

Stereo Types:
Sounding Race in Twentieth-Century America

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INTRODUCTION

In her autobiographical novel of psychological illness and healing, *The Words to Say It*, Marie Cardinal recalls attending a Louis Armstrong concert where she experiences what she terms “her first encounter with the Thing”:

Armstrong was going to improvise with his trumpet, to build a whole composition in which each note would be important and would contain within itself the essence of the whole. I was not disappointed. . . . The sounds of the trumpet sometimes piled up together, fusing a new musical base, a sort of matrix which gave birth to one precise, unique note tracing a sound whose path was almost painful, so absolutely necessary had its equilibrium and duration become; it tore at the nerves of those who followed it.¹

Cardinal goes on to describe her anxious reaction to this sound, her heart beating faster and faster until it grew “more important than the music, shaking the bars of my rib cage, compressing my lungs so the air could no longer enter them.”² Finally, she runs from the concert hall “into the street like someone possessed.”³ At this reflection, Toni Morrison, in her seminal piece of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, wonders: “What on earth was Louie playing that night? What was there in his music that drove this sensitive young girl hyperventilating into the street?”⁴

In its opening moment, not only does *Playing in the Dark* launch its project to make explicit the notion that at America’s and American literature’s center is blackness,

¹ Marie Cardinal quoted in Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, v.

² *Ibid.*, vi.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

it highlights the fact that such imagery is not solely visual; it is aural and sonic as well. Morrison marvels at Cardinal's precise recall of the music and how she is able to bring the immediacy of what she heard that night to the page, how it moves her as a reader to listen to another's listening. There is a sense that learning to listen is what literature might teach, by a kind of shared activity between author and reader, page and ear, sound and soundings, in a mutual or interactive work of apprehension. "The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader,"⁵ writes Robert Frost, as if the work required for both writing and reading were the same. Those moments when writers make special calls on our ears, by setting listening against listening *to*, hearing against listening, or by planting an oddly angled listener in the text, are moments when the verb becomes as much an object itself as the means of finding an object. In such moments, we listen to that space which opens up in the curiously self-imagining ear of the text. To think of the text as having ears, as Morrison does in this moment, is to think also of laying an ear to an ear, in order to listen in to what might be said within its resonantly calling quiet.

But if, as Nathaniel Mackey asserts, "The page and the ear coexist. Not only do they coexist, they can contribute to one another,"⁶ then how do these sonic interactions of literary race help shape our reading and interpretive imagination? How do they affect our understanding of difference? How, exactly, does one read as a listener?

This study explores listening's relationship to reading and its inflection through the materiality of the silent page. More specifically, it aims to understand how listening functions to perceive and interpret bodies, ideas, and aesthetics of racial difference in

⁵ Robert Frost quoted in Yezzi, "Sound and Sensibility."

⁶ Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*, 313.

creative and active scenes of audition across twentieth-century American and African American literature, poetry, and music. Turning to the works of authors and artists who, I contend, in their constructions of race seek to shift emphasis away from the visual toward the aural, I consider the ways in which aural literacy emerges as a significant modality of identity, representation, and engagement during the modernist and postmodernist period. By being aurally attentive to these dynamics, these authors and artists explore the lower frequencies of representation, considering the ways in which aural perception can reveal the ambiguities, certainties, and suggestive sonic life of racial difference. Furthermore, the texts that I examine are sonic sites that provide opportunities for a more fully attuned, nuanced aural engagement of what Julian Henriques calls “*sonic logos*”—that is, “the *relationship*, connection and intertwining of body and mind together.”⁷

Throughout this project, sound is shown to function in two ways: as material, embodied phenomenon on one hand and as signifying trope on the other. As such, this study joins a collective effort within African American literary and cultural studies to shift from notions of objectively hearing race and blackness specifically to foregrounding a practice of listening that is more self-aware and allows for an examination of how aural practices have generated particularly useful but sometimes limiting notions of black racial identity over time. This shift is evident in studies such as Tsitsi Jaji’s *Africa in Stereo*, Carter Mathes’s *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights*, and Jennifer Stoevers’s *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. Especially resonant with my own study, Stoevers identifies the

⁷ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*, 243, original emphases.

figures of the sonic color line and the listening ear to expose sound as “visuality’s doppelgänger in U.S. racial history, unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression.”⁸ Jaji’s *Africa in Stereo* posits “stereomodernism” as a way to identify and amplify a sonic politics of solidarity operating within pan-African solidarity. She explores the question “How has being modern shaped African modernism?” through an interplay of many authors and artists whose literature, poetry, music, and film form a dense but highly resonant polyphony. As in my own study, listening for Jaji is “essential work” that “brings affiliation, affinity, and negotiated resolution into acoustic liveness, fully resonant (or equally important, muffled) across geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and technical fissures.”⁹ In *Imagine the Sound*, Mathes examines the sonic as “a mode of aesthetic and political resistance against external and internal oppression.”¹⁰ Focusing on the post-civil rights literary sounds of black radical thought, he asserts that “diagnosing and confronting the mythic construction of white supremacy entails shifting the focus from simply the visual dominance of race in the American public sphere to perceiving the interaction between the apparent, and more ephemeral, but no less definitive dimensions of racial formation” in the sonic.¹¹

This study intervenes and provokes differently, however, from these rich works in several ways. In it, I treat writers and artists as theorists of listening and creators of complex listening texts that think aurally about black and white subjectivity. Throughout this treatment of twentieth-century American literature and culture, I posit listening as an

⁸ Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, 4.

⁹ Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 17.

¹⁰ Mathes, *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

aural form of agency, an ethics of community building, a set of strategies for cultural revision, and a practice of historical thinking. While this study engages in robust ways with music, it stretches the critical ear to consider other important sounds present in the tradition. It is also invested in unmuting print to the reader's ear through exploring listening as a crucial element of reading, perceiving, and interpreting texts. By challenging readers to listen, the texts I examine here shift reading from an action solely of the eyes to one that demands an aural sensory engagement of constructions of difference. To conceive of author and reader as involved in an aural relationship is to think of them as subjects immersed in history and in particular contexts and moments.

In these ways, my work builds on Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Josh Kun's *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*, and Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Moten's work in particular informs my engagement with listening, especially in his careful attention to a wide range of sonic phenomena within the black radical jazz tradition—screams, cries, groans, hollers, and whistles—and his exploration of literature's overlooked aurality. Moten also acknowledges *Invisible Man*'s call for "a new analytical way of listening and reading."¹² Like Moten, I am interested in the "ensemble of senses" from which listening emerges and in listening's capacity to disrupt the traditional separation between acts of reading (highly visual and focused on the eye) and reception of orality (highly audible and focused on the ear).¹³

¹² Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84. For an exception to this focus on reading as solely ocular, see Philip P. Schweighauser, *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics*.

While this study is not a history of literary listening, it also draws from cultural histories such as Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* and its treatment of listening as different from automatic understanding. Rather than being speculative, listening as it is presented throughout this study is historically, materially, and culturally informed and is embodied, lived, and artistically practiced. This focus on listening is not meant to suggest that aural engagement represents a higher level of logic or interpretive work. Rather, it is a mode of engagement in the continuum of sensory cultural engagement, one that enacts change. As Don Ihde asserts in his study of a phenomenology of auditory experience, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, a focus on listening is "a deliberate decentering of a dominant tradition" that "symbolizes a hope to find . . . a different understanding of experience, one which has its roots in a phenomenology of auditory experience."¹⁴ Ihde's phenomenological approach to listening and auditory experience involves "an intense and concentrated attention to sound and listening" and raises another important issue for this study in its significant awareness of "certain 'beliefs' which intrude into . . . attempt[s] to listen 'to the things themselves.'"¹⁵

Keying into assumptions, misunderstandings, and biases (implicit and otherwise) matters because they can significantly impede our ability to listen, particularly since assumptions so often subconsciously frame how we listen and can determine what we are open to hearing. Implicit in Ihde's phenomenology of listening is the idea that listening is a learned activity—what Jonathan Sterne refers to as a technique—in that listening "connotes practice, virtuosity, and the possibility of failure and accident. . . . It is a

¹⁴ Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

learned skill, a set of repeatable activities within a limited number of framed contexts.”¹⁶ For Sterne and Ihde, listening should be considered as a process that is formed and transformed through social, cultural, and political forces, rather than treated as a fixed cultural or automatic physiological act. In this sense, listening is an active and fully engaged process that is largely dependent on the particular contexts in which it occurs. This is the aurally inflected work that this dissertation performs.

Overview of Chapters

This study is divided into two sections, each of which outlines a larger theoretical argument that aims to amplify listening as a creative, aesthetic, and interpretive practice in ways that provoke robust motivations to develop our capacities to listen. The first section, which consists of the first two chapters, challenges the apparently neutral scientism of narratological rhetoric by considering how neutrality risks dematerializing the voice and sounds of modern life, removing them from bodies and spaces marked by class and race. Referencing Melba Cuddy-Keane’s methodological focus on sound as an object, I suggest that making sound the object of our reading or viewing de-emphasizes the fact that race determines in advance the field of audibility. To that end, I examine how readers are implicitly trained to attend to the racial signifiers of voice in literary form via an elliptical narrative acoustics that indirectly mediates and reinforces the sounds of racially marked speech in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and William Faulkner’s *Flags in the Dust* (1927), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).

¹⁶ Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, 92.

In the second section of the study—its final three chapters—I expand this theoretical framework to include modernist and postmodernist American poetry and music, fields which, I argue, produced conceptual provocations that ask us to rethink the relationships between sound, race, and aesthetic form. Beginning with Charlie Parker’s approach to musical narrative, which I examine in Chapter Three, I show how Parker’s solos during the bebop revolution of the 1940’s fragment overall narrative into discrete moments of virtuosity that refuse to cohere into the larger narrative structure prescribed by the song forms over which Parker’s improvisations take place. This fragmentation does two things. First, it makes the sounds of Parker’s solos opaque to the hermeneutic model which presumes a jazz solo to be “telling a story” about the musician performing it—an unmediated expression of that musician’s inner psychological state, or, more problematically, a representative statement of racial identity. Second, it uses improvisation to generate a new, negative reading of the song forms underlying his solos. By undermining the normative prescriptions of these song forms while keeping those prescriptions audible, Parker transforms “form” itself into a multi-layered, dialectical phenomenon.

Chapter Four turns to Langston Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* to articulate a theory of racially-engaged, non-mimetic poetic musicality that derives from the advances developed by Parker. For Hughes, the opacity Parker’s music institutes adheres in the chasm *Ask Your Mama* imposes between its own musicality and the actual music of bebop. This move proceeds by way of a double gesture, separating text into “musical” and “poetic” components on one hand but structurally aligning the 12-bar blues (sincerity) with the “dozens” (fabrication) on the other. While the result inaugurates

a new formal model for Black diasporic poetics, it does so hesitantly, suggesting that the impossibility of naming what ties this diasporic community together inheres at the basic level of language. Most important here is Hughes's complete abandonment of the goal of having his poetry recreate the music it holds so dear. In this poem, what emerges as the music upon which the poem pins it hopes for uniting the diaspora it describes remains a music that is, ultimately, unheard. This strategy then mobilizes the poem to do the work of this music, producing its larger effects without resorting to sound to do so.

My final chapter, Chapter Five, continues this work of articulating a theory of racially-engaged, non-mimetic poetic musicality that derives from the advances developed by Parker by examining Robert Creeley's mid-1960's volume *Words*. Though superficially different from Hughes, I argue, Creeley similarly gains force from exploiting language's communicative limitations. In contrast to *Ask Your Mama*, however, the reduction of content to near banality strips language of its deictic contexts, keeping Creeley's poetry caught between saying and observing itself saying. Though this situation perpetually threatens Creeley's poetry with the possibility of solipsism, it also enables this work to de-emphasize *what* it says in favor of its raw *that-ness*, what Creeley calls "a tall sense of enclosure." The effect is to conceive musicality as the dispersion of identity, rather than its consolidation.

Because both projects fundamentally stem from the separation Parker's music imposes between the body understood as a set of sound-producing capacities and the body viewed as racially-marked exterior, I argue, their pairing newly describes lyric's capacity to reflect race as an external referent. Pairing Hughes and Creeley also helps trace out a new history of post-war poetry. Despite Creeley's occasional expressions of

interest in Charlie Parker, the idea that Black Mountain poetics and the work of Hughes would be working on a shared project is not one to which many critics of American poetry would subscribe. Reading Hughes and Creeley as collectively developing a non-mimetic jazz poetics, then, realizes two goals. First, it redraws the historical boundaries of American post-war poetry along newly uncovered lines, opening up new directions for historical and conceptual accounts of the innovation of the period. Second, it places an engagement with race (if implicit) at the center of a poetic lineage—that commonly known as the “Black Mountain school”—for which race is more often considered a tangential concern at best. In so doing, it opens up Creeley’s ideas about poetry to future scholars of race-directed poetry.

PART ONE
Bodies of Sound: Audibility and the Space of Reading

Preface

We begin this section in a rented cabin room in Georgia in 1923. For a moment, we hang suspended, waiting for the arrival of the imputed final revelation of Jean Toomer's *Cane*. Its last vignette, "Kabnis," begins as, "Ralph Kabnis, propped in his bed, tries to read. . . . An oil lamp on a chair . . . burns unsteadily. The cabin room is spaced fantastically about it. Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw-teeth (*Cane* 111). Something of the logic of the figure in relation to the surface of the skin brings both the literary world—as a space of appearance—and the body of its narrator and character into being. Light writes on the room, the condition of all vision. The walls of the room, as a surface of reflection, bear the very bodies whose skin has not yet been identified as the content of spatial form. Is it darkness that affords the body its blackness or blackness that affords the darkness its body? Facsimile and simile here share a most fundamental ground.

There is a hiatus in the phenomenal as the presence of substance. This room has been structured in advance by my determinate expectation, now haunted by the sense that a narrator has omitted or is withholding some "object" from me: blackness in a work that, before this final vignette, had probed the vicissitudes of a black life of song on the cusp of disappearance in 1920s Georgia. The narrator finally sees the features of the propped body in the room: "Brown eyes stare from a lemon face" (*Cane* 111).

The third-person narrator is not a someone I can claim to imagine or imagine that I hear. The narrative voice that reports the color of Kabnis's face has been divested of subject position, one that might utter, "[I see that] Brown eyes stare from a lemon face." The anonymous voice of a narrator confers a face on Ralph Kabnis; that much is clear—there has been an elliptical appearance of a character's body. But behind that appearance, as it were (for it is without proper topography or location), there has been a disappearance of the narrator. There is an as-yet unnamed other within (or perhaps as) the room that occupies that site of a more primary ground: the blank space against which things may appear.

"Behind" narrative space and its figures is a motivating voice, irrecoverable, one that brings narrative into being. This force is not itself narrated. Samuel Beckett has dramatized the divine performative of literary appearance: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."¹⁷ There has been a sleight of hand, one internal to the very structure of third-person address. Someone is narrated into existence. That someone doing the narrating evokes, brings into being, but is not itself called forth; it simply manifests.

The elliptical power of this room is testimony to the fact that we have yet to understand audibility and visibility in relation to the production of written narrative. Narrative discourse is, Gérard Genette insists, the only level "directly available to textual analysis."¹⁸ To ask after the forces that determine that availability, but also reveal its availability as the realm of the apparent, is to exit the realm of narrative theory as it concerns itself with the realm of the signifier. And yet, as I will describe, pursuing that

¹⁷ Beckett, "Company," 1.

¹⁸ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 27.

project to its own logical conclusion, particularly as it concerns a racial signifier of voice, opens up a series of questions regarding a level that does not, and cannot, come under the purview of narrative theory without at the same time becoming an acoustics, rather than, strictly speaking, a poetics or rhetoric.

A number of studies have described the politics of transcribing dialectic and vernacular voice in American modernism.¹⁹ Yet, the phenomenological threshold between the sonic and the literary has yet to be elaborated, given the turn away from the linguistic and semiotic upon which sound studies is so often premised. My interest here is drawn to the ambiguous ground of narrative theory—particularly narrative voice—and with it, the difficulty in retrieving its auditory threshold, a virtual or hypothetical hearing. Modernist literary production bore witness to new forms and spaces of interracial encounter, most palpable in the acoustical spaces in which voices, sounds, and bodies touch. Focusing on the racially and sexually fraught narrative spaces of Jean Toomer, Ernest Hemingway, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner, I argue that this encounter is not to be found solely within the diegetic space of the literary world. It is related to a hiatus in the no less material space of readerly consciousness. The space of reading presents an interracial encounter.

We can return for a moment to Kabnis's room. Its *fiat lux* is not without a certain surplus sound. The wind whispers through the cabin's horizontal cracks that bring shards of darkness. Afforded the space is not only a looker, but a listener:

Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering. The warm whiteness of his bed, the lamp-light, do not protect him from the weird chill of their song:

White-man's land.

¹⁹ See, for example, Michael North's *The Dialectic of Modernism*.

Niggers, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground. (*Cane* 142)

The wind's message is encrypted in sound, just above the threshold of audition. But before chilling the body, it is wrapped once more in a second, graphic layer of poesies. It is as if the wind sings. Its chill stands in relation to the surface of the body, but also in circular relation to figuration. The song refers back to itself, commanding song and singing of song. It is what Jean-Luc Nancy might call "tautegorical" (borrowing the word from Schelling and Coleridge), for "it says nothing other than itself."²⁰ Something of (facsimile) in relation to an imputed racial substance is being performed. This performance, we will find, exposes the highly mediated quality of narrative space. Visually, the page suggests the citation of an unnamed singer or group of singers, but also figures a burrowing inward, as if the narrator overhears an interior auditory space. Kabnis might be remembering a song while he lies awake, but whose voice(s) he remembers is perhaps even less articulated or more diffuse than the anonymous narrating voice that communicates the scene of haunting recitation.

While a reader arrives at an interior more historical, further away in time from the moment of audition, the historical content is itself encrypted. The transmissive force that has brought the song here—historicity as such—is lost to representation. The song acts as an elliptical and difficult to interpret preface to the story of the lynching of Mary Turner, referred to in "Kabnis" as Mame Lamkins. Her story is carried, but also omitted or

²⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 49. My aim here is show how modernist voicing exposes tautologies within the very logic of racialized production.

waylaid, by the sound of the wind. Mary Turner, lynched while eight months pregnant in Georgia in 1918, was nearly expunged from public record to be remembered principally by the unofficial histories of modernism.²¹ Throughout the story, Toomer's mode of presentation—a half-presentation—absorbs into itself public memory's mode of silencing.²² The sound of wind is disarticulated in relation to content. It remains unclear who is hearing it as song or if this song has ever been sung outside of its citation by narrative, one that will refrain throughout the story and never through an attributed singer. It is not even clear that Kabnis hears it as such. It has been internalized as an interpellative voice of social memory. The song is an imaginary auditory object, yet voices something of the reality of racial consciousness. There is very little of this sound that “is” available to audible presentation.

In a real way, the *reader* (not the characters) is the audience for this sound; it is the reader who alone is addressed by the narrative or narrative discourse. In other words, the reader “hears” the sounds, the characters' voices, and the discourse that is organizing it in a kind of orchestration. It is as if the narrative discourse is introducing an alterior sound *against which* to assert its neutrality. Giving a focused reading of a scene in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* in which Jake and Brett walk into a jazz club (a scene rarely attended to in its complicated acoustics); the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible*

²¹ Julie Buckner Armstrong's *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* addresses the central importance of Mary Turner as an unfathomable presence in *Cane*. Confronting the social memory of Mary Turner, the prose of “Kabnis” can appear to be what Armstrong calls “an incomprehensible mess” (7).

²² See Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s monumental rethinking of narrative theory, *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates notes “the privileged oral voice [of *Cane*] . . . and its poignant silences,” describing at length a set of African American rhetorical strategies that both conceal and reveal (178). These strategies retain in their play a “primarily antiphonal function” of a black oral tradition (178).

Man; and the distinctly functional role that black voices serve in William Faulkner's emergent project of reproducing the South—how they act as conduits, or mediums, through which Faulkner and his white characters gain access to embodied sensation and psychological interiority—in *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, I argue that the individual narrative negotiates an avowed voice while at once registering voices that are displaced in order to become *possible*; it is against the “background noise” of acoustic displacement that the avowed voice can even be heard. In other words, the reader is made to hear certain disruptive sounds in relief against narrative voice itself—as Jake and Brett are caught in a jam, both a musical excess and a black voice crowd upon direct discourse, bracketing each phrase as its enabling exterior. Ellison's narrator will listen to Louis Armstrong's 1929 rendition of “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue,” a song that reflects on “the curse of Ham,” the “sin that's in my skin,” as it relates the regret of one who has been left for a lighter skinned lover. “I'm white inside, It don't help my case / 'Cause I can't hide, what is on my face, oh!” The phrase ends with a cry, Armstrong then scatting at the word “face,” as if deconstituting the identity to which it supposedly refers.²³ The inarticulate call of an elderly black man will usher Quentin Compson into the more volatile memories of his sister's loss of virginity and pregnancy, memories he is compelled to relive over and over again until he takes his own life. Such sounds are not “details” that might be cut from a revision. These instances of vocal performance are the mechanism through which racial difference (or, as we shall see in the case of Faulkner, racial intermixing) registers. They are, in a real way, the *substance* of the narratives, what holds them together.

²³ David Copenhafer makes this suggestion in his article “Invisible Music (Ellison).”

In my reading, these novels are exemplary because they remind us that the threshold of audibility is not simply a matter of loudness, nor is it one of pronunciation or timbre. There are sounds that do not become more or less audible through volume. We cannot make reference to audibility solely in its brute materiality. Sound is, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, “that which is and may be heard.”²⁴ We should hear a curious tautology, an is that is. I cite this definition as one that opens the recent volume, *Keywords in Sound* (2015), but also because of its passive grammar that masks the subject position and with it, audibility as it is always-already in relation to a listening subject. There is always a spatial configuration of audibility, or a distribution of sounds and points of their reflection in relation to an imputed listening subject. But the space of configuration is precisely that, a figuring of relations between subjects.

In writing of listening as an essential element of modernist fiction, then, I mean to 1) broaden the consideration of the audible in modernist narrative in ways not delimited by orality and 2) to work against the sense that if there is a voice, it must be “personal,” that it is contained, motivated, and determined by the intention of the writer; it is subject to modulations. I suggest we reopen for inquiry a simple question that Barthes once asked of a sentence from Balzac in “The Death of the Author”: “who speaks thus?” Barthes begins his famous essay by forcefully resolving this question in tautology:

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself . . . the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.²⁵

²⁴ Cited in Novak and Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound*, 1. The editors begin, “sound is vibration that is perceived and becomes known through its materiality” (1). This definition functions via a similar tautology.

²⁵ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, 142.

Barthes continues: “No one, no ‘person,’ says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of writing, which is reading.”²⁶ But what is reading?²⁷ As if in answer to this also quite simple question, Barthes concludes his essay by invoking a scene of listening. He recalls the ambiguity of Greek tragic utterance, or words woven with “double meanings” and misunderstandings that lend drama its tragic dimension: “there is, however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁷ As Garrett Stewart asks, in one of few reflections on the question of sonorousness in the event of reading, “Where do we read?” Such a question, he suggests, immediately leads us to the “reading body” as the “somatic locus of soundless reception.” Stewart, *Reading Voices*, 1. Recent work by Anežka Kuzmičová is also instructive for an acoustic-narratological thesis of reading. Leaning on “experimental contexts in which V[erbal]A[uditory]I[magery] has proven to depend . . . on lower-order embodied process, and/or to have a pronounced effect on silent reading,” Kuzmičová introduces the notion of aural “reverberations” experienced by readers of fictional narratives, which, unlike the nonconscious VAI investigated in cognitive science, can be traced via introspection as contributing to the way we construct some particulars of the storyworld embraced by further, more profound interpretations. According to Kuzmičová, “the basic felt quality of all reverberations is that the linguistic medium of a written narrative enters the reader’s awareness *qua* spoken discourse” (“Outer vs. Inner Reverberations” 117).

Kuzmičová distinguishes between *outer reverberations*, whereby readers, “with notable ease,” hear a voice embodied within them as originating elsewhere, even though it is “just a construct” of the mind only retrospectively described as “based on the preceding narrative” (119), and *inner reverberations*, when the text is felt to originate in the reader’s own speech apparatus, with motor articulation involved, so that the sound is “subvocally rehearsed” in the reader’s own voice. A paradoxical attribute of such identification with the implied (fictitious) speaker is that the opacity of the message rises, its form obscures the content, and the comprehension of even surface meanings is slowed down (120). As for which qualities of the text may cause reverberations of either type, Kuzmičová summarizes their symmetrical complementarity by saying that

inner reverberations may be particularly likely to occur with utterances *lacking in orality, speaker familiarity and situational embedding*. More generally still, inner reverberations may simply result from the language of an utterance appearing markedly non-situated to the reader (for whatever reason), as the raw stuff of language rather than speech proper. (Kuzmičová 122, my emphasis)

As far as meaning-making is concerned, inner reverberations “imply that interpretation is instantaneously obstructed” (124), whereas the opposite is true for outer reverberations.

the characters speaking in front of him—this someone being precisely the reader (or here, the listener).”²⁸

Barthes moves from drama to the novel, from listening to dramatic speech to “listening” to sentences on a page. His parenthetical remark leaves open this gap or transference that is metaphor. Listening appears to be an attribute of reading while also its figure. Perhaps this attribute of reading is necessarily incomplete, requiring a figure to make itself known in its effects. Further, it remains difficult to establish if, in this account, one would merely be listening to oneself. We will have occasion to return to these questions in the cases of Ralph Ellison and William Faulkner.

The reader-voice is perhaps only a terminological convenience, one that borrows from the long tradition of inner speech. “I’m aware of it *sounding* in a very thin version of my own tone of voice. I can hear myself in its silent sound, a paradox audible only to me.”²⁹ It is the immediacy of this experience that Jacques Derrida named auto-affection or “hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak.”³⁰ If a reader-voice carries, transmits, and transports the words into consciousness, then what is the nature or structure of the “invisible distance” it traverses?³¹ Sound, in this space, is pushed through into an

²⁸ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148.

²⁹ Denise Riley, “A Voice Without a Mouth,” 58, original emphasis.

³⁰ Derrida elaborates this phrase across numerous works and evokes the double sense of the French verb *écouter*, both “to hear” and “to understand.” “[To speak] produces a signifier which seems not to fall into the world, outside the ideality of the signified, but to remain their sheltered—even in the moment that it attains the audiophonic system of the other—within the pure interiority of auto-affection. It does not fall into the exteriority of space, into what one calls the world, which is nothing but the outside of speech.” Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 166.

³¹ I borrow this phrase from Derrida’s critique of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena*. Derrida writes of “the invisible distance held out between the two acts” of phenomenological reduction and between the transcendental and the world that requires it to appear (11-13).

alternate dimension. When I read, there is nothing that, properly speaking, separates written voices from one another: no surface of another body emerges by which to posit their limit. The space of reading is a singular, absolute space.

“There” the threshold of audibility concerns the very “voice” that might be recognized as the immediate, internal voice of reading. One readily speaks of seeing narrative, or of reading as an ideational space in which characters, settings, and scenes appear in acts of what phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser has called “image-building,” a phrase that promises the substantiality of architecture.³² There are various forms of support for this space that are non-ideational because they produce no images. Reader-response theory and phenomenology of reading are deeply eidetic, unable to ask after the very force of voicing that is the traversal of an invisible distance. There is a rhetorical sliding between listening as metaphor and listening as act, a sliding that must be designated the threshold of audibility. The history of philosophy would indicate that such a threshold is impossible in the case of visibility, so coequal are the image and the idea.

Even Barthes must retain an ideal space (metamorphized as listening) where all levels of articulation are simultaneous and coterminous.³³ There is merely a transfer of power from the voice (of the writer) to the ear (of a reader). But this ear, I will argue, is not without its own stratification, particularly in these scenarios, so difficult to recuperate

³² “The process of image-building begins . . . with the schemata of the text, which are aspects of a totality that the reader himself must assemble; in assembling it, he will occupy the position set out for him, and so create a sequence of images that eventually results in his constituting the meaning of the text.” Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 141.

³³ In part, this space owes to Barthes’s investments in certain models of psychoanalytic listening. See, for example, “Listening” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 245-60.

and narrate. There is an ellipsis, a dot-dot-dot in our own ability to think through reading in relation to listening and its subject.

This is due, in part, to the fact that narrative voice is no voice at all or lacks sonorous substance. As a grammatical category, it is *desonified*. Someone is speaking (in the case of the first person) or reporting speech (in the case of the third person). This “voice” bears no relation to timbre, which immediately gives rise to the question of a point of audition, a someone who is listening. Narrative voice also bears no relation to phenomenological voice as the animating intention of *logos*. Again, it is merely the “narrating instance,” that blank neutrality of the space of narrative. How are we to anatomize a series of auditory thresholds that determines narrativity? I take narrativity here to be not only the presumed narratability of an object that makes it available to focalization, but also the supposed neutrality of narrative voice as grammatical agency: voice as it brings into existence, as it signifies, but is not itself retrievable. Narrative voice is a figural voice that displaces, but cannot fully overcome, its acoustical associations.

Moreover, at the level of acoustics, this displacement composes a compelling, modernist critique of racial identity as akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Per Robert Merton’s description, the self-fulfilling prophecy is “in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come *true*.” He continues, “This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.”³⁴ In the case of racialized vocal timbre, for example, the

³⁴ Merton, “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy,” 195.

“false definition” is the belief in sound as stable and knowable—which causes us to fail to attend to the many ways in which timbre is learned and performed, including those we associate with race, ethnicity, or authenticity.³⁵ We then listen for those phenomena that we believe to exist; we subsequently hear them; and because we hear them, we believe the perceived meaning to be verified. Within such a constellation of beliefs in a stable, knowable sound we are conditioned to *hear what we listen for*, and to assume that what we hear is indisputable.

Independent of the “actual” or intended sound, what a given listener hears depends to a large extent on his or her assumptions regarding the ontology of sound. For example, the belief that it is possible to know something firm about a sound and its source deeply affects the meaning the listener will form based on that sound. Such belief arises from assumptions that sound can be known, is stable, and can be unequivocally recognized and unambiguously named. Furthermore, such belief assumes a deep connection between sound and its assumed signification—an assumption regarding significance that is taken on through enculturation. The narratives explored herein help us to see how we will listen for and, indeed, hear according to categories, such as race, that are aligned with values in a given society. The work of Ellison in particular opens a consideration of the ways in which modernism’s famous aspirations to what Walter Pater calls “the condition of music”³⁶ become, in texts interested in the possibilities of communication between black and white Americans, a means for imagining the experience of song and sound as a vicarious experience of race. Why should the sound of

³⁵ Nina Eidsheim, “Voice as Action: Towards a Model for Analyzing the Dynamic Construction of Racialized Voice,” 12-13, 19-21.

³⁶ Pater, *The Renaissance*, 86.

music made by a phonograph echo with the histories of slavery and segregation? It is not simply the fact that Ellison's "lyricism" marks one of U.S. modernism's most compelling examples of the period's romance with musical aesthetics; it is also that his narrative is itself pervaded by a sense that writing itself requires a "soundtrack" to communicate its meanings. To listen to the world of these texts, then, brings with it questions addressed to a reader's capacity to hear in a world organized by class, race, and gender: How is one to approach discourse in the novel insofar as it is not circumscribable by quotation, in its acoustical displacement, the stratified locations in which sounds carry the burden of what is not said? With what, and to whose, ideological expectations do we listen? Dear reader: are you the one who sounds or the one who receives?

The narratological category of voice remains instructive, for properly speaking, it is without body and a face. It is merely what Genette calls "the narrating instance."³⁷ Genette describes at length the structure that distinguishes the narrator, the one who reports the scene, from a focalizer, the agent who "sees and selects" the particularities of world to be given over to representation. We must suspend for a moment the provocative point that Genette makes no distinction in focalizing between *seeing* and *hearing*, that is, between an object that has been selected for a character or narrator's audition and an object that has been selected for a character or narrator's vision. Genette's use of "voice" is not, Stephen Ross summarizes in his own monumental study of speech and writing, "a medium of utterance, but rather a set of relationships among time of narration, implied or actual narrators, and diegetic levels of the fiction's discourse."³⁸ Ross continues: "From

³⁷ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 214.

³⁸ Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice*, 7-8.

this fundamental relationship Genette can derive subtle and elaborate configurations of narrative without pretending to solve the mystery of an author's (or implied author's) assumed presence behind voice and absence from discourse."³⁹

In this structure, the distinction between first- and third-person is ontologically abridged. I suggest that what matters most in narrative discourse is focalization, a selection of sensory data. That selection at times coincides with the person narrating and at times does not. Genette, for example, typologized focalizers that are "internal" and "external" to the diegesis, but also made an allowance for "zero focalization" in the case of classical narrative or epic.⁴⁰ In any event, what matters is that selecting goes on ontologically and temporally prior to narrating. In among the most enigmatic contributions to narrative theory, Maurice Blanchot writes "the speech of narrative always *lets us feel* that what is being recounted is not being recounted by anyone: it speaks in the neutral."⁴¹ Blanchot is an interesting figure in that regard, in that he is both drawn to the impersonality afforded by the concept of narrative voice and is a highly acoustical thinker. He theorizes a generative contact between the physical properties of hearing and the act of writing, arguing for writing as "a space of redoubling, of echo and resonance where it is not someone, but rather this *unknown* space—its discordant accord" that speaks in narrative voice. It is unknown, but sounding. I suggest that even in this floating, yet purposive dimension of voice, in the zero, there is a focalizer, a focalizer of

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 189-94.

⁴¹ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 384. While Blanchot does not discuss focalization per se, his parallel theory of narrative voice adopts "*il*," often translated as "he," but also indicative of a neuter "it."

what Blanchot names “the neutral space of narrative.”⁴² The focalizer is an anonymous accompaniment to any literary voicing, available to narrative, though not fully retrievable by it as its condition. Even the most neutral of spaces, that lets me feel as though “it speaks,” is a selected space.

The sensible is never simply or immediately such but rather regulated, censored or organized by laws that are perhaps not fully discoverable as laws for there is no place outside of representation from which to see them. Visibility is the perceptual condition of the object as it might present itself to vision.⁴³ As we move from the visual to the acoustical register, there is also a passage between them: audibility itself is an audiovisual form. And yet, the moment we concern ourselves with audibility, we are no longer concerned simply with the material life of the object, but also with its subjective and somatic possibilities for recognition. Audibility is not a purely material category that can be pluralized and distributed in a series as would a series of things: it is the ontological force by which consciousness can experience itself as such. Audibility is the supportive, yet occluded, function of the subject as the verb’s mode of action.

The focalizer sees but does not “say.” My concern here is not only the issue of confounding hearing and seeing, but also the distribution of the sensible by which politics

⁴² Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 384.

⁴³ The work of Pooja Rangan recommends, in this vein, a related passage from Gilles Deleuze when he writes of “visibilities.” These “are not to be confused with elements that are visible or more generally perceptible, such as qualities, things, objects, compounds of objects. . . . Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under the light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer.” Deleuze, *Foucault*, 45; Rangan, *Immediations*.

determines aesthetics, or the threshold of an object's perceptibility.⁴⁴ Modernist scholar Melba Cuddy-Keane has also asked after the limits of focalization in the account of sound, focusing in particular on what she calls "the new aurality" of technological modernity:

Besides the problem of mediating sound through a visually oriented discourse, there is the fundamental problem of mediating sound through language at all—the inevitable translation of sound into a conceptual category that takes place in the process of verbalization.⁴⁵

But is that not a problem with any sensation or perception? The literary can only become the site in which to recuperate such an object if it is to be understood as a purely representational space. Cuddy-Keane argues that rather than focalization, terms such as "diffusion and auscultation may thus help us both to focus on the presentation of sound in itself."⁴⁶

The gains of such a shift in focus to "sound in itself" remain unclear, or rather, politically neutral. This neutrality defines the limits and scope of narrative theory in relation to audibility. Race, taken to be a purely visual phenomenon, has been largely absent from discussions of the sound object. Yet, race is not a content, a content that can be added and then removed through reduced listening. My insistence is on the "audible," which is not prior to an act of reading. These questions become more vexed in moments of half-presentation and in the sound object that is its narrative "voice," the very

⁴⁴ Jacques Rancière writes in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, "the system of a priori forms determines what presents itself to sense experience. [Aesthetics] is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (13).

⁴⁵ Cuddy-Keane, "Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality," 70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71. Also see John M. Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes*, in which he discusses the Romantic and Victorian literary imagination in terms of auscultation, a technique whose history has since been richly explored by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past*.

intersection of the linguistic, imagistic, psychic and sonorous. Judith Butler writes of a “racially saturated field of visibility.”⁴⁷ We might say in turn: race determines in advance the field of audibility.

⁴⁷ Butler, “Endangered/Endangering,” 15. In this seminal essay, Butler writes of the video of Rodney King being brutally beaten, as it was nonetheless marshaled as visual evidence of King being a threat. “The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful” (17). Butler does not isolate the “seen” as being prior to reading (15-16).

