this Gershwin tune, and Gershwin's "S Wonderful" is the informing tune in "Stupendous." Sonny, more important, does not recognize that numerous tunes performed by Charlie Parker and his musicians are informed by Blues. One can begin with "Cool Blues," "Dark Shadows," "Carvin the Bird," "Bongo Bop," and "Bird Feathers," all of which are based in basic twelve-bar Blues music. Then there is "The Hymn," which is based in the Blues tune "Wichita Blues." In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin positions his title character so that he can come to understand that Parker musically expands Armstrong; he does not annihilate him.

Sonny, as yet, has not developed his Jazz aesthetic. As the title of Baldwin's story states, he takes readers through Sonny's Blues as this character tries to emerge into Blues' newest extension, Jazz. Despite Sonny's

rejection of Blues, his behavior demonstrates that his life is influenced by shared—not just individual—disappointments, imposed on him by racial categorization, and that he employs sheer strength of will to live through and in that disappointment. What Sonny fails to understand is the way that Jazz allows him to hear many voices at once, including the Blues fragments that he denies in his own life and that shape much of Jazz.

Sonny rejects the past while, conversely, his brother is comfortable in the Blues world of yesterday's pain and today's hard-won comfort, the maintenance of which becomes a daily triumph. Both men, nevertheless, are pulled toward Spiritual-Gospel music. The mother in this story represents Spiritual-Gospel philosophy; her life is a constant prayer for survival on earth and a final reward of heavenly triumph. Her life's work has been guided by God. Mama's Spiritual-Gospel viewpoint is first introduced when she is mentioned in Sonny's letter to his brother after his niece Gracie dies: "I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord" (93). The mother's Spiritual-Gospel philosophy is reinforced as she engages in her last conversation with the narrator and through her choice of song in moments of contemplation: "She was humming an old church song, 'Lord you brought me from a long ways off'" (97–101). Baldwin's use of Spiritual-Gospel, as represented in the mother, also recurs as a musical riff that appears later in the story and resounds her earlier appearances in the story. At the same time, the last references to her subtly indicate the ties that both men have with each other. As a trace in Blues, which both men represent, and in Jazz, to which Sonny aspires, is Spiritual-Gospel aesthetic.

Baldwin masterfully returns the mother's Spiritual-Gospel aesthetic through the revival singers, and her presence through a musical riff reinforces the idea that at bottom there are fragments of similarity between her two very different sons. As the narrator watches the "old-fashioned revival meeting" on the street outside his window, he observes Sonny in the crowd listening to the people sing, "Tis the old ship of Zion. . . . [I]t has rescued many a thousand." Sonny's walk reminds his brother of "Harlem hipsters, only . . . [Sonny has] imposed on this his own half-beat" (110–12). Here, Baldwin's narrator realizes that his error has been in failing to see his brother as a distinct personality; instead, he has viewed him as undifferentiated chaos that is situated in and resists against the racialized discourse of the United States.

In a similar fashion as the narrator's earlier use of the Blues tune from Ethel Waters's repertoire, this Spiritual song is a message to Sonny. He is being told that he is missing vital pieces in his Jazz music and in himself if there is nothing for him in the older music. The subtlety of the Spiritual's message reaches Sonny far more poignantly than the smug attitude that his brother demonstrates earlier in the story at Sonny's apartment in Greenwich Village. Sonny also is able to connect to the love of his mother through the Spiritual tune. Shortly after this, both men watch from the window and listen to the revivalist sing "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again!" Sonny and his brother have been unable to find a common musical or personal ground between them, yet the music of their mother provides this seemingly comfortable neutral ground. The revivalists depart the street singing a song that denotes the mother's wish for both of her sons: "God Be with You Till We Meet Again."

In this passage, the narrator receives a message through his mother's Spirituals; the music suggests to him that his responsibility to Sonny is not to make him over but to see in Sonny their differences as well as their similarities. The Blues philosophy of the older brother and Sonny's desire for Jazz aesthetics and philosophy have been concatenated by the Spiritual-Gospel music of the mother who, as Spiritual-Gospel did for Blues and Jazz, gave birth to both of them. The appreciation both men have for the music of their mother has created some closure in the gulf that separates them. Sonny is now able to invite his brother to hear him play Jazz at "a joint in the village," and his brother is able to accept (112–13).