CHAPTER ONE

Against Background Noise: Narrative as Acoustic Displacement in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and William Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust*

Not all voices of reading translate a measure of vision. Some readerly voices occlude, vex, or hyper-accentuate that translation and in different somatic sites of animation. There is a voice that a reader might lend to writing, a voice that might efface, misappropriate, and misconstrue. The voice without a mouth is not without reference to a situation. Rather, it is with an elided or half-presented situation. Richard Dyer writes, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular . . . [moreover] when whiteness qua whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial.”⁴⁸ Consciousness itself—the very “site” of the world’s animation and shelter—is a racial formation. The act of reading, in traversing an invisible distance, traverses not an emptiness of immediacy, but a virtual and yet no less material and racialized space.

The challenging issue of focalization or selection in the space of reading remains to be considered within this nexus. To that end, I would like to begin this chapter by turning our attention to the following scenes from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Near the novel’s conclusion, Lady Brett Ashley and her former love Jake sit

⁴⁸ Cited in Shannon Jackson, “White Noises: On Performing White, On Writing Performance,” 51.

at a café table with a young bullfighter, Pedro Romero, in Spain. Chapter 26 abruptly comes to an end when Jake leaves the table for a moment, only to return and find that Brett and Romero are gone. “The coffee-glasses and our three empty cognac-glasses were on the table. A waiter came with a cloth and picked up the glasses and mopped off the table” (SAR 149). We have only metonyms, the empty table and glasses, to depict, vividly by way of narrative omission, that Brett and Romero have gone off together for the night. Fantasy must intervene where description will not. We come to know that something has happened, not because it is presented but by way of remainders, an affective halo around the scene of action that points towards it. Narrative that “shows” by omitting, what Hemingway called “the principle of the iceberg,” here can be defined in rather visible terms.⁴⁹

But consider another passing moment in *The Sun Also Rises* when Jake meets Brett in a jazz club in Spain. The moment is itself a passageway—a sonorous corridor—for larger themes of the novel concerning omission, but also reticence and repression:

The music hit you as you went in. Brett and I danced. It was so crowded we could barely move. The nigger drummer waved at Brett. We were caught in the jam, dancing in one place in front of him.

“Hahre you?”

“Great.”

“Thaats good.”

He was all teeth and lips

“He’s a friend of mind,” Brett said. “Damn good drummer.”

...

“Oh darling,” Brett said. “I’m so miserable.”

I had the feeling of going through something that has all happened before.

“You were happy a minute ago.”

The drummer shouted: “You can’t two time—”

“It’s all gone”

⁴⁹ Hemingway, “The Art of Fiction No. 21.” In the interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway states that only something that a writer knows can be omitted; anything else is a “hole.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. I just feel terribly.”

“” the drummer chanted. Then turned to his sticks.

“Want to go?”

I had the feeling as in a nightmare of it all being something repeated, something I had been through and that now I must go through again.”

“” the drummer sang softly.

“Let’s go,” said Brett. “You don’t mind.”

“” the drummer shouted and grinned at Brett. (SAR 51-52)

A selected sound object is “audible” to the focalizer; a selected visual object is “visible.”

This scene forces us to ask, what is a *deselected* object? Are its axes purely silence and invisibility, or rather a more fraught sensory and political territory delimiting speech from noise, image from its occlusion, a location in which seeing and hearing are co-produced in the somatic act of reading?

Brett knows one of the musicians and while she does not say more, in a novel that is fundamentally about words withheld or omitted, they perhaps know one another from America. We know from other moments in the text that Brett has left a long line of lovers, the implication here being that Brett and the unnamed drummer have been sexually involved. The racial epithet serves the psychic function of neutralizing Jake’s anxiety in this interracial space. Already displaced away from the American scene, the presence of jazz speaks to an America abroad in suspension. But the scene, as presented by Jake, is notably disfiguring. The body of the drummer, in a measure of vision, is corporealized by the epithet as a black body. But that body is immediately reduced, disappearing behind two remaining figures (teeth and mouth) that hang suspended. A floating mouth absorbs and stands in place of the rest of the body. Jake’s mode of narrative is not only reductive, but also aggressive, disfiguring the drummer’s face.

And yet, not only is seeing the drummer not at issue, but also hearing him. An essential violence is happening at the level of reported speech. The drummer's speech is rendered in vernacular, which is perhaps how Jake hears it, that is, through racist filters. But this violence is happening in the apparatus of reporting itself. For, while the scene is focalized through Jake, he is also one of the scene's objects. The apparatus must overhear the characters as well as the music and drum-taps. There is some shift in attention: the narrative registers these sounds, but it increasingly attempts to banish the language of the drummer to non-narrative. Rhythm is the impetus for an elision in the ellipsis, which then comes to stand in for a voice. It is worth noting that another character in the scene is referred to simply as "the count." What begins as stenography of the drum-taps becomes overfull with displacement (by what force or from what point of audition, it is unclear). It is no longer sufficient to isolate the racist structures of representation within Jake. The well-worn literary question "Who is speaking?" is perhaps best rendered here as "Who is selecting?"

Perspective, narratologist Mieke Bal maintains, "covers both the physical and psychological points of perception," but it has come traditionally to mean both the narrator and the "vision."⁵⁰ The term focalizer, meant to cover the act of vision alone, is drawn from the language of film and photography, preferred by Bal over something like "perspectivizer" for being both subject-oriented while also technical. The examples that tether and elaborate Bal's theory of the focalizer are drawn from spectatorship for reasons that remain instructive in the case of the racial signifier: the focalized objects (another character, a landscape, a thing, or a voice or sound event) are fundamentally specular.

⁵⁰ Bal, *Narratology*, 146.

As Jake moves through the music of the jazz club, we are, despite an elision, in the realm of something that gains its narrative status from being seen: a body under the erasure of racist disfigurement, rendered and reduced graphically to a series of dots. But it also gains its status from being heard. Selection still remains in this instance an operative act. While a subject—who has been reduced to a (sound) object—is being heard, it is selected and unselected at the same time. That is not to claim that the drummer “is not being heard,” for the very structure of audibility here underscores that objects (who are also subjects) are not simply available to hearing. We are in the realm of *deselection* as the speech of the drummer moves further away from representation, being first in a dialect rendering of a racialized timbre. It is perhaps even a Southern timbre, but it is made to take on black proportions: the matter of his voice is left unnarrated, calling upon the reader’s inner sense of sound and that reader’s archive of racial associations of voice. It is then a singing, a chanting, until finally it is an ellipsis, a spacing out within written discourse itself.

But while it is out of the ordinary for a drummer to sing, the ellipses stand in for a problem of description, as if the sound qualities of the drummer’s singing cannot be graphically represented.⁵¹ The very notion of timbre is premised upon a descriptive desire in relation to sound. In one of few reflections on the incredibly difficult to define notion of timbre, Emily Dolan writes, “to talk about timbre is to value sound as sound and not as a sonic manifestation of abstract principles.”⁵² Timbre indicates an attention to what

⁵¹ For a related reading, see Alex Benson, “Gatsby’s Tattoo,” which argues for “jazz under erasure” in *The Great Gatsby* (747). Benson compellingly highlights a moment of racialized foot tapping within the broader context of anthropology and ethnography.

⁵² Dolan, *Orchestral Revolution*, 87-8.

Dolan calls the “eachness” of sounds.⁵³ But how is eachness, or particularity, to be resolved with an attention to the *structural* levels that support the racialization of timbre—the claim to reduce and therefore (mis)recognize a black voice or sound, in reading and in listening?

Certainly, the elision indicates a problem of acoustics, as Jake might not hear when the drummer sings (though the drummer’s skin has silenced him in advance of speech and music). Perhaps Jake turns his ear elsewhere physically. The gap in both narrative and the grapheme might also be a kind of background noise, as if his emotional attention is drawn elsewhere in ways that he cannot quite articulate. If we return to Barthes’s formulation of tragic listening, double meanings lend the scene its dramatic proportions: this scene unfolds principally as a failure of dialogue. Both Brett and Jake circle around some void in feeling they cannot say clearly or directly. But it is the body of the drummer that indicates something of that circle. He was there, in the scene, for a moment, just before marking its borders of inclusion. The novel has rich technical resources internal to itself for omission. What work is he—as a spectral, elliptical frame of dialogue—doing for narrative?

The acoustical pulses around narrative, just as the music pulses around dialogue: the music is represented *so as* to be marginalized. Yet, that narrative and textual labor is, nonetheless, unfulfilled. While the racialized sound object has been marginalized, it remains “in” the narrative in elided and distorted (but also compressed) form. The racialized drummer is “there,” at the audiovisual margins of narratibility: the ellipsis is a visualized fracture in articulation.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88.

The two-time is in the text. It is the only thing that the drummer says: he is elided as a double elision, two-timed out of the narrative. It is possible that Hemingway here meant to say “double time,” a double time solo being the lingua franca of jazz of this moment, a remark about how early jazz was played. Perhaps the drummer is cautioning the player not to double the rhythm. The phrase “two time” then takes on an ironic proportion as overheard by Jake who is, in a sense, asking Brett to two-time with him (she is engaged to Mike, a name with an easily substitutable phoneme). In Jake’s impotence, an injury from the war, he could never fulfill that two time, where the drummer it seems, already has, making Jake painfully, or doubly secondary.

The elliptical sound, or the half-presentation of the music, indicates not only what the characters cannot hear, but also what narrative discourse itself cannot hear if it is to maintain its semiotic hold upon the affective limitations of its characters. The emptiness of the ellipses, or rather an emptying out of music by narrative and the grapheme, figures the characters’ own sense of emptiness. But that emptiness is symptomatic of an absence already within and as whiteness, preserving its dominance. Jake cannot admit the drummer into his society if he is to preserve it; he can dance along to the music, but no more. But this emptiness is doubly empty, two-timing. The ellipsis is then over-full to double fully the convention of three dots. Jake and Brett are miserable, to be sure. But the narrative discourse borrows the authenticity of their emptiness from the erased music to communicate its own lack. The melancholy of the characters is borrowed, omitted music being its prosthetic.

The drummer indicates a rhythm, “two timing,” that is at the limit of narrative temporality and serial presentation. The narrative space is pulled in two directions—a

syncopated rhythm stands as the limit of the linguistic representation of layered acoustical space. If narrative turns fully towards the drummer, it will negate the spoken scene, falling into the music that will become its primary object. Narrative is in the midst of a struggle to the death. In that moment, “background noise” ceases to be an appropriate designation, for the written finds its limit in its capacity to represent what is underneath the spoken as its support. But, at the level of inscription, this support (of music) can only be *just alongside* of dialogue, visibly surrounding direct discourse. This proximity signals an acute danger: for what if narrative discourse were to turn its attention to this music?

II. Acoustic Exteriors and Authorial Voice

One must account for a further intimacy between a narrative that de-semanticizes voice—turning it into a kind of “sound”—and narrative as it works towards becoming the silent, visible object signifying authorial voice. I turn, then, to William Faulkner, who seemed to be working out the problem of forgotten and displaced registers *in* the moment he was working out the problem of his literary identity. Faulkner's interest in voice can be traced to the sketches he did for the *Times Picayune* in the 1920s, but it is in *Flags in the Dust* (1927), often described as his first truly Southern novel, that he enters what we might think of as his own sound era.⁵⁴ In *Flags*, Faulkner becomes newly attuned to spoken language, and specifically to what Karl Zender describes as the “concrete and highly distinctive voices and sounds” of Faulkner's native Mississippi.⁵⁵ In an unfinished

⁵⁴ For a discussion of Faulkner's early prose experiments with voice, see Martin Kreiswirth, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Novelist*, Chapters 2 and 3.

⁵⁵ Zender, “Faulkner and the Power of Sound,” 91.

essay written after the manuscript's completion, Faulkner claimed that this turn toward the voices and sounds of his youth was triggered by a heightened awareness of his own mortality, his realization that "there would come a day on which the palate of [his] soul would no longer react to the simple bread-and-salt of the world" ("The Composition" 260). He was compelled to brave again "the agony of ink" ("The Composition" 261) with the intention of "recreat[ing] between the covers of a book the world [he] was already preparing to lose and regret," desiring "if not the capture of that world and the fixing of it as you'd preserve a branch or a leaf, to indicate the lost forest, at least to keep the evocative skeleton of the dessicated leaf." Only thus, he claimed, could he "bind into a whole the world which for some reason [he] believe[d] should not pass utterly out of the memory of man" ("The Composition" 263).

This account frames the novel's genesis as a rehearsal of the artist's eternal struggle against time, but, as Julian Murphet argues, Faulkner's act of "world creation" takes place within an early-twentieth-century "post-literary media ecology" in which writers labored under "accumulating pressure from new narrative media such as cinema and radio and new communicational media such as the telegraph and telephone."⁵⁶ Considered in this context, Faulkner's account is less striking for the nostalgic attachment the author expresses for a preindustrial world (figured as the lost forest) than for its depiction of writing as a form of media that, like leaf-pressing, is antiquated and on the verge of disappearing. And yet the same metaphor that relegates literature to a dusty corner of the modern media landscape also supplies the foundation for Faulkner's claims regarding his art's abiding potency—its capacity to recreate the world by preserving its

⁵⁶ Murphet, "New Media Ecology," 16.

most evocative, material traces. The image of the leaf's "skeleton" serves as a crucial pivot, for, as Faulkner goes on to describe, the writing of *Flags* takes him back to the body as a medium of sensory experience:

So I began to write, without much purpose, until I realised that to make it truly evocative it must be personal, in order to not only preserve my own interest in the writing, but to preserve my belief in the savor of the bread-and-salt. So I put people in it, since what can be more personal than reproduction, in its two senses, the aesthetic and the mammalian. In its one sense, really, since the aesthetic is still the female principle, the desire to feel the bones spreading and parting with something alive begotten of the ego and conceived by the protesting unleashing of flesh. So I got some people, some I invented, others I created out of tales I learned of nigger cooks and stable boys of all ages between one-armed Joby, eighteen, who taught me to write my name in red ink on the linen duster he wore for some reason we have both forgotten, to old Louvinia who remembered when the stars "fell" and who called my grandfather and my father by their Christian names until she died, in the long drowsy afternoons. ("The Composition" 261-62)

Deborah Clarke has argued that Faulkner ties his aesthetic to the female body in order to "rob the mother" (as the title of her 1994 monograph suggests) of her procreative powers. I want to underscore how, in this instance, Faulkner links the "agony of ink" to the agony of childbirth in order to lay claim to the body as an instrument of sensation—a means of "preserving [his] belief in the savor of the bread-and-salt." By thus depicting writing as an act of aesthetic reproduction that aims to "fix," "capture," and "preserve" the world by recreating embodied feeling, Faulkner positions writing amid what Sara Danius calls "technologies of perception," which include devices such as the phonograph and cinematic camera that "stor[e], transmi[t], and reproduc[e] sense data."⁵⁷ That he appeals specifically to taste—a sensory faculty that remains conspicuously outside the scope of modern devices that focused overwhelmingly on the eye and the ear—confirms Murphet's suggestion that Faulkner's work reveals an "extraordinary effort, in prose, to

⁵⁷ Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*, 3.

mark out some territory appropriate to a medium consigned to the outer edges of the media ecology.”⁵⁸ That territory is, in a word, Yoknapatawpha, but what I find striking here is that Faulkner lays claim to the South by marking out territory on the body, itself—first, the palate, and then, through the laboring female flesh, the rest of it.

Even more striking is how this claiming of the body leads, in turn, to the “tales [he] learned of nigger cooks and stable boys,” or the black voices of his Mississippi youth. With the memory of Joby teaching him “to write [his] name in red ink,” African Americans materialize in this account not only at the birth of *Flags* but also, if only symbolically, at Faulkner’s origin as a writer, a detail that confirms Thadious M. Davis’s claim that “the Negro is part of Faulkner’s creative impulse.”⁵⁹ Defining the role black people play in that impulse, however, is not easy. While Faulkner turns to them out of a desire to make his novel “personal” by “put[ting] people in it,” he does not present the cooks and stable boys, Joby and Louvinia, as “people” themselves; rather, these black figures are the tellers of the tales “out of” which he claims to have “got” people or, in a curious form of creative miscegenation, to have begot them. To complicate things further, we should note that the whole point of making the novel “personal” is apparently to make it more “evocative” and thus to “preserve” Faulkner’s, and presumably the reader’s, “belief in the savor” of the world he presents. This suggests that “people” materialize in *Flags* not as characters in the traditional sense but as instruments that function in service of the novel’s central aim: to reproduce the vanishing “world” in all its sensorial authenticity. What seems to set black people apart from white ones is Faulkner’s sense

⁵⁸ Murphet, “New Media Ecology,” 21.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Faulkner’s “Negro”*: *Art and the Southern Context*, 15.

that they are more effective conductors of “feeling,” better equipped to evoke—as they do toward the end of the excerpt—the “long drowsy afternoons” of the author’s youth.

Faulkner was not alone in his turn toward African Americans for the specific purpose of sustaining “belief” in the authenticity of his artistic creation, or as he puts it in the essay, of effecting a “verisimilitude” (“The Composition” 263) that aims to take the vanishing world and “bind [it] into a whole.” As film scholar Alice Maurice explores in rich detail, sound film relied heavily on black bodies and black voices to “ground [the cinema’s] claims to authenticity and presence,”⁶⁰ especially during the early sound years when the yet-imperfect technology was producing images and sound that were literally out of sync. Achieving the “fantasy of synchronization”⁶¹ was a delicate operation, for if the new medium was to be seen as “‘whole’ rather than as a merger of separate parts,” image and sound had to be “bound together seamlessly” not only to one another but also to “other ‘natural’ links: external and internal traits, body and essence, image and meaning must be ‘in sync’ as well.” Relying on essentialist rhetoric about black bodies and black voices, white producers and promoters claimed that the “cure [for] what ailed the new sound cinema”⁶² was to be found in African Americans’ voices, which, it was rumored, “produced better and truer sound recordings”⁶³ due to their resonance, timbre, and “reduplicable authenticity.”

Faulkner’s account of how he wrote *Flags in the Dust* has little to say about the material quality of the black voices that he drew on to make his story “evocative,” but if

⁶⁰ Maurice, *Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema*, 13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 167.

we turn to the novel, we can see how the narrative deploys black voices as highly conductive mediums for sensory experience. Consider, for example, Elnora Strother, the only female member of the African American family that lives with and works for the novel's central white family, the Sartorises. Elnora first enters the novel as a disembodied voice, "a steady preoccupied minor, like a chant" (*Flags* 9), that issues from an invisible location inside the Sartoris home and enfolds old Bayard, its patriarch, as he stands arrested in the foyer. Her words are "not distinguishable"; old Bayard, being hard of hearing, "could not hear them at all." And yet this does not preclude the narrative from registering Elnora's voice at this and other moments involving old Bayard. Thus, for example, after she has "raised her voice to penetrate his deafness," Bayard moves on and stands momentarily at a window. From there, he "look[s] down upon his saddle-mare tethered to a mulberry tree in the back yard and a negro lad lean as a hound, richly static beside it" (*Flags* 20), while from the kitchen, "invisible from this window, Elnora's endless minor ebb[s] and flow[s] unheard by him upon the lazy scene." Later in the evening, he sits on the porch while "a shrill monotone of crickets rose from the immediate grass, and further away, from among the trees, a fairy-like piping of young frogs like endless silver small bubbles rising, and a thin sourceless odor of locust drifted up intangible as fading tobacco-wraiths, and from the rear of the house, up the dark hall, Elnora's voice floated in meaningless minor suspense" (*Flags* 39). Invisible and inaudible, Elnora might as well not exist to Bayard in either of these moments, and yet her voice still materializes within the ambient solutions of odor and sound—in both instances as their final note and most poignant expression.

These scenes illustrate well how Faulkner uses black voices to flesh out his first fully realized Southern landscape. But black voices perform instrumental roles for Faulkner's white characters as well as for his narrative. Turning to a voice that Bayard can hear, that of Elnora's father, Simon, we see Faulkner underscore the unique capacity of black voice as a conductive medium. Here, Simon is carrying old Bayard home in a horse-drawn carriage and, in telegraphic manner, relaying a rumor picked up from a local section hand about the return of Bayard's nephew and namesake from World War I:

[Simon's] voice was not particularly robust nor resonant, yet somehow he could talk to old Bayard without difficulty. Others must shout in order to penetrate that wall of deafness beyond which Bayard lived; yet Simon could and did hold long, rambling conversations with him in that monotonous, rather high sing-song of his, particularly while in the carriage, the vibration of which helped Bayard's hearing a little.

"Mist' Bayard done got home," Simon remarked in a conversational tone.
(*Flags* 6)

Bayard's receptiveness to Simon's voice, like his preference for horse-drawn carriages, is linked to the two men's shared attachment to the past. But it also seems to have something to do with physics, in which natural vibration constitutes the ontological ground of mechanization. The communication carried out between Simon's voice and Bayard's ear is accomplished through a happy marriage between the vibration of the wheels and the pitch—another form of vibration—of Simon's "high sing-song" voice. Simon's voice in this way opens up, via its vibration, a kind of private frequency with old Bayard, a line of communication based, as with Elnora's "endless minor," on the quality of the voice as a physical medium rather than on what it says.

The conductive capacity of black voice is even more pronounced in the presence of the younger Bayard Sartoris, who returns home unstrung by the violent death of his twin brother and a deeper dissonance, exacerbated by the war, between his own

experience and the glorified myths of his familial past. Because Bayard spends much of the novel physically engaged in various attempts to get himself killed, the moments when he appears at rest are significant. Still more significant is the fact that they frequently involve the presence of black voices. One afternoon, for example, he goes downtown for lunch. Pausing for a moment on the sidewalk “while the noon throng parted and flowed about him” (*Flags* 117), he registers the sounds of “Negroes slow and aimless . . . murmuring and laughing among themselves” and detects in their “consonantless murmuring something ready with mirth, in their laughter something grave and sad” (*Flags* 117-18). A “blind negro beggar” (*Flags* 118) catches his ear with his guitar and mouthorgan, with which he “pattern[s] the background of smells and sounds with a plaintive reiteration of rich monotonous chords.”⁶⁴

Something similar happens when Bayard takes his wife Narcissa on an opossum hunt with Simon’s grandson, Caspey. Like the bluesman from the earlier scene, Caspey also has an instrument, a “cow’s horn slung over his shoulder” (*Flags* 292), but he doesn’t seem to need it:

At last, from some distance away, came that single ringing cry. Caspey stopped. “Le’s see which way he gwine.” They stood in the darkness, in the sad, faintly chill decline of the year, among the dying trees, listening. “Whooy,” Caspey shouted mellowly. “Go git ‘im.”

The dog replied, and they moved again, slowly, pausing at intervals to listen. The hound bayed; there were two voices now, and they seemed to be moving in a circle across their path. “Whooy,” Caspey called, his voice ebbing in falling echoes among the trees. They went on. (*Flags* 297)

⁶⁴ For a sensitive reading of this encounter between young Bayard and the bluesman, see Adam Gussow, “Plaintive Reiterations and Meaningless Strains: Faulkner’s Blues Understandings,” 68-69.

As when Bayard stops amid the “consonantless murmuring” of the black voices in the square, here he pauses and just listens to the sound of Caspey’s voice, the “whooy” that arrests him by interacting with the surrounding environment. Even as Bayard listens to Caspey, he also seems to listen through him to the dogs and, beyond them, to the world itself—the darkness and the dying trees which materialize in the soundless intervals between the echoing, or patterning, of the black man’s cries. Stephen M. Ross touches on the immersive quality of black voice in Faulkner’s work when he suggests that “Negroes’ voices in particular signal the blended voice of nature and community.”⁶⁵ These two scenes, however, suggest that black voices do more than “signal” that blending: they enable it. By facilitating the act of listening, they function as a kind of aural prosthetic that tunes Bayard into the world, giving him a moment of respite by suspending his trajectory of self-destruction.⁶⁶

As I will show in the next chapter, this prosthetic function plays a crucial role in *The Sound and the Fury*, in which Faulkner redeploys black voices to eavesdrop on the minds of the Compson brothers. *Flags* gives us little by way of interiority—one can only wonder what young Bayard is thinking as he listens to the bluesman and Caspey—but it

⁶⁵ Ross, *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner*, 30.

⁶⁶ Relevant here, and to Bayard’s encounter with the bluesman, is Joel Dinerstein’s suggestion that “West African-derived sociomusical practice” (*Swinging the Machine* 78)—which includes African American blues and jazz—consists not of “correctly playing a written score through notes” but rather “*re-presenting* the soundscape in rhythmic phrases” and, in this way, “render[ing] the universe intelligible through sound.” He cites the example of the blues artist DeFord Bailey, who “was proud of his ability to stylize and re-present any sound, even in the agrarian environment” and who claimed, “I’m just like a microphone . . . I pick up everything I hear around me.” In language that resonates with Bayard’s experience of Caspey’s voice, as well as with memorable scenes of (white) listening from *As I Lay Dying*, Dinerstein describes how Bailey “would lie in bed and hear dogs howling, or wild geese honking as they flew overhead, or the wind as it blew through the house, and he would play any and all of it.”

begins to lay the foundation for his next novel's exploration of white psychic architecture, and the more dynamic function of black voices within it, in a few key scenes. The first takes us back to Simon's daughter, Elnora. As we have already observed in the scene with old Bayard on the porch, Elnora's voice functions less for Faulkner's character, who doesn't seem to hear it, than for the author's aim of reproducing the world in its sensory immediacy. This function is complicated when the narration leaves old Bayard on the porch and follows his aunt, Miss Jenny, who also pauses before an open window and experiences the same night expanse that surrounds her nephew:

Just beyond the corner from the invisible kitchen, Elnora's voice welled in mellow falling suspense. *All folks talkin' 'bout heaven aint gwine dar* Elnora sang, and presently she and Simon emerged into the moonlight and took the path to Simon's cabin below the barn. Simon had fired his cigar at last, and the evil smoke of it trailed behind him, fading; but when they had gone the rank pungency of it seemed still to linger within the sound of the crickets and of the frogs upon the silver air, mingled and blended inextricably with the dying fall of Elnora's voice.

All folks talkin' 'bout heaven aint gwine dar (Flags 40)

As in the scene with old Bayard, Elnora remains invisible. Her voice materializes out of the darkness to mingle and blend with the surrounding smells and the sounds of crickets and frogs, creating a dense, sensory landscape that enfolds Miss Jenny as she pauses and—in a now-familiar pattern—just listens.

But there are key differences here as well. Whereas, in the other scenes we've considered, black voices exist in solution with the sounds and sensations that surround them, Elnora's voice creates dissonance within the otherwise pastoral landscape. The "evil smoke" and "rank" odor of Simon's cigar, "mingled and blended" with Elnora's song, contribute to that dissonance by lending a dark and even sinister edge to her voice's "dying fall." But what really makes Elnora's song stand apart are its lyrics, which are

apparently audible to us because Miss Jenny's more acute ear can distinguish what old Bayard's cannot: "*All folks talkin' 'bout heaven aint gwine dar.*" We've seen how black voices produce pockets of peaceful suspense by serving as wordless mediums for the transmission of ambient sensation. Elnora's voice troubles that suspense by facilitating the communication of disruptive meaning—meaning that proves less applicable to herself than to the Sartorises. Thus, for example, when Miss Jenny later insists that she's been "laying up crowns and harps for a long time" (*Flags* 63) and therefore has every reason to be "sure of [her] own destination," Elnora's suggestion that not everyone talking about heaven will get there assumes a distinctly ironic, even admonitory tone with respect to the older woman. That, in fact, no Sartoris is going to heaven, or at least not to the heaven they imagine for themselves, is implied in a separate scene when old Bayard conducts a ceremonial airing of the family chest—a collection that consists largely of old weapons—and envisions a "legion of ghosts" (*Flags* 87) hovering over his shoulder, caught in a kind of limbo because they've been "denied that Sartoris heaven in which they could spend eternity dying deaths of needless and magnificent violence." The Sartoris family's love of dying clearly informs the "dying fall" of Elnora's song, but suicidal tendencies are not all that stand between the Sartorises and heaven. As epitomized in the "viciously and coldly utilitarian" (*Flags* 88) derringer pistol that old Bayard unpacks from the chest, Faulkner ties the family's tradition of needless self-destruction to its history of killing others. Old Man Falls acknowledges this connection when he muses that "when a feller has to start killin' folks, he 'most always has to keep on killin' 'em. And when he does, he's already dead hisself" (*Flags* 23). If, as Elnora's song suggests, the family has sins to atone for, those sins are intimately bound up with their history of brutal violence.

All this is to suggest that Elnora's words have the potential to produce critical reflection in those with ears to hear them. And yet they seem to go unheard, or at least unheeded, by the novel's white characters, including Miss Jenny. For an example of a black voice that comes closer to catalyzing self-reflection, we should return to the opossum hunting scene with young Bayard and Caspey. This moment also revolves around a weapon, but the associations point in a different direction. Prompted by Narcissa, Caspey reminisces about his childhood with Bayard and Bayard's dead twin, Johnny: "You 'member dat ole single bar'l, Mist' Bayard? But hit would shoot. Many's de fox squir'l we shot in dese woods. Rabbits, too" (*Flags* 298). Speaking in his "slow, consonantless voice with its overtones of mellow sadness" (*Flags* 299), Caspey continues, "Mist' Johnny, now, he sho' could shoot. You 'member dat time me and you and him wuz—." Before Caspey can finish his sentence, Bayard stands abruptly and says, "Let's go." Caspey rises and, as if in deference to Bayard's preference, puts his cow horn to his lips, issuing a "sound [that] swell[s] about them, grave and clear and prolonged" until it "die[s] into echoes and so into silence again, leaving no ripple in the still darkness." Articulate speech thus reverts to wordless sound that fades into echoes and silence, and the past remains in the past.

Considered in tandem with Elnora's song, this exchange illustrates something crucial about the function of black voices in *Flags*: although they affect white characters through their evocation of "meaningless suspense," they are actually engaged in what we might describe as the suspension of meaning. Put differently, by tuning young Bayard into his surroundings, Caspey's voice also tunes him out of himself. This suspension of meaning—which entails the suspension of memory, introspection, and critical self-

reflection—often requires the repression of speech, as when Caspey picks up his horn, or a modulation of voice that keeps black words on a frequency inaudible to whites. In a separate scene involving old Bayard, Caspey does this with the clear intention of defying his employer's authority, mumbling "I aint workin' here" (*Flags* 80) at a pitch directed "just beneath [his] deafness."

What we see in the moment with the horn is more subtle but also more indicative of how Faulkner will develop black voices in *The Sound and the Fury*. For unlike his bold defiance of old Bayard, and also unlike Elnora's more subtly admonishing song, Caspey's words to the younger Bayard don't assert anything. They simply prod him to "'member dat time"—that is, to reflect on the past. It is worth noting here that the bygone time Caspey recalls is not the ancestral past so frequently evoked in *Flags* but rather—to return to a word Faulkner used in his account of the novel's inception—the "personal" past of Bayard's childhood. More specifically, he points Bayard back to a period in their shared youth when the three of them—Caspey, Bayard, and John—all hunted together: "You 'member dat time me and you and him wuz—." The interracial intimacy implied in this construction is in no sense the subject of *Flags*; it is, however, the underlying condition that informs the curious capacity of Caspey's voice not only to suspend self-reflection in young Bayard but also to provoke it.

CHAPTER TWO

Technologies of Identity and the Space of Modernist Narrative:
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and
William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

I turn now to an acoustical narrative space whose structure of selection will strike us as the kind inverted by Ernest Hemingway and only hinted at in William Faulkner's early writings. In relation to this difficult-to-narrate region of audibility the prologue to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) stands as a primal scene. The title of the novel would indicate a problem with vision alone. The novel's narrator describes himself only as "invisible," or "the product of a 'refusal' on the part of others to see him" (*IM* 3). Because he is invisible, light, he tells us, "confirms [his] reality, gives birth to [his] form" (*IM* 6). Light is that which gives birth to form, form here taken to be the outline of the body, the very shape of what would otherwise be a "formless mass" (*IM* 7). But his form reflexively indicates a structuring omission in the ontology of form as such, its manner of appearing as if from nothing. While the emergence of any literary world posits a ground against which figure appears, here ground persists as that *against which* a body resists manifestation, even against so many lights. Ground is figured. "There is a certain acoustical deadness to my hole," he explains—there is a resistance, then, even to echo of the voice—to vocal reduplication—as auditory reflection of the self (*IM* 8). There is a fundamental gesture of disappearance in the will to escape, to re-determine determination.

As this unnamed narrator addresses us, some reality of voice, one not without its own skin remains. David Copenhafer writers of Ellison's prologue:

The narrator insists that his invisibility is not natural, nor even accidental, but the product of a "refusal" on the part of others to see him. "Blackness," the unnamed "biochemical accident" to which he refers, would appear to provoke this refusal. But insofar as the narrator is able to speak, to write, to *figure* his condition, his invisibility would appear not to be absolute. Indeed, the very figure of the "bodiless head" by which he means to mark his invisibility would appear to confer some minimal visibility would appear to confer some minimal visibility on the narrator, and it suggests that the refusal of the black body is perhaps never complete. A mouth, a face, may tend stubbornly to persist. Beyond this particular figure, however, the simple fact of the narrative voice, what we might call an irreducible acoustic remainder in the text, tends to bring the blackness of the narrator in visibility. Someone is speaking. And it is difficult not to confer a "raced" body to a voice despite the massive epistemological uncertainties of such a conferral. Oddly, voice translates a measure of vision.⁶⁷

The "measure of vision" in which the black body of the narrator appears is perhaps only a measure because it cannot be sustained, that is, made properly substantive. It disappears as quickly as it appears. A measure of vision of course has musical and rhythmic implications—a sequence, a series of beats, a unit protraction in time. If *legein*, the Greek root of *logos*, means speaking, gathering, binding, joining, but also "to count" and "to recount," *logos* also requires "a sequence, or chain that is developed temporally."⁶⁸ This chain is between single words, a chain that gives them meaning. As I will return to, this sequence would seem to forbid anything like an ellipsis, for each dot is a unit of the same. If there is always a space between words that holds together their meaningful sequence, the ellipsis is a pure holding together, a pulse.

In the translation of voice into a measure of vision, it is as if audibility, visibility, and legibility coincide along a certain threshold. I cannot claim to "see" the body of the

⁶⁷ Copenhafer, "Invisible Music (Ellison)," 172.

⁶⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 43.

narrator, just as I cannot claim to hear his voice. I can only claim to do so to the extent that a written figure might facsimile something other than what it is.

In an Invisible Man's room, it is difficult to know if voice only translates a measure of vision because someone—who wishes to be anonymous—is speaking in the first person. Decades of post-structural narrative theory, from Barthes to Genette and Gates, would encourage us not to seek out anyone speaking behind the first-person voice. “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative [*le noir-et-blanc*] where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.”⁶⁹ If in Kabnis's room, there are two entities (one a disembodied narrator, the other the body it narrates into existence), in an Invisible Man's room there is one entity. An “I” addresses, seemingly directly, a “you” who cannot possibly respond.

But Ellison's unnamed narrator draws the conditioning disappearance of the third-person voice into his own being, wishing to overcome its intractable determination. He cannot perfectly imitate its force, displaced as it is onto a series of prosthetics under his tight supervision. He lives in a dark hole artificially illuminated by 1,369 pilfered lights. Ellison borrows the structuring omission of the third-person to lend it architectural and technological proportions; in that gesture its sly force becomes figured as his dwelling (invisible, at least to us). Yet, who could forget that his narrator sits not only amongst the

⁶⁹ Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 142. It is a bit odd to translate the phrase “*le noir-et-blanc*” as “negative,” though it is true that the contrast bears within itself a dialectical, and thus negating, relation. Barthes's original sense might have been the blank (white) page, which then bears black ink. But given that black-and-white is stated as if in union, it is difficult not to hear a prelude to Barthes's future thinking on photography. At the same time, given Barthes's silence on Algeria, it is also quite difficult not to hear an occluded racial other. This play is of course testimony to his central thesis.

artificial lights, but also with the disembodied voice of another? The singing voice of Louis Armstrong floats from out of a radio-phonograph. The narrator writes:

Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. (*IM* 8)

The title of the song Armstrong sings, “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?”, dramatizes the difficult to retrieve bracketing of the agential force of third-person narrative. I say “bracketing” of the third-person because though the first part of the title avows an “I,” it is an “I” that poses a difficult-to-answer question. The parenthesis acknowledges that the agency lies with someone else who is not there or, what’s more, fundamentally unavailable.⁷⁰

We should leave for a moment the song as described by the narrator to consider the song as sung by Armstrong. Reading Ellison invites moving between these two regions. After a protracted instrumental introduction, Armstrong finally sings. Ellison does not transcribe the lyrics of the song. While we must go outside of the novel, as listeners, Armstrong again forces us to become readers, reading and listening being enjoined in his voicing of the problem of legibility. At the bridge, that part of any song that is cast between its beginning and return, Armstrong sings:

I'm white inside but that don't help my case
'Cause I can't hide what is in my fa . . . ⁷¹

⁷⁰ Also see Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, in which Weheliye argues for the paramount importance of the subject position in Ellison's discourse. Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* and *The Psychic Life of Power* are also foundational meditations on what in subject-formation cannot be narrated and is only figured.