At the club, Baldwin introduces Creole, a character reminiscent of Jazz musician Charles Mingus, whose Blues-influenced Jazz music continuously resounds the Blues basis of Jazz. Both Baldwin's character Creole and jazzman Mingus play upright bass and revel in the Blues qualities of their music. Creole is a Jazz character, and, as his name suggests, he is a mixture; he contains many musical and cultural parts. He is, among other things, a character with all of the musical parts of the past as well as his own unique Jazz style. Creole is older than Sonny and the narrator, who is seven years older than his brother. His strong, distinctive voice among the many other distinct voices in the club is evident: "He had a big voice . . . , [and when he spoke] heads in the darkness turned" (118). These qualities situate Baldwin's Jazz character in a position to expose the confluence of Blues and Jazz that escape Sonny's and the narrator's notice.

Creole immediately begins the subtle process of showing Sonny the space for himself and his brother within the full range of Sonny's own music. Sonny's brother is warmly welcomed, and Creole stresses the importance of the brother's presence. Soon the band begins to play. As Creole musically attempts to get Sonny to realize that Jazz is Blues and gospel as well as new expression, he restrains the other band members and begins a musical call-and-response "dialogue" with the young musician. As Sonny struggles along, it is clear that he is still missing something in his music. Creole realizes that he must bring Sonny into the depths of himself, which will bring him into an understanding of what Jazz really is. So "without an instant's warning, Creole started into something, it was almost sardonic, it was 'Am I Blue.'" At this point Sonny's playing expands. Previously, "[h]e and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped, started another way, panicked, marked time, started again." But on hearing "Am I Blue," "Sonny was part of the family again. . . . Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues" (120–21). Earlier in the story Baldwin portrays the narrator's Blues philosophy through a tune with which Ethel Waters is associated; and he makes the tie between the brothers and the connection between their musical philosophies even more perceptible through "Am I Blue," another Waters favorite, which she performed in 1929 in the film *On with the Show*.<sup>3</sup> Yet an "almost sardonic" Billie Holiday version enjoys much success during the time period in which Baldwin's story is situated.

Baldwin's character Creole, or the music for which he is a metaphor—Jazz, is the catalyst that Sonny and his brother need to come together as men who are both different and similar. Sonny also needs Blues in order to speak fully through his voice as a Jazz musician. Creole shows them that they are both alike and different, in ways that are similar to the repetitions and revisions in Blues and Jazz music. Sonny has to realize that he cannot reject the "down-home" without rejecting a part of himself. Creole demonstrates that Jazz is not created *ex nihilo*. Jazz is "keeping it [Blues] new." After Sonny accepts Blues, Creole "stepped back, very slowly, filling the air with immense suggestion that *Sonny speak for himself*" (121; emphasis added). Sonny now has created for himself a space within Jazz, a confident Jazz expression of innovative personal style.

In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin figures Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz through his fictional characters. At the center of this story are Blues characters, while a Blues philosophy shapes the critical issues in this story.

Jazz, in this story and in many others, is an emerging viewpoint for which a space of acceptance is opened. While it is clear that in the beginning Sonny is lost in a musical void, his brother—though more mature because he understands his Blues experiences and recognizes that the solutions are “all within”—has found a comfortable yet narrow space for his life. Both brothers have to expand their perceptions. The narrator has to accept, even if he cannot express, Jazz. Baldwin demonstrates his narrator’s former fears about Jazz and the qualities that it suggests when at the club Sonny’s brother recognizes a “circle of light” that he perceives as having the potential to consume the Jazz musicians “in flames.” In the end, however, the narrator no longer fears the closeness to chaos<sup>4</sup> that Jazz brings Sonny, so the narrator says that Sonny “could help us to be free if we would listen.” And, for his part, Sonny has to engage the old music before he can locate himself in Jazz. He has to step into the deep water of Blues without drowning (115–22).

Jazz characters in African American fiction frequently are marginalized, but their inclusion in fiction as well as in drama (Lyons in August Wilson’s *Fences* and Nelson in Alice Childress’s *Wedding Band*.) makes an important statement about the way that African American fiction creates a space for nonconformity, a space that repeats the musical practice of black people and reinscribes African American history as well as experiential narratives.<sup>5</sup> Creole, as Jazz in “Sonny’s Blues,” is Baldwin’s way to make familial and musical connections as well as political, social, and cultural alterations in the landscape of the United States. In many African American fictional texts, black writers employ Jazz in ways that move away from an emphasis on similarity, which is the quality that Creole uses to bring Sonny and his brother together. Instead, many black writers focus on a Jazz aesthetic of difference, while recognizing intertextual traces from predecessors as well as from the contemporary cultural milieu, as is the case in the collective improvisational style of bebop.