⁷¹ Qtd. in Copenhafer, 173.

I borrow this transcription from Copenhafer's "Invisible Music (Ellison)," a title whose own punctuation dramatizes a missing voice (illegible and inaudible). The standard transcription of the song provides the full word "face," but that belies Armstrong's performative omission. For, just then, Copenhafer notes, Armstrong begins to scat, transcribed here as an ellipsis. Ellison, Copenhafer convincingly argues, could only have been referring to a 1929 recording, in which Armstrong replaces the original lyric "on my face" with "in my face."⁷² The grammar of that substitution claims to convert the surface of the skin, from form to an imputed content. Such a claim is simultaneously undone by its own articulation in (or as) Armstrong's voice. He refuses to articulate the phoneme and digs up sounds secreted within or rejected by the word as it has shaped itself. Again, content stands in disarticulated and transmuted relation to form. "In fact," Copenhafer writes, "he never completes the word, never completes the rhyme with 'case' that might bring some kind of closure to the bridge."⁷³ Ellison's unnamed narrator concludes the novel with an elementary blues lyric, one that completes the very phonetic structure of rhyming that, Copenhafer suggests, had been occluded in the revelatory moment of Armstrong's performance.⁷⁴ The narrator intones: "Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?" (*IM* 581). The narrator then culminates with a single, dangling line: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (*IM* 581). He suggests, then, something of his inaudibility.

He ends with a rhetorical question, figuring a direct address and with it, the

reader's conjectural hearing. I agree that the rhyme is fundamental to blues musicality

and that his particular rhyme is one that ironizes his racialized condition. Yet, the

narrator's address figures its somatic and acoustical collaboration with the timbre of

reading. Does not the reader begin to transit rhythm to his word, translating word into

song? These frequencies and rhythms suggest something of the material process of

traversing an invisible distance between text and consciousness. It is a paradoxical site—

paradoxical, because nowhere locatable—for word to become rhythmicized as song.

Simultaneously, or at least structurally inseparably, these lower frequencies function on

the baritone register of a male voice, a timbre that is often racially stereotyped and

⁷² *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 185. Throughout his essay, Copenhafer shows how the narrator's language resists or forecloses rhyming more generally, making this final moment of rhyme all the more powerful.

therefore functions in advance of his individual speech. The narrator tells us that his invisibility is “a matter of the construction of [people’s] *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (*IM* 3). Yet, at issue in the space of narrative is the threshold of audibility, or what I call the stratification of the ear: the inner ears with which we hear through physical ears. A white woman at one point says to the narrator that his voice has “primitive” associations: “no one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?” (*IM* 413). It is a timbre that he himself does or cannot hear: the narrator ironizes something of the act of reading, for even in his reduced space of disembodiment, he is given black skin within the ear of a (white?) reader. There is, then, a kind of fulfillment of voice by a reader who might provide both the sensuous, yet structural archive of timbre, the reader perhaps recalling a series of phantasmatic voices to suture to this narrating instance.

The lower frequencies are lower still, beneath even that threshold that gives the lowest range of human audition, and yet more intimately travelling: the narrator’s voice might in fact line and people the inner speech of reading. The threshold of audibility concerns the very voice that might be recognized as the immediate, internal voice of reading, a voice presumed to be racially neutral. It is as if the narrator asks, if this space is so fungible that you can continue to attribute to me a race, then how do you know that you are where and who you are when you hear yourself?

Elision, all that dictates how the raced body is to be both seen and heard in advance of seeing and hearing, is an audiovisual form. Such labor cannot in itself be narrated, but supports narration. We can see, then, that this scene—which borrows structural elision to displace it onto electric lights and the phonographic voice—posits

something of the exact inverse of Hemingway's jazz club. What Hemingway elides, Ellison refigures.

We might even go so far as to hazard that, as Hemingway's project of narrative omission reaches a certain limit, *The Sun Also Rises* would have to become *Invisible Man*, the two novels together being what Barthes had called "the negative [le noir-et-blanc] where all identity is lost." As the Invisible Man listens in the prologue,

the unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. (*IM* 8-9)

He hears several layers of discourse beneath the lyrics of Armstrong's "Black and Blue," the voices of a congregation and then finally, of the ancestors. He begins to hear a more "rapid tempo," perhaps as a compound rhythm. The ellipses are (in the) original, indicating a sound space in text, but also the logic of tautology as it eclipses genesis:

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"
And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black . . ."
"In the beginning . . ."
"At the very start," they cried.
". . . there was blackness . . ."
"Preach it . . ." (*IM* 9)

In the beginning . . . there was blackness. How blackness came to be lies in the ellipsis, that invisible distance between matter and form. Here, a sonorous and non-verbal relation is performed. The ellipses are not a pause, but indicate the acoustics of their imaginary space, its resonance where the voice of one is ending and the voices of the others begin. The ellipsis, as antiphony, is a place of calling back. It is where the other lives, in resonance. The ellipsis is the only way, graphically, to indicate something of that interface between voice and space as a site of animation and circumscription.

But this relation, though difficult to narrate in its genesis, is not essential. Weheliye has persuaded us to hear the narrator's room as a fundamentally technological space, connecting its parameters to the trajectory of Afro-Futurism.⁷⁵ In that spirit, we should remember that the narrator tells us that he plans one day to have five radio-phonographs playing simultaneously. Such a device has a dual function; it both repeats and transmits. The narrator leaves unsaid how they, in his extreme solitude, could possibly be made to play the same record synchronously. Used as a radio, each device could tune in simultaneously to the broadcast, multiplying the same. Five records playing simultaneously would pose a different condition of listening: they would fall out of phase, echoing each other in odd and not fully determined intervals. The distinction between transmission (playing sound from afar) and reproduction (generating sound from within) is along the axis not of form or even "format," but content.⁷⁶ Out of phase, the envelopes of words—their consonants and sibilance—would become prolonged . . . *as a whispering through its cracks* (we should hear, once again, the figural winds that give shape to Kabnis). The phase relations would return the words of the song into the sound of sibilance. In 1947, there were not yet stereophonics, but Ellison's narrator, a "thinker-tinker," imagines dividing the unitary mono-sound not into two but *five* (*IM* 7).⁷⁷ He is already beyond the fundamental units of dialectics, one and two, being amidst the many. Perhaps, then, we are in an ultra-dialectical space, as it pushes out from the given. The

⁷⁵ See Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

⁷⁶ For a discussion of the notion of format in relation to form and content, see Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*.

⁷⁷ So, too, does Toomer in "Kabnis": "Way off down the street four figures sway beneath iron awnings which form a sort of corridor that imperfectly echoes and jumbles what they say. A fifth form joins them" (*Cane* 103).

disarticulation of the phase relations is not immediately immanent to the space as negativity: the phase relations do not neutralize, but multiply and expand. This is the elliptical shape of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, one articulation of the modern predicament. In considering the musicality of the last line of the novel and its mode of address in relation to how the novel begins—with the end or the closest point of the present—we come to understand how the narrator and reader hear in ways not yet possible at the beginning of the book. He (and we) finally “hears” his own self-alienation.

The room, the Invisible Man tells us, is anechoic. It is through the technological addition of surround sound, phasing so many simultaneous recordings, that echo would be simulated rather than given in advance as a property of space. The work removes echo only to give it back as a facsimile, phase relations being the future of modernist music. Now, consider the impact such music would have on those living above ground in a “building strictly rented to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century” in what the Invisible Man terms “a border area” to Harlem (*IM* 6). Even if the records were playing at different speeds, Armstrong's voice would achieve a kind of verbal stuttering that would intensify the signifying power of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” exponentially, thus turning what had been an exclusively “white” space into a white space *with a difference*. The negative feedback loop created by the social policy of racial exclusion would remain intact. However, the narrator's auditory posture of playing the record over and over, on multiple record players, would mean that the feedback loop between listening and speaking that is achieved when whites believe they are talking amongst themselves, a condition that assumes the exclusion of the black body as a constant, would now be infiltrated by a

black and disembodied voice. The black voice would become, in other words, a *medium*: an intervening substance, something that a speaking or writing subject is articulating through rather than about.⁷⁸

II. “Like sharp black trickles”

In this sense, we might say that Faulkner’s project resembles Ellison’s. As Karl Zender writes of Faulkner’s turn to disrupting sounds in the major period, “These voices that reside in the air . . . , begin to remind us less of the muse than of some dark opposite, and in their ability to overwhelm the characters who unwillingly listen to them, they suggest that a tragic incongruity lies at the heart of the individual’s relation with the world.”⁷⁹ This is especially true of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Whereas in *Flags*, we might recall, black voices like Elnora’s issue from within the interior of the Sartoris home, in *The Sound and the Fury* the Gibson family speaks not only from within the Compson household but also out of the private recesses of the Compsons’ minds. One of the most remarkable features of the interior landscapes that materialize over *The Sound and the Fury*’s first three chapters, and that culminates in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is the pervasiveness of black voices, how the very tissue of white consciousness is shot through with things that black people say, said, or would say. By emphasizing the instrumentality of black voices to these novels, however, I do not claim that African American characters, or race itself, constitute their central subjects; rather, what interests me is the

⁷⁸ I borrow this concept from W. J. T. Mitchell, who describes race as “something we see *through* like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than something we *look at*” (*Seeing Through Race* xii).

⁷⁹ Zender, “Faulkner and the Power of Sound,” 90.

distinctly functional role that black bodies and black embodied voices serve in Faulkner's emergent project of reproducing the South—how they act as conduits, or mediums, through which Faulkner and his white characters recover, or are compelled to confront, the most private, unspeakable, and painful things about themselves. Put another way, Faulkner, in tapping into the mediatory potential of black voices, creates an acoustical narrative space that extends and revises the Invisible Man's query from underground: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (IM 581).

My analysis focuses on Quentin, but I want to approach him by way of his younger brothers Benjy, in whose consciousness black voices are highly pronounced and flatly instrumental, and Jason, who sorts out who he is by determining what he is not. Consider, for example, the following early passages of *The Sound and the Fury* in which Luster leads Benjy through the broken fence, and then past the carriage house, in an attempt to get him away from the sounding of Caddy's name on the golf course:

We came to the broken place and went through it.

"Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail."

Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. [. . .]

Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze. You don't want your hands froze on Christmas, do you.

"It's too cold out there." Versh said. "You don't want to go out doors."

(TSatF 4-5)

And here:

Cant you shut up that moaning and slobbering, Luster said. Aint you shamed of yourself, making all this racket. We passed the carriage house, where the carriage was. It had a new wheel.

"Git in, now, and set still until your maw come." Dilsey said. She shoved me into the carriage. T.P. held the reins. "Clare I don't see how come Jason wont

get a new surrey.” Dilsey said. “This thing going to fall to pieces under you all some day. Look at them wheels.” (*TSatF* 9)

Donald Kartiganer observes that Benjy’s mind is “utterly open to whatever sight and sounds and smells happen to touch its senses,”⁸⁰ such that his chapter serves as an index to the experiential reality of his daily life. That almost every page of Benjy’s chapter includes multiple—sometimes upward of twenty—references to what this or that member of the Gibson family “said” can thus be read as a reflection of the fact that Dilsey, Versh, and Luster Gibson oversee every aspect of Benjy’s life: because their bodies maintain his body, their voices supply the most stable points of reference for his psychic activity. The above scenes are exemplary on this point. When Luster pushes Benjy through the gap in the fence in the novel’s narrative present, delivering him to an afternoon over two decades earlier, not only Caddy, Benjy’s sister, but Luster’s older brother, Versh, is there to greet him on the other side. Similarly, when he steers Benjy past the carriage house, triggering the earlier conversation about the surrey, Dilsey picks up the conversation, and the thread of consciousness, to carry it forward. It is only through this “passing” of Benjy’s mind across time and between generations of the Gibson family that the halting “stream” of his consciousness, much like his body, is able to persist and proceed at all.

It is important to recognize that though the pervasiveness of black people in Benjy’s mind reflects the particularities of his condition, it also provides, from a developmental perspective, a point of continuity between his psychology and those of his brothers. As Dilsey reminds both Roskus and Jason, she “raised all of [the Compson children]” (*TSatF* 198), and Benjy’s reliance upon her, and the other members of the

⁸⁰ Kartiganer, “‘Now I Can Write’: Faulkner’s Novel of Invention,” 79.

family who dress and feed him, scold and comfort him, take him out of doors and bring him back, is, in this sense, unique amongst the brothers only insofar as he alone has never outgrown it. For all of its radical otherness, then, Benjy's section provides a psychological map of an interracial dependency constitutive of all the Compson siblings' childhoods, a fact that will prove crucial to our understanding of Quentin and Jason, as well. Benjy's utter obliviousness to race, coupled with the fact that his mind is literally "made up" of black people, in this way establishes one of the basic conditions of racial consciousness in the novel as a whole, which is that it assumes not an awareness of, or preoccupation with, race, (though this, too, will be true for Quentin and Jason), but rather a consciousness mediated by black people, in which the things that black people say and do become internalized as psychic touchstones through which the white male psyche navigates between the present and the past.

The result is a recognizably Southern, interior landscape that remains organized around a principle of traumatic repetition that points back not to the historical past, but rather to personal history, which is the only kind of history that can really exist for Benjy. Thus, in the two passages cited above, we can note how the passing of Benjy's consciousness across time, and between Luster, Versh, and Dilsey leads him back to moments from his childhood that aggravate rather than quiet his inconsolable crying, a fact registered by Luster's repeated interjections, "*What are you moaning about*" and "*Cant you shut up that moaning and slobbering*" (TSatF 9). That Luster delivers Benjy again and again into memories that are more likely to make him moan than hush tells us less about his competence as a caretaker than it does about the inner-workings of Benjy's mind—how it seems bound, regardless of what Luster says or does, to relive events in his

past that move him to grief. Insofar as every object and locale on the Compson property—including the broken fence and the carriage house cited in the passages above, but also the family cow, the hill, the ditch full of Nancy’s bones, and the porch swing—function like wormholes in Benjy’s mind that turn him backward into his childhood, and back to Caddy, in particular, Luster seems bound to fail in his task of keeping Benjy quiet.

It is thus neither pure coincidence nor through any fault of Luster, himself, that when the latter takes Benjy down to the branch, he unlocks the memory, which, by Faulkner’s own account, doubles as the novel’s central trauma and ecstatic origin:

“Sit down.” I sat down and [Luster] took off my shoes and rolled up my trousers. “Now git in that water and play and see can you stop that slobbering and moaning.”

I hushed and got in the water *and Roskus came and said to come to supper and Caddy said,*

Its not supper time yet. I’m not going.

She was wet. We were playing in the branch and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet and Versh said,

“Your mommer going to whip you for getting your dress wet.” (*TSatF* 17)

That the materialization of this crucial episode occurs here, in Benjy’s chapter, and nowhere else in the novel is more than a formal conceit. Though, as critics have long recognized, Benjy’s chapter enables Faulkner to introduce the central motifs and structural principles that will only assume significance in the subsequent chapters, it does not follow that his interior monologue meets a strictly practical demand within the fiction. Richard Godden overstates the case for rhetorical effect when he argues that Benjy’s “control over time,” though spasmodic, is “consistent enough to be spoken of as *his* control,”⁸¹ but he is right to insist upon the existence of a human intentionality to

⁸¹ Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South’s Long Revolution*, 17.

Benjy's psychic process, what he characterizes as a "preference for particular times"⁸² and an underlying "aim" to its seemingly random ricochets. The presence of this subjective "aim" in Benjy's psyche need not suggest agency of any kind, however. By mobilizing this psychic drive within Benjy's consciousness, while also depriving him of the capacity to divert it, Faulkner does not deny him humanity so much as he denies him the defensive mechanisms necessary to repudiate the fundamental condition that makes him human to begin with, a fact registered in the resonance between his near-constant, inconsolable bellow—that "grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun" (*TSatF* 316)—and, in "Elmer," a satirical portrait of the artist as a young man that Faulkner ultimately abandoned, Elmer's cry on the night of the fire, when, overcome by the scorching heat and his own feelings of terror and abandonment, he "we[eps] for himself, for man, for all the sorrows of the race" ("Elmer" 347). Whereas Quentin and, as we shall see further on, Jason, all attempt with varying degrees of failure to evade the hurt that they cannot bear to own—a hurt which points back for Quentin but also, as I will argue further on, for Jason, to the crucial night of Caddy's soiling in the branch—Benjy can no more resist this memory than he can keep his hand out of the fire.

Because he serves as a kind of impersonal repository for sensory data, including voices, Benjy has frequently been compared to a tape recorder. Echoing Sara Danius's account of modernism's debt to "technologies of perception,"⁸³ Jay Watson has characterized Benjy as "a movie camera, a living media linkage for the recording and playback of sensory data flows, and a powerful literary vehicle for the exploration of the

⁸² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸³ Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*, 99.

sensory faculties.” Watson is interested in the “asynchronies”⁸⁴ created by Faulkner’s use of nonstandard punctuation and formatting in Benjy’s chapter, which he speculates might have been inspired by the technological “growing pains”⁸⁵ of the talkies that put the films’ images and sound out of sync. Rather than simply mimicking cinematic technology, Watson suggests, Faulkner exploits one of its vulnerabilities in order to stage an avant-garde experiment in human perception, one that forcefully desynchronizes the eye and ear by presenting us with a consciousness “calibrated . . . on a molecular scale: frame by frame, as it were . . . where the ‘flicker’ between the frames is capable of disrupting even the seemingly organic nexus of speaker and voice.”⁸⁶

Watson’s analogy becomes even more suggestive if we incorporate Alice Maurice’s account of how African American voices in the early sound film days were tasked with “prop[ing] up” the cinematic apparatus by “weld[ing] the sound and image tracks together,”⁸⁷ thus bridging gaps within the medium. If, as Watson suggests, Benjy’s chapter presents us with a consciousness highly, even painfully, attuned to sensory data that goes unregistered by the average ear or eye, the constitutive presence of black voices within his mind reminds us that what holds true for the cinema pertains also to the white psyche: these mediums only hold together because black bodies, and black voices in particular, fill in the gaps. Black voices thus make up not only for shortcomings in the new technology but also, as Maurice argues, for the “potential inadequacy of whiteness

⁸⁴ Watson, “The Unsynchronable William Faulkner: Faulknerian Voice and Early Sound Film,” 103.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁷ Maurice, *Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema*, 154, 168.

itself.”⁸⁸ The roots of this “inadequacy” are of course complex, but as Michael Rogin argues in his study of film’s roots in blackface minstrelsy, cinema’s constitutive dependence on blackness is symptomatic of its ties to “the structures of white supremacist racial integration that built the United States: black labor in the realm of production, interracial nurture and sex (the latter as both a private practice and a unifying public prohibition) in the realm of reproduction, and blackface minstrelsy in the realm of culture.”⁸⁹ *The Sound and the Fury* arguably engages all three of these “realms,” but Benjy’s chapter is instructive for how it immediately grounds the distinctly instrumental functions of blackness within what Rogin titles “the realm of reproduction,” and especially the sphere of “interracial nurture.” For if, to borrow Maurice’s language, black voices “weld” the otherwise disparate elements of Benjy’s radically fractured consciousness, they do so because the Gibsons constitute a constant, embodied presence as the people who dress and feed him, scold and comfort him, take him out of doors and bring him back—in short, as the people who prop him up in the most basic sense.

Insofar as he takes Faulkner back to the origins of the subject, Benjy is a deeply regressive character; however, by unearthing at this ground zero of being the naked kernel of a white subjectivity that is ignorant of race but everywhere mediated by black people, he also marks the first articulation of a crucial idea that Faulkner will continue to work out through Quentin and Jason, but will not fully come to fruition until *Light in August*, which is that race, like gender, “gets into” the subject long before the subject becomes aware of it. That Benjy never achieves this awareness is precisely what enables

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁸⁹ Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, 5.

his narrative to disclose, with utter indifference, the degree to which the white male psyche is fundamentally constituted by the black people who make up its outer and, consequently, its inner life, a truth which his brothers' narratives will also admit, but only under extreme duress. This resurfacing of race relations from within what I am calling the "hardware" of the white male psyche is shown in its greatest depth in Quentin's chapter, but before we turn to Quentin, it will be useful to consider Jason's more two-dimensional narrative, where the relative lack—or, rather, concealment—of psychological depth enables us to see more clearly how race is deployed within the mechanisms of repression and displacement that Quentin's chapter will undermine.

As André Bleikasten has argued at length, the distinguishing feature of Jason's chapter lies in "the way in which society conditions and shapes [his] very language and thought," enabling Faulkner to "set the family drama in a social context and to relate it to all the pressures and influences of a specific cultural environment."⁹⁰ We should note that Jason's conditioning seems to work from the outside in, a quality that Bleikasten captures acutely in his suggestion that his chapter is "thickly encrusted with ideological deposits."⁹¹ Thus, while we are given direct access to Jason's interiority, his inner world feels strangely external, because—in sharp contrast to the novel's first chapter, which, as Philip Weinstein suggests, projects a narrative voice which seems to lie "beyond the inflections of class, race, and gender"⁹²—it is virtually all social inflection. "Bitches," "sluts," "niggers," "jews," "rednecks": his recourse to these terms evidences what

⁹⁰ Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August*, 120.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns*, 117.

Bleikasten describes as Jason's tendency to "congeal" individuals into "rigid categories" that "reduc[e] their being to a small set of unalterable predicates" until, "petrified by prejudice, they become safe objects for hatred and contempt."⁹³ The result is an interior monologue that reads less like a stream-of-consciousness than a public rant. The novel's third chapter is, in this sense, the obverse of its first, the otherness of Benjy's consciousness stemming, in part, from the radical democracy that attends his utter obliviousness to social groupings—all characters, regardless of race, class, or gender, retain their individuality and, if they are a constant in his existence, the integrity of a proper name in Benjy's mind—and the otherness of Jason's consciousness stemming from its obsessive adherence to stereotypes that parse and stratify his world into pre-determined, impersonal categories.

Beneath this ostensible difference, however, lies a deeper continuity, for in the particular contempt that Jason reserves for "bitches" and "niggers," and his tendency to yoke these groups both in the grammar and ideologies of his invectives, we can detect the degree to which his mind remains, like that of his brother, centrally organized around the women and blacks who make up his inner world. The opening lines of his narrative are telling in this respect: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say. . . . I says she ought to be down there in that kitchen right now, instead of up there in her room, gobbing paint on her face and waiting for six niggers that cant even stand up out of a chair unless they've got a pan full of bread and meat to balance them, to fix breakfast for her" (*TSatF* 180). What Jason is talking about here, as everywhere else in his narrative, is himself, but it is a

⁹³ Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August*, 112.

gesture of self-assertion that he completes only by putting down the “bitches” and “niggers” in his environment, killing two birds with one stone by ensconcing the critique of the latter as a subordinate clause within his critique of the former. The emphasis that he places upon positionality—Quentin should be “down there” in the kitchen rather than “up there” in her room, whereas the black people in the kitchen are sitting down when they should be standing up and working—belies the underlying purpose of his tirade, which is to establish his own place in the world, an upstanding position, which, to borrow his own metaphor, he maintains only by “balancing” himself against his projected inferiors, piling insult upon insult in order to elevate his own sense of righteousness and authority. As revealed in his warning to Miss Quentin, “dont think you can run it over me. I’m not an old woman, nor an old half dead nigger, either. You dam little slut,” he can only hold his ground by constantly cutting down the women and blacks around him (*TSatF* 185).

If we are to appreciate Jason’s contribution to Faulkner’s larger project of mapping the white male mind, and to this novel’s particular project of fleshing out the psyche as a social space, it is vital to recognize his virulent misogyny and racism as sweeping, reactionary responses to an acute sense of injury that remains, as for his brothers, located in the novel’s psychosexual past. Bleikasten makes a vital contribution to our understanding of this dynamic when he observes that though “memory plays no prominent part in [Jason’s] life”—a claim that I will complicate somewhat further on—“the ‘outrage’ [Jason] suffered when Caddy deprived him of the promised job [at the bank of Herbert Head, Caddy’s ex-husband] is still an open wound,” leaving him “as

trapped in the past as his brothers are.”⁹⁴ I want to emphasize here, however, that the lost job is not, in and of itself, the wound against which Jason’s psyche rails; rather, much like Caddy’s loss of virginity for Quentin, it is the more recent affront to which Jason positively *clings*, and which he obsessively nurses in his mind, in order to avoid a deeper, older, and more damaging hurt that his entire posture of economic autonomy functions to deny. His psyche thus becomes a kind of case study, as Bleikasten puts it, in “how alienation works,”⁹⁵ which is to say, how social identity is secured only through a scabbing over of deeply personal wounds into a shell of a self—a posture of fierce autonomy which relies upon an illusion not only of sexual but also racial integrity.

In order to detect the tender wound that persists beneath the scab of Jason’s rhetoric, it is first necessary to recognize that the economic language that structures all of his relationships, including those that he holds with women and blacks, functions as a way of controlling or, in his own idiom, “managing” the past and the genuine feelings that are associated with it. It is notable in this regard that whereas his brothers’ minds constantly gravitate toward memories of their childhood and youth, Jason’s chapter only includes one extended detour into the past, and it is limited to the period following Caddy’s departure. This focus is in part a practical device: Jason’s memories of the baby Quentin’s arrival, Mr. Compson’s funeral, and Caddy’s subsequent visits to Jefferson, bring us up to date on what has happened between Quentin’s suicide and the present day. It also reveals something essential about Jason’s psychology, however, which is that while he regularly cites the “lost job” as a touchstone for his sense of self-righteous

⁹⁴ Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August*, 115.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

outrage, he never actually revisits this period in his life or anything prior to it. As captured in the following exchange, this means Jason only actively remembers Caddy in situations where their relations are structured around financial transactions:

“Jason,” she says, looking at the grave, “if you’ll fix it so I can see her a minute I’ll give you fifty dollars.”

“You haven’t got fifty dollars,” I says.

“Will you?” she says, not looking at me.

“Let’s see it,” I says. “I don’t believe you’ve got fifty dollars.”

I could see where her hands were moving under her cloak, then she held her hand

out. Dam if it wasn’t full of money. I could see two or three yellow ones.”

(*TSatF* 203)

The image of Caddy reaching into her cloak and pulling out bills anticipates how, in the novel’s last chapter, Jason will similarly compel his mother to yield up, from within the folds of her skirt, a “huge bunch of rusted keys on an iron ring like a mediaeval jailer’s” (*TSatF* 281). Both images work through a form of metonymy, in which Jason’s relationship to the women in his life is captured in the objects that he attempts to wrest from their bodies. Like Jewel Bundren of *As I Lay Dying*, another favored son tasked with being the “salvation” of his mother, what Jason seems to want most from Mrs. Compson is a means of escaping her, but what he wants from Caddy is something more tangible, something that he can put his hands on much as he “gets ahold” of her daughter during their physical struggles. Though his extortion of his sister seems utterly heartless—Caddy, herself, accuses him of “not having a drop of warm blood in [him]” (*TSatF* 209)—by siphoning off the funds that she sends home for Quentin every month, and by wresting additional money from her in person, Jason is essentially exploiting an arrangement to which his sister has agreed by necessity in order to steal not only her wealth but the love that her money symbolizes. For it is love that Caddy is trying

to smuggle back to her daughter, a feeling that she tries to convey to her brother when she says, “I’ll send more each month. Just promise that she’ll—that she—You can do that. Things for her. Be kind to her. Little things that I cant, they wont let . . .” (*TSatF* 209). Caddy’s money is, as the image of her pulling cash from underneath her clothes suggests, a kind of “blood money,” a substitute for her body and physical presence through which she tries reach out, via Jason, to her daughter, much as “her eyes” seem to “touch [his] face” when she tries to elicit a promise from him to treat Quentin tenderly (*TSatF* 210).

It is this human touch that Jason converts into hard cash, and then secretes away into a locked box, under a board, in the back of his closet, behind the locked door of his bedroom, both as a way of sealing it down and away, but also, perhaps, as a way of holding it close and keeping it all to himself. Indeed, given his claim that “money has no value; it’s just the way you spend it. It don’t belong to anybody, so why try to hoard it” (*TSatF* 194), it is curious that he does keep Caddy’s cash so close, a fact which the sheriff points out when he asks, “Jason . . . What were you doing with three thousand dollars hid in that house?” (*TSatF* 303). If he hoards rather than spends his sister’s money it is apparently because it does have value, but value not in how its spent but in how its kept; thus, having cheated Caddy out of the hundred dollars, he locks himself in his room and “count[s] the money again . . . and put[s] it away,” noting, “I didn’t feel so bad. I says I reckon that’ll show you. I reckon you’ll know now that you cant beat me out of a job and get away with it,” a ritual that he repeats on the afternoon of April 6th, apparently as a way of soothing his increasing headache (*TSatF* 205): “I took the box down and counted the money and hid the box again and unlocked the door and went out. I thought about the camphor, but it would be too late now, anyway” (*TSatF* 237). In short, he keeps the

money in the house so that he can count it, and he counts it for much the same reason that he bothers to “coun[t] over a hundred half-hatched pigeons on the ground” (*TSatF* 247), minutes on the clock, and “no count niggers” who eat in his kitchen—because these rituals of counting, like the act of re-counting memories of exploiting his sister, make him “feel better,” which is to say that they enable him to avoid feeling altogether.

Though these strategies work well enough within the limitations of Jason’s own mind—and we shall see further on that they ultimately fail even within those limitations—they function within the economy of the novel as a whole to expose the contingency of his identity, how, much like a Hemingway protagonist, he only avoids feeling “so bad” through vigilant policing of his own thoughts and emotions. For, as with his brothers, memory leads to memory, and thus in retracing one fragment of the past he runs the risk of exposing other fragments that he is at greater pains to avoid. Thus, for example, when Jason mulls over the memory of Caddy’s first return home on the day of their father’s funeral, he seems to come dangerously close to remembering the night of Damuddy’s funeral and Caddy’s soiling in the branch. In a manner more characteristic of Quentin’s chapter than his own, his attention gravitates toward the dampness and muddiness of the landscape when he recalls the grave diggers “stamping every now and then and trying to kick the mud off their feet and sticking to the shovels so they’d have to knock it off, making a hollow sound when it fell on it,” and then later “throwing dirt into it, slapping it on anyway like they were making mortar or something or building a fence” until he “began to feel sort of funny and . . . decided to walk around a while” (*TSatF* 198, 201). Having stood beneath the dripping cedars until the mourners leave, he “follow[s] the path to keep out of the wet grass,” (an act that also recalls his brother’s failed attempts

to keep himself dry and clean), comes upon Caddy standing over the graves of Mr. Compson and Quentin, and then begins “thinking about when [they] were little and one thing and another and . . . [gets] to feeling funny again, kind of mad or something . . .” (*TSatF* 203). What this episode suggests is that Jason’s psyche only maintains its elevated pitch of bombastic and self-righteous outrage through strategic evasions of the “funny feeling” that comes over him when he unwittingly thinks about his own childhood, a feeling that he conflates with anger, but which is almost certainly tinged with grief. He detects and immediately disavows the same feeling in his niece’s face when, crumbling momentarily under his wrath, her “eyes tur[n] kind of funny,” inciting Jason to inwardly warn “if you cry here in this car, on the street, I’ll whip you. I’ll wear you out. Lucky for her she didn’t” (*TSatF* 188). Lucky for him, as well, because if there’s one thing Jason can’t do, it’s cry.

By skirting the tender wound of “when they were little,” and channeling his sense of injury into anger and rage, Jason denies the truth that haunts so many of Faulkner’s early protagonists, which is that despite his claims to have “no more ties than a pigeon”—a statement that undermines his intention insofar as the pigeons, like Jason himself, apparently don’t have “sense enough to leave town” (*TSatF* 247)—he, too, feels the ties of blood, hating them. As captured in Faulkner’s account of the novel’s inception,⁹⁶ in which the original trauma of “separation, division” that unfolds between brother and sister is progressively fleshed out into an increasingly concrete, Southern scenario that

⁹⁶ “An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (Summer 1973): 410-415. Rpt. in *The Sound and the Fury: an Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Context Criticism*. Edited by David Minter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994. 228-232.

includes the “nigger children” and Dilsey, Jason’s childhood implicates him within a crosshatch of sexual and racial dependencies that his posture of economic autonomy functions to repress. It is thus only when we juxtapose his insistence, “I can stand on my own feet; I don’t need any man’s mahogany desk to prop me up,” with the memory preserved in both Benjy and Quentin’s chapters but elided in Jason’s own, of how, on the night of Caddy’s soiling in the branch, Jason “ran on, his hands in his pockets fell down and lay there like a trussed fowl until Versh set him up” that we can see how Jason’s pose of self-sufficiency functions to mask his dependency not so much upon “any (white) man” as upon the people who have physically raised him up from childhood—the “bitches” but also the “niggers” whom he continues to rely upon rhetorically, as we already have seen, to “prop up” his manhood. By clinging to his convictions about “niggers” Jason thus avoids the truth that comes through so powerfully in Benjy’s constant citation of what Roskus, Dilsey, Versh, T.P. Froney, and Luster say and do, which is that despite his constant complaints against “no count niggers,” his life has been made up of countless acts of physical intimacy between himself and the individual members of the Gibson family, Versh’s gesture of setting him back up after his fall constituting only a single, emblematic example.

If Jason seems to derive a kind of sadistic pleasure from taunting Luster with the promise of a nickel he has no intention of giving him, and if he seems to actually relish the “kitchen full of niggers” about whom he constantly complains, going so far as to inflate their number to six, though with Versh off in Memphis, Roskus dead, and Froney married, it seems unlikely that there are ever more than three members of the Gibson family in his kitchen at one time, it is because these acts enable him to hide, or buy his

way out of, his own neediness, concealing his emotional vulnerability by exposing and exaggerating the material dependency of others. That Dilsey emerges as a target for particularly vicious attacks along these lines—he remarks at one point, “She was so old she couldn’t do any more than move hardly. But that’s all right: we need somebody in the kitchen to eat up the grub the young ones cant tote off” (*TSatF* 185)—it’s because he has relied, and continues to rely, upon her the most. The reference to her “eat[ing] up the grub” is particularly transparent, for as Faulkner pointed out in his appendix, she cooks the food he eats, and it is precisely this reliance upon her for his physical sustenance—a form of dependency that is particularly troubling to the Faulknerian male subject—that he tries to reverse by translating their relationship back into strictly economic terms. In response to Dilsey’s damning statement “You’s a cold man, Jason, if man you is . . . I thank de Lawd I got mo heart den dat, even ef hit is black,” he says, “At least I’m man enough to keep that flour barrel full . . . And if you do that again,” (Dilsey has allowed Caddy to see her own daughter in secret), “you wont be eating out of it either” (*TSatF* 208). As Jason, himself, admits, however, Dilsey “wont pay [him] any mind” (*TSatF* 207), which is to say, she won’t buy into his posture of male authority. After he taunts Luster with the extra tickets to the show, she scolds him, “You, Jason . . . Aint you shamed? A big growed man like you . . . Git on outen my kitchen” (*TSatF* 255).

What Dilsey knows better than any other person in Jason’s life is that beneath his swagger he remains the same vulnerable child that he always was. This ability to see through Jason’s posturing is, from one perspective, simply a more elaborate version of a device that Faulkner had first experimented with in *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926), whereby black characters provide acute commentary upon the problems of white people, precisely

through their disengagement from them. As evident in the following scene, however, Dilsey critiques Jason's posture of manhood precisely by refusing to play passive spectator to its performance:

[. . .] "You put that cup down and come in here a minute," I says.
"What for?" she [Quentin] says.
"Come on," I says. "Put that cup in the sink and come in here."
"What you up to now, Jason?" Dilsey says.
"You may think you can run over me like your do your grandmother and everybody else," I says. "But you'll find out different. I'll give you ten seconds to put that cup down like I told you."
She quit looking at me. She looked at Dilsey. "What time is it, Dilsey?"
"When it's ten seconds, you whistle. [. . .]"
I grabbed her arm. She dropped the cup. It broke on the floor and she jerked back, looking at me, but I held her arm. Dilsey got up from her chair.
"You, Jason," she says.
"You turn me loose," Quentin says. "I'll slap you."
"You will, will you?" I says. [. . .]
"You, Jason!" Dilsey says. I dragged her into the dining room. Her kimono came unfastened, flapping about her, dam near naked. Dilsey came hobbling along. I turned and kicked the door shut in her face.
"You keep out of here," I says.
[. . .]
Dilsey came in the door. "You, Jason," she says.
"You get out of here, like I told you," I says, not even looking back. [. . .]
"I'll show you," I says. "You may scare an old woman off, but I'll show you who's got hold of you now." I held her with one hand, then she quit fighting and watched me, her eyes getting wide and black.
"What are you going to do?" she says.
"You wait until I get this belt out and I'll show you," I says pulling my belt out. Then Dilsey grabbed my arm.
"Jason," she says. "You, Jason! Aint you shamed of yourself."
"Dilsey," Quentin says. "Dilsey."
"I aint gwine let him" Dilsey says. "Don't you worry honey." She held to my arm. (TSatF 183-185)

What the above episode underscores is how Dilsey inserts herself between Jason and his niece despite his dogged attempts to "keep [her] out," which is to say, to keep her behind the kitchen door and in her place. If we compare this intervention to a particular scene from *Flags in the Dust*, in which the Strothers family sits in the kitchen and listens to

Miss Jenny and Old Bayard's raging argument, "blurred a little by walls, but dominant and unequivocal"—a sound that Simon discourages his family from tending to because "dat[s] white folks' bizness" (*Flags* 266)—we can see how Dilsey's active participation in the Compson's most private, even shameful, disputes crosses a border that had remained largely intact in Faulkner's earlier novels. It is a border that is both physical and psychological, for insofar as her refusal to "pay [him] any mind" plays out from within the space of Jason's own mind, her stubborn appearance through the door that he kicks shut in her face, and her persistent naming of him with the words, "You, Jason," in a kind of counter-refrain to his monologic "I says," Dilsey materializes within his consciousness as a figure of self-indictment, an internal reminder of the human dimension that he cannot buy off completely and that persists despite his attempts to close it off and shut it up. Indeed, in the physical struggle that goes on between the three characters—Jason showing Quentin "who's got hold of [her] now" by pinning her arms with one hand, and Dilsey grabbing his other arm from behind—we can detect a pantomime of Jason's entire psychological stance, how, in contrast with Quentin, who folds passionately inward upon the memories that worry him from within, Jason "gets hold" of his immediate environment as a way of holding off the past that continues to touch him, via the woman who has raised him up, regardless of whether he looks back at it or not.