Baldwin’s conclusion in “Sonny’s Blues” suggests a personal triumph for the narrator as well as for Sonny. According to Williams, “Sonny’s brother begins to understand not so much Sonny, as himself” (149). Triumph for both results from personal strength of character. The narrator requires a high level of internal strength to attain his personal accomplishments, and his brother Sonny successfully struggles to maintain the strength to remain outside the dominant society without destroying himself. The reconciliation of Sonny and the narrator

demonstrates a Blues process of singular voices finding a way to live within the context of a shared problem.

In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin represents the lives of his characters through the three major forms of music that have prevailed as influences among African American musicians in the twentieth century. In so doing, he has shown the propinquity of the experiences in African American music to both the social real and life as depicted in many of the narratives by black writers.



## Conclusion

# TOWARD A STOPPING PLACE



**S**tating that the convergence of the social real and art operate in African American fiction is almost a commonplace. It is even almost glib to say that a number of African American fictional texts draw from the cultural well of music. What I have endeavored to demonstrate in the preceding pages is how this convergence occurs not only in its most obvious way, as specific references to music and musicians, but in its sometimes nuanced and at other times quite pronounced social, aesthetic, and philosophical intersections with history, society, and politics. What I found was that there was far more cultural activity of this sort—intersections of fiction and music—than the contemporary scholarship has addressed. In fact, among writers of the twentieth century, for the most part only Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have gained sustained criticism on their uses of music in their fiction. Yet even with these writers, much of this scholarship, as I see it, addresses clear cases of specific references to music. The writers mentioned above as well as other African American writers also use the stories found in music as sites for elaboration and change, as this

music clearly—as I endeavored to have demonstrated—collects valuable social ideas, concepts, and ideals. I hope that somehow I have shown when and where this intersection occurs in the literature I discuss in this book.

One may argue that in this study there is a thin description of musical and social history. This thin description of history may inadvertently appear to make history the background of literary studies and subordinate to the thick descriptions of the fictional narratives. In fact, my approach emphasizes the historical positioning, that is, the historicity of the literary texts that I read, yet this approach does not diminish the textuality of history. This means that I acknowledge the ways in which history is determined by multiple discourses (body of rules) that allow me to position history within my readings of the literary texts and to suggest how history, at the same time, also operates outside of the fictional narratives. My intention, then, was to point to the convergence of poetics, society, and politics. History is in my readings of the literary texts just as it is in the literature, yet history precedes my readings in this study only as a reminder of some of the historical locations out of which the production of the literary texts operate and to which the literary texts themselves often do not speak directly. I also take the approach that I do in the preceding pages as a result of our contemporary position within a culture in which a commodified consumerism proliferates and in the process effaces a sense of historicity.

African American music continues to expand and reshape itself as an intracultural discourse and as an intertextual site for the production of cultural knowledge. In the contemporary music scene of the twentieth century *fin de siècle*, many of the musical innovations of previous decades have become established traditions, and Amiri Baraka's concept of the changing same in African American music is now an internalized and established discursive formation among African American musicians. This era finds Blues, Jazz, and Spiritual-Gospel persisting yet changing. There are generational extensions in the music found in the Blues of Big Bill Morganfield, son of Muddy Waters; in the New Orleans Jazz music family of Branford, Wynton, and Delfayo Marsalis, sons of Ellis Marsalis; in T. S. Monk, son of Thelonious Monk; and in Ravi Coltrane, son of John Coltrane. There also are new names keeping African American music alive: Cassandra Wilson, Lynn White, Keb Mo, India.Arie, Yolanda Adams, Donnie McClurkin, and Kirk Franklin, among others. The contemporary music business and popular cultural forms in the United States thrive on music influenced by Blues, Jazz, and Spiritual-Gospel sounds.