The crucial point about Jason, however, is that he never does look back, which is to say that even though his rhetoric of "bitches" and "niggers" belies the interweave of primary dependencies that bind him to the women and blacks who raised him up, his mind remains stubbornly turned toward the present, and riveted upon the "bitch of a girl" who constitutes, in his own imagination, the sole avatar of his old, unbearable wounds.

Thus, though Dilsey embodies the truth of Jason's dependency more directly than any other person in his life, it is Quentin who, by reaching into the hidden recesses of her uncle's room and withdrawing the money with which he has staunched all feeling, literally turns him inside out, setting in motion a series of ironic reversals whereby every prop he has set in place to shore up the illusion of his own integrity—including the crutch of racial superiority—systematically betrays him by exposing precisely the dependencies that they are designed to mask and deny. The cache of money that is supposed to make him "feel better" but ultimately serves as the central mechanism of his downfall is the most obvious example of this reversal, but it also underwrites the debacle of his car, that literal vehicle of his disgrace. In a precursor to Jewel and his horse in *As I Lay Dying*, Jason buys the car in order to get out from under his mother, but also to "show" Caddy, who was the first person in town to own a car, that he won't be outdone by a "bitch of a girl." On April 8th, however, both of these functions are overturned, for though Jason refuses to admit it, the car makes him sick, the smell of gasoline having become bound up in his mind—much like the smell of honeysuckle for Quentin—with his sister: Quentin recalls, "*the first car in town a girl Girl that's what Jason couldn't bear smell of gasoline making him sick then got madder than ever because a girl Girl . . .*" (TSatF 172). A greater irony is to be found in the camphor handkerchief that he depends upon to counteract the gasoline, for though it eases his headaches, it is also bound to remind him of the other woman that he is trying to escape: his hypochondriacal mother. Quentin recalls how, on the night that Caddy leaves with Herbert head, "*Mother lay back in her chair, the camphor handker-chief to her mouth. Father hadn't moved he still sat beside her holding her hand the bellowing hammering away like no place for it in silence,*" a

sound that seems to underwrite Jason's throbbing head, which "feel[s] like somebody [is] inside with a hammer, beating on it" (*TSatF* 238). The car that is supposed to afford him autonomy and comfort thus delivers him directly back to the throb of feeling, the women, and the past that he is so bent on escaping. That he is ultimately reduced by his own headaches to soliciting a black driver to escort him back home in his own car, and thus to rely upon one of the anonymous "no count niggers" who, by his own account, depend upon him, is just the final blow in a string of outrages that begins with his niece's betrayal and transforms him over the course of two days from a "man" who "stands on his own two feet" to one "sitting quietly behind the wheel of a small car, with his invisible life raveled out about him like a wornout sock" (*TSatF* 313).

The unraveling of Jason's life should remind us of Quentin, who, to borrow François Pitavy's formulation, suffers a "tear" in his mind through which he "lets out his being and his life," for though Jason never relinquishes his illusion of autonomy, he, too, undergoes a form of internal hemorrhage as a result of his niece's betrayal.⁹⁷ Indeed, of all the outrages that he suffers on April 6th and 7th, none is more profound than the inversion that occurs from within the very discourse of blood that structures his narrative. Like everything else that troubles Jason's psyche, blood is not so much repressed as reified in his mind, transformed into a set of static, foreclosed meanings that he attempts to manage by way of reiteration. That is to say, Faulkner pits the discourse of blood against full-blooded experience, such that Jason's subordination to the internal hammering that dogs his every step gives life to the shibboleth of "bad blood," the idea that Caddy and her daughter are somehow contaminated, or cursed, by a blood that is

⁹⁷ Pitavy, "Through the Poet's Eye: A View of Quentin Compson," 85.

different from his own. What Jason's chapter suggests is that blood *does* tell, but not in the way implied by the timeless invective that launches his chapter, "Once a bitch always a bitch" (*TSatF* 180). Rather, the inextricable truth that blood reveals in his chapter is that Jason, like his brothers, carries "ancient wounds" that points back, beyond the outrage of his niece and the insult of the lost job, to "when [he was] little" (*TSatF* 306). It is for this reason, perhaps, that he imagines his headaches as a person beating upon him not only from within, but also as if from behind, as when he imagines that "with every step . . . somebody [is] walking along behind [him], hitting [him] on the head with a club," or when, having turned his back on the man with the hatchet, he feels "something cras[h] against the back of his head," a sensation that leads him to wonder, irrationally, if someone had "hit [him] a long time ago . . . And [he] just now felt it" (*TSatF* 310). It is only when we consider these sensations in tandem with his refusal to "look back" at Dilsey and the period in his life that she embodies, that we can see how Jason's body registers the touch of the past even as his mind refuses to acknowledge its hold upon him. As captured in our final glimpse of his character leaping into the carriage and raining blows upon Luster, Queenie (the horse), and Benjy, while shouting "Shut up! Shut up!" in a vain attempt to silence the "hoarse agony" of his brother's bellow, Jason continues to beat back the old hurt until the novel's bitter end.

It is to Quentin's chapter that we must turn if we are to trace the deeper implications of Dilsey's touch, for it is through his narrative that Faulkner maps the dissolution of an adult male mind down to its founding trauma, a hemorrhaging of the self that reveals an intricate black underweave that extends into the core of his psyche. As critics have long recognized, Quentin's mind lies somewhere between the deeply

“private” and radically “public” worlds of his brothers. Deprived, on the one hand, of Benjy’s innocence to all social distinctions, his psyche nonetheless retains, on the other hand, the openness to genuine feeling that the scab of Jason’s bigotry everywhere disavows. What this means in effect is that though Quentin, like Jason, exhibits what Thadious M. Davis identifies as a “preoccupation with blacks” in which he “return[s] time and again to ‘niggers,’” this gravitation towards black people tends to stir up precisely the things that Jason’s racism functions to hold off, namely, the past and all its associations.⁹⁸ It is useful to consider along these lines Quentin’s suggestion that “when you don’t want to do a thing, your body will try to trick you into doing it, sort of unawares” (*TSatF* 83), for his heightened awareness of black people seems to operate, much like his sensitivity to clocks, factory whistles, and the angle of the sun, as a kind of embodied “trick” that manipulates his mind against its conscious will, in this case, by drawing him into memories of a “home,” which, like his sister’s body, proves antic and perverse—a still, suave shape filled with the internal flux of unbearable experience.

The essential structure of this racial consciousness can be seen in what Richard Godden labels the “discover Deacon plot” that occupies the first part of Quentin’s chapter.⁹⁹ That Quentin spends the early hours of his last day on earth searching for a black man in Cambridge should immediately remind us that, unlike Benjy, he is not surrounded by black people so much as he gravitates toward them, a truth further underscored by the manner in which his eye seems to involuntarily register the presence or absence of “niggers” in his immediate environment. Having noted that “Deacon wasn’t

⁹⁸ Davis, *Faulkner’s Negro: Art and the Southern Context*, 94.

⁹⁹ Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South’s Long Revolution*, 32.

at the postoffice either,”—this line being the first indication to us that Quentin has, in fact, been looking for Deacon to begin with—he encounters “two bootblacks” at the corner, “one on either side, shrill and raucous, like blackbirds” (*TSatF* 83). After he leaves these two men behind, he boards a train and notes that “[t]he only vacant seat was beside a nigger,” an observation that he will repeat in reverse later on when he takes a different train and sees that “[t]here was no nigger in this car” (*TSatF* 86, 94).

Quentin theorizes his own sensitivity to blacks when, having taken the vacant seat on the first train, he muses, “I thought at first that I ought to miss having a lot of them around me because I thought that Northerners thought I did, but I didn’t know that I had really missed Roskus and Dilsey and them until that morning in Virginia” (*TSatF* 86). The transition between the two clauses of this statement captures something essential about the inner-workings of Quentin’s mind, which is how it tends to move from north to south, and also from abstract ideas about race—what he “ought” to feel and what Northerners expect from him, as a Southerner—to memories of black people from his own past. It is precisely these southerly, backward looking tendencies that direct the stream of thought that unfolds as he sits down beside the black man and recalls that Virginia morning when another train had carried him home from Harvard for Christmas. What follows is one of the more frequently cited, and thoroughly criticized, scenes in the novel, in which Quentin’s encounter with the Northern black, who is dressed in a “derby and shined shoes” and holding a dead cigar stub, gives way to his memory of seeing a “nigger on a mule”:

The train was stopped when I waked and I raised the shade and looked out. The car was blocking a road crossing, where two white fences came down a hill and then sprayed outward and downward like part of the skeleton of a horn, and there was a nigger on a mule in the middle of the stiff ruts, waiting for the train to

move. How long he had been there I didn't know, but he sat straddle of the mule, his head wrapped in a piece of blanket, as if they had been built there with the fence and the road, or with the hill, carved out of the hill itself, like a sign put there saying You are home again. He didn't have a saddle and his feet dangled almost to the ground. The mule looked like a rabbit. I raised the window. (*TSatF* 86-87)

After engaging in a game of "Christmas gift" with the man, Quentin throws him a quarter and the train begins to move again.

I leaned out the window, into the cold air, looking back. He stood there beside the gaunt rabbit of a mule, the two of them shabby and motionless and unimpatient. The train swung around the curve, the engine puffing with short, heavy blasts, and they passed smoothly from sight that way, with that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity [. . .] (*TSatF* 87)

If Quentin's Southern daydream were to end here, it would present the flip side to Jason's sour bigotry, for though laced with sentimentality rather than acrimony, the man on the mule is as much a stereotype as any of Jason's maligned "niggers," evoking what Davis describes as the "age-old conception of the South's 'nigger'" by drawing upon language and imagery that Faulkner had relied upon in his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*.¹⁰⁰ Though sketched in greater detail and granted a speaking role, the "nigger on a mule" revives the condition of suspended motion and stopped time that we have traced in the "niggers and mules" of Charlestown, those "long eared beasts" and "Negroes humped with sleep" that make up the Southern backdrop against which the novel's white characters and their modern problems come into focus (*TSatF* 147).

Davis makes an important distinction, however, when she suggests that "the Negro and mule standing 'motionless and unimpatient' is a metaphor characterizing Jefferson and home" not as they are, but rather "the way Quentin *would like them to*

¹⁰⁰ Davis, *Faulkner's Negro: Art and the Southern Context*, 100.

be.”¹⁰¹ For, as his memories everywhere confirm, there is very little in Quentin’s home life that conforms to the “static serenity” that he longs for in this scene. Indeed, though Quentin apparently awakens to find the man and the mule outside the window of his car, the entire episode has the quality of a daydream, one that subsequently gives way to the more unsettling recollections that lie coiled beneath:

And all that day, while the train wound through rushing gaps and along ledges where movement was only a laboring sound of the exhaust and groaning wheels and the eternal mountains stood fading into the thick sky, I thought of home, of the bleak station and the mud and the niggers and country folks thronging slowly about the square, with toy monkeys and wagons and candy in sacks and roman candle sticking out, and my insides would move like they used to in school when the bell rang. (*TSatF* 88)

As Quentin’s attention slides from the seemingly motionless and eternal landscape outside the window, to more inward thoughts of the station, the mud, and the “thronging” crowds, his “comforting image of a familiar, fixed world” yields to the impatient, surreptitious, alien movements of his own “insides.”¹⁰² As we have already seen, this stream of thought subsequently leads Quentin, via the ringing of the school bell that would make “his insides . . . move, sitting still,” to the deeper memory of Caddy’s loss of virginity (“*One minute she was standing in the door*”) and then to the buried kernel of her soiling in the branch (*I’m going to run away. He began to cry she went and touched him. Hush. I’m not going to. Hush. He hushed*) (*TSatF* 88-89). His initial encounter with the “nigger” on the train in Cambridge thus eventually delivers him, via the memory of the man on the mule, to the trauma of Caddy’s soiling.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 110, my emphasis.

¹⁰² Davis, *Faulkner’s Negro: Art and the Southern Context*, 100.

If we turn to the episode in which Quentin finally locates Deacon, we can see that the same basic pattern repeats, whereby Quentin's encounter with a Northern black man turns his mind back to memories of Southern blacks, which unearth, in turn, the old wounds of childhood. Whereas the man on the mule is largely a throwback from *Soldiers' Pay*, Deacon borrows more from Simon Strother, the elderly black coachman and butler of Bayard Sartoris in *Flags in the Dust*. Though Roskus occupies that role in the Compson household, Deacon inherits more of Simon's character, particularly his penchant for racial performance. Much as Simon acts out a repertoire of roles for his white employers, so does Deacon, by Quentin's account, initially greet Southern transplants to Harvard in a "sort of Uncle Tom's Cabin outfit, patches and all," which enables him to relieve the unsuspecting undergraduates of their pocket cash before they "began to learn better" (*TSatF* 97). We might even seem to detect something of the "leashed military imminence" (*Flags* 31) that Simon puts on for Old Bayard in the "salute" that Deacon executes upon first catching sight of Quentin, and which Quentin interprets as a residual effect of the Decoration Day Parade in which he had last seen him. (According to Quentin, Deacon will take part in "whatever parade came along," and dressed for the part [*TSatF* 82]). However, whereas Simon's entire attitude toward Bayard is an homage to the Old South, (his deference and formality evoke the more decorous days of John Sartoris), Deacon's military demeanor seems to point, as Godden has argued in detail, not to the nostalgic past but rather "toward future purposes," purposes, which, however ambiguous, seem decidedly political rather than simply sartorial in nature, and therefore lie "beyond Quentin's powers of definition."¹⁰³ If, in

¹⁰³ Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution*, 33.

seeking out Deacon, Quentin is looking for a reminder of the backward-looking “home” embodied in the man on the mule, he would seem to have come to the wrong person.

It is therefore all the more remarkable that his mind still manages to turn Deacon into Roskus:

He was looking at me now, envelope white in his black hand, in the sun. His eyes were soft and irisless and brown, and suddenly I saw Roskus watching me from behind all his whitefolks’ claptrap of uniforms and politics and Harvard manner, diffident, secret, inarticulate and sad. “You aint playing a joke on the old nigger, is you?”

“You know I’m not. Did any Southerner ever play a joke on you?”

“You’re right. They’re fine folks. But you cant live with them.”

“Did you ever try?” I said. But Roskus was gone. Once more he was that self he had long since taught himself to wear in the world’s eye, pompous, spurious, not quite gross. (*TSatF* 99-100)

As in the earlier episode with “nigger” on the train, the Northern black man provides Quentin’s mind with an occasion for reflecting back upon the Southern blacks that he has left behind, a maneuver that his mind executes in this instance only by interpreting everything about Deacon that makes him different from Roskus as “claptrap,” a costume that he has “taught himself to wear” over the deeper, truer self that seems to gaze out at him from beneath this Northern mask. As Godden puts it succinctly, Quentin “runs south” in this moment, but it is vital to recognize that in seeking out Roskus through Deacon, South within North, past within present, Quentin’s mind delivers itself into memories that prove no more stable, familiar, or comforting than the future that Deacon seems to embody, and of which Quentin cannot yet conceive. After Roskus vanishes from behind Deacon’s eyes, the two men parts ways and Quentin’s mind slips back home again, but this time into more unsettling memories:

The chimes began again, the half hour. I stood in the belly of my shadow and listened to the strokes spaced and tranquil along the sunlight, among the thin, still little leaves. Spaced and peaceful and serene, with that quality of autumn always

in bells even in the month of brides. *Lying on the ground under the window bellowing* He took one look at her and knew. Out of the mouths of babes. (TSatF 100)

Whether it is due to the bells themselves, the recent impression of the “envelope white in [Deacon’s] black hand”—an image that perhaps recalls the wedding announcement that sits unopened on Quentin’s desk—or something about the look that Quentin ascribes to Roskus’s eyes, his mind slips through the veil of tranquility, “spaced and peaceful and serene,” into a volatile cocktail of memory in which Caddy’s wedding (“*Lying on the ground under the window bellowing*”) and Caddy’s loss of virginity (“He took one look at her and knew”) are intimately mixed. In “run[nin]g south” for the second time, Quentin is thus delivered once again into the old wound of Caddy.

By drawing up the old stains of the past, the black characters that materialize in Quentin’s narrative serve as “custodians” for white memory by preserving both a romanticized myth of the Southern past and the elemental taint of violence and waste that tarnishes that myth from within. It is also vital to recognize, however, that Quentin’s Southern daydreams are interrupted not by an historical past oriented around the Civil War—a past that finds its clearest expression to date in the tarnished rapier, that “symbol of his race,” that Old Bayard pulls from the family chest—but rather by a psychosexual history that points back to Quentin’s own childhood, and which finds its central symbol in his sister’s muddy backside. Considered in light of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Southern history and race relations will prove so central to Faulkner’s understanding of Quentin’s character, and of his obsession with Caddy’s virginity in particular, the (re)materialization of this soiled body at the core of Quentin’s psyche is prone to being read, on the one hand, as wholly regressive or as extremely pregnant, replete with the

racially charged content that will explode in *Light in August*, but which remains, at this moment in Faulkner's career, largely unconscious and/or inarticulate.

The problem with both of these readings is that neither recognizes the true innovation of Quentin's chapter, which is how it initiates Faulkner's confrontation with race from within the innermost spaces of the white male psyche, not by tapping into a pre-existing, hitherto repressed core of racial anxiety, but rather by fleshing out an interracial intimacy that touches every part of Quentin's psychosexual past. It is helpful in this respect to consider the integral role that black voices play in calling Quentin simultaneously into his own past and into the depths of his own mind in the following passage:

The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of railing, my shadow leaning flat upon the water, so easily had I tricked it that would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned, the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying on the water. Niggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time. It twinkled and glinted, like breathing, the float slow like breathing too, and debris half submerged, healing out to the sea and the caverns and the grottoes of the sea. The displacement of water is equal to the something of something. Reducto absurdum of all human experience, and two six-pound flat-irons weigh more than one tailor's goose. What a sinful waste Dilsey would say. Benjy knew it when Damuddy died. He cried. *He smell hit. He smell hit.* (TSatF 90)

As it foreshadows Quentin's death by drowning, this passage uses his pause on the bridge to showcase the internal architecture of his mind. Whereas Benjy's mind moves horizontally between the present and past (as though wriggling through a fence), Quentin's moves vertically, sinking over the course of this passage downward into memory and the levels of his psyche that lie far below immediate life. As Stephen Ross observes, Quentin's mind is constituted to a remarkable extent by the voices of other people: "the more deeply Faulkner permits us to delve into the individual unconscious . . .

the more it echoes other discourses.”¹⁰⁴ In this passage alone, we hear echoes of Prufrock, Quentin’s father, and perhaps a teacher and a hardware store employee. Framing these echoes are the black voices that seem to both trigger Quentin’s descent (“Niggers say”) and receive him on the other end (“*He smell hit*”). If, as Ross suggests, the presence of voices within the characters’ minds creates a kind of “‘call and response’ between levels of the psyche,”¹⁰⁵ black voices play an instrumental role by facilitating movement between those levels.

The first black voice that surfaces in Quentin’s mind seems to function along these lines. The memory of what “Niggers say” produces a state of calm, in which the water and float both seem to breathe slowly, and Quentin imagines “healing out to the sea and the caverns and the grottoes of the sea.” This fantasy of recovered wholeness quickly gives way, however, to a series of broken utterances that deliver him, in the end, to the memory of his grandmother Damuddy’s death when he was still a child and an unspecified black voice saying, in reference to Benjy’s alleged ability to sense death, “*he smell hit*.” While Quentin gravitates toward black voices for their capacity to “heal” and suspend, those same voices thus prove inextricably bound to the memories he most wants to avoid but cannot always deflect.

The most striking example of this phenomenon occurs in a separate scene, in which Quentin meditates directly on the nature of sound and how it carries. Ruminating on the difference between the air in the North and the air back home, he notes that “even sound seemed to fail in this air, like it was worn out with carrying sounds so long. A

¹⁰⁴ Ross, *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice, Speech and Writing in Faulkner*, 141.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

dog's voice carries further than a train, in the darkness anyway. And some people's. Niggers. Louis Hatcher never even used his horn carrying it and that old lantern" (*TSatF* 114). Louis's voice then delivers him to a memory of hunting that rewrites Bayard and Caspey's hunting scene in *Flags in the Dust*. Here, once again, is the passage found in *Flags*:

At last, from some distance away, came that single ringing cry. Caspey stopped. "Le's see which way he gwine." They stood in the darkness, in the sad, faintly chill decline of the year, among the dying trees, listening. "Whooy," Caspey shouted mellowly. "Go git 'im."

The dog replied, and they moved again, slowly, pausing at intervals to listen. The hound bayed; there were two voices now, and they seemed to be moving in a circle across their path. "Whooy," Caspey called, his voice ebbing in falling echoes among the trees. They went on. (*Flags* 297)

And here it is rewritten in *The Sound and the Fury*:

Even sound seemed to fail in this air, like it was worn out with carrying sounds so long. A dog's voice carries further than a train, in the darkness anyway. And some people's. Niggers. Louis Hatcher never even used his horn carrying it and that old lantern. [. . .] And we'd sit in the dry leaves that whispered a little with the slow respiration of our waiting and with the slow breathing of the earth and the windless October, the rank smell of the lantern fouling the brittle air listening to the dogs and to the echo of Louis' voice dying away. He never raised it, yet on a still night we have heard it from our front porch. When he called the dogs in he sounded just like the horn he carried slung on his shoulder and never used, but clearer, mellow, as though his voice were a part of the darkness and silence, coiling out of it, coiling into it again. WhoOoooo. WhoOoooo.

WhoOoooooooooooooooooooo. *Got to marry somebody*

Have there been very many Caddy

I don't know too many will you look after Benjy and Father (*TSatF* 115)

Once again, a young, inwardly tortured white man listens to the "mellow" sound of a black man's voice, while also listening through it to the intermingled sounds of the world itself. If, as I have suggested, Caspey's "whooy," "ebbing in falling echoes among the trees," behaves like an aural prosthetic that enables Bayard to tune into the world and tune out of himself, Quentin seems drawn to Louis's "WhoOoooo" for much the same reason.

And yet we should note where this stream of consciousness leads. The sound of Louis's voice saying "WhoOoooo" gives way suddenly to Quentin's sister Caddy's voice and the memory of her loss of virginity and pregnancy. This is a painful memory in itself, but it quickly pivots Quentin's mind to the memory of another black voice:

I've got to marry somebody Versh told me about a man who mutilated himself. He went into the woods and did it with a razor, sitting in a ditch. A broken razor flinging them backward over his shoulder the same motion complete the jerked skein of blood backward not looping. But that's not it. It's not not having them. It's never to have had them then I could say O That That's Chinese I dont know Chinese. And Father said it's because you are a virgin: dont you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you dont know. You cant know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realize that tragedy is second-hand.

(*TsatF* 115-16)

Like the memory of Louis's voice, Versh's story takes Quentin's mind into the woods, but whereas Louis's wordless call puts everything into a state of peaceful suspension, Versh's voice ushers Quentin to a scene of violent action and irreparable damage. From the "ditch" that mars the landscape (Quentin elsewhere refers to a ditch as a "black scar" [*TSatF* 153]) to the mutilated body of the self-castrating man with its "broken razor" and "jerked skein of blood," this scene works to rupture the "slow respiration" and seamless unity of the earlier memory.

What Quentin encounters at the core of this memory is a kind of mirror. The image of the man flinging his genitals backward over his shoulder produces recognition, and then an insight about himself: "But that's not it. It's not not having them. It's never to have had them." Quentin sees in the man's brutal act of self-mutilation his own need to be free of all desire; and yet what the man reveals to him above all is the futility of that need. Because, as Quentin works it out for himself, "that's not it"; it is not enough to put

the body, or its most offending parts, behind him. Like his own fantasy of purifying his sister by way of incest, such an act can only compound the hurt. Rather, he wants “never to have had them,” to inhabit a state of serene wholeness that knows nothing about need or desire, a condition he perhaps comes closest to attaining in the presence of Louis, whose voice moves so effortlessly in and out of the world as to be “part of” it. That such a condition might not truly exist, anywhere, for anyone, is a possibility that tortures Quentin throughout his chapter, primarily through the voice of his father, whom he here recalls saying, “purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It’s nature is hurting you not Caddy.” While this statement speaks volumes about the central problem of Caddy’s sexuality within Quentin’s mind, it says something about “nature,” too. Mr. Compson’s point here is probably that the idea of purity, like the idea of virginity, is a construct and thus not worth crying over, but to Quentin it means that, contrary to his experience with Louis in the woods, nature hurts; pain and longing are the way of the world.

That this truth, which is the closest thing we get in the novel to an explanation for why Quentin kills himself, only becomes available to him through a story that he has heard from a black character is striking enough. It is even more striking if we assume, as I think many readers do, that not only the teller but the subject of the story—the self-mutilating mirror image that Quentin recovers from the depths of his own consciousness—is himself black. In one respect, we can read this encounter with his black double, or twin, as the culmination of the black body’s instrumental function: Quentin can only access and recover his own pain and despair by projecting it onto a black body. And yet the scene also invites us to see what Quentin, in his self-absorption,

apparently cannot, which is an image not of white but of black suffering. The question that apparently never occurs to Quentin is why this man has committed the act that he has. Notwithstanding the famous scene in the Gibson family's church, black pain remains largely untouched in *The Sound and the Fury*. However, it returns in provocative ways in *Absalom, Absalom!* Before we turn to that novel, I want to consider a final, pivotal scene from Quentin's chapter that not only encapsulates the essential functionality of black voices within the white psyche but also begins turning toward that instrumentalization as a subject.

Riding the trolley only hours before his suicide, Quentin contemplates the late afternoon light, "supine and tranquil upon tideflats like pieces of broken mirror" (*TSatF* 170), an image that triggers in turn the memory of his younger brother Benjy soothing himself before a mirror in the Compson home:

How he used to sit before that mirror. Refuge unfailing in which conflict tempered silenced reconciled. Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt. O Benjamin. Dilsey said it was because Mother was too proud for him. They come into white people's lives like that in sudden sharp black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in unarguable truth like under a microscope; the rest of the time just voices that laugh when you see nothing to laugh at, tears when no reason for tears. They will bet on the odd or even number of mourners at a funeral. A brothel full of them in Memphis went into a religious trance ran naked into the street. It took three policemen to subdue one of them. Yes Jesus O good man Jesus O that good man. (*TSatF* 170)

Despite the persistently scopic character of Quentin's meditations, beginning with the mirror and culminating with the microscope, this passage is actually about something heard rather than seen. When Quentin observes that "they come into white people's lives like that," he is referring to the previous line: "Dilsey said it was because Mother was too proud for him." The image of the "sharp black trickle" thus enacts a synesthetic fusion of image and sound, a visual rendering of how Dilsey's remembered words come into

Quentin's consciousness in this moment and of how black people, and black voices, "come into white people's lives" more generally.

This passage is pivotal in Faulkner's treatment of black voice. Evoking the idea that African Americans are "just voices," it reaches back to the "mellow," "consonantless" murmur that produces suspension in *Flags*. And yet, Faulkner is more interested here in describing what happens when black people cease to perform that earlier function—that is, how they "come into white people's lives" by coming out of that rich medium of "just voices." At the most basic level, this shift entails a transformation from wordless sound to arresting words. In a manner anticipated by Elnora's admonitory refrain, "*All folks talkin' 'bout heaven 'aint gwine dar*," Dilsey doesn't just hum, laugh, or murmur; instead, she speaks, and the "sharp black trickle" of her words alters the flow of Quentin's thoughts by confronting him with the "white fact" of his mother's pride. The sudden materialization of Dilsey's voice, as well as the curiously bloodlike image Quentin attaches to it, should remind us of Versh's story of the self-mutilating man. In both instances, a black voice "comes into" Quentin's mind and catalyzes precisely the critical self-reflection that, in *The Sun Also Rises*, black voices function primarily to suspend.

The most provocative thing about this passage, however, is how it conceptualizes, with the metaphor of the microscope, the medial function black voices like Dilsey's perform. This metaphor puts voice into a visual register, which allows Quentin to contemplate the impact of Dilsey's words on his mind through the image of whiteness clarified by an interposing blackness. But the figure of the microscope also operates at a second, and higher, level. Enabling Quentin to see a specific truth about his own family,

as well as the broader conditioning truth of how blacks “come into white people’s lives,” Dilsey’s voice is not just what Quentin sees but that which allows him to see. It is not just the black trickle on the slide but the microscope itself. Whether or not Quentin understands it, his analogy recognizes blackness as both the subject of his attention and the technology through which it operates. We can measure the difference this lens makes for how Quentin sees if we compare his metaphor of the microscope to the image of Benjy sitting rapt before the mirror. In both cases, whiteness gazes at itself, but whereas the mirror offers Benjy refuge and reconciliation—an uninterrupted healing or “temper[ing]” (*TSatF* 170) of the white subject with his own image—Dilsey’s words have the opposite effect. They divide Quentin from himself by situating him as a disinterested observer to his own whiteness, and then they give that whiteness back to him in refracted, fractured form—that is, under powerful magnification that lays bare its interstitial blackness. What “Dilsey said” thus functions as an instrument not only for white self-reflection but for white self-exposure as well; it is a medium or, to borrow an image that Quentin uses twice in his chapter, a “piece of colored glass” (*TSatF* 175) through which truths that would otherwise remain obscure and inaccessible to Quentin are both thrown into relief and brought into focus.

To conclude, I want to close by looking forward to a scene from *Absalom*, *Absalom!* that brings the medial function of black voice and black bodies in Faulkner’s work, and the Invisible Man’s parting question—“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (*IM* 581)—to a point of maximum exposure. The scene describes an explosive confrontation between Rosa Coldfield, who is white, and Thomas Sutpen’s mixed-race daughter, Clytie. Having received word that her nephew Henry has

shot and killed Charles Bon, her niece Judith's fiancé, Rosa travels to Sutpen's Hundred, where, intercepted by Clytie, she calls out to Judith from the foot of the stairs:

I was crying not to someone, something, but (trying to cry) through something, through that force, that furious yet absolutely rocklike and immobile antagonism which had stopped me—that presence, that familiar coffee-colored face, that body (the bare coffee-colored feet motionless on the bare floor, the curve of the stair rising just beyond her) no larger than my own which, without moving, with no alteration of visual displacement whatever (she did not even remove her gaze from mine for the reason that she was not looking at me but through me, apparently still musing upon the open door's serene rectangle which I had broken) seemed to elongate and project upward something—not soul, not spirit, but something rather of a profoundly attentive and distracted listening to or for something which I myself could not hear and was not intended to hear—a brooding awareness and acceptance of the inexplicable unseen inherited from an older and purer race than mine which created postulated and shaped in the empty air between us that which I believed I had come to find (nay, which I must find, else breathing and standing there, I would have denied that I was ever born):—that bedroom long-closed and musty, that sheetless bed (that nuptial couch of love and grief) with the pale and bloody corpse in its patched and weathered gray crimsoning the bare mattress, the bowed and unwived widow kneeling beside it— (Absalom 110)

Clytie's body does not initially seem to function like a medium; on the contrary, it presents Rosa with an impenetrable obstacle, a "*furious yet absolutely rocklike and immobile antagonism*" through which she attempts to force her voice. Indeed, it is Rosa who instead seems to function as a medium for Clytie, whom she perceives to gaze not "at" but "through" her, to the door she has just entered. I will return to that reversal shortly, but I want first to consider Rosa's striking description of what happens next, how Clytie's body "*seemed to elongate and project upward something . . . of a profoundly attentive and distracted listening to or for something which [Rosa herself] could not hear and was not intended to hear*" and then "*created postulated and shaped in the empty air between [them] that which [Rosa] believed [she] had come to find.*"

By Rosa's account, Clytie is not looking at her because she is too busy listening to things Rosa cannot hear, things that are audible to Clytie because she belongs to an

“*older and purer race*” that possesses an “*awareness and acceptance of the inexplicable unseen*.” In short, Rosa would have us believe that because Clytie is black she can hear things that Rosa cannot. And yet we should note that the “*inexplicable unseen*” is by no means unrelated to Rosa simply because she can’t hear it. This becomes clear when, in an almost magical move, Clytie’s body converts what she hears into “*something*” Rosa can see, what Rosa describes as that which she “*must find, else breathing and standing there, [she] would have denied that [she] was ever born*”—the scene of Judith weeping over Bon’s corpse. A full explanation for why seeing this scene of grief is so crucial to Rosa’s existence would require its own chapter. What matters for our purposes is how Rosa gains access to her need to see through Clytie’s body, which functions, on the one hand, like an aural prosthetic attuned to the “*inexplicable unseen*” of Rosa’s own unspeakable desire and, on the other, like a projector that makes that desire available to Rosa by “shap[ing]” in the space between them the strikingly cinematic scene of the fallen soldier and his grieving widow.

Peter Lurie provides an essential framework for interpreting this moment when he observes that throughout Rosa’s chapter we find “language that specifically connotes the processes of film production and film viewing.”¹⁰⁶ He cites, among other examples, her description of how she “sees the world through “a piece of smoky glass,” a metaphor that evokes “the image of reality viewed or presented through the projector or camera lens.” For Lurie, the “smoky” quality of this lens is linked to Rosa’s uncritical attachment to the romanticized myths of the Old South typical of Southern film narratives. I would

¹⁰⁶ Lurie, “‘Some Trashy Myth of Reality’s Escape’: Romance, History, and Film Viewing in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” 576.

argue that considered within the context of Rosa and Clytie's confrontation it also takes on a racial tinge that points back to Clytie's body. Curiously immobile and oriented toward "*the open door's serene rectangle which [Rosa] had broken,*" Clytie's body—that "*familiar coffee-colored face . . . the bare coffee-colored feet motionless on the bare floor*"—bears an uncanny resemblance to the camera apparatus itself, especially when it proceeds, in effect, to play back the reel of Rosa's romantic fantasy.

In assessing the significance of this image of the black body-as-camera, it helps to consider Julian Murphet's provocative suggestion that Faulkner revisits filmic narratives about the South with the precise intention of "retard[ing] the speed of projection just enough that the occluded black screen, and the sheer mechanism of the apparatus itself, can begin to show again."¹⁰⁷ Murphet invokes what Watson describes in his analysis of Benjy's chapter as the "'flicker' between the frames," but Murphet does so with greater pressure on that interstitial blackness—how, though it is "engaged in what appears to be the uninterrupted transmission of a blinding white light," cinema actually "tarr[ies] with the absolute darkness that fills the screen between every frame cranked automatically into place before the projector bulb." Focusing on this darkness enables Murphet to use the physical apparatus of the camera as an analogy for the racial—and racist—underpinnings of the cinematic medium and its narratives. We have seen how both Benjy's and Quentin's chapters expose the occluded blackness Murphet describes through their attention to the constitutive black voices that make up their characters' respective streams of consciousness. By presenting Clytie's body as a projector, Rosa's chapter goes even further toward recognizing blackness as a crucial part of the "sheer mechanism of the

¹⁰⁷ Murphet, "Faulkner in the Histories of Film: 'Where Memory Is the Slave,'" 213.

apparatus, itself.” If, as I have argued, Quentin’s microscope metaphor suggests that blackness, in the form of black voice, constitutes not just the trickle on the slide but the lens through which he confronts his own whiteness, Clytie’s listening black body cements that idea by materializing as the exquisitely tuned instrument that detects Rosa’s unconscious desires and then “crank[s] [them] automatically into place” before her.

Or, perhaps, not so automatically. For in the moments that follow their initial face-off, Clytie complicates her instrumentalization in two ways: first by speaking to Rosa and then by touching her. Her words are simple enough—“*Don’t you go up there, Rosa*” (*Absalom* 111)—but Rosa insists that in that moment Clytie “*did [her] more grace and respect than anyone else [she] knew.*” As Carolyn Porter suggests, Clytie’s address constitutes “the sole instance in Rosa’s life when she is recognized as a person,”¹⁰⁸ and what follows should be understood within the context of that felt recognition. Undeterred by Clytie’s warning, Rosa continues to advance until she feels the other woman’s hand on her arm, a sensation that produces an explosive verbal reaction—“*Take your hand off me, nigger!*” (*Absalom* 112)—followed by one of the most stunning and complexly sedimented images in the novel: “*We just stood there—I motionless in the attitude of running, she rigid in that furious immobility, the two of us joined by that hand and arm which held us, like a fierce rigid umbilical cord, twin sistered to the fell darkness which had produced her.*”

It is difficult to imagine a metaphor more well-suited to the expression of an unmediated connection than an umbilical cord, a reading that Rosa seems to encourage

¹⁰⁸ Porter, “Symbolic Fathers and Dead Mothers: A Feminist Approach to Faulkner,” 117.

when she insists that “*there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering*” (*Absalom* 111-12). Yet we should not mistake Rosa’s vision of black and white fetuses “sistered” by an umbilical cord for an expression of human contact that escapes or transcends the strictures of race and class, much less mediation itself. On the contrary, even as it registers Rosa’s sense of an undeniable, visceral bond to Clytie, the image continues to speak directly to the power of those “*intricate channels*” to shape, and also to distort, even the most fundamental human connections. Fused together by a cord that should connect them to a mother, the two women are both bonded and trapped, locked into a tortured interdependency that harkens back to the earlier image of Clytie’s body functioning as a projector for Rosa’s unspeakable desire. What is stunning and subversive about Clytie’s touch is how, from within the reified structure of their intimacy, it makes Rosa feel something for which she is utterly unprepared. She describes this feeling as “*not outrage*” (*Absalom* 112) and “*not terror*” but rather “*some cumulative over-reach of despair itself,*” a feeling that compels her to cry out, “*perhaps not aloud, not with words,*” “*And you too? And you too, sister, sister?*”

By serving as a conduit for a despair that Rosa clearly recognizes as her own, Clytie’s touch marks the culmination of the black body’s function as a medium through which white characters first suspend and then access their own feelings. Rosa’s sistering with Clytie is in this respect similar to Quentin’s doubling with Versh’s self-mutilating man in *The Sound and the Fury*: in both instances, black bodies mirror, or echo, white pain. But in a significant reversal, whereas Quentin sees only his own pain in his self-castrating twin, Rosa is consumed by a despair which, in its “over-reach,” affects her as

originating with the other woman. That is to say, it's Clytie's pain, too, or at least that's how it feels to Rosa. The possible grounds for this common pain are complex and by no means self-evident, but any explanation must take into account the "adjunctive" status of women within the dynastic designs of Thomas Sutpen and the slave society on which those designs have been patterned (*Absalom* 211). In short, Clytie's touch forces Rosa to confront something she will experience all too acutely when Sutpen, suddenly alert to her potential not as a wife but as a womb that can produce an heir, addresses her as he would "a bitch dog or a cow or mare" (*Absalom* 136): what it feels like to be treated like someone else's instrument. That, to borrow Quentin's phrase, is what hurts.

As a system that, in Mr. Compson's words, "us[es] human beings for tools" (*Absalom* 94), slavery is deeply implicated in the despair that Rosa feels coming through Clytie's arm. More precisely, Clytie's touch taps into a specific condition of slavery that seems, retroactively, to inform the instrumental function of black characters in Faulkner's earlier novels—what I would describe as a cauterization, or truncation, of feeling that the reduction of human beings to tools both requires and produces in his white subjects. The primary embodiment of this condition in *Absalom* is of course Thomas Sutpen, whose "innocence" (*Absalom* 192), which rises "like a monument" in the aftermath of his defining injury, ensures that he is forever cut off from pain only by inuring him to the suffering of others. Quentin and Shreve imagine this condition as an immunity to the "living touch" (*Absalom* 255), the "hot communicated flesh" (*Absalom* 256), that Charles Bon longs for and never finds in his would-be father. Thinking back to Quentin's desire "never to have had them" (*Absalom* 116), young Bayard's rejection of Caspey's invitation to "member," and even Old Bayard's purported deafness, we can perhaps

detect early instances of a white resistance to feeling that achieves its most outrageous fulfillment in Thomas Sutpen, and undergoes a stunning, if only instantaneous, collapse under Clytie's touch.¹⁰⁹ For despite her longstanding need to shut Clytie out, even to "*shun the very objects which she had touched*" (*Absalom* 112), Rosa's body proves involuntarily receptive to everything Sutpen, in his stonelike innocence, is not: the black voice that acknowledges her own humanity and the black touch which, by communicating a human suffering as real as her own, demands that acknowledgment in return. In one of the novel's many tragic failures, Rosa rejects both, but not until she has felt, and served as a medium for, a despair that is more than just her own. It goes too far, I think, to say that in Rosa Coldfield black pain finds an audience, much less a voice. Through her body, however, it does become distinctly, if only momentarily, felt.

¹⁰⁹ In "Faulkner's Narrative Frames," John T. Matthews touches on the resistance to feeling that I allude to here in his reading of "That Evening Sun." He suggests that Quentin's inability to decipher Nancy's whisper—"It was oh or no, I don't know which" (81)—is symptomatic of Quentin's own inability, or unwillingness, to comprehend her fear and suffering.

PART TWO
Sounds to Break Bodies Apart:
Form and Voice in American Modernist and Postmodernist Poetry and Music

Preface

In the previous section, I argued that the category of narrative voice is structured by auditory elision. I considered the possibility of a mode of omission that is vexed in its play of appearance and disappearance in part because a series of graphic omissions are made to stand in for auditory thresholds, both physical and what Frantz Fanon might call “historico-racial.”¹¹⁰ I also insisted that some of the most compelling constellations of audibility and narrativity are those in which race functions not merely as a content but as an intervening substance. In Hemingway, Ellison, and Faulkner, I located ways of hearing that are only possible in writing and yet, they force us to reconsider how we hear or what is considered eligible for hearing. Interrogating the means by which sound conveys the depth of racial subjection, these are works that require a kind of attention that can be both lulled and incredibly focused, engaging the reader in an activity that is both acoustical and visual, the acoustical accessing alternative regions of the image. In other words, in reading one seems to develop a new way of listening.

However, in order to work towards a necessary fuller understanding of how we, as readers, are implicitly trained to attend to the racial signifiers of voice in literary form, we must also inquire as to why certain associations between sound and race come to

¹¹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

seem normal, natural, and “right.” Why do racialized American listening practices—and attendant sonic racial representations—continue to emerge and spread? If black voice becomes, as I have suggested in my readings of Ellison and Faulkner, in and of itself a conduit of psychological interiority and embodied sensation counteracting the reification of “the black body,” how can we resist reifying this voice, this black vernacular? For what strikes me as radical about the seemingly more marginal voices in Ellison and Faulkner (the Invisible Man, the old woman singing a spiritual, Dilsey, Clytie, Caspey, *et al.*) is precisely their resistance to containment, to predictability. And yet what Faulkner (and Ellison, in the Jim Trueblood episode) celebrates in a Southern vernacular sound that is inextricably black might too easily become monumentalized—a sort of oral and aural memorial to a *fantasy* of anterior authenticity, wholeness, and community.

Within *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner offers such a vision in the scene wherein Quentin is drawn to Louis’s “WhoOoooo” (*TSatF* 115). We might recall that Quentin’s nostalgic memory here is a memory of lyricism itself, of the sound of both Southern nature (“the dry leaves that whispered a little with the slow respiration of our waiting and with the slow breathing of the earth”) and of a particular black voice ultimately indistinguishable from that nature. Though part and parcel of the Southern landscape around him, Louis’s voice is also linked both metonymically and metaphorically to the musical instrument, the horn, he carries with him. The suggestion is of a power mythical in nature, beyond social place, more resonant than the modern instruments of sound and vision (the horn and the lantern, respectively) afforded him. With such a voice, profound yet nostalgically linked to the Real of an ineffable,

unchanging Nature, how are we to read Faulkner's celebration of a mythical, mystical black Southern sound?

Such theorists as Diana Fuss and Dorothy Hale have questioned the particular terms of this same sort of celebration of black vernacular by such pillars of black literary theory as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker. In her 1994 article, "Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory," Hale accuses Gates and Baker, among others, of simplifying Bakhtin's ideas of *heteroglossia* in order to "theorize a stable, authentic, empowered African American social identity."¹¹¹ (Hale doesn't critique the goal, necessarily, but questions the mishandling of Bakhtin's theory.) Hale claims that for African Americanists like Gates and Baker, "voice is nothing less than the authentic de-essentialized self, made manifest."¹¹² Similarly, Diana Fuss describes Gates and Baker's approaches, in particular, in terms of a paradoxical propensity to question the idea of reading race on the body while simultaneously locating an essential blackness in voice. Fuss writes:

What makes the vernacular (the language of "the folk") so powerful a theme in the work of both Gates and Baker is precisely the fact that it operates as a phantasm, a hallucination of lost origins. It is in the quest to recover, reinscribe, and revalorize the black vernacular that essentialism inheres in the work of two otherwise anti-essentialist theorists. The key to blackness is not visual but *auditory*; essentialism is displaced from sight to sound.¹¹³

If Hale and Fuss are right, if black vernacular comes to stand for "a hallucination of lost origins," how do we resist essentializing voice? In the case of this study, how do I resist replacing an essentialized, simply victimized black body with an essentialized, simply

¹¹¹ Hale, "Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory," 448.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 448.

¹¹³ Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, 90.

triumphant black voice? How do we move out of the impasse of essentialism, without veering toward the perhaps more perilous approaching of abandoning an ideal of, in Hale's words, an "empowered African American social identity"?

In this section, I seek not a way out of these impasses, precisely, but perhaps a way through them by turning to that sound which traffics in both sounds and bodies: jazz. As I will argue, jazz's aesthetic traction rests in its ability to offer not only an evolving set of sounds, but an evolving way to think about how sound comes to *mean*. And the way sound comes to mean is deeply intertwined with historical representations of blackness. In reconceiving not only *what* specific notes and rhythms come to signify (or to evade signification), but *how* specific notes and rhythms come to signify, then, this section thereby proceeds by positing sound as both experience and figure, the medium in which arguments are made and an identifiably racial feature of musical and textual performances.

I begin by developing a new account of jazz-inspired lyric based in Charlie Parker's approach to musical narrative. What Parker's music in particular shows us, I argue in Chapter Three, is that these interpretations—interpretations that assume an improvised solo to be a musician's "telling a story" about herself—rely on an improvised solo's conforming to the prescriptions of underlying form in a particular way. By upsetting these conventional relations of improvised sound to underlying form, Parker's music shows us that this hermeneutic depends *on* those conventional relations, and, consequently, that there are other modes by which improvised sound might signify relative to the body of the musician producing them. More specifically, Parker's improvisational strategies upset the conventions that read sound as indicative of race.

Now, it is not that the result eschews all claims to be making a statement about racial identity. Rather, the musical statements that Parker makes redescribes what sound might be able to say about race. In his works, “blackness” moves from being the phenomenon directly articulated in improvised sound to a phenomenon defined as the *resistance* to being read in these conventional manners, or as the *evasion* of hermeneutic stability. In this context, sound comes to describe race as that phenomenon which sound cannot describe.

It is this structure that makes the improvisations of Parker relevant extra-musically. Moving from Langston Hughes’s 1961 long poem *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* in Chapter Four to Robert Creeley’s mid-1960’s volume *Words* in Chapter Five, I argue that the significance of these poets’ work rests in their hearing jazz not simply as a set of imitable sounds, but as an ongoing argument about the nature of aesthetic form. Engaging with the ideas Parker present in notes and rhythms, I argue, empowered poets to rethink the very nature of poetic activity, newly accommodate lyric’s material limits to its trans-medial aspirations, and in turn construct a powerful new model of race-inflected aesthetics. For the poets I examine in this study, then, what matters is the turn to jazz not only as figure, or even the turn to jazz as technique (though both of those turns are certainly important), but the turn to jazz as a reservoir of conceptual approaches. Incorporating the conceptual advances proffered by the musical tradition allows these poets to recast what “musicality” comes to mean in a poetic context, and what powers that musicality might have. This process further contributes to poetry’s ability to capture or express racialized identity. Put differently, wrestling with the conceptual schemas articulated by the jazz tradition frees these poets to work as musicians do, putting sounds

together in new ways and rethinking what sound means for the medium in which they work.

As I discuss in Chapter Four, this account does run on lines askew to more standard accounts of “jazz poetry.” This is largely because of what this study takes “jazz poetry” to mean. Traditionally (as I also discuss in Chapter Four), “jazz poetry” is understood as taking one of three general forms. Most commonly, it designates poetry that is meant to sound *like* jazz. Rarely addressed is the fact that “sounding like jazz” more often than not indicates less a poem’s *actual* sound than it does a poem’s trafficking in the range of poetic codes (scat syllables, for instance), that have come to signify “jazziness.” In another vein, the term indicates poetry that takes either the music itself or a specific musician as its subject. Examples here (there are many) might include Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died,” for example, or Michael Harper’s “Dear John, Dear Coltrane.” Finally, the term often specifies poetry that is written according to some version of the improvisatory experience, however construed. The primary example here would be Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac’s theories of spontaneous composition.

While all these are important modes of poetizing, and as such deserve attention, in this study, “jazz poetry” indicates less any of these models than poetry that thinks about itself in a jazz-inspired manner. For my purposes, that is, “jazz poetry” is poetry that employs the strategies of jazz to rethink its own condition of possibility. What matters less is whether these poems sound like jazz, or demonstrate an allegiance to jazz through choice of content, but whether they consciously extend the ways of thinking about sound and representation, particularly racial representation, inaugurated in the music whose details I limn.

Put differently, what matters about this poetry is its ability to take the full measure of the jazz tradition. By “the full measure” I mean the multiple identities that “jazz” as signifier has come to connote. Indeed, pace the famous but apocryphal description of jazz attributed to Louis Armstrong, “If you have to ask what it is, you’ll never know,” in this study “jazz” does maintain a definable identity, if a complex one. This identity has the word signifying (at least) three things, and as such represents the ongoing interaction between them. First, “jazz” indicates a *style of playing music*, an approach to music-making which counts improvisation as a major component. As I detail below, what “improvisation” means in this context is relatively well-delineated; nonetheless, there is some truth to saxophonist Sonny Rollins’s claim that “jazz is the type of music that can absorb so many things and still be jazz.”¹¹⁴ Second, “jazz” represents a recognizable *body of sounds*, sounds produced by specific musicians, bequeathed to us in recordings and transcriptions and nightly developed on the bandstand. This is jazz in the sense of “She started off playing some blues, but as her set continued she moved more into jazz.” Finally, “jazz” signifies as an *African American aesthetic*. In this sense the word designates a music whose origins lie in African American culture and the history of ways that certain sounds (the second definition above) have come to bespeak (or not) African American culture writ large.

That “jazz” is such a complicated signifier means that taking stock of the advances that characterize the music’s tradition necessarily entails an examination of how the music works. By this I do not mean an account of the order of events in a typical jazz

¹¹⁴ <<https://jazzonline.gr/en/jazznews/great-quotes/item/1173-great-quotes---sonny-rollins.html>>.

performance, but rather an account of how the sounds issuing from the instruments of jazz's performers come to signify beyond the strictly musical contexts in which they appear. As such, there is one more crucial axis on which this section focuses. This is the body, especially as that body is constituted relative to sounds that bear a history of signifying race. And in accounting for the ways that jazz's sounds come to be taken as racially significant, a brief examination of the way jazz as an aesthetic engages the body is necessary. As I read it, jazz implicates the body in two ways. On one hand, because jazz is a performative aesthetic, its sounds inevitably manifest the lineaments of the musician's body—the hands, lips, tongue, feet, etc., that collectively produce sound. On the other, that jazz is a performative aesthetic taking place in the present means that a jazz improvisation necessarily foregrounds the body of the musician making it, putting that body's racially-identifiable exterior on display. As I argue in Chapter Three, that jazz evokes the (generally black) body in this manner is a primary way that jazz comes to be read as reflecting something important or essential about African American culture. And that puts race, to a degree, at the core of whatever textual (i.e. “strictly” musical) meaning a given solo may produce, since regardless of the *textual* status of the sounds that issue from the improviser's body, the possibility of their being read *as* text depends on that body's signifying within the matrix of race.

To accommodate these varying approaches to the music, throughout this section I develop a concept that I term “voice.” I choose this particular word because its implications tie hearable sound to representative capacity—as we saw in the previous section—and thereby embodied activity to racialized identity. “Voice” as I read it thus also works to bind together the dimensions through which jazz works, both as a musical

practice and as the impetus for the poetic developments I trace. On one hand, “voice” indicates the sonic emanations of a corporeal body, the literal sounds that issue from a speaker’s mouth. On the other, as Chapter Three describes, “voice” connotes perspective, viewpoint, or opinion, what the *OED* calls “a mode of expression or point of view.”¹¹⁵ This definition also extends into poetry, wherein “voice” designates a poem’s implied speaker. In the context of my analysis, it is this “voice” that is often the most directly racialized one, though many of the poems I examine help explain how this latter notion of voice is imbricated with the first. There is finally the use of “voice” in a grammatical context—passive or active voice, for example—which will come to claim particular attention when discussing Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama* and Creeley’s *Words*.

Rather than focus on any one of these definitions in isolation, however, what this study aims to do is explore the way these different implications interact with one another. That “voice” understood as a sonic production comes to be read as “voice” taken as a racially-identifiable viewpoint; that poetic voice works itself out by being read as sound; that grammatical voice might undermine the possibility of a poem’s realizing a stable account of its own ontological status: the development of the concept allows this section to engage all these dimensions. And, even more crucially, read all of them as fundamentally stemming from the exploration of sound and representation developed in the music that forms the backbone of my analysis.

Read together, my aim in this section is to trace out the way “blackness” emerges as a phenomenon at once sonic, textual, phenomenological, and linguistic. Repositioning the coordinates of modernist and postmodernist American aesthetics will, I hope, lead us

¹¹⁵ *OED*, *Voice*, N.

further down the path of liberation from the stranglehold of an essentializing, monumentalizing theory of identity and an equally blinding refusal to acknowledge the presence of that real phantom “race” in our personal and collective acts of reading and narration.

CHAPTER THREE

Visions of Jazz and Race: Charlie Parker and the Forms of Opacity

Disruptive and defiant, bebop music arrived in 1945 with a definite goal of remaking the future. Or, at least, scrambling whatever sense could be read out of the present. Arriving after three years of recorded silence—the wartime ban on musical recording imposed by the American Federation of Musicians had left listeners disconnected from the music’s ongoing development—the six songs Charlie (“Bird”) Parker (1920–1955) recorded for Savoy Records dropped with the same sense of finality the atom bomb had brought three months earlier, unconditionally cleaving history into two periods: before and after.¹¹⁶ Difficult, intellectual, and resolutely urban, these performances seemed to capture the sense of restlessness and opposition animating post-

¹¹⁶ Whether bebop marks a decisive break with swing or is merely an extension of it (whether, to borrow Scott DeVeaux’s words, the shift is best described as “evolution or revolution” (1)), remains an ongoing debate, one addressed with notable precision by DeVeaux in his *The Birth of Bebop: a Social and Musical History*. Though there are good arguments for both positions (or, as DeVeaux finally decides, for seeing neither as definitive), I tend to hold with the history of Parker’s reception among actual musicians, for the majority of whom Parker’s music does represent as a seismic shift—a “cut,” as it were—in the tradition. Chico O’Farrell, for example: “I think anything that came afterwards wasn’t as drastic as that particular first step from swing to bop. I think in a sense bop probably marks the real cut-off point of the old concept of swinging” (qtd. in Gitler, *Swing to Bop*, 153).

war African American culture. Historians, musicians, and critics have been clearing the rubble ever since.¹¹⁷

There has been no lack of attempts to get at the core of Parker's music. Intimate knowledge of Parker's advances is expected of any jazz musician; indeed, there are few living musicians who have not spent significant time absorbing Parker's vocabulary, phrasing, and sense of harmony. In this Parker himself represents the fount from which post-war jazz has flown. As Scott DeVeaux notes, "Bebop is a music that has been kept alive by having been absorbed into the present; in a sense, it *constitutes* the present."¹¹⁸ Still, despite the fact that nearly every note Parker played has been transcribed and memorized, taking the measure of his achievement has still left critics, to summon one of Parker's song titles, "chasing the bird." Far more than merely offering a new approach to music, Charlie Parker's playing offers a new aesthetic model, one that seems to perpetually resist our registers of knowing. Not only does it tell us how jazz might be newly played, or newly heard, it tells us how jazz might newly *mean*.

This chapter's goal is to examine this new experience of meaning, especially as it traces out this project's larger argument about Blackness and sound. What I argue is that Parker's music introduced into American culture not only a new set of sounds, a body of solos and compositions that sounded different from what had come before (or, that took up the materials provided by the tradition and synthesized them anew), but an entirely new way of thinking *about* sound. This new way of thinking about sound then offers a

¹¹⁷ As Eric Lott writes, "almost fifty years on, the story of how the crash crew made a revolution at Minton's Playhouse is so worn that we forget how disruptive bebop actually was" ("Double V, Double-Time" 597).

¹¹⁸ DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 2.

new way of thinking about Blackness as a concept, especially as that concept emerges as a *sounded* phenomenon.

These larger claims, however, still emerge from the music. It is therefore the music with which one must start. Harmonically, for example, Parker radically expanded the palette, introducing a host of new techniques that would soon become jazz's *lingua franca*: extensive use of notes from chordal "upper regions"; flat-5 substitutions; upper- and lower-neighbor chromaticism; and superimposition of ii-V sequences over moments of harmonic stasis.¹¹⁹ Rhythmically and dynamically, Parker's solos remain no less thrilling: initiating and ending phrases on unexpected beats, rapidly fluctuating between eighth-note and triplet feels, dynamically emphasizing unexpected notes to create internal counter- and cross-rhythms, Parker's lines seem to toy with time more than they coordinate with it.

Other characteristics are less technical, but equally noteworthy. Among these one could count Parker's vibrato-less tone, famously described by Ralph Ellison as the "sound of amateurish ineffectuality," or the redistribution of musical roles in Parker's

¹¹⁹ "Upper-regions" of a chord (or the chord's "extensions") name the chord's 9th, 11th, and 13th degrees. "Flat-5 substitution" is a technique that calls for an improviser to substitute for the chord specified by the underlying form a chord whose root is a tri-tone (a "flat-5th") away from it. Since the important notes (the 3rd and 7th) of both a dominant chord and its flat-5 substitute resolve in the exact same way, the technique is an easy and effective way to add tension to an improvised line. "Chromaticism" in general indicates the use of notes that are not a part of the key prevailing at a given moment of a musical piece. "Upper and lower neighbor chromaticism" in particular specifies the use of the chromatic notes that surround the diatonic (i.e. "in the key") note to which a given phrase is leading. A "ii-V" sequence designates a specific chord progression, one of the most common progressions in jazz. Superimposing ii-V sequences over static chords (i.e. playing lines that make it sound *as if* the underlying chords specify a ii-V sequence) gives otherwise monotonous passages a sense of forward movement.

groups.¹²⁰ Handing the swing-era drummer's role as a group's main time-keeper over to the bassist, bebop freed the drummer to become a more primary colorist. Chordal accompaniment ("comping") also became looser and more individualistic, with pianists devising both new, complex chords and new, complex rhythms with which to play them. The result was a significant revision of what counted as foreground and what as background: while individual solos in big-band and swing-era music often acquired force by being posed against a more stable background accompaniment, bebop's having made comping as dynamic and improvisational an activity as soloing helped usher in jazz's first true era of collectively-realized improvisation.¹²¹

Above these, perhaps most disconcerting were the punishingly fast tempos with which Parker and his confederates unleashed their music. Upending the swing era directive that its music above all be made for dancing, one implicitly dictating that even the wildest individual exploits be embedded in tempos solicitous of rhythmic movement—if not dancing, then at least foot-tapping or head-bobbing—bebop's blistering tempos effectively foreclosed the possibility of casual, bodily absorption.¹²² The resulting mode of bodily attention bebop effectively imposed on its listeners—individuating, cerebral—proved more redolent of the art gallery or lecture hall than the juke joint or ballroom.

¹²⁰ Ellison, "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz," 230.

¹²¹ On the perceived breakdown of identifiable performative roles and structures, it is worth remembering drummer Davey Tough's infamous (and oft-quoted) description: "Those cats snatched up their horns and blew crazy stuff. One would stop all of a sudden and another would start for no reason at all. We never could tell when a solo was supposed to begin or end" (Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*, 224-25).

¹²² In his analysis of Lester Young's "Shoe Shine Boy" solo, Lawrence Gushee suggests that dancing may in fact be the primary way that listeners internalize the structure of "four- and eight-measure phrases" through which swing-era soloing generally proceeds.

Today, of course, it is not solely (or, arguably, even primarily) the music by which bebop is remembered. If today's pop culture artifacts are to be a guide, the music defining post-war American counterculture has come to take a backseat in our cultural memory to the clothing, language, and generalized hipster ethos of the period. Which is not to devalue these cultural markers, since they too lent their wielders (particularly the ones who happened to be black) significant power in a pre-civil-rights era where such power was in gratuitously short supply. The sartorial choices of musicians like Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, for example—berets, sharp suits, shades—functioned not only to lend an air of intellectualism to a music many still considered essentially primitive, but also to carve out a secure space which, because it seemed so inscrutable from the outside, allowed the musicians a measure of creative freedom.¹²³ The same could be said of the culture's cryptic argot, (calculatedly) indecipherable to all but a select few. So, too, with the affected body language and widespread drug use shared by bebop devotees, both of which, like the features just listed, helped demarcate the clear line separating insider from outsider, hipster from square.¹²⁴

Inasmuch as the music does legitimately fit into this larger story, such an approach contributes much to our understanding of post-war jazz culture. Given this, it is understandably tempting to identify bebop's *musical* impact as merely one element (if an

¹²³ The best articulation of this idea, perhaps, comes from the famous scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the narrator encounters three black zoot-suiters on the train and begins to see them for the first time: "I stared as they seemed to move like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony . . . their black faces secret . . . For they were men outside of historical time, they were untouched . . . But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?" (*IM* 440-41).

¹²⁴ For a helpful discussion of the hipster figure as read through the music and literature of the period, see Saul (2003).

undoubtedly important one) within a larger narrative of cultural shift. This is, for example, the conclusion Eric Lott reaches in his otherwise masterful reading: “the music,” Lott argues, “attempted to resolve on the level of style what the militancy combated in the streets.”¹²⁵ Ramsey Guthrie, too, in his affecting *Race Music*, ultimately understands “African American music . . . in the 1940’s” as “a site for expressing some of the paradoxes, contradictions, tensions, and, of course, the joys and pleasures of African American life in those years . . . music and the critical discourses it inspired became conspicuous public activities within which these issues were sorted out, expressed, and debated.”¹²⁶

That these post-war years designate an important period of American (especially African American) culture is of course true, and this historically-oriented work helps us significantly in calculating its lasting import. If one is to take the music of this period *itself* as critically important, however, this approach reveals some potential limitations, of which two are paramount. The first is that reading bebop primarily as an expression of culture, style, or economics tends to obscure the way jazz, as a predominantly *musical* practice, intervenes into these discourses of race, culture, and history. To read the music as a signifier of culture rather than its catalyst, that is, glosses over (at least potentially) the unique material operations that make jazz an aesthetic unlike any other, and therefore ignores the formal musical mechanisms that tie the specific musical choices improvisers make to their larger racial, cultural, and philosophical meanings. Put differently, this approach presupposes the derivative status of music as such, and thus begs the question

¹²⁵ Lott, “Double V, Double-Time,” 599.

¹²⁶ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 97, 98.

of what specific musical choices might mean. While the goal of this chapter is therefore to point out some important features of Charlie Parker's music and to draw out some wider implications of those features, this project will necessarily proceed hand-in-hand with a provisional description of the distinctive material and historical properties that make jazz, as an aesthetic, an important site of cultural intervention. As I will argue, much of what ties jazz's sounds to its broader meanings can be explained by turning to the body, with the latter realized in two capacities: as a site of the music's production (the emitter of sound) on one hand, and the racialized entity to which these sounds come to be attached on the other.

Even beyond this potential failure to attend to the music's material and procedural dimensions, however, there remains a perhaps more hazardous problem with reading bebop, or Charlie Parker's music in particular, primarily as an expression of a wider cultural or racial experience. Though engaging this problem will take up a significant portion of this chapter, in broader terms its outlines are these: to understand bebop as a cultural or racial signifier is, arguably, to rob the music of one of its most powerful claims. This is the claim, made by Charlie Parker in resolutely *musical* terms, that at a fundamental level his music cannot, or should not, be taken as an expression of cultural or racial identity, that at its most effective the music retains a stubbornly untranslatable dimension as music. To read the music most essentially as a larger racial or cultural communiqué, this argument goes, is to enervate the purely *sonic* character of the music—the fact that its argument is essentially musical—by rendering it in essentially *non-musical* terms. Part of Parker's project, I argue, proceeds as a pre-emption of this potential reading, one that aims to restore to his music—in a way that importantly still

responds to the cultural conditions that make the music legible in the first place—a version of irreducible *sonicity* resistant to any extant hermeneutical framework.¹²⁷

Both of these aims—elucidating the meanings, both musical and cultural, Charlie Parker’s musical choices put in place, and accounting for the ways the jazz aesthetic facilitates the making of those meanings—are deeply embedded in discourses of race. What this chapter adds to this story is an analysis that helps account for jazz’s participation in the larger operations (historical, musical, cultural) that establish race as a phenomenon partially rooted in *sound*. In so doing it speaks to the way the history of “blackness” has seen it both associated with and in part derivable from the circulation of music, speech, rhythm, and other modes of sound-making.¹²⁸ At core here are the two related developments that have helped to associate and reduce blackness to a historically specific set of sounds, a pair of developments at whose crossroads one finds jazz.¹²⁹

They are these: on one hand, there is the fact that jazz, as both a historical body of sounds and an ongoing aesthetic practice, emerges largely *from* a subset of people racially identifiable as “Black.” This is a historically traceable phenomenon, at least insofar as audio recordings allow us to trace the music’s aesthetic development and other forms of historical documentation allow us to match these sounds to a group of people

¹²⁷ That this irreducible presence of sound then inevitably comes to acquire its own racial implications, that it, in a sense, becomes the very mode of racial performance Charlie Parker’s music works so hard to disavow is of course a crucial element in the story I am trying to tell.

¹²⁸ For a historical account that aims to specify how the idea of “blackness” came to be understood as an essentially rhythmic phenomenon, see Ronald Radano’s *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*.

¹²⁹ For an interesting discussion of the gains and losses to be had by associating blackness with music, see Ingrid Monson’s introduction to her edited volume *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*.

identifiable under racial rubrics. On the other hand, however—and it is an other—there is the history of those sounds and gestures having, on their own, even in the *absence* of visual correlates, come to represent or speak *for* blackness, the way certain sounds have come to “sound black.” The way a bent note on a guitar automatically inserts its player into arguments about “authenticity” and the “blues,” the way popular singers become “soulful” by summoning the vocal manipulations of gospel, the way radio listeners in 1954 heard Elvis Presley for the first time and assumed they were listening to a black man, are all examples of this latter phenomenon.

Despite their easy association, the correspondence between these two phenomena is clearly not one-to-one, with the style and degree of their interpenetration reflecting, as does any conceptual phenomenon, historical developments, performances, acquiescences, resistances, and most crucially, matrices of recognition. And that jazz stands (or has stood, for much of the twentieth century) in the center of these developments is one of the factors that lends the specifically musical choices its practitioners make no small degree of influence in reconfiguring the relation between race and sound. The specific force with which jazz does this, I call “voice.” As a descriptive term, “voice” aims to pull together the various strands of aesthetic, cultural, racial, performative, and philosophical import that circle around the music. Indeed, the primary claim of this chapter will be that Charlie Parker’s music provides a new version of “voice,” one that uses sound—with the latter figured simultaneously as bodily production, material entity, and cultural sign—to reimagine the codes that structure both *what* and *how* that sound can communicate.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ In this sense, my analysis attempts to satisfy the goal Paul Gilroy sets for critics of Black music: “The power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of

Working through *musical* means to re-envision the relationship between sound and body, Parker relates sound to the body primarily through the disavowal of sound's being able to speak *for* that body, at least in traditionally recognizable hermeneutical models.

Blackness, as a result, becomes a sonically realizable condition only insofar as it *evades* being spoken in sound. The dialectical relation at the heart of this operation represents Parker's enormous intervention into and restructuring of what "blackness" comes to mean in post-war America. As we move into the music, then, let us remember that while racially-marked aesthetic formations often render bodies legible by attaching those bodies to certain sounds, or certain ways of hearing, sounds themselves can always be harnessed to refuse, disrupt, or unsettle those conscriptions.

II. Form and Narrative: "The Way You Look Tonight"

As I briefly listed above, analyses of Parker's music have tended to break that music down along numerous lines—harmonic, rhythmic, timbral, dynamic. What exploring these components considered in isolation tends to miss, however, is the way they collectively unfold relative to the underlying chord changes of a given tune. For to ignore this last detail—which helps explain jazz's particular mode of generating meaning—is to ignore the way improvisation actually works. Despite the popular understanding of "improvisation" as something akin to "unmediated outburst of random sound," that is, in actuality jazz improvisation involves musicians' creation of new

subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this expressive culture and its distinctive *moral basis*" (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* 36, original emphasis).

melodies over a loosely agreed-upon sequence of chords. This sequence of chords—what musicians are referring to when they say “form”—then gives an individual or group a rough framework for their improvisations to follow. Form itself thereby plays a crucial role in the jazz aesthetic, since in the jazz setting notes and rhythms played by members of a group are never received as isolated entities, but always as responses to or engagements with this underlying form. In general, the less the notes a musician plays invoke the basic chord structures of form, the more “outside” she is said to be playing; the more her musical choices reinforce those chords, the more “inside.” Within a given solo a musician can build or release tension by moving from inside to outside and back again.

I raise these issues to make the simple point that what jazz improvisation thereby reveals is less the raw musical outbursts of the improviser than an individual or collective *interpretation* of the possibilities of this underlying form, that every jazz solo is in part a *reading* of form. In exploiting the tensions between the actual sounds a musician plays and the expectations of sound prescribed by this underlying form, a jazz solo is always a localized reading of what those chords can potentially *mean*. To ignore this fact—that jazz improvisation is in many ways an ongoing meditation *on* form—is thereby to miss the stakes, both historical and musical, set up by any particular solo. Indeed, seen this way, jazz’s history itself might be seen as that of various musicians’ expanding the range of what sounds come to be understood as being authorized by a given set of chords.¹³¹

¹³¹ For an example of an analysis of a solo that does focus on the relation of that solo to its underlying form, see the aforementioned Lawrence Gushee’s “Lester Young’s ‘Shoe Shine Boy.’”

While I therefore began with a short list of some isolated aspects of Parker's music, my aim in doing so was to show how these individual elements are subtended by the overall structure of his solos. For while it is inarguable that Parker's approaches to harmony, melody, rhythmic phrasing, and harmonic rhythm have deeply permeated the standard improvisatory vocabulary, considering Parker's music through its relation to form, as spelled out above, suggests that these various aspects of Parker's style can collectively be viewed as one improvisatory dimension, and the overall structure to which Parker submits them another. And while the critical literature has granted the former—Parker's approach to harmony and rhythm—the lion's share of its attention, I would like to argue for the critical importance of the latter, Parker's overall structural concerns, what one could call his approach to musical *narrative*.

Some indication of Parker's particular narrative style does come to us from the careful work of Scott DeVeaux in his *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Using a comparison with Coleman Hawkins's music, DeVeaux describes how Parker's "concise and streamlined" approach to soloing worked to frustrate (and often to upend in bandstand "cutting sessions") the more straightforward, drawn-out narrative style of his Swing-era predecessors. While Hawkins's solos, DeVeaux notes, generally conform to a more linear model, one that steadily builds intensity, "continually deferring closure . . . until he attains a simultaneous climax of timbre, register and volume,"¹³² Parker's solos take the opposite approach, "[delighting] in sudden and disorienting shifts of rhetoric."¹³³ Whether or not Parker's startling and virtuosic jumps in style fulfill the ideal of pure

¹³² DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 267.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 380.

improvisation announced by the cliché that Parker “never played the same thing twice”¹³⁴ (a description that even a cursory examination proves either grossly untrue, or true only in the most banal sense) or are actually “skillfully molded” results of planning and artifice, Parker’s music nonetheless works less to endear than to “provoke, startle and delight.”¹³⁵ Mixing dirty blues, European chromaticism, Swing-era steadiness, and bebop asymmetry with seeming abandon, Parker’s music above all seems geared to keep its listeners guessing, to deny them the satisfaction of predicting what will come next. Or, even more accurately, Parker’s music expands the range of what sorts of musical statements can generally be expected to succeed other musical statements.¹³⁶

While this description is certainly correct, it acquires a slightly different valence when read in terms of my suggestion that jazz solos be read as meditations on form. For if this claim is true, then Parker’s having repackaged the process by which jazz improvisation works ultimately describes a new understanding of form’s potential to communicate, and therefore a new conception of both what and how jazz could mean.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 376.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

¹³⁶ The level at which Parker’s music keeps listeners guessing is of course somewhat circumscribed, given that his music still operates within many standard protocols of jazz performance. This larger claim is (arguably) too compromised by the cultural history of the music’s reception, in which Parker’s denial of certain listener expectations was quickly (as someone like Adorno might have predicted) reabsorbed into the very structure of audience expectation, so that “surprising his listeners” became the very expectation Parker’s performances came to fulfill. From this perspective, the open question is then whether or not Parker’s aesthetic strategy maintains the negativity necessary to retain something like true novelty in the Adornian sense of the word. Though I certainly do not claim to offer a definitive answer to this question (nor to directly engage Adorno’s critique of jazz), I do hope to suggest, if even implicitly, the possibility of an affirmative answer.