# APPENDIX

## Allusions and References to Musicians and Music in the Narratives

*Sport of the Gods* (1902)<sup>1</sup>

*Quicksand* (1928)

Lines from and references to:

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," traditional

*New World Symphony*, 1893, Antonín Dvořák

"Showers of Blessings," E. Condor

"We'll Understand It Better By and By," 1905, Charles Albert Tindley  
Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

*The Blacker the Berry . . . : A Novel of Negro Life* (1929)

Lines from and references to:

"St. Louis Blues," 1914, William Christopher Handy

"Blue Skies," 1927, Irving Berlin

"Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)," 1927, often attr. to Bessie Smith  
"Jelly"<sup>2</sup>

"Bye, Bye, Blackbird," 1926, Mort Dixon and Ray Henderson

"Charmin' Betsy," 1929, Henry Thomas<sup>3</sup>

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Lines from and references to:

"This Little Light of Mine," traditional

"Walk in the Light," traditional

"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," traditional

"Down Hearted Blues," 1922, Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin

"Going Away Blues," 1928, Lottie Kimbrough<sup>4</sup>

"Safe in the Arms of Jesus," F. J. Van Alstyne

"Ring the Bells of Heaven," William O. Cushing

*The Street* (1946)

Lines from and references to:

- "Swing It Sister," 1932, Harold Adamson and Burton Lane
- "Darlin'," 1945, Lucky (Lucius) Millinder and Frances Kraft Reckling
- "Night and Day," 1932, Cole Porter (1891–1964)
- "Rock, Raleigh Rock"<sup>5</sup>

*Invisible Man* (1952)

Lines from and references to:

- "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue," 1929, Andy Razaf, Harry Brooks, and Thomas "Fats" Waller
- "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," 1529, Martin Luther
- New World Symphony*, 1893, Antonín Dvořák
- "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," traditional
- "Dry Southern Blues," 1926, Blind Lemon Jefferson<sup>6</sup>
- Symphony no. 5, 1808, Ludwig van Beethoven
- "The Holy City," Stephen Adams and Frederick E. Weatherly
- "My Old Cabin Home," 1908, W. H. Drumeller
- "Back Water Blues," 1927, Bessie Smith
- "St. Louis Blues," 1914, William Christopher Handy<sup>7</sup>
- "Bread of Heaven," 1875, William D. MacLagan<sup>8</sup>
- "Lead Me to a Rock that Is Higher Than I," traditional<sup>9</sup>
- "Hiding in Thee," William O. Cushing and Ira D. Sankey
- "Go Down, Moses," traditional
- "Boogie Woogie Blues," 1936, Albert Ammons
- "John Brown's Body," traditional
- "Media Luz," 1925, Carlos Cesar Lenzi and Edgardo Donato
- "Many a Thousand Gone," traditional
- "Jelly, Jelly, Jelly," usually attr. to Billy Eckstine and Earl Hines
- "Old Ship of Zion," usually attr. to Thomas A. Dorsey<sup>10</sup>
- "Old Man River," 1927, Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern
- "Joe Louis Blues," 1934, Earl McIntyre
- "Buddy Bolden's Blues," Jelly Roll Morton
- "Stealin' Stealin'," 1928, often attr. to Memphis Jug Band<sup>11</sup>
- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
- Daniel Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong (1898/1900–1971)
- Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)
- Peter Wheatstraw (William Bunch) (1905–1941)

*Sula* (1973)

Lines from and references to:

- "In the Sweet By-and-By," 1868, Sanford Filmore Bennett and Joseph P. Webster
- "Abide with Me," Henry F. Lyte and William H. Monk
- "Nearer My God to Thee," Sarah F. Adams and Lowell Mason
- "Precious Memories," traditional

“Save a Little Dram for Me,” Egbert “Bert” Williams  
 “Shall We Gather at the River (Beautiful River),” 1865, Robert Lowry  
 “Amazing Grace,” 1779, John Newton  
 Egbert “Bert” Williams (1875–1922)  
 Bessie Smith (1894–1937)

*Train Whistle Guitar* (1974)

Lines from and references to:

“Sugarfoot Stomp (Dipper Mouth Blues),” 1926, Joseph “King” Oliver  
 and Louis Armstrong  
 “Sundown,” usually attr. to Son House  
 “At Sundown,” 1927, Walter Donaldson  
 “Little White Lies,” 1930, Walter Donaldson  
 “Precious Little Thing Called Love,” Cole Porter  
 “Oh Freedom,” traditional  
 “Ain’t Going to Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” traditional  
 “Amazing Grace,” 1779, John Newton  
 “Nearer My God to Thee,” Sarah F. Adams and Lowell Mason  
 “St. Louis Blues,” 1914, William Christopher Handy<sup>12</sup>  
 “Ain’t She Sweet,” 1927, Milton Ager and Jack Yellen  
 “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” traditional  
 “Three Little Words,” 1930, Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby<sup>13</sup>  
 “Lilac Time,” 1928, L. Wolfe Gilbert and Nathaniel Shilkret  
 “My Blue Heaven,” 1927, George Whiting and Walter Donaldson  
 “Dream a Little Dream of Me,” 1930, Gus Kahn and Wilbur Schwandt  
 “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” 1924, Gus Kahn and Isham Jones  
 “Kansas City Stomp,” 1923, Jelly Roll Morton  
 “How Come You Do Me Like You Do,” 1924, Gene Austin and Roy Bergere  
 “Ja-Da,” 1918, Bob Carleton, Nan Lynn, and Ken Lane  
 “Squeeze Me,” 1925, Clarence Williams and Thomas “Fats” Waller  
 “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” Elisha Albright Hoffman and  
 Anthony Johnson Showalter  
 “Get Right with God,” traditional  
 “No Hiding Place,” traditional  
 “The Blood Done Sign My Name,” traditional, often attr. to  
 Huddie Ledbetter  
 Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) (1889–1949)  
 King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band  
 Bessie Smith (1894–1937)  
 Ma Rainey (1886–1939)  
 Mamie Smith (1883–1946)  
 Trixie Smith (1896–1967)  
 Ida Cox (1896–1967)  
 Ferdinand Joseph La Menthe (Jelly Roll Morton) (1891–1941)  
 Jelly Roll Morton and the Red Hot Peppers  
 Daniel Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong (1898/1900–1971)

*Sent for You Yesterday* (1983)

Lines from and references to:

- "Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today," 1938, Count Basie and Eddie Durham
- "You Are My Sunshine," 1930, Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell
- "Farther Along," 1937, J. R. Baxter and W. B. Stevens
- "In the Garden," 1912, C. Austin Miles
- "Peach Tree Blues," traditional/often attr. to James Yank Rachell<sup>14</sup>
- "Lay Down My Burdens (Down by the Riverside)," traditional
- "Lonesome Train," Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson<sup>15</sup>
- "C. C. Rider," 1924, traditional/usually attr. to Ma Rainey
- "Round Midnight," 1947, Thelonious Monk<sup>16</sup>
- "Didn't He Ramble," often attr. to Al Hirt<sup>17</sup>
- "In the Sweet By-and-By," 1868, Sanford Filmore Bennett and Joseph P. Webster
- "Down by the Riverside (Ain't Going to Study War No More)," traditional
- "Falling Rain Blues," 1925, Lonnie Johnson<sup>18</sup>
- "The How Long Blues (When the Evening Train's Been Gone)," 1928, Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell
- "The Hut-Sut Song (A Swedish Serenade)," 1941, Leo V. Killion, Ted Michael, and Jack Owens
- "God Bless America," 1938, Irving Berlin
- "America the Beautiful," 1913, Katherine Lee Bates
- "Tracks of My Tears," 1965, William "Smokey" Robinson
- William "Count" Basie (1904–1984)
- Jimmy Rushing (1903–1972)
- William Clarence "Billy" Eckstine (1914–1993)
- Sarah "Sissy" Vaughan (1924–1990)
- Dinah Washington (1924–1963)
- Ella Fitzgerald (1918–1996)
- Billie "Lady Day" Holiday (1915–1959)
- Lester "Prez" Young (1909–1959)
- Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899–1974)
- William "Smokey" Robinson (1940–)

*"Sonny's Blues"* (1957)

Lines from and references to:

- "Old Ship of Zion," usually attr. to Thomas A. Dorsey (see note 10)
- "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again," James Rowe and James W. Vaughn
- "The Lord Has Brought Me a Mighty Long Way," traditional
- "God Be with You Till We Meet Again," Thomas A. Dorsey and Artelia W. Hutchins<sup>19</sup>
- "Am I Blue," 1929, Grant Clarke and Harry Askt
- Daniel Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong (1898/1900–1971)
- Charlie "Bird" Parker (1920–1955)