To explain, I move to a reading of Parker's 1947 recording "Klaun Stance." Though played less often than many of Parker's other tunes, "Klaun Stance" is particularly instructive because it encapsulates in a few short choruses much of what is most provocative, and most intransigent, about Parker's work. The first salient thing to notice is that "Klaun Stance," like many other bebop tunes, borrows its chords from a well-known standard, in this case Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields's "The Way You Look Tonight."¹³⁷ Even though the practice of borrowing song forms from popular music in order to turn them into vehicles for improvisation did not begin with bebop, it has historically been one of the key features by which bebop, or even jazz as a whole, is often identified.¹³⁸ Langston Hughes, for example, describes jazz as "a way of playing music . . . almost any music can become jazz if it is played with jazz treatment," and saxophonist Sonny Rollins similarly notes that "jazz is the type of music that can absorb so many things and still be jazz."¹³⁹ Yet while the mere fact of this borrowing has often seemed sufficient evidence to justify broader claims, what is more important for my argument are the specific shapes this borrowing took. Before I turn to "Klaun Stance," then, let us examine some significant elements of the tune from which it borrows.

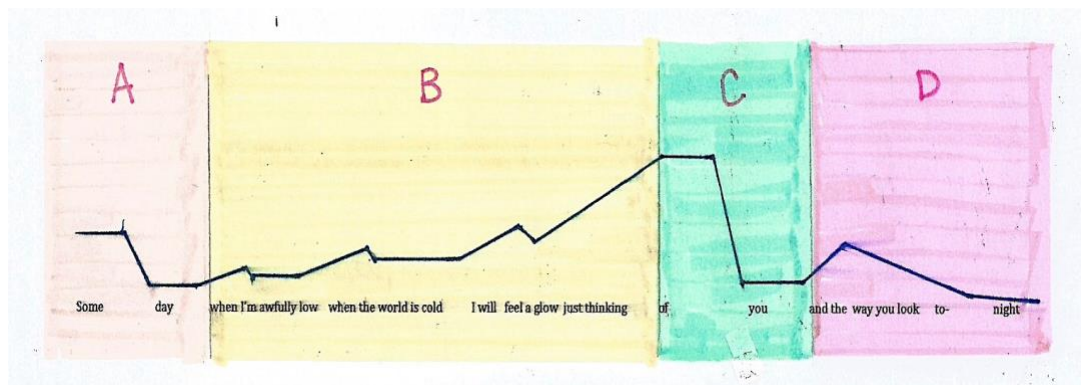
¹³⁷ Koch, *Yarbird Suite*, 126. Koch writes: "*Klaunstance* is in normal AABA form but with sixteen-bar sections and a four-bar 'tag' section. The 'tag' was used on Jerome Kern's original show version of *The Way You Look Tonight*, but its inclusion in this improvised version can be confusing if the listener is not familiar with it."

¹³⁸ The chord changes to George Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm," for example, have stood as one of jazz's most basic song forms for more than 80 years. This is so much the case that over time the name "I've Got Rhythm" became shortened to "Rhythm changes," or even merely "Rhythm." It would not be inappropriate for a leader on the bandstand to indicate the next number to her fellow musicians by merely calling out "'Rhythm' in A-flat!"

¹³⁹ Hughes, *The First Book of Jazz*, 46.

If one of the standards by which melodies are judged is the apparent ease with which they generate and maintain narrative interest, then “The Way You Look Tonight” is by all measures a classic of its genre. Indeed, its deep command of melodic structure keeps Kern’s tune far more recognizable, even popular, than the majority of other songs from its era, most of which have faded from public memory. Even the mere shape of the melody (below, rendered in two forms) well demonstrates the tune’s masterful use of classic narrative technique, the way the tune almost effortlessly builds and resolves tension:

SHAPE:



ACTUAL MELODY:

B_b **The Way You Look Tonight** By Jerome Kern & Dorothy Fields

Some day when I'm aw-fully low When the world is cold I will feel a glow just think-ing of you and the way you look to-night

Chords: FΔ, D-, G-, C7, Eb13, D7-, G-, C7, C-, F7, BbΔ, D7+9, G-, C7, FΔ, (G-), FΔ, (G-)

Handwritten annotations: A (bars 1-3), B (bars 4-5), B cont. (bars 6-8), C (bars 9-10), D (bars 11-13)

Looking at the musical notation, one can see how the tune from its very beginning leverages its chords to maximize melodic potency. The tune's first two bars, for example, dexterously set (at least) three separate operations in motion. First, the sharp drop in pitch, from C to F, with which the melody begins **(A)**, immediately captures interest. Second, this drop, in classic narrative style, foreshadows (indeed, renders in miniature) the moment of high climax to which the melody will ultimately lead, the octave drop that arrives in bars 9 and 10. Third, these two notes shrewdly capitalize on the tune's underlying chords to generate forward movement: while the notes themselves spell out "5-1" in the tune's home key, and thereby reinforce the "home base" quality of F major, the implied stability of this melodic movement is countered by a harmonic movement from the I chord to the vi chord, so that arrival at the most stable *note*, F, is temporally matched by a departure from the more stable *chord*. This slight rub sets up a feeling of concurrent stability *and* movement that persists throughout the tune.

After this initial drawing of interest, the upward steps in pitch that follow **(B)** lap like waves, carrying the tune forward. The steady but inexorable movement upwards (the highest notes of each little phrase, taken individually, articulate an ascending major scale) raises tension most directly by implying a movement *towards* a point of resolution looming in the distance. The way the melody here simultaneously implies that its end point lies ahead but withholds the immediate satisfaction of reaching it represents a paradigm example of tension-and-release composition; the control with which it operates is easily demonstrated by the way this upward- moving line stealthily takes control of the body of its implied performer, practically forcing its singer or player to render the line with a steady but seemingly unforced increase in volume (try it yourself and see if this is not the case).

Having repeatedly shortened the rest time between phrases, this ascending movement raises tension further by accelerating towards its goal, the climactic moment in bar 9 **(C)**. It is here that the tune perhaps reveals its true genius. Again, two simple notes—this time, a high F held for a bar and then a low F held for a bar—perform multiple, if inconspicuous, operations. First, these two notes, by standing as the highest and lowest notes the melody will reach, bind that melody, defining its scope and thereby contextualizing what has come before. Second, and more important, the octave drop here recapitulates and extends the drop from C to F with which the tune began. As a moment of maximum release, it therefore gives us exactly what we wanted but were not aware we wanted, fulfilling the tune’s initial promise that its end was all along in its beginning. Third, the tune also performs a modest modulation, from the key of F-major to that of Bb-major, which brings a new note, Eb, into the tune’s harmonic field.

Now, these last two techniques in general—a large drop up or down in pitch, especially when played in contrast to a mostly step-wise line, and the introduction at a crucial moment of a new but related key—are on their own classic songwriting techniques, and as such provide the memorable moments of many popular songs.¹⁴⁰ The brilliance of “The Way You Look Tonight,” however, lies in the way it joins these two separate techniques in a single two-note sequence, so that this climactic moment becomes both satisfying *and* interesting, reaching the end point it has posited all along while slyly withholding just a bit more from the listener. Thus while we learn in reaching it that we have been waiting for this moment all along, the experience is not one of abrupt termination, for the ear still wants the modulation to resolve itself. The short scalar passage that follows **(D)**—the cigarette after the climax, so to speak—thereby carries the tune gracefully to a point of rest, resolving the harmonic ambiguity and giving the melody time to gather itself before beginning another cycle.

Though I have only described the A section of the tune, these sixteen measures demonstrate just how effectively “The Way You Look Tonight” mobilizes the traditional features of straightforward narrative: initial drawing of interest, teleological movement forward, and thematic development. And as we turn to Parker’s version of the tune, let us keep these narrative techniques in mind. For despite Parker’s harmonic and rhythmic advances, it is the way Parker reconfigures *these* codes—the way melody works relative to the chords over which it proceeds—that holds importance for the argument I am making.

¹⁴⁰ It is, in fact, the bits of songs that contain events like these that are most likely to be remembered by listeners.

III. Blackness, Form, and History

The issue, as I read it, has to do with the mode of presentation a given musical relation to form allows. For while Parker's expanded harmonies and rhythmic asymmetries in his purview represent ways to elaborate or reinterpret (even if quite strikingly) the forms he borrows from outside, Parker's music nonetheless argues that these improvisatory techniques *on their own* do not make a decisive statement *about* that form—both in its strictly musical guises and in its wider cultural role—if in the end they merely repeat the narrative gestures already supplied by that form. That is to say, even if an improviser does employ those expanded harmonic, rhythmic, or timbral techniques, to do so in the service of a linear narrative that exhibits the same narrative and emotional dynamics of the text upon which one is signifying, to create, in essence, a linear narrative that can *substitute* for the tune's original melody, is nonetheless to allow oneself to be bound by the expectations of form, instead of performing one's mastery over it.¹⁴¹

What is at stake here, to put the matter somewhat differently, is the traditional reading of a jazz solo as a musician's "telling his story." This is, of course, a standard trope of the idiom.¹⁴² As such, it has been heavily theorized. Even so, before we move to

¹⁴¹ I take these terms from Houston Baker, whose "deformation of mastery" argument in his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* has been crucial to my work here. I address Baker's argument more fully shortly.

¹⁴² This trope is so pervasive that documenting its importance is almost unnecessary. Nonetheless, see, for example, Robert O'Meally's introduction to Part 5 of *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*: "Among this music's most magical words are those reminding its players to 'tell the story.' This is jazz's profoundest invocation, its most deep-voiced invitation . . . to 'tell the story' means to find an artistic voice and language of one's own and to recite with style one's own personal history." Or Paul Berliner: "Improvisers illuminate these principles with perhaps the richest of their language material, storytelling, whose multilayered meanings have been passed from generation to generation within the jazz community since its earliest days" (Berliner 200).

a reading of Charlie Parker's music, it is worth situating that music within the theoretical and historical trajectories that articulate its stakes. As a brief review, let us remember that what counts as "story" *in* this story is of critical importance for the understandings of African American aesthetics it has yielded. Key to these understandings is the idea that African American aesthetics, insofar as they are identifiable *as* African American, roughly proceed along techniques describable by, in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s words, "repetition with a signal difference" or Amiri Baraka's, "the changing same."¹⁴³ Rather than set as its goal the accumulation of new forms, this aesthetic model works through performers' passing down (or borrowing) a given set of conventions or loose details, the performance of which then lends its performer her particular artistic identity. Zora Neale Hurston's seminal ethnographic work describes it well: "What we really mean by originality," she writes, "is the modification of ideas . . . While [the Negro] lives in and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use."¹⁴⁴

Theoretically, this idea has come to be constitutively significant in two ways. On one hand, "repetition" (to borrow somewhat arbitrarily James Snead's word; there are a number of equally apposite choices, among them Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "signifyin(g)," Houston Baker, Jr.'s "mastery of form/deformation of mastery," even Fred Moten's "break") highlights the distinctiveness each iteration of a repeated form exhibits relative to its others, the way individual identity emerges as a distinctive rendering of a commonly-shared form rather than a product of an author's having created a new one.

¹⁴³ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiv; Mackey, "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka."

¹⁴⁴ Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," 37.

Within this circular mode of temporality (an idea discussed by Snead, but whose most extensive articulation is found in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*), the crucial activity becomes "performance" far more than "authorship"; or, put differently, the latter term becomes significant only when folded into or read out of the former.¹⁴⁵ On the other hand, the aesthetic of repetition becomes the mark of an initial aesthetic differentiation relative to the European-derived culture of which it is both part and not-part, so that the employment of repetition itself comes on its own to denote "blackness." Circular time here comes to signify within and comment on the linear, accumulative mode of time in which it is allegedly embedded.¹⁴⁶

From this perspective, what a more Euro-centric literary critic might describe as jazz's inherent intertextuality merely reflects the music's developmental affinity with other African- American aesthetics. Yet the story is of course not this simple, since the specific racial dynamics involved in *jazz's* intertextual formation—the fact that the forms over which its musicians improvised were often borrowed from non-jazz, mostly white composers—too result from specific historical circumstances. To a not-insignificant degree, the particular form of intertextuality seen in Parker's music reflects simple economic realities: because a composer could gain composition credits for a tune based solely on melody, regardless of the similar chord structures that song might share with others, bebop musicians would often improvise new melodies in the studio in order to

¹⁴⁵ See Snead: "Repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music, dance and language" ("Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" 68).

¹⁴⁶ See Snead: "What recent Western culture repeats continuously is precisely the belief that there is no repetition in culture but only a difference, defined as progress and growth" ("Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" 60).

gain income-generating songwriting credits from them.¹⁴⁷ On a more abstract level, however, these economic motives clearly bled into the social realm: barred from spheres of popular culture, which rendered black musicians visible largely only in the marginalized realm of “race music,” in appropriating the musical forms created by white composers jazz musicians were able to nonetheless use these forms within the frameworks of their own developing aesthetic. This aesthetic recognized creativity not in the dissemination of written inscription, but in the ephemeral yet materially identifiable moment of the music’s performance.¹⁴⁸

Within this environment, as the critics listed above might observe, the mode of telling became a new kind of content. Artistry was found not in the mere creation of new forms, but in the revelation of individuality through an improviser’s ability to adapt a given form to the specific, contingent, localizable circumstances of his life and experience. Yet unlike other, mostly written aesthetics, jazz—and this is crucial—required for its very existence the presence in time and space of the body of its producer. This formal requirement then paid cultural dividends: employing these forms to signify its being both part *of* the tradition having created them yet simultaneously apart from it,¹⁴⁹ jazz became a modernism whose very existence asserted the simultaneous existence of the often historically ignored person producing sound. Later in this chapter I address the specific role of the body in the jazz aesthetic. For now, however, let us note that it is this dynamic that shapes the very idea of a musician’s “telling his story,” that “telling

¹⁴⁷ See DeVeaux, among others.

¹⁴⁸ At least until later, when learning solos from transcriptions became one of the prominent ways the jazz language is learned.

¹⁴⁹ In this sense Du Boisian double consciousness may still stand as the fundamental critical lens from which to understand these activities.

one's story" has often rendered bodies recognizable by becoming the primary means of attaching sounds to those bodies.

As a result, the process has come to situate (or engender) blackness, or at least the version of blackness that sees the concept as being most forcefully expressed in sound, as a relation between two conditions: the performance of musical sound on one hand and the hermeneutic expectations that make such sound legible on the other. And let us also observe that while understanding jazz improvisation as the transmission of an individual story tends to rest critical attention on the storyteller, the success of this model—that we *can* understand a jazz solo as telling a story about its producer—still depends for its success on a number of factors. First, since the aesthetic is essentially one of repetition, its success depends on the underlying form's being recognizable as such, even if in highly ornamented or embellished form. Second, it requires hearing the story through the hermeneutic assumption that the "story" an improviser tells us be representative *of* that improviser, that it be readable as "*his* story." This "his" can then function in multiple ways. On one hand it can be read as revelatory of the inner state, emotional core, or perspective on the world of the improviser considered as an individual. The history of jazz, however, has often seen the concept extended to a wider realm, so that the story thus told is taken to be a story, occasionally *the* story, of blackness itself, with the improviser's sounds taken to be revealing something essential about what it means to be African American.

The history of this tradition—of the relationship between aesthetic productions and the reading to which they have been submitted, even perhaps before their having been created—is of course quite long and complicated. It is, perhaps, possible to read the

history of black performance itself as, simultaneously, the development of each of these activities and the degree to which they have shaped each other. Yet that any such interpretive hermeneutic is always the product of specific historical, musical, cultural, and philosophical circumstances need not obscure the fact that it has been embraced, or at least manipulated, by readers on all sides of the political spectrum, that it has been employed to both “bad” and “good” effects. Thus while there have been no lack of quotes like Norman Mailer’s that “in [the Negro’s] music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm,” there are also many that come from African American interpreters, like Amiri Baraka’s (then LeRoi Jones) famous argument that “Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made,” and Langston Hughes’s declaration, in a fictional dialogue with his Harlem-dwelling character Jess B. Semple, that “every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, ‘BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP!’ . . . That’s where Be-bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro’s head into those horns and saxophones and the piano keys that play it . . . That’s why real bebop is mad, wild, frantic, crazy—and not to be dug unless you’ve seen dark days, too.”¹⁵⁰

On a larger scale, the various operations of this particular hermeneutic within the jazz tradition has often been *the* process producing black bodies *as* readable in various historically- recognizable ways. This is the background against which Charlie Parker’s

¹⁵⁰ Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” 347; Jones, “Jazz and the White Critic,” 13; Hughes, *The Best of Simple*, 117-8.

music operates. And what his music does most effectively, I hope to show, is to intervene in this process by exposing its workings, the complicities accepted by both musician and listener that make it possible in the first place. This intervention, I am arguing, occurs most primarily on a musical level, and the site from which it is lobbied is, precisely, form. For it is ultimately the way he rewrites form as an expectation that simultaneously bears its own critique that Parker forges a new mode of black performance.

IV. “Klaun Stance” and the Disarticulation of Form

Returning to “Klaun Stance,” then, let us observe that Parker’s improvised rewriting of “The Way You Look Tonight” seems calculated at almost every moment simultaneously to expose the inner workings of the tune *and* to display Parker’s dismantling of them. If the mastery of “The Way You Look Tonight” lies in its leading listeners through a well-controlled (and historically familiar) series of expectations and fulfillments, “Klaun Stance” (**transcription on page 164**) takes the opposite approach, yielding little in the way of familiar ground. From the beginning, the song’s tempo, a blistering 300 beats per minute, easily undermines whatever expectation listeners may have of dancing, singing along, or even tapping their toes. Second, and even more disorienting, the tune is played without a head, instead beginning directly with Parker’s solo.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ In jazz, a “head” is a tune’s original melody, generally played in unison by the front-line instruments before individual solos begin. For a more detailed breakdown of the standard components and order of events in a jazz performance, see Jackson (2000).

“Klaun Stance” is certainly not the first (nor even a prominent) example of a tune beginning with a solo; Coleman Hawkins’ enormously popular 1939 version of “Body and Soul,” for example, consists of nothing but Hawkins’s soloing over the tune’s changes. Hawkins’s performance, however, is much more geared towards enhancing

Now, in the standard reading, bebop heads themselves count as radical (usually enduringly so) revisions of the original melodies of the tunes from which they come. As DeVaux argues, bebop heads, being asymmetrically phrased and melodically unstable, “concentrated all that was most novel and disorienting in their new musical language. By placing it *first*—before the listener could situate the improvisation within some recognizable context—the beboppers made it impossible to hear their music as a version, a ‘jazzing,’ of some other repertory.”¹⁵² As a mode of engagement with a recognizable canon of American music, bebop heads in this reading succeed at publicly registering their music’s vexed relationship to that canon, their being at once inside and outside of it.

While this characterization undoubtedly holds some truth, one might still be somewhat skeptical of the claim that bebop heads succeed at fully obscuring their source texts in this manner. Or, even if they do, that their having done so represents the radical gesture it is posed as being. For while this description explains the initial encounter with a bebop head, it becomes (and historically became) significantly less accurate after time. Despite the apparent radicality of Parker’s heads, the truth is that once they entered the common jazz argot, beginning to be widely recorded and performed, these heads themselves quickly came to fulfill the anchoring function played by the melodies they set out to replace. The very novelty with which bebop heads obscured their sources was what enabled their functional recuperation as substitutes for the heads they aimed to repress, since the more inventively any given head rewrote its source text, the more likely it was to be memorized and played by other musicians.

rather than distorting this form, as the tune’s slow tempo, title, and vertically-oriented improvisation all make clear.

¹⁵² DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 425.

My point here is not to malign this reading, but instead to embed it in a larger framework that better explains how, exactly, Parker's music intervenes into the cultural and racial discourses it addresses. For despite the sheer sense of alterity with which bebop both was and is trumpeted (and, perhaps, even legitimately experienced), the truth about Parker's aesthetic is that its potency comes not from erasing earlier approaches to improvisation, but from engaging with them in a way that undermines much of the prescriptive force with which they had been associated. It is not that Parker's music—including his heads—made itself impossible to hear as a revision of another repertoire, but that at its most successful it performs itself precisely *as* a revisionist negation of a canonized repertoire, keeping many of the terms of that repertoire in place but enervating much of its coercive potential.

Of course, by forgoing the head entirely in "Klaun Stance," Parker arguably pushes this dialectical approach even deeper into the form, dispensing even with the stable ground of recuperated function. Beginning the tune instead with his own improvised solo, Parker ensures that the only people likely to feel situated in the form are other musicians, or, maybe, listeners with exceptional ears. In a further nod to their implied control over the form, at the *end* of the tune, after solos are finished, Parker and a young Miles Davis (Parker's front-line conspirator on the date) play a quasi-unison passage (**below**) that simplifies the melody of "The Way You Look Tonight" to, in essence, an outline of the tune's guide tones, played as a series of descending fifths.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ "Guide tones" are the notes of a chord that most clearly identify the chord's harmonic meaning, generally the chord's 3rd and 7th degrees. When an improvisation contains many guide notes played on dominant beats, listeners can generally identify the underlying chords of the tune, and the improviser is said to be "hitting the changes."

Appearing after the fact as it does here, this faux-head (which was in fact the head-out from Kern's original show version of *The Way You Look Tonight*), like a magician's revealing the secret to a trick immediately after having performed it, serves as an announcement by Parker and Davis that despite the seeming speed and chaos of what has come before, they were in fact in full control all along.¹⁵⁴

"Faux Head"



Turning to Parker's actual solo, one can see that even though his improvisations may initially sound bewilderingly complex, especially when played at breakneck speed, and while abrupt juxtaposition of contradictory rhetoric is important to their success, in actuality their complex hermeneutical value far more often results from Parker's simple repositioning of repeated elements relative to underlying form. While "repeated elements" here may seem to imply a theme-and-variations approach, however, it is for Parker emphatically the opposite. Eschewing linear development, Parker's approach is, rather, anagrammatic: repeating licks and phrases, combining them in novel ways, lending complexity to simple lines by playing them at unexpected moments, Parker retains the familiar components of musical narrative, but reorganizes them in ways that

¹⁵⁴ Koch, *Yardbird Suite*, 126.

obviate their cogency. What remains is less a forward-moving theme and variations than a series of pieces that rigorously maintain their independence.¹⁵⁵

The very beginning of his solo makes this clear. Starting off with nine straight measures of eighth notes, enhanced occasionally by a triplet phrase but unbroken by any rest, Parker leaves no room for a motif to be stated, let alone developed. The saturation of notes overwhelms, and at first listen it is perhaps not difficult to hear why so many saw Parker as a source of wild, unrestrained inventiveness. Hearing this remarkable string of notes as simple musical stream-of-consciousness, however, misses the subtle way the line works. In measure 1, for example, Parker starts off by playing the first five notes of the F major scale, ascending **(A)**. F-G-A-Bb-C: this simple beginning could be the content of a child's first music lesson. By the end of the measure **(B)**, however, Parker has already repurposed these notes to sharply inventive use: taking the exact three notes he has just played—A, Bb, and C—Parker phrases them so as to imply an A7b9 chord, a chord not explicitly indicated by the form, but one that nonetheless anticipates the D7 in the next bar. While this implied superimposition thereby expands the potential meaning of the tune's underlying chords, turning an otherwise unremarkable moment into one fraught with drama and potency, the important observation is that Parker performs it without in

¹⁵⁵ There are clearly those whose analyses of Parker disagree with mine. Henry Martin's *Charlie Parker and Thematic Improvisation*, for example, offers a detailed musicological reading that addresses the thematic coherence of Parker's improvisational style. It is clear, however, that by "thematic" Martin means the way individual pieces of Parker's solos reference the initial head of the tune, not necessarily the way those pieces *themselves* form an overall narrative. Indeed, as Martin acknowledges, "Parker was not especially interested in thematic *development*, despite frequent *reference* to the thematic material" (120, original emphasis), and therefore, that "thematic interconnection [in Parker's improvisations], if it exists, must be sought elsewhere than in conscious motivic development" (4).

the least modifying his melodic vocabulary. Rather than adding complexity by importing new notes into the measure, Parker's simple repositioning and rhythmic phrasing extracts new harmonic meanings from those already there.

This general strategy of repeating and recontextualizing in a way that rigorously avoids thematic development extends throughout the solo. In measure 2, for example, Parker plays a four-note arpeggio, spelling out the 3rd through the flat-9th (F#-A-C-Eb) of the D7 chord sounding underneath him (**C**). Now, from one perspective, the mere use of the b9 ("flat-9") in this context, especially when employed to such clear harmonic directives, represents the noteworthy element of this phrase. Notes like the b9 were, in fact, a significant bebop-era addition to the improvisatory vocabulary; that it and other altered notes are now considered standard is a direct consequence of solos like this one. For our context, however, the mere presence of this note is less important than the way the phrase in which it is embedded repeats across the chorus. A mere two measures later, that is, we see (hear) the exact same four-note arpeggio played again, though altered to fit a new context, with Parker playing it a whole-step lower and shifted one beat earlier in the measure, in order to fit over the C7 called for by the form (**C'**). In bar 6—we are still within the stream of Parker's initial nine-measure salvo, let us remember—Parker approaches the second D7 chord of the tune by playing the exact same arpeggio yet again, but this time lowered a full octave (**C''**). Even the short portion of Parker's solo reprinted below—not even a full chorus—sees Parker incorporating this lick twice more (in bars 14 and 24, both of which see it played over D7 (**C'''** and **C''''**)), making, in total, five repetitions in a mere 32 bars.

Other examples of this strategy abound. To pick another one that also first appears in the opening bars of the solo: in bar 2, Parker follows up the lick just discussed with a four-note upper-neighbor + chromatic ascent phrase (**D**). Even in this initial context, the lick—another pet phrase of Parker’s—is wonderfully suggestive: preceding the D that ends the phrase, the Eb, C, and C# that set it up delay gratification just long enough to keep things interesting, yet when the D note does appear, its delayed arrival allows it to work as a bridge of sorts between measure 2 and measure 3, since the note D functions as both the root of the chord in bar 2 (D7) and the 5th of the chord (G-minor) in bar 3. Just as with the lick above, it does not take long for this short phrase to start to pepper the rest of the solo. In bar 6, for example (again, we are still within the initial nine bars), Parker repeats bar 2 note-for-note, though playing the notes an octave lower than the original and shifted one beat earlier in the measure (**D'**). Bars 22 and 23, too, see the gesture of bars 2-3 repeated almost verbatim, with Parker using the lick’s final “D” to link D7 to G-minor, though the sequence is again modified by being played in the lower octave (**D''**). Bar 12 sees an even more inventive use of this phrase: using the lick twice in rapid succession, the first time to spell out the 5th of the chord at hand, the second time to spell out the chord’s 3rd (**D''**; the chord is Bb-major; its 5th is F and its 3rd is D), Parker makes repetition near-universally applicable. These five appearances of this lick are not all, as the phrase pops up at least four more times over the course of Bird’s solo (in bars 30, 47, 54, and 63).

These examples are, of course, somewhat arbitrary; one could identify any number of similar small phrases in this solo, or in fact in nearly every solo Parker plays. Yet the fact that there are so many examples to choose from is, in many ways, the point:

though the specific content of these phrases is clearly important, my aim is not so much to describe any of them individually. Nor is it merely to observe that Parker's improvisations often comprise an arsenal of stock phrases; as DeVeaux tells us, "the fact that Parker systematically repeated himself is a basic insight that jazz musicians long ago discovered for themselves."¹⁵⁶ It is rather to indicate the strategy by which Parker's solo uses these little licks to articulate itself relative to the underlying chords of the tune.

By way of contrast, let us remember how the melody of "The Way You Look Tonight" works: setting up a long-term strategy of expectation and fulfillment, the tune leverages the inherent drama of its chords to generate a melody marked by many of the hallmarks used (at least since Aristotle) to identify effective narrative: teleology, developmental variation, climax, and denouement. Now look at what Parker's solo does to those same chords. The key is this: while repetition of phrases across register, chords, and measures might outwardly suggest a theme-and-variations approach, Parker's repetition of these little riffs—"themes" might be too strong of a word for them, given that "themes" become identified as such only by virtue of their having been developed in historically-codified ways over the course of a work—incorporates little to no actual *development*. None of these phrases grows over the course of a solo into a rich, complex idea. None becomes the launch pad to an extended riff. The variation to which each is submitted seems far more a product of the lick's need to fit into different contexts than it does the marshalling of those contexts by the improviser to tell a broader story. Indeed, providing less a sense of motivic expansion than of non-developmental recurrence, the solo seems to jettison narrative development almost entirely, substituting for it a form of

¹⁵⁶ DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 377.

simple, *mere* repetition, one in which its musical components accrue little significance or meaning for having been repeated.¹⁵⁷

It is not that there are no dramatic moments in the solo; even in the short passages discussed above, there are moments of great tension and release, of surprise, of both frustration and fulfillment of expectation. But the key is that these moments come not from their being embedded in (or collectively engendering) a larger story which will ultimately make sense of them, a broader architecture that will subsume the whole. Pace the melody of “The Way You Look Tonight,” whose teleological movement forward feels inevitable, each measure, phrase, and sequence in Bird’s improvisation seems unconditioned by what has come before and uncontextualized by what follows.¹⁵⁸ Even the nine-measure passage that opens Parker’s solo, for example, striking as it is, claims no special distinction for being located at the solo’s beginning; one would not be surprised to find it at any point in one of Parker’s improvisations.

From a strategic perspective, we can use this moment to begin tracing out the broader meanings put in place by the specific relationships to form Parker’s solo develops. On one hand, the sheer pervasiveness of Parker’s modular approach dramatically recontextualizes the speed at which the music is performed. For even as the surging tempo pushes forward, this forward-directed movement is counterpoised by Parker’s rigorous *avoidance* of forward-moving storytelling. The relationship thus poses the song’s melody (if it can even be called that) as an explicit response to, rather than the

¹⁵⁷ Other than the way I am weighing them with significance, of course, a second-order weighing in which their repetition becomes significant precisely by *not* becoming significant.

¹⁵⁸ Or, strictly speaking, conditioned by different, negatively-realized mechanisms.

naïve corroboration of, the forward-directed movement of the tune's underlying rhythm. Stripped of its customary narrative assistance, tempo therefore becomes an isolated element of the music, its seemingly inescapable forward movement reduced to *mere* propulsion.

But while the untangling of tempo from narrative is one way the solo aims to disarticulate form as given, its ultimate aims are larger. What I am trying to disaggregate here are the two separate but related readings of form—both major advances from the jazz that had come earlier—that Parker's improvisations put in place. On one hand there is the introduction of new harmonic vocabulary, the altered and chromatic notes that saturate Parker's improvisations. Often identified as the major contribution of bebop to the music, these extended and altered harmonies indelibly shaped the jazz that was to follow.¹⁵⁹ So thoroughly did they suffuse the idiom, in fact, that by the mid-1950's, players not playing Parker-inspired lines sounded almost instantly outdated. It is furthermore a testament to these harmonic innovations that harmony became *the* axis against which future expansions of the idiom were measured.¹⁶⁰

Yet, as Parker's improvisations eloquently show, positioned against this is the way these moments of harmony collectively unfold along the length of the solo, the story they end up telling relative to the cycle of tensions and resolutions enabled by the harmonic movement of the tune's underlying chords. And merely to ratchet up the

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Ajay Heble's *Landing on the Wrong Note*, for whom chromaticism is this key innovation. LeRoi Jones similarly notes in *Blues People* that "although it would seem now that bop's rhythmic conceptions were its most complete innovations, during the forties many people . . . seemed to be mystified most by its harmonic ideas" (*Blues People* 196).

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, the music of Miles Davis's famous mid-60's quintet.

harmonic complexity of an improvisation while still acceding to the *narrative* prescriptions of underlying form, Parker's music argues, is nonetheless to bind oneself within a particular hermeneutic that helps establish, before the improvisation even takes place, both *what* and *how* it can mean. It is not that harmony and rhythm are not important, even crucial, to successful improvising, but rather that effective engagement with form proceeds only by coupling these harmonic techniques to a narrative approach that undoes the narrative prescriptions *of* form, and thus resists a solo's being potentially reduced *to* those prescriptions.

Which is exactly what Parker's solo does: figure his improvisation as an accumulation of individual moments of virtuosity spliced together in ever-inventive ways. The result is the dispersive fragmentation of form rather than the yoking of form to emotional swell and diminution. In so doing, Parker replaces the idea of a solo as a grand, unified gesture with one characterized by endless recontextualization. Working less to follow the narrative guidelines provided *by* the chord progression, to solo in a way that embellishes the cohesive narrative structure *it* facilitates, Parker retains the tune's underlying structure but decouples his improvisations from the narrative expectations that structure raises. The result is the detachment of narrative prescription from what Parker plays, so that as a prescriptive document, the form itself gives little indication of the swell and diminution of tension that will take place in his particular solo.

Key to this argument, however, is that the disarticulation of form (and all the attendant meanings a given relation to form entails) at stake here proves truly effective only when both of its components—the movement of form and the improvised dismantling of its narrative flow—are foregrounded in Parker's improvisation. For

though I have been highlighting the way Parker's music struggles against the narrative prescriptions of form as given, it is not as if his improvisations achieve anything resembling formlessness (were the latter even a real possibility). Quite the contrary, in fact: despite the asymmetric phrasing of the lines within them, Parker's solos still add up to lengths that are multiples of the form, and his lines very clearly still articulate, if with undoubtedly novel and creative embellishment, the underlying chords of the tune he is playing. My point is rather that despite how it may have sounded to whatever at the time, Parker's music represents less the complete destruction of form than the introduction of a new, *dialectical* approach to form, one in which form is made (or shown) to bear its own critique. And it is this figuring of an improvised solo as a multi-layered, multi-purposed text, one expressing aims that are varied, conflicting, and often contradictory, that represents Parker's radical innovation, his having pried a new, negative model out of the tradition.

To observe this dialectical approach at work, one might direct attention to what "Klaun Stance" does with what I earlier identified as "The Way You Look Tonight"'s most important moment. If the peak of this source tune's melody takes place in bars 9 and 10, where the octave drop from high-F to low F at once brings the melody to its climax, releases tension, and introduces new harmonic information, one might notice what Parker plays in the exact same spot in the form **(E)**. That's right: *nothing*. At the moment of peak tension, a moment in which the tune's chord movement would make almost anything played over it sound interesting, Parker lays out entirely.¹⁶¹ One can certainly hear the chords passing by, including the introduction of the new note, Eb, into

¹⁶¹ To "lay out" is to not play for a period of time.

the tune's harmony. Rather than exploit this moment for the narrative tension it could provide, however, rather than follow its lead, Parker plays nothing, with the result that one can hear *both* the opportunity these chords provide *and* Parker's choice to ignore it.

The power of this new dialectical reading (or rendering) of form, then, is of making form bear its own critique. It is of cracking open the prescriptive components of form to expose the standard improvisatory model, that which creates a story that repeats the conceptual gestures of the form it borrows, as only one choice out of many. As a result, form in Parker's hands gains a certain musical potency, since Parker's music clearly expands the range of form's potential expressions. At the same time, it loses a great deal of its power to lay out, before a solo is even played, a potential reading of what that solo will mean.

It is Charlie Parker's ability to relentlessly foreground both sides of this dialectic—the narrative prescriptions of form and his improvisatory disassembling of them—that keep his music largely inimitable even after his approaches to harmony and rhythm have been almost completely absorbed by the idiom. And it is also this virtuosic reading of form that radically alters what his musical strategies come to mean in a larger sense. For my ultimate argument here is not only about Parker's music *qua* music, but about Parker's music as a new and important mode of performing blackness. Tracing out *why* this disarticulation of form, *why* Parker's sundering of the connections between form and narrative (and his consequent establishment of new modes of connection between them), claims so much importance in this latter field, then, involves a small step outward, into a short discussion of jazz's particularities as an aesthetic. The crucial site, I hope to show, is the role of the body in jazz improvisation, the body realized in its multiple

capacities or modes of presence, and the relation those modes of presence, finally, have with the performance of form.

V. Voice, Form, and the Body in Jazz

At stake in this argument are (at least) two intertwined issues. First is the particular role blackness plays in the jazz aesthetic as a whole—the way, in short, that the aesthetic and the historical intertwine in the music. The second is therefore the impact Charlie Parker’s music in particular makes on this aesthetic, considered in as many contexts as possible. Both are best explained, I believe, by examining jazz, or bebop in particular, as an aesthetic taking place within the wider context of modernism.

That bebop is a modernist aesthetic is by now a somewhat standard argument.¹⁶² Both aesthetically and culturally, the classification exhibits a great deal of explanatory power. Even the few features by which I have already identified the music—its fragmentation of narrative, its pervasive intertextuality, its resistance to physical and intellectual internalization, its privileging of formal virtuosity—easily establish Parker’s corpus as a member of the wider family of modernist texts (“The Waste Land,” for example, or Pound’s *Cantos*) for which extra-textual referentiality, rhetorical juxtaposition, and formal fragmentation are also constitutive. The dynamic of cultural

¹⁶² See Lott: “Bebop, in other words, was one of the great modernisms” (Lott 602); Ramsey: “I should stress here . . . that Afro-modernism has similarities to classic (or canonical) modernism, the other experimental developments in music, literature and art that emerged in European and American metropolitan centers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Ramsey 106); Saul: “The bebop head, which became the signature of the genre, fulfilled the modernist imperative of defamiliarization” (Saul 219); even drummer Kenny Clarke: “The music wasn’t called bop . . . in fact, we had no name for the music. We called ourselves modern.” (qtd. in Ramsey 96).

hermeticism surrounding the music also echoes wider descriptions of modernism.¹⁶³ At very least, bebop's emphasis on surprise and the confounding of expectations easily fulfills Pound's modernist imperative to "make it new."

Despite these formal affinities, however, truly taking the measure of jazz's place within twentieth-century aesthetics also requires attending to jazz's distinctiveness as a modernist enterprise. For our purposes, this distinctiveness arises along two poles: the contribution of race to bebop's inherent modernism on one hand, and on the other the fact that jazz is a fundamentally *sonic* enterprise.

While both are important, I would like to start with the first. This is for the simple reason that while jazz, bebop especially, certainly demonstrates formal features deserving of the title "modernist," the very fact of their race-based origins lends very different valences *to* those formal features, that despite their being formally akin to the strategies found in other modernist works, these features—whether by intention or reception—signify differently when plotted against the axis of race. Put differently, from a historical perspective the simple acknowledgement that jazz indulges in the same types of formal experimentation one sees in other modernist works ignores the aims for which these formal strategies were used, especially as those strategies reflect economic and historical realities. The difference, I believe, centers around the term I introduced earlier, "voice." Blending the material and the historical, "voice" aims to capture the fundamental differences jazz exhibits relative to its modernist brethren: while high European and

¹⁶³ See Anatole Broyard: "[bebop] established the hipster as a keeper of enigmas, ironical pedagogue, a self-appointed exegete . . . that which you heard in bebop was always *something else*, not the thing you expected; it was always negatively derived, abstraction *from*, not *to*" ("A Portrait of the Hipster" 116).

American modernism generally used its intertextual and fragmentary techniques to trouble narrative or authorial cohesion, undermining the alleged link between corporeal author and produced artwork, jazz has worked most often in the opposite mode, borrowing sounds from without in the service of quasi-sincere expressions of personal voice.

To be sure, “voice” is a complicated notion here; from the beginning, though, let us note how the word signifies in two separate but related ways. On one hand, “voice” indicates the literal sonic emanations of a corporeal body. In this meaning, voice invokes raw sound, sound as the material result of a body’s having engaged in contexts—talking, singing, music-making—that call for sonic productions. On the other, “voice” connotes perspective, viewpoint, or opinion, what the *OED* calls “a mode of expression or point of view.” This is voice in the sense of a people’s having a voice, or a literary work’s having one.

I choose this word because jazz’s status as a recognizably African American music, with both of those terms claiming emphasis here, simultaneously engages both of these meanings. In this sense voice is simply the name for jazz’s way of using sound as a mode of cultural intervention. The way it does so, I believe, has to do with the body and its relation to sound, and in this capacity “voice” is meant to capture the primary importance of the body in jazz, an importance that is also double-sided. First, there is the very literal way that the great majority of a jazz improviser’s identifiable style—tone, timbre, feel, phrasing—directly implicate the specifics of her body: the fingers, lungs,

and embouchure collectively producing sound.¹⁶⁴ Sound, as it always does, thereby reflects and hearkens back to the ongoing set of comportments by which the lived-in body is actualized as such.

Second, and radically different, jazz as a performative aesthetic necessarily requires for its very existence the presence of the body of its producer in time and space, and in this way comes to engage the body's status as a historical signifier. Regardless of the sounds that may be coming from the body of the improviser, that is, that jazz takes place only in the moment of its being created means that the improvisatory process always foregrounds the materiality of the body. That jazz evokes the (generally black)

¹⁶⁴ I am aware that using a word like “voice” here could arguably be said to overlook the various physical and technological mediations—on one hand the actual the instruments played, which may not directly involve the bodily capacities generative of sounded, vocalized voice; on the other, the LP's, CD's and MP3's—through which sound reaches listeners. To the first issue, the applicability of this term to a non-wind instrument, for which a word like “voice” seems less appropriate, I offer two responses. First, that jazz is such a saxophone-based idiom that a great deal of “what it makes sense to say” in jazz derives from phrasing that is natural to saxophone playing, and therefore to the movement of the lungs, tongue, and mouth. Singing, too, is, important to jazz improvisation, even if that singing takes place below the audible level. When learning the music, even non-wind instrumentalists are often encouraged to sing what they play, or to not play something they cannot sing. Some musicians, in fact, like pianists Bud Powell and Keith Jarrett, sing along with their playing so loudly that their singing often becomes a distraction to listeners. Second, while the standard understanding of music sees note choice as a primarily intellectual activity and timbre and feel as a primarily physical one, there is a small body of work that is beginning to undermine this often-assumed binary. As more work is done on the phenomenology of improvisation, we will likely see more evidence of the body's importance for note choice, and therefore being to see even the parts of solos that can be transcribed as constituted partially though the material ways the improviser's body moves in the world. On this point, see Vijay Iyer's *Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics*, or David Sudnow's *Ways of the Hand*. The second issue—the way jazz is most often received through recorded media—of course opens up numerous huge and necessary questions about the role of distribution, circulation, and media itself in constituting what counts as authenticity. For some helpful work in this direction, see Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, or Bryan Wagner's *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and Police Power after Slavery*.

body in this second capacity is thereby a primary way that jazz can be read as reflecting something important or essential about African American culture writ large. This puts race, to a degree, at the core of whatever textual (i.e. “strictly” musical) meaning a given solo may produce, since regardless of the *textual* status of the sounds that issue from the improviser’s body, their very possibility for being read as text indelibly ties them to their production as “literal” (i.e. sounded) voice.¹⁶⁵ Unlike a written text, which must work to identify itself as racialized in a certain manner, a jazz solo in the very possibility of its existence implies the real existence, the unignorable *visibility*, of the racially-coded subject. As a physically coordinated set of characteristics and movements (and, to the degree an improviser achieves an identifiable style, of characteristic movements), it is the body that enables the actual sonic productions we identify as jazz. But it is also often by recourse to the body’s identity as a racially-coated entity to which those sounds are then attributed, that we identify those sounds as *jazz*.

Historically, the stakes of this structure are huge: rather than occasioning the death of the author, turning “voice” into an abstract disruption of the presumably unified source of authorship, as the radical intertextuality of high modernism is often read as

¹⁶⁵ This argument is in many ways an extension of Houston Baker’s “deformation of mastery” argument, to which I briefly alluded above. In Baker’s account, the deformation of standard cultural tropes into sounds that “[appear] monstrous and deformed . . . to the intruder” are best read as “a distinctively Afro-American sounding of events” in which the performer enacts a “loud assertion of possession” (50-52). For Baker, “the Afro-American spokesperson who would perform a deformation of mastery . . . must transform an obscene situation, a cursed and tripled metastatus, into a signal self/cultural expression. The birth of such a self is never simply a coming into being, but always, also, a release from a BEING POSSESSED” (56, original capitalization). We can see this doubleness of “voice” at work in Baker’s formulation, for whom “being possessed” indicates both literal enslavement and the “inscribed ‘otherness’ of the *con-scripted* (those who come, as necessity, *with* writing)” (53, original emphasis).

having done, jazz's intertextual mode became the very vehicle that allowed for the assertion of "voice" as a localizable, individual mode of expression. Intertextual and multi-layered, yet nonetheless always tied to the material "I" from which it issues, the jazz voice represents both a unique brand of modernism and the mode of performance always linking specific musical decisions to bodily (and racial) presentation. This is why Charlie Parker's overall approach to narrative, I am arguing, carries so much political and social weight, and why being spoken *by* form poses such a problem for him. For if an improvised performance necessarily foregrounds the body of the improviser, then both the content and form of that improvisation necessarily imply means by which that body might be read.

Put in the terms outlined above, the implied performance or hermeneutic against and within which Parker's music works—that traditional mode of reading wherein the actual sounds a musician produces are alleged to provide access to the inner life of that musician's psyche, politics, or racialized perspective on the world—operates by either confusing or conflating the two modes of "voice" at stake in any given improvisation. This expressivist mode of reception takes the material, embodied characteristics of a jazz solo—the way its sounds reflect the physical and intellectual capacities of the musician's body—and grafts them to that body's racially-recognizable exterior. The result is the subsumption of musical *capacity* (the solo as indicative of the skill of its player) to the potential signifying effects of the products *of* that capacity (the solo as text). Most obviously, this mode of reading—the hermeneutic into which most jazz solos are placed (and, it is worth remembering, to which most solos accede)—in Parker's view devalues, first, the uniqueness of a musician's capacities, by making them representative of the

musician's perspective on the world, and second, the individual body of the musician, by making it representative of blackness as a whole.

Less obvious, however, is the larger transformation through which this first occurs, which forms the more direct stakes of Charlie Parker's music. Regardless of the degree to which a given solo may be read as a story rendering the body of the musician readable along given racial coordinates, or whether it is read only as the expression of that musician's personal history regardless of race, at end this mode of reading minimizes a solo's musicality by assigning to it an essentially *non-musical* function. Making the music's connotative content outstrip its sonic one, this hermeneutic thereby ascribes to the actual sound a musician produces a *transparent materiality*, whereby sound's material presence becomes important only insofar as it can communicate the historical or emotional experience of its producer. To improvisationally conform to the prescriptions of form, then, is to allow the sound one produces to be stripped of its fullness and meaning *as sound*, to allow it to be transformed into a mere vehicle for expression, the bearer of content rather than content itself.

This is why the fragmentation of narrative—of teleological forward movement, of climax and resolution, of accession to underlying structure—becomes the crucial operation in Parker's aesthetic. For even as Parker's harmonic and rhythmic embellishments of form may have expanded (even revolutionarily so) the potential meaning of individual chord types or common chord sequences, in Parker's view these interactions with form merely modify the way the musician's body is read, perhaps lending that body a different shape or set of features, but at bottom do not—can not—address the structures by which that body becomes readable in the first place. The

narrative disruption of form, in contrast—the demonstration that form can be made to produce its own opposite—works by refusing accession to the narrative framework which reduces sound to this initial expectation of narrative communication. The issue Parker puts at stake, that is, is not only how a particular reading of form might lend interpretive shape to the body of its performer, but whether or not a given improvisation subscribes or not to the mechanisms making such an interpretive reading even possible.

If the improvisational style against which Parker's music is posed, then, works according to a process that lends racialized bodies a legitimated form of *recognizability*, Parker's music works in the opposite mode, working within these same channels to conjure from them a new mode of *unrecognizability*. Insofar as structuring a solo so that it conforms to given narrative expectations lends the body of its player recognizability within the wider culture in which that body would otherwise remain invisible, Parker's music argues, the jazz tradition allows an important avenue for presentation. But the hermeneutic coherence that results from "telling a story" also involves the major tradeoffs and reductions listed above: the reduction of sound to a non-sonic communication; the conflation of the two modes of voice (sonic production and perspective on the world); the transformation of whatever voice the participating musician does achieve to a representative token of the state, the explanation of which that musician is then made responsible for. Rather than accept these tradeoffs, Parker's music takes the materials of this tradition but refuses the reductions they entail. For clearly, the mode of reading jazz as the expression of emotional interiority or representative racialized perspective is always only a product of a historically agreed-upon set of hermeneutic codes. And rather than either accede to these codes or choose the ironic

position the situation offers, Parker's music announces that there are, on a fundamental level, other options available. Rather than improvise in a way that produces a coherently readable body, Parker's music strongly resists its being read as "telling a story" in the first place.

To be clear, it is not so much that Parker invalidates the prescriptive value of form so much as his music wrenches another possibility out of it. Just as his fragmentation of narrative still produces solos that express their underlying chords, so his assertion of unrecognizability within standard hermeneutic models always already counts as a new mode of recognizability. That Parker makes this assertion through form means that his music finally becomes another reading of form, and that it is this reading of form means that Parker's resistance to "telling a story" finally becomes the actual story his music comes to tell. What turns Parker's music into a mode of critique, however, is the substance of this reading, the fact that it reads form precisely *as* the possibility of its own undermining. Thereby rendering form as, simultaneously, the narrative expectations generated by its harmonic movements *and* the fragmented repudiation *of* those expectations, Parker makes form spell out a different mode of cultural signification, one that need not bind in any pre-given manner the body of the improviser to the sounds it produces.

In the terms I have offered, then, it is correct to a degree to say that Parker's music, through its unrelenting fragmentation of narrative, decouples the two versions of voice from a relationship that otherwise seems congenital. And one of the key accomplishments of Parker's music is that in severing the apparent link between musical sounds and cultural meaning, it puts those sounds in a position to reacquire an identity *as*

sound, as music that remains to a crucial degree untranslatable. In insisting on the irreducible presence of his music *as* music, Parker lends his sound a solidity and opacity that remain resistant to hermeneutic co-optation. Hammering a wedge between his music's sonic presence and its communicative potentials, Parker's music restores to sound an irreducible presence, one that frustrates sound's wholesale reduction to the handmaiden of immediately translatable meaning. Sundered from the expectation that they express a deeper essence, bebop sounds express precisely the fact that sound *cannot* express all there is to express about the bodies and experiences of its makers. In insisting on the hermeneutic opacity of his music, Parker suggests that sound itself can be creative and virtuosic without necessarily succumbing to the connotative prescriptions under which it might be read.

And because the two modes of bodily presence at work in jazz—roughly, the body as producer of sound and the body as racially-signified object—stand on opposite sides of this newly-instituted chasm between sound and culture, the opacity that characterizes Parker's musical sound then comes to equally characterize the body of the improviser. The result is a fullness of bodily presence, of the body being made present as unique and distinctive in a non-reducible way. What Parker's music says is that the body of the improviser will always retain a material dimension not subsumable to, or forever evasive of, whatever modes of racial interpretation prevail at any given moment. Regardless of the degree to which a jazz performance may render its player's body understandable, visible, or legible within racial coordinates, that body can always say, in an *absolute* sense, "you don't know me." The illuminating comparison here is to those (many) modes of black performance that employ irony as a primary strategy. Rather than

hiding behind the music, projecting a visual identity to which his “real personality” may not accord, Parker insists on his personal and material presence while not allowing that presence to imply a communicable depth of character. Sundering the two notions of voice, Parker remains visible the whole time, while simultaneously insisting, *musically*, that absolutely nothing can be said about the nature of this visible identity.

The key, however, is the way that Parker nonetheless makes this detachment of sound from hermeneutic expectation, the claim that his music is not reducible to a statement about blackness, speak precisely *as* a mode of performing blackness. For, performing an identifiably African American music in a body still identifiable as Black, it is not as if Parker’s insistence that his music be read against historically-available modes of “telling a Black story” somehow makes race disappear from the situation, reassuring as that prospect might seem. The point, therefore, is not that Parker’s music “succeeds” in any enduring way in sonically detaching itself from the racially-coated exterior of the body from which it emerges, for regardless of (or perhaps because of) their musical refusal to speak for blackness writ large, these sounds employ their ostensive detachment from the body precisely as a new mode of attaching themselves to that body. What is important, however, is not whether or not Parker manages to banish race from the equation, but the degree to which his performative refusal to unify his sounds into a translatable story about blackness works both to realize and to open up new possibilities for what “blackness” can mean or even not-mean. For insofar as Parker sonically poses blackness as a condition *not* synecdochally revealed in sound, “blackness” thereby becomes a mark of absolute, not relative, illegibility; it is through this illegibility that Parker modifies the tradition as given.

On one hand, that his music cannot be read as an absolute alternative to the hermeneutic to which it responds is evidenced by the fact that Parker's performance of musical illegibility works in one sense as a tool for financial gain. For, as DeVaux describes, the more hermetic bebop *seemed*, the more profitable it became: "the most visible signs of [bebop's] resistance—the subcultural wardrobe, the impenetrable lingo, the refusal to play the expected role of entertainer—defined a place for bop in the marketplace."¹⁶⁶ (That most of its profits went to feed Parker's heroin addiction is a different story.) In this Parker's aesthetic traffics in some of the most traditional modes of black presentation available: those that see the term itself as being intimately informed by its circulation in the economic world. In coming to signify difference, recognizable resistance to the dominant aesthetic order, to signify, finally, a kind of *readable* illegibility, Parkers' music certainly takes advantage of the long tradition by which Black music is read as "the unknowable."

Yet at the same time it trades in the expectation that blackness be *the* confounding of expectations, Parker's music also radically limits the reach of those expectations, and, consequently, expands the range of what *both* "blackness" and "jazz" mean. Inasmuch as his music actively repudiates being read as a window into internal character or perspective, Parker makes "blackness" a condition available and present to both sonic and visual modes of recognition, but, crucially, *reducible* to neither of them. Which means that *readable* illegibility is only part of the story, for, located in between and coordinated through divergent modes of perception and interpretation, "blackness" in Parker's music becomes a non-originary condition that exists in only a functional sense,

¹⁶⁶ DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 24.

not a fundamental one, a fundamental, non-readable absence of legibility.¹⁶⁷ And in maintaining a non-co-optable presence of sound (even partially non-co-optable even as “non-co-optable sound”), in positing sound as the negative refusal of accession to any given hermeneutic (even the hermeneutic that reads it precisely *as* this negative refusal), Parker’s music retains the possibility of new modes of creation and presentation.

Given this, we might mark Parker’s moment as that in which jazz became something other, or something more, than race music. Rather, it became, in a sense, exactly what it was—a difficult music playable only by those with near-virtuosic talent. It was not the inner soul of blackness finally speaking forth; it was not even (or even fully) a product reducible to historical circumstances; it was the product of a non-representative cabal of talented musicians, musicians whose music announced that while they happened to be black, that need not be the primary metric by which they were measured.

From a strictly aesthetic perspective, Parker’s musical accomplishments rewrote the standards by which improvised music could (or, perhaps, should) be evaluated. While many of the musicians, poets, and other artists in his wake responded by taking up only the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary he developed, the more radical of his devotees took (whether intentionally or not) Parker’s development of form as an aesthetic challenge. Ornette Coleman’s free jazz, John Coltrane’s “sheets of sound,” the wide-open

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Gates’ “‘blackness’ is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not have an essence; as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity” (“Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext” 162), or Fred Moten’s description of blackness as a “transference, a carrying or crossing over, that takes place on the bridge of lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom, that interinanimates the body and its ephemeral if productive force, that interarticulates the performance and the reproductive reproduction it always already contains and which contains it” (*In the Break* 18).

music of Miles Davis's mid-60's group: all share an insistence on the opacity of sound itself. In the larger realm of black performance, Parker's legacy—the detachment of sonic presence from its alleged ability to communicate a depth of experience, and the attendant foregrounding of sound that actively resists the conscriptions by which it would be read—proved to impact a host of other media, as well as modes of black identity in general. In so doing, it left those who succeeded Parker both a powerful gift and a powerful challenge. The gift, of course, was Parker's having exploded the codes that tied sound to certain prescribed modes of being read, proving, definitively, that the sonic as such always represents a viable site for disrupting the standard modes of racial reception.

Yet Parker's answer to this potential conscription—to produce music that through its disarticulation of form poses blackness as something *apart* from sound—also poses a potential problem to artists. For once the alleged link between musical sound and racial identity, or even emotional interiority, has been sundered, artists who then desired to employ sound, or representations of sound, to convey an idea of blackness (whatever that concept might mean) would need to imagine more complicated, creative, and thoughtful ways of doing so. For stripped of its apparent communicative transparency, such ostensibly communicative methods of engaging sound could be exposed as naïve, ineffectual, or even harmful.

From the poetic perspective, which will occupy the final chapter of this dissertation, Parker's music posed a problem for those poets interested in working out a jazz-inspired relationship to the world. This is because Bird's music denies the mere poetic imitation of "jazzy" sounds the meanings it had prior to Parker. For if Parker's sounds became most revelatory the moment they resisted their potential transformation

into direct signifiers of inner emotional or larger social experience, then direct poetic recreation of these sounds could hardly hope to recuperate this function, and would in fact merely collapse the divides between sound, meaning, and appearance his music works so hard to erect. Or if it could, it would have to do so in a manner that reframed the very status of poetic imitation. That this challenge proved also to be an opportunity for rethinking some of the fundamental assumptions underlying lyric poetry as a whole is testified to by the enormously creative responses witnessed in the poetry emerging in Parker's wake. Chapters Four and Five, then, will examine two of the most provocative and generative readings of what a "post-Parker" lyric might look, sound, and feel like.

Klaun Stance

By Charlie Parker

SAVOY 2201

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Handwritten annotations in pink:

- A, B, C, D, C' (Staff 1)
- C'', D' (Staff 2)
- E (Staff 3)
- C''' (Staff 4)
- D''' (Staff 6)
- C''' (Staff 6)

Chord symbols and other markings:

- F, D7, G-, C7 (Staff 1)
- F, D7, G-, C7 (Staff 2)
- C-, F7, Bb, Bb (Eb7) (Staff 3)
- F, C7, F, C7 (Staff 4)
- F, D7, G-, C7 (Staff 5)
- F, D7, G-, C7 (Staff 6)
- C-, F7, Bb, Bb- (Eb7) (Staff 7)
- F, Ab-, G-, C7, F, Bb-, Eb7 (Staff 8)

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CHAPTER FOUR

An Illusive Game to Bag: Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama* and a Non-Representational Jazz Poetics

A footnote explains “that ancient Greek music . . . depended upon its character as an accessory to verse to make its imitative meaning clear . . . as far as we know, all music originally served such an accessory function.”¹⁶⁸ The essay from which it comes, Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” has of course long been standard stock in the modernist critic’s toolkit, so much so that its claims are by now both familiar and familiarly problematized. In retrospect, Greenberg may be fairly criticized for his inability to anticipate aesthetic practices like jazz, which can legitimately be described as both “avant-garde” and “folk art,” and jazz poetry, which arguably blends the examples—“a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley Song”¹⁶⁹—whose simple presence ostensibly testifies to the insurmountable chasm separating avant-garde from kitsch. More troubling are the problems caused by the medial separation of Greenberg’s theory—that “in turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his own craft”¹⁷⁰—for the simple reason that

¹⁶⁸ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

the history of Western poetry has nearly always held “musicality” to be one of the medium’s constitutive components.¹⁷¹

So why do I raise it? Because despite the bizarre history implied by the footnote above—one doubts many anthropologists would be compelled by the claim that poetry not only precedes music (“all music,” at that), but actually delivers it into the world—Greenberg’s ideas do help situate the conceptual terrain faced by the poets I discuss in this chapter. The same footnote, after all, observes that “music” is the “abstract art . . . which avant-garde poetry has tried so much to emulate.”¹⁷² This, of course, is also true for non-avant-garde work; and while the historical relationship between poetry and music has taken turns both cooperative and antagonistic, the enduring force of the comparison does perhaps suggest that a turn *to* “the medium of [one’s] own craft” often involves, precisely, a turn *away* from the presumed form of that medium.

Musicality, of course, is not music. Or, it is not quite music, or not always music. Indeed, for the poets addressed in this chapter and the next, conceptually untangling the two—musicality and music—often proved an unwelcome task. This was in part a reflection of the fact that these were both poets for whom the music inspiring their poetry (and to which their poetry often aspired) was not “music” considered in the abstract, but an actual, extant body of sound: that having emerged from Charlie Parker’s horn. Of

¹⁷¹ The history of Greenberg’s critical reception is, of course, far too long and detailed to be traced out here. For two canonical readings of Greenberg on the issues of aesthetic essentialism briefly raised here, see T.J. Clark’s “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” and the response from Michael Fried, “How Modernism Works.” For a relatively recent and useful rebuttal of Greenberg’s theory of medial fusion and separation, one that relates more directly to the argument I make here, see Daniel Albright’s *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*.

¹⁷² Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 6.

course, calling Parker's music, too, *merely* a body of sound also misses much of its wider impact. While one would be hard-pressed to find a jazz musician alive today whose style does not bear traces of Parker, the music's conceptual effects clearly extend beyond the merely musical. Chapter Three addressed some of these; for our purposes, most prominent was the fact that this was a music that radically reshuffled the coordinates tying music and Blackness, if not sound in general and identity in general, to one another. For many of the artists who followed, especially those whose work bore explicit ties to the tradition of Black music, the challenge lay not only in confronting a new set of sounds, but in learning to navigate a new conceptual landscape.

This chapter aims to examine one such poetic mapping of this landscape: Langston Hughes's 1961 poem *Ask Your Mama: 12 Modes for Jazz*. Specifically, I read Hughes as inaugurating a foundational response to the question Charlie Parker leaves to his aesthetic offspring: "How does one represent what explicitly eschews representation?" In thinking through this question, Hughes comes to pose a deep hermeneutic instability, if not a constitutive unknowability, at the heart of his project. For Hughes, the problem lies in the poetic medium: *Ask Your Mama* sees the division between poetry's semantic and phenomenological (or musical) capabilities, if not the inherent limitations of language itself, as engendering a situation that radically strains poetry's ability to communicate ideas, feelings, or experiences in a straightforward manner. The issue is therefore either capturing or creating a stable notion of identity without falling prey to the philosophical or political pitfalls of seeing language, poetry, or music as straightforwardly or predictably communicative. In Hughes one sees traditional

modes of aesthetic communication dismantled, dissolved into parts without the poet's providing a hermeneutic strategy for pulling those parts together in a coherent way.

To be sure, Parker's music inspired plenty of poetry. Yet on the whole, poets tended to approach it more as a source for vocabulary or internal subject matter than a call to reevaluate the nature of poetic musicality itself.¹⁷³ At the risk of being overly schematic, we could say that the general "Charlie Parker poem" tends to move in one of three directions, largely distinguishable by the way the poems figure the signifier "Charlie Parker."

The first of these sees "Charlie Parker" internalized as a specific *body of sounds*, with the corresponding mode of response being what one might call "imitative." See, for example, Ray Bremser's "Blues for Bonnie":

zoo.

a dam-giraff.

whallop, a
lalapalooza floozie
on via flamina piazza
masticating a ruddy pizza
pie --
pie-pie.

[. . .]
but
a hubbalubba drum, hellofa biff-bam hallabaloo
(fountainebleu in the
background.)

¹⁷³ As Sascha Feinstein asks, "If Charlie Parker could read the thousands of poems written in his honor, would he be delighted enough by the sheer volume to overlook the weakness of the verse itself?" (Feinstein, "Yusef Komunyakaa's 'Testimony' and the Humanity of Charlie Parker, 757).

dribble sinbah,
tic.¹⁷⁴

Jazz-wise, the goal here is to announce one's link to Parker's music by employing sonic effects (rhythmic, phonemic, accentual) that allegedly lead a poem to *sound like jazz*. Of course, whether lyric as a genre is actually capable of realizing the extreme degree of onomatopoeia necessary to achieving this goal (the goal being, essentially, to turn lyric into an ersatz audio recording) remains a generally unexamined question. To this end, it is more accurate to describe this imitative mode less as repeating the actual sounds of Parker's horn, Kenny Clarke's drums, or another bebopper's instrument than as trafficking in the poetic codes (many in fact visual) that quickly came to signify a poem's "sounding like Charlie Parker."

The second standard post-Parker trope lies in the many attempts made to compose according to procedures labeled "improvisatory." Though such poems too take many forms, most influential have been those for which "improvisation" equals a sort of free, unmediated spontaneity. Alan Ginsberg's famous directive, "first thought, best thought" captures the idea well; as Ginsberg describes, improvisation is "like a fountain of instantaneous inspiration that's available to everybody. All you have to do is turn on the radio or put on a record or pick up an axe yourself and blow." In retrospect, descriptions like Ginsberg's represent rather easy objects of ridicule. Certainly, their resemblance to the actual experience of playing jazz is minimal, at best. Yet to their defense (racial problems notwithstanding¹⁷⁵), the adequation of poetry to actual music here is arguably

¹⁷⁴ Bremser, *Poems of Madness*, 15-16.

¹⁷⁵ Most damning in this regard are the claims that viewing jazz as the unrestrained abandon of super-ego traffics in the discourses of primitivism to which African American aesthetics have been submitted since nearly their genesis; discourses by African

less of a goal than adopting this mythic, idealized view of improvisation as a countercultural symbol is.

The third major mode of poetic engagement with Parker lies in poems' venerating "Charlie Parker" as a Christ-like figure of African American heroics, "Jesus saves" syncretized as "Bird lives." Figuring Parker as the savior who sacrificed his body so that his sounds could redeem us, these types of poems tend to, as Sascha Feinstein describes, "praise [Parker] with embarrassingly hagiographic detail," often "[relying] on clichés, most obviously 'Bird lives!' but also 'Blow, Bird, blow!' as well as a host of dreadful ornithological metaphors."¹⁷⁶ A relatively well-known example might be Gregory Corso's 1955 poem "Requiem for 'Bird' Parker, Musician":

gone
BIRD was goner than sound
broke the barrier with a horn's coo
BIRD was higher than moon
BIRD hovered on a roof top, too
like a weirdy monk he drooped
horn in hand, high above all
lookin' down on them people
with half-shut weirdy eyes
saying to himself; "yeah, yeah"
like nothin' meant nothing' at all

Despite the earnestness with which all three models claim Parker's music as an inspiration, that so many of the poems they produced retain an interest more as historical

American artists are inevitably described as more honest, intuitive, and, generally speaking, lacking the inhibitions that Western civilization has imposed on its White inhabitants. These implications, which, as long-standing tropes, valorize "blackness" as the antidote to repressive civilization, certainly cannot be ignored. For an extended critique of many Beat-era appropriations of jazz, see Jon Panish's *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*. Also see David Yaffe's *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing*.

¹⁷⁶ Feinstein, "Yusef Komunyakaa's 'Testimony' and the Humanity of Charlie Parker," 757.

documents than aesthetic ones does suggest that despite their superficially radical appearances, many bebop-inspired poems nonetheless demonstrate some rather conservative approaches to poetizing. The issue, at end, is Charlie Parker, and the degree to which poems are able to absorb his more fundamental impacts. Despite the degree to which Parker introduced new sounds—new notes, rhythms, and phrases—into the jazz idiom, the conceptual force of his music emerges, I argued in Chapter Three, not from those sounds and rhythms considered in isolation, but in the way these discrete moments of virtuosity refuse to cohere into the larger narrative structure prescribed by the song forms over which Parker’s improvisations take place. This fragmentation does two things. First, it makes the sounds of Parker’s solos opaque to the hermeneutic model which presumes a jazz solo to be “telling a story” about the musician performing it—an unmediated expression of that musician’s inner psychological state, or, more problematically, a representative statement of racial identity. Second, it uses improvisation to generate a new, negative reading of the song forms underlying his solos. Now, it is not that the result eschews all claims to be making a statement about racial identity. Rather, the musical statements that Parker makes redescribe what sound might be able to say about race by transforming “form” itself into a multi-layered, dialectical phenomenon. In his work, “blackness” moves from being the phenomenon directly articulated in improvised sound to a phenomenon defined as the *evasion* of hermeneutic stability. In this context, sound comes to describe race as that phenomenon which sound cannot describe.

The issue for lyric is then the following: if Parker’s music succeeds at decoupling the inherited links tying musical sound to culturally representative function, so that

sounds could no longer be read as immediately revelatory of either a musician's "inner self" or a larger race-based perspective on the world, then poetically *imitating* Parker's sounds would reinscribe the very structure of reference Parker's music works so hard to undermine, making poetic sound relevant only as representative of an essentially *non-poetic* experience. Likewise with the naïve models of poetic improvisation, which disregard the fact that Parker's is always an improvised reading of a pre-given form, and in so doing conceal the dialectic argument at the heart of Parker's aesthetic. While both processes might yield poems that capture Parker's cultural importance, or even Parker's personal character, neither would have learned much from Parker's actual music.

The importance of Hughes, then, lies in his poetics' having registered the complex ways in which Parker's music calls jazz-inspired lyric to revise some of its most fundamental assumptions. Because his project fundamentally stems from the separation Parker's music imposes between the body understood as a set of sound-producing capacities and the body viewed as racially-marked exterior, I argue, their pairing reimagines the relationship between poetic musicality and representative capacity. That jazz has often been the figure for African American identity, that is, necessarily lends both poetries a wider import when each offers a new way of thinking about what and how jazz might mean. *Ask Your Mama* registers this condition, given that a large majority of the ways we think about jazz's meaning for poetics have come from Hughes's earlier work.¹⁷⁷ Yet on this issue Hughes's poem is not necessarily sanguine. In the ten years

¹⁷⁷ Indeed, by 1951, Hughes had already secured his position as chief poetic chronicler of African American music. Having spent the previous three decades forging the sounds and structures of Black music into a sophisticated poetic voice, Hughes had earned an international reputation whose consequence was also to ensconce those sounds and structures as legitimate objects of poetic attention. Given his ties to jazz, it was perhaps

separating *Ask Your Mama* from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, the concept has clearly undergone some expansion: while *Montage* limited its version of “African-American-ness” to a localized, temporally-specific voice of 1950’s Harlem, in *Ask Your Mama* it has transformed into a dispersed, trans-national web of experiences, a simultaneity unlocatable to a single place or point in time.

The shift from a national to a diasporic concept of ethnic or cultural identity is a considerable one, and it has become a major object of theorization in the past twenty years or so. Yet the move also saddles *Ask Your Mama* with a number of difficult problems. The biggest of these plays out as a struggle to come up with a way to name, capture, or express a version of African American-ness that will tie together the hugely divergent range of people and experiences that constitute the African diaspora. On a formal level, this goal leads *Ask Your Mama* to develop a number of experimental techniques rarely seen in Hughes’s poetry. The result is, clearly, a strikingly new mode of poetic musicality, as well as a new mode of poetic representation. Yet while I (and a number of poets who followed) find these new developments both provocative and productive, *Ask Your Mama* itself portrays them as having emerged from, and arguably capturing, only a repeated sense of failure. If the conundrum of Charlie Parker’s music is that it becomes most revelatory at the moment it refuses reduction to its representative value, then for Hughes, the music that counts—the music that can somehow capture or produce an experience that unifies subjects dispersed across space and time—becomes music *Ask Your Mama*’s readers cannot ever hear. And while the poem itself offers (at

inevitable that the first great statement of bebop poetics would emerge from Hughes’s pen in the form of the 1951 sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

least) two different kinds of music, both remain permanently hobbled, communicatively incomplete.

What sets Hughes apart from other so-called “jazz poets,” then, is that, for Hughes, “jazz” is both figure and technique, a set of recognizable sounds bearing an extensive social history and a larger approach to aesthetic form. These two aspects are not necessarily rendered separately: in *Ask Your Mama*, “jazz” works both as the primary symbol for African American aesthetics and, crucially, the social history of its having served as this symbol. That Hughes’s earlier poetry has figured largely in this history is not lost on this poem; in some ways *Ask Your Mama* sees Hughes reckoning with the history of ways his work has turned to jazz as figure and as technique. Again, the assessment is not always encouraging; this poem is more ambivalent than almost any in Hughes’s career about poetry’s capacity to capture or recreate the power of Black music, and, even more alarmingly, the capacity of Black music itself to effect actual, meaningful change for those who identify with it. Indeed, lurking behind *Ask Your Mama*’s creative use of music is a worry that such an identification may at end leave listeners with only the simulacrum of freedom rather than legitimate social advance.

What Hughes’s experience shares with the music of Charlie Parker is the performance of unknowability, of hermeneutic undecidability, and the ensuing resistance to projecting a clearly readable self. Hughes thereby works to undermine any investment in concreteness, whether that be concreteness of voice or concreteness of image. In *Ask Your Mama*, typeface, visual structure, and semantic compression (among other techniques) are used to put ostensibly straightforward phrases in hermeneutically ambiguous contexts, illustrating a willingness to produce poetry out of a hesitancy about

the powers of poetic representation. It is, importantly, not that Hughes abandons the imitative and improvisatory modes through which jazz-inspired poetics seems to be called to work. It is rather that he employs these *topoi* while simultaneously thinking through their conceptual implications, poetically reflecting on what it means for a poem to adopt either as an explicit response to Parker. While Hughes thus helps trace out a loose theory of poetic musicality, he does so without losing a sense of music's importance to lyric *qua* lyric, not just lyric *qua* music. In so doing, his work allows bebop to provide poetry not only with new ways to sound, but new ways to mean, especially as that mode of meaning ties music to racial representation. Together, Parker and Hughes help us make new sense of three phenomena: the way poetry relates to musical sounds external to it; the way poetry understands itself as a form of music; and the prospects for racial representation this reevaluation makes possible.

It is to the poetry that we now turn.

II. Musicality Minus Music: *Ask Your Mama* and the Sounds of the Unhearable

Let us start with the title. *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*: the barb opens up what Scott Saul calls a “devastating dialogue of insult,”¹⁷⁸ ensnaring its audience in a poem-long session of “the dozens,” the ritualized vernacular game. The phrase sets the stakes high, summoning the dozens’ most potent object of insult, and betraying more than a hint of sexual conquest (“ask your mother where she was last night”). Sexual innuendos extend throughout, especially when we remember the apocryphal story in which “jazz” originates as a synonym for “jizz.”¹⁷⁹ Yet this opening effrontery is also overblown, over-

¹⁷⁸ Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 7.

¹⁷⁹ See Merriam (1998).

impudent; as a psychic strategy, its provocation seems simultaneously contrived to conceal its more tempering insinuations. Chief among these is the fact that “ask your mama” also summons the familial politics of slavery, whereby the condition of the slave followed the condition of the mother. In this the phrase spits back, spitefully, the long-time, painful, non-answer given to African Americans asking the central question of identity: Who Am I? As the poem’s final mood notes, “THE TELL ME OF THE MAMA / IS THE ANSWER TO THE CHILD.”¹⁸⁰

Just as telling is the “12 Moods for Jazz.” As critics have observed, “12” links “the dozens” to the 12-bar blues, conjoining two vernacular traditions, one associated with artifice and the other with authenticity.¹⁸¹ The suggestion casts a long shadow over much of Hughes’s earlier career. The bitter hint is that the apparent “authenticity” of the blues—the “authenticity” for which much of Hughes’s *oeuvre* has been praised—is at end simply another performance, even a joke. Twelve is also the number of notes in a musical octave, further indicating the poem’s marshaling of musical resources.

Let us continue. Why “moods”? Even at close examination, the poem’s twelve sections do not seem to be organized around discrete emotional states. For “mood,” the *OED* also lists “a form or set of forms of a verb in an inflected language.” Observe the imperative of the poem’s title: the modality of verbs—the shifting of language itself—will be crucial here. The word also describes, more archaically, “in late medieval music: the ratio of the duration of a large to a long, or a long to a breve, in the rhythm of a

¹⁸⁰ Hughes, “Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz,” 524.

¹⁸¹ As both Scott Saul and Larry Scanlon point out, Hughes used the one piece of extant sociological literature on the dozens—social psychologist John Dollard’s 1939 study “The Dozens: The Dialectic of Insult”—as a point of departure for the poem.

piece.” “Mood” is a synonym for musical “mode,” a scale based on a single chord degree; it also appears frequently as a descriptor of classical music. The preposition “for” complicates things even more, confusing the intended relationship between the words and the music. Are the “moods” there “for jazz” in the sense of enabling or augmenting the jazz in the poem, becoming the accompaniment to their own (musical) accompaniment? Is the poem a set of “moods for jazz” in the sense of “sonata for piano,” turning “jazz” into the poem’s figurative instrument? Or is it the opposite: does “for” suggest that the “12 moods” are offered in honor of jazz, a paean presented in thanks to the music inspiring it?

Finally, there is the way the closing phrase evocatively echoes Whitman, “Moods for Jazz” as Hughes’s “Leaves of Grass.” Hughes’s interest in Whitman is of course longstanding. A quarter-century earlier, Hughes doubled down on Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” with his own, “I, Too, Sing America,” echoing the earlier poet’s sentiment that “America” remains a song worth singing while simultaneously stretching its listeners’ ears to hear voices ignored by Whitman’s. Here we see a similar borrowing, with “Moods for Jazz” replicating not only the syntax of “Leaves of Grass” (indeterminate plural, ambiguous preposition, terminal noun), but its sound, too, with “jazz” rhyming with “grass.” On a thematic level, *Ask Your Mama* certainly engages the familiar Whitmanian problem of articulating, on the level of form, a conceptual relationship that links the individual with the collective. As before, Hughes’s adoption of this problem sees him tightening his range, abandoning Whitman’s “America” to focus more directly on the nation’s African American constituents. Yet *Ask Your Mama*’s particular development of this idea also sees the poem dramatically enlarging Whitman’s

geographical scope, reaching beyond national boundaries to recast “African American” as an international and diasporic category instead of a native one.

Begun in 1960 in response to the riots at that year’s Newport Jazz Festival, and published in 1961, *Ask Your Mama* remains what Larry Scanlon calls “Hughes’s last major poem,” Arnold Rampersad “the most ambitious single poem of [Hughes’s] life,” and Eric Sundquist “Hughes at his most ‘revolutionary.’”¹⁸² Formally, the poem is as difficult as any Hughes wrote. As my brief unpacking of the title shows, the poem deploys a dizzying drama of semantic compression. Overloading words and phrases with meanings and implications, *Ask Your Mama* allows connotations to inhabit states of permanent contradiction and irresolvable tension. The poem as a whole integrates dozens of names of people and places, American and international, without spelling out what they all have in common. Songs and languages appear and disappear, jostling for position. The end of the poem offers a list of twelve “Liner notes for the poetically unhep,” clearly meant, in the double gesture of parody and homage, to signify on Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”¹⁸³ *Ask Your Mama* is, in this sense, a landmark of African American experimentalism: with its doubled columns, deep compression of reference, strange typeface, visual symbols, complicated sense of time, and new approach to poetic musicality, the poem literally precludes being consumed in a linear, straightforward manner. The overall experience is far more one of fragmentation, separation, and ambivalence than it is of consistency or coalition. Günter Lenz explains: “as with the

¹⁸² See Scanlon (2000), Rampersad (1989), and Sundquist (1996). For a reading of *Ask Your Mama* that contextualizes the poem as a response to Newport, see Scott Saul’s *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*.

¹⁸³ Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 123.

wide range of musical idioms used and reappropriated in *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes does not attempt to create or evoke an all-inclusive ‘blend’ or synthesis.”¹⁸⁴ Anticipating, perhaps, the American avant-garde poetries that would follow, the poem radically substitutes difference for the expected sameness, “[refusing],” in Saul’s words, “the exceptional, lyrical ‘I’ in favor of a more floating voice.”¹⁸⁵

In this, one can see in *Ask Your Mama* the culmination of a career-long trajectory, one that sees Hughes moving from an investment in direct, all-inclusive representation to a mode of poetizing that explodes the very possibility of that sort of representation. The opening moment of this evolution might be Hughes’s first major poem, 1921’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In that poem, the plain initial article (“*The Negro*”) and easily-assumed speakerly “I” implicitly accord the poem the authority to identify and name an emblematic, pervading essence that links people across time and space. Hughes’s Marxist turns in the 1930’s and 1940’s saw him moving to speak for the proletariat mass, though Hughes’s version of this proletariat clearly incorporated a racial tint absent from much Marxist thought of the period (this absence being so effectively demonstrated in the “Brotherhood” section of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*). Even *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, while refusing the easy transparency of voice often imputed to black music,¹⁸⁶ nonetheless proceeds by convening a sequence of stand-alone poems that sustain voices generally attributable to single, identifiable speakers.

¹⁸⁴ Lenz, “‘The Riffs, Runs, Breaks, and Distortions of the Music of a Community in Transition’: Redefining African American Modernism and the Jazz Aesthetic in Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama*.”

¹⁸⁵ Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t*, 136.

¹⁸⁶ As I argued earlier, “voice” in a jazz context works by linking the actual sounds issuing from improvising bodies with the perspective those sounds are potentially read as representing.

Ask Your Mama, in contrast, breaks this model, actively disallowing the possibilities of singular representation, and offering a clear affront to those used to hearing Hughes as the authentic voice of the unmediated vernacular. As I discuss in what follows, the focal point of this reconception of the powers of representation is *Ask Your Mama*'s engagement with music on levels both formal and thematic. The key ambivalence adheres in the poem's pervasive worries about representing music as *the* synecdochal figure for African American culture. This worry takes multiple forms, and engages both implications of the previous sentence: *Ask Your Mama* worries about figuring *music* as the synecdochal figure for African American culture, and worries about *figuring* music as this synecdochal figure. Formally, this ambivalence works itself out in *Ask Your Mama*'s use of poetic language. As noted above, the poem's semantic compression is so dramatic that implications of individual words and phrases often come to undermine one another. Connotations clash; innuendos tangle. This strategy proves simultaneously propitious and cynical. Propitious because it grants words the power to work on multiple levels and in multiple ways, enacting, linguistically speaking, the strategy of hermeneutic opacity or dialectic uncertainty heard in the music of Charlie Parker. Cynical, however, because it leaves words constantly threatening to undercut themselves, therefore making them untrustworthy. While words are all the poem is made of (or almost all it is made of—non-linguistic symbols do occasionally appear), words offer both limited representative capabilities and the permanent threat of self-subversion. That this is the case represents a source of persistent trepidation, frustration, and, towards the end, fatigue.

Yet even as the poem's most explicit emotions are frustration and bitterness, the new formal ground it breaks also offers a host of tantalizing possibilities for rethinking poetic musicality. Most directly, in coping with the worries articulated above—that investing in music as redemptive experience leaves African Americans with the simulacrum of freedom rather than legitimate social advance, and that the simple attempt to imitate music poetically pushes music into a representative economy that maintains stereotypes even as it purports to dissolve them—*Ask Your Mama* comes to develop a version of musicality in which the poem's descriptions of music come to generate the same effects as the music it describes. By doing so, however, the poem renders music itself—or at least music as a set of sounds—irrelevant. This is, in a sense, musicality *sans* music, a musicality that works only as long as it can permanently distance itself from music. Only by keeping its music unheard, that is, can *Ask Your Mama* continue to grant music the power to unify the disparate formal and thematic fragments that make up the poem. In my previous chapter, I argued that the music of Charlie Parker poses the question, “How does one represent what explicitly eschews representation?” In what follows, I will use *Ask Your Mama* to formulate one version of an answer.

Taking up twelve sections (a move that again twines “the dozens” to the 12-bar blues), *Ask Your Mama* for most of its length proceeds as two simultaneous columns of text. On the left lie its more traditionally “poetic” lines, rendered throughout in ALL CAPS. On the right stretches a script of musical directions, rendered in italics and (arguably) cued to accompany these “poetic” lines. Here is an example, from the second mood, “RIDE, RED, RIDE”:

I WANT TO SEE MY MOTHER MOTHER
WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED UP YONDER

*Maracas
continue*

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
TELL ME HOW LONG –
MUST I WAIT?

*rhythms
of
“When*

CAN I GET IT NOW?
ÇA IRA! ÇA IRA!
OR MUST I HESITATE?
IRA! BOY, IRA!

*the
Saints
Go
Marching
In”*

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
TU ABUELA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?
LOST IN CASTRO’S BEARD?

*until
the
piano supplies*

TU ABUELA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?
BLOWN SKY HIGH BY MOUNT PELÉE?
¿DÓNDE ESTÁ? ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?
WAS SHE FLEEING WITH LUMUMBA?
(GRANDPA’S GRANDMA’S GRANNY
ALWAYS TOOK THE OTHER SIDE.)
A LITTLE RUM WITH SUGAR.
AY, MORENA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?
GRANADINE GRANADA OR

*a softly
lyrical
calypso
joined now
by the
flute
that ends
in a high
discordant*

DE SANGRE ES LA GOTA?

cry.

There are multiple observations to be made about this structure. The first and most notable is that it poses a relationship of poetry to music wholly new in Hughes’s career. For, pace the huge bulk of Hughes’s previous poems, the “poetic” lines here make no claims to spell out a music that resembles jazz, or indeed any recognizable form of black music. As Jean Wagner, one of *Ask Your Mama*’s earliest critics noted, “the poems in it no longer strive through their own means alone to reproduce the jazz orchestration.”¹⁸⁷ Their link to African American music proper comes by way of description, not performance; what makes them musical in a recognizably African

¹⁸⁷ Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, 464.

American idiom is only the fact of their inhabiting the same page as the poem's musical cues. In other words, the simple presence of a musical script on the page makes these poetic lines reliant for their musicality on external intervention. From this perspective, the poem thus keeps music and poetry separate, rendering them simultaneously but dividing their duties.

The second observation to be made here is that the poem's having unburdened its poetic lines from the need to sonically imitate black music seems to have enabled a *visual* freedom also rarely seen in Hughes's work up to this point (Hughes's 1931 "Advertisement for the Waldorf- Astoria" being a notable exception).¹⁸⁸ Even briefly examining the poem, in fact, identifies *Ask Your Mama*'s visuals as its most distinctive feature. The fact that the poem's "poetic" column appears in ALL CAPS, for example; the poem's many indentations and offset print; most strikingly, the moment in the poem's sixth mood, "HORN OF PLENTY," in which a left-justified list of black entertainers is matched with enough "\$\$\$\$", and then "¢" symbols, to create a right-justified block of text (one whose musical accompaniment is marked "TACIT," meaning no music): all these suggest that, in Meta DuEwa Jones's words, the poem's typography "makes the lyric sing and shout on the page, shaping sound as a *visible* medium."¹⁸⁹ In so doing the poem redefines what "for jazz" might mean, suggesting that the music may inhabit sensuous modes beyond the audial.

¹⁸⁸ For a reading that engages specifically with the visual aspects of Hughes's Waldorf-Astoria poem, see Lesley Wheeler's *Voicing American Poetry*.

¹⁸⁹ Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry From the Harlem Renaissance to the Spoken Word*, 40.

In time, poets would come to see these visual developments as offering a new template for African American experimentalism. Yet, from the poem's perspective, the effects are not all sanguine. Instead, for much of the poem, what these visuals convey is a feeling of communicative impotence. Notice, for example, the paradoxical effect of the pervasive capitalization in the left-hand column. As a textual move, capitalizations are most often used for emphasis, indicating a raised voice, scream, or yell. This certainly seems to be a legitimate justification here, given the catalogue of frustrations the poem outlines. Indeed, textually one might read this capitalism as the poem's offering a constant shout. Yet, as we see, the persistence with which *Ask Your Mama* pursues this goal paradoxically reduces its potential efficacy. While shouting often works to attract attention, that is, *constant* shouting tends to inure its audience to its intended force. While the need to SHOUT is thus splashed across every page of the poem, that it is so ultimately renders the move *less* expressive. This is not just a conceptual assertion; it is a visual one, as Jones observes: "the lack of variation in the block lettering flattens the visual and hieroglyphic resonance of the words in the field of the page."¹⁹⁰ Because block lettering is justified on both top and bottom, that is, it evinces less visual variation than normal type, and therefore provides fewer opportunities for emphasis. The poem thus bumps up against a seemingly insurmountable obstacle: to not express frustration is to not be taken seriously, or to risk being ignored; yet to express frustration directly and constantly, as is warranted by the world the poem outlines, is to undermine whatever persuasive force that expression would engender. This is a situation where, as the mood

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

“ODE TO DINAH” argues, “EVEN WHEN YOU’RE WINNING / THERE’S NO WAY NOT TO LOSE.”¹⁹¹

The third observation to make about the poem’s dual-columned structure is that while it may purport, at least from a semantic perspective, to hold the poem’s music separate from its poetry, in actuality the poem undermines this difference as much as it sustains it. By this I mean the following: while *Ask Your Mama*’s “poetic” lines make no attempt to replicate jazz in any phenomenological capacity, they do very clearly carve out their own music. And while *Ask Your Mama* superficially sets its right-hand column as the “musical” one, the fact that the left-hand column necessarily produces this regular and identifiable music means that the poem as a whole is less suggestive of a dialogue between word and music, than a dialogue between two *versions* of music.

One can see this by examining the actual shape of the music rendered by the left-hand column. Specifically, for the vast majority of the poem its lines spell out a steady, repetitive four-beat rhythm. Unlike the blend of styles and the implied historical development of the music on the right, this “poetic” column evinces a near-uniform rhythmic regularity that persists through all twelve moods. See, for example, *Ask Your Mama*’s opening lines:

IN THE
IN THE QUARTER

¹⁹¹ Other readers have offered different explanations for the capitalization. Jennifer Kilgore reads it as suggesting transmission by telegraph. Though she does not push on this analysis, the theme of betrayal by mass communication is clearly an important one to the poem. Jean Wagner uses the capital letters to link Hughes to his contemporaries: “just as E. E. Cummings and Kenneth Rexroth had chosen to use only lower case, here Langston Hughes prints everything in capitals” (461). I find this reading slightly less compelling, since the extreme parody of *Ask Your Mama* seems far more targeted at T.S. Eliot, Vachel Lindsay, and other pre-war modernists than it does Hughes’s early-60’s contemporaries.

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROS
WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER DUST OF DINGY
ATOMS
BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.
AMORPHOUS JACK-O'-LANTERNS CAPER
AND THE WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT
FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN

BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD
WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING
BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING
NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING –
YET LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING

Scott Saul and Larry Scanlon have both examined the linguistic connotations of these stanzas; to my knowledge, however, no critic has yet examined their music. So: while the “opening stutter” (the repetition of “IN THE”), in Saul’s words, “models an uncertain approach,”¹⁹² *musically* it also functions as a repeated anacrusis, or pick-up note, generating anticipation and momentum for the steady, pulsating rhythm that is to follow. Heard as music, in fact, the anacruses foregrounded in these opening lines work throughout to set up contrast between *Ask Your Mama*’s poetic lines’ *musical* rhythm and their *grammatical* one. Grammatically, we might observe, the lines above are marked by their extreme lack of enjambment. And this repeated end-stopping works to render lines distinct from one another; each line above, for example, tends to develop its own image, one not shared by the surrounding lines. As a result, the poem’s lineation comes to work additively, accruing discrete individual units of image and idea to portray a larger whole.

Rhythmically, however, the same lines tend to generate a steady four beats, with the final beat of each musical grouping being filled in by the first syllable or two from the

¹⁹² Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 137.

line *following*. Put differently, the first strong stress of most lines above coincides with the line's third syllable: "QUAR-," "DOORS," "JACK," "WIND," and "RI-" are all examples. There are variations, of course: some lines begin with a stressed syllable ("DUST," "BLOWS," "BOUND-"), and others compress the two anacrustic syllables into one ("FOR," "WITH," "A"). Yet the point is that heard musically, the poem's rhythmic structures tend to group themselves *across* lines, overcoming the independence implied by the lines' syntactical structure. While the pervasive end-stopping grants lines a seeming independence from one another, this rhythm ties each line to the one before it and after. Here is a rendering of the same lines as above, but with musical bar lines placed in (what I hear as) the appropriate position:

IN THE
 IN THE QUARTER
 IN THE | QUARTER OF THE NEGROS
 WHERE THE | DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER |
 | DUST OF DINGY ATOMS |
 | BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.
 AMORPHOUS | JACK-O'-LANTERNS CAPER
 AND THE | WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT
 FOR | FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN

 BY THE | RIVER AND THE RAILROAD
 WITH | FLUID FAR-OFF GOING |
 | BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
 A | WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING
 NO | TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING –
 YET | LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING |

For those able to read music, to my ear this rhythm aligns extraordinarily well with the following, the first riff of Benny Goodman and Charlie Christian's 1939 tune "Seven Come Eleven"¹⁹³:



I use this particular musical comparison not to suggest that Hughes had Goodman and Christian in mind while composing (doubtful!), but more to demonstrate how *poetic* music, as opposed to music *described* poetically (as in the right-hand column) works in this poem. While one can perhaps imagine the sounds described in the right-hand column, those sounds that are actually *in* the left-hand column tend to reorganize the grammar of their lines, submitting all to a smooth, ongoing, consistent pulse. Beating at regular intervals, this rhythmic structure persistently lulls the body into repetitive movement.

From the perspective of the poem as a whole, this is significant. For while most of the poem seems marked by fragmentation—of its columns, of “poetry” and “music,” of time and place, of individuals and figures who seem to have little to do with one another—this steady rhythm ensures that there *is* a phenomenological link that ties them all together. While the poem is resolutely committed to conceiving “African American” as a diasporic category, one incorporating people across the globe, from different historical periods, and with different ethnic backgrounds, one of the conceptual problems it repeatedly encounters is that of articulating what, exactly, justifies including all of them

193 As of January 31, 2020, the first riff of “Seven Come Eleven” can be listened to at the following link: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOnhcdAMInA>>.

in the poem. Examining the music of these “poetic” lines, then, offers “rhythm” as a possible answer. Though it is split into twelve sections, addresses different moments in time and space, and even seems to take different approaches to history, the consistency of this rhythm ensures that, phenomenologically, the poem can offer the possibility of a cross-temporal and cross-spatial unification.

The trade-off here, which is one that *Ask Your Mama* will employ to its benefit later, is that while this poetic rhythm enables an experience of *conceptual* unity, because the poem has relieved the lines from which it comes from the requirement that they perform a music that is identifiably “black,” this unifying rhythm cannot be presented as that of “black music.” While the history of African American music is effectively sounded out in the poem’s right-hand column, which moves from “*distant / African / drums*” in the first mood to “*Rhythmic / bop, / ever / more / ironic*” in the last one, the repeated four-beat rhythm of *Ask Your Mama*’s “poetic” lines is too general to evoke a recognizable African American musical tradition. As a result, African American music proper remains an accessory to this unifying poetic rhythm.

And this split between the integrating music of the poetic lines and the recognizably “black” music of the right-hand column thereby problematizes the means by which one might read music as *Ask Your Mama*’s unifying gesture. For what links the poems disparate references to one another is the poem’s music—not jazz, or blues, or “*distant / African / drums*.” Put differently, the music that forges this link is not identified as music; in contrast, the music from the right-hand column, that which actually describes an extended cultural history, becomes only a piece the poem needs to coordinate with its others. While the former links the varied moments of the African

diaspora, it can only do so through a music that cannot call attention to its own musicality. While the latter can chronicle an aesthetic narrative, it cannot let us actually *hear* it.

The result is therefore, on the surface at least, a doubled experience of advance and retreat, of formal innovation and emotional frustration. Yet the poem comes to exploit the idea of music unheard to generate a set of conceptual resources that, while arguably deriving from a position of frustration, nonetheless comes to grant significant power in achieving its aims. To explore this idea with more specificity, I turn to two particular moods: mood #4, “ODE TO DINAH,” and mood #8, “IS IT TRUE?”

One of the poem’s longest moods, “ODE TO DINAH” encapsulates many of *Ask Your Mama*’s main themes. The semantic compression evinced by the poem’s title is on full display here, with the opening lines of the mood enacting a complicated play on the word “snow”: “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES / WHERE TO SNOW NOW ACCLIMATED / SHADOWS SHOW UP SHARPER.”

Historically, the acclimation named here describes the after-effects of the Great Migration—the movement of millions of African Americans north in the first part of the twentieth century. As the second half of this mood reminds us, this large-scale shift retraces an older path: that of the Underground Railroad. Yet if this earlier journey marked a “LINE WHOSE ROUTE WAS FREEDOM,” its contemporary version has produced more complicated results. On one hand, “the quarter of the Negroes” now identifies an area less geographically restricted than at any point in history. But the movement to cold Northern climes has also heightened both the difference and the tension between black residents and their white neighbors. “[Showing] up sharper,” black

inhabitants now attain a sort of hyper-visibility. (“Sharper” also suggests the cultural “hipness” of Black culture, in the sense of “sharp suits,” and offers a subtle dig at White Americans who become “hip” by appropriating Black culture.) Their presence further crystallizes the resistance to their presence among the communities to which they have moved; the blanket of “snow” (or “whiteness”) surrounding these black residents is cold both climatologically *and* emotionally.

Yet “snow” bears other meanings. On one hand it functions as a synonym for “static,” the random mix of white and black spots on the TV that indicate a signal’s not coming through. On the other it connotes “mislead” or “deceive.” Lines 7 and 8 pick up both of these implications: “SINCE IT’S SNOWING ON THE TV / THIS LAST QUARTER OF THE CENTENNIAL.” The “snowing” TV—the fact that it doesn’t work—exemplifies the lack of direction these migrating blacks receive. But even when the picture on the TV *is* clear, it nonetheless “FAILS TO GET PEARL BAILEY,” suggesting both that black culture doesn’t reach that far north (“get” as “receive”), and that when it does, it is inevitably (or intentionally) misunderstood (“get” as “understand”). The TV thus “[SNOWS]” by misleading its viewers, covering them in a field of whiteness.

That “SHADOWS” are “ACCLIMATED” to this scenario is, then, both encouraging and tragic, since it suggests a sad acceptance of their fate. This problem also plays out in the economic realm, as we see in the equally complicated play on the word “quarter.” A crucial word to the poem, “quarter” ties together many of *Ask Your Mama*’s themes, linking places of residence to money and economic exchange, as well as

implying “quarter notes,” a standard duration of musical time.¹⁹⁴ Thus in the place where the “SHADOWS SHOW UP SHARPER,” “THE ONE COIN IN THE METER / KEEPS THE GAS ON.” Quarters (the coin) are therefore the only means by which the black northern-dweller gains a modicum of relief from the bitter cold (thereby maintaining the inhabitability of the “quarter,” meaning “place”). But this quarter in the meter is also the aforementioned “LAST QUARTER OF CENTENNIAL,” “centennial” marking the 100-year anniversary of emancipation. The picture is unpromising: the historical fulfillment of emancipation has become a mere token, the single hope blacks have against being smothered by snow (in the word’s multiple senses).

As we can see, the poem’s linguistic condensation helps project a vision of contemporary black life marked by loss of community and estrangement from roots. What makes this situation particularly bleak is that even black music—which for Hughes has long represented the cultural recouping of these losses—may itself be no longer able to exert the restorative power imputed to it. We see this in the second part of the mood, which reverses the earlier movement north, traveling from Buffalo back to Harlem. The difference between the two places is certainly stark. In Harlem, unlike Buffalo, “DARK SHADOWS BECOME DARKER BY A SHADE”: African Americans feel more in touch with their culture, and enjoy a small amount of emotional security (“shade” suggests a curtain’s being drawn, and thus a measure of privacy). Contra the “shadows”

¹⁹⁴ Scanlon is particularly insightful on this issue. As he argues, the word “*Quarter* came into Middle English from Latin, via Old French. Its subsequent profusion of meaning illustrates the power of vernacularization” through which Hughes “defiantly proposes the African- American tradition as a central node of an international vernacular” (“Death is a Drum,” 53).

who stick out in the “snow,” here “*WHITE SHADOWS PASS*” (my emphasis), trying to fit in where they are not the norm.¹⁹⁵

Yet the fact that “SHADOWS” and “SHADE” share the same root and describe a very similar phenomenon also suggests that “SHADOWS . . . SHADE” names less a real transformation than the *appearance* of transformation, one that hides what at end is a mere repetition of the same. While allowing for a sense of commonality, the retreat into “darkness” functionally maintains the status quo. It does so by fundamentally misleading its participants, directing them to invest their energies in aesthetic solutions that cover over some more troubling economic problems. Thus “quarters” here become “SILVER SHADOWS,” which, in an image inverting the earlier description of coins falling into gas meters, are here inserted into “FAT JUKEBOXES.”

The sounds these jukeboxes produce? Dinah Washington. And, as befits a mood titled “ODE TO DINAH,” Washington’s voice here does enable a communal experience of listening that fortifies a sense of shared African American experience. Earlier in the mood, in fact, it was “A DISC BY DINAH” that the denizens of Buffalo turned to as a source of comfort. In Harlem Washington’s voice produces a similar effect. Yet *Ask Your Mama* deeply undermines the sense of possibility Washington’s music offers by posing the listening experience as an economic experience:

AS EACH QUARTER CLINKS
INTO A MILLION POOLS OF QUARTERS
TO BE CARTED OFF BY BRINK’S
THE SHADES OF DINAH’S SINGING
MAKE A SPANGLE OF QUARTERS RINGING.

¹⁹⁵ One might also hear echoes here of Claude McKay’s “Harlem Shadows,” which condemns the “stern harsh world” for forcing little girls in Harlem to prostitute themselves.

TO KEEP FAR-OFF CANARIES
IN SILVER CAGES SINGING,

Notice the order of events here: before we hear Washington sing, the poem gives us the “clinking” of quarters that, though summoning Washington’s voice, at end feed only the coffers of the company to which Brink’s carries them. Regardless of the degree to which Washington’s music engenders a shared experience of listening, it is these companies that financially profit from the music. And their ability to do so, this section implies, grants *them* ultimate control over the Negro “quarters” (in both senses of the word).

These lines further play out this experience whereby the reinforcement of community insidiously works to preserve economic inequalities. We see this in the second half of the quote above, where “THE SHADES OF DINAH’S SINGING”—both the audible “blackness” in her voice and the subtlety with which she wields her instrument—“MAKE A SPANGLE OUT OF QUARTERS RINGING.” This last line works on multiple levels. First, it extends the poem’s standard 4-beat rhythm, adding a beat to render one of the poem’s few pentameter lines. The suggestion is that Washington’s singing exceeds the representative capacity of the poem, the extra beat pushing us to imagine new modes of representation unavailable in the poem. More directly, “spangle” conjures “The Star-Spangled Banner.” This implication is profound, at least to a degree: in these lines, Dinah Washington’s voice takes the various meanings of “quarters ringing”—both the sound of quarters dropping into a jukebox and the image of African American people collectively singing—and forges them as an anthem, unifying its members under a collective tradition. While this sense of collectivity may appear merely ornamental to the outsider (“ornamental” being the other meaning of “spangle”), it nonetheless feels and sounds real to those participating in it.

The lines that follow, however, “TO KEEP FAR-OFF CANARIES / IN SILVER CAGES SINGING,” undercut much of this implied optimism. That “SINGING” in the second line rhymes with “QUARTERS RINGING” emphasizes the degree to which the act of singing, liberating as it seems, still fails to liberate the “canaries” from their “silver cages”—silver being another slang term for “coins.” Even as Dinah Washington’s voice brings its listeners together, that is, this shared experience of community fails to gain African Americans any measure of economic freedom. And it is economic realities, these lines suggest, that more directly restrict the African American “quarters.” The reference in these lines, of course, is to Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s 1899 poem “Sympathy,” most famous for the line “I know why the caged bird sings.” Dunbar’s poem is a lament for those who misapprehend the voices of Black Americans, hearing joy when pain is the expressed emotion. “The caged bird sings,” Dunbar writes, “not a carol of joy or glee, / But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core, / But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—.”

That Hughes references Dunbar reinforces the sense of commonality and continuity enabling the very category of “African American literature.” But it also suggests that more than sixty years after Dunbar bemoaned his people’s condition, social conditions remain static—“shadows” becoming simply “shade.” And while Dunbar’s poem aims to educate listeners who hear Black voices as expressing merely “joy or glee,” and therefore grants poetry—an aesthetic object—the power to modify the world, Hughes’s suggests that the assumption that the aesthetic realm offers liberating power may *itself* be the problem. For to invest Black cultural productions with the power to change African American circumstances is, arguably, to misidentify the cause of African

American exploitation, and therefore to be complicit with the economic operations that perpetuate captivity. It is to participate in, as I described earlier, the simulacrum of freedom rather than its true expression. And not only do African Americans thereby remain oblivious to the engine of their oppression, they gladly pay to perpetuate it.

This bitter acknowledgement—that singing, or Black music in general, may not be liberating, but is in fact an element of the system that keeps African Americans economically confined—thus provides further justification for *Ask Your Mama*’s ambivalent take on musicality. One might, in fact, read the poem’s insistence that its music not be given by its “poetic” lines, but must instead appear in a separate column, as helping to keep its poetic lines from falling prey to the illusion that they *can* “sing.” If the belief that singing is liberating is itself a problem, that is, disallowing its lines from doing so helps keep them from building their own “silver cages.”

Yet as I observed above, this idea, however attractive conceptually, remains unsustainable, for the simple reason that the “poetic” lines *do* produce their own music. And that they do so helps explain why this moment in the poem—the moment that summons Dinah Washington to our presence—does not allow us to actually hear Washington’s voice. By this I mean that as much as it seems to be called for, the *musical* cues that correspond to this moment of the text (the poem’s right hand column), curiously call for us to hear not Dinah Washington, but rather, the poem’s leitmotif, the “Hesitation Blues,” “*softly / asking / over / and / over / its old / question, / “Tell / me / how / long?”*” Against *this* musical backdrop, the poetic lines play out a set of blues lyrics that presumably reiterate Washington’s jukebox song:

TELL ME, PRETTY PAPA
WHAT TIME IS IT NOW?

*PRETTY PAPA, PRETTY PAPA
WHAT TIME IS IT NOW?
DON'T CARE WHAT TIME IT IS
GONNA LOVE YOU ANYHOW*

As I noted earlier, one consequence of the poem's division into columns is that it sets up a contrast between competing versions of musicality. This division arguably reaches its peak here. The contrast is sharp: on the right an anonymous blues; on the left Dinah Washington; on the right a song meant to be heard; on the left one meant to be read. Yet most notable is the contrast in versions of agency these juxtaposed songs imply. As the leitmotif to the poem, the "Hesitation Blues" suffuses *Ask Your Mama* with a sense of frustration that echoes that explored in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Asking "*How long must I wait? / Can I get it now – / or must I hesitate?*," whatever sense of agency its singer might acquire can only be satisfied by an answer—forever delayed—from outside. The song thus engenders an experience of unending deferral, and, therefore, a near-permanent immobility. The lyrics of Washington's song, in contrast, take the opposite approach. *Their* singer refuses to wait; though she asks her "pretty papa" what time it is, in the end she doesn't care—her choice is to "love you anyhow." The opening question, "what time is it now?," is thereby rendered unimportant—what time it is does not matter for someone willing to take action whenever they feel like doing so. There is no hesitation in this song; it spells out the opposite of deferral.

However, while this song thereby offers a counter, and perhaps a solution, to the endless paralysis of the "Hesitation Blues," it is also hobbled by the fact that it is not a song we can actually *hear*. If music itself is to give us a solution to the problem of deferral, that is, it is telling that the "music" that enables this solution is given in words, not in sound. The "sound," in contrast—the actual music *in* the poem—keeps its listeners

waiting. And while it may effectively reproduce the experience of waiting, it can do little to escape this condition. We are, thus, thrust back into the poem's initial problem: *Ask Your Mama*'s poetic lines register musical power only by *not* being musical; the actual music in the poem, in contrast, engenders a condition of deferral and immobility. The only music the poem can rely on, it seems, is the music it cannot reproduce.

Yet inasmuch as the respective deficiencies of music and poetic language here represent an experience of frustration with the poem's inability to reproduce the music upon which social advance relies, another mood, "IS IT TRUE?" helps explore the representational possibilities *of* this inability. And faced with this problem—that of being unable to imitate the music it calls for—"IS IT TRUE?" generates a solution that depends on its developing not the music that the reader can hear, but the music it cannot. The result is a new concept of musicality, and a new mode of using music to generate the community "ODE TO DINAH" ultimately undoes through its invocation of economics.

Put differently, if "ODE TO DINAH" captured the poem's deep ambivalence about music as redemptive experience and redemptive figure, "IS IT TRUE?," *Ask Your Mama*'s eighth mood, extends these ideas into the realm of poetic representation. From the beginning, it seems to take its title seriously, acquiring power precisely by developing an account of black music that depends on the reader's being unable to know what, exactly, is true and what, exactly, isn't. The mood begins by describing how

FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE QUARTER
SHOUTS ARE WHISPERS CARRYING
TO THE FARTHEST CORNERS SOMETIMES
OF THE NOW KNOWN WORLD.

The prepositional substitution that opens these lines ("from the" as opposed to "in the," which begins most other iterations of this phrase) as well as the shift in diction, from "the

quarter of the negroes” to “the shadows of the quarter,” speaks to this mood’s taking up and commenting on *Ask Your Mama*’s general strategies. It also foregrounds the semantic layering through which “shadows” specifies both the places of the quarters shrouded in darkness and black people themselves. This conjunction between identity and lack of recognition—the idea that “shadows” (as people) remain unseen (in the shadows)—will become particularly important as the mood develops. That “shouts” become “whispers” here is in part explained by the poem’s insistent capitalization, which literally dulls the power of visual shouting; the diminishment of voice that results mirrors the reduction of visibility that occurs when “shadows” (people) are located in “shadows” (darkness).

Yet while the first two lines paint a straightforward, if complicated picture, numerous words in the third line baffle. Why “fartherest” as opposed to “farthest”? And why “sometimes”? Sonically, “fartherest” recreates the hushing sounds of whispers; it additionally betrays the lines’ rhythm by adding an extra syllable, producing one of the poem’s few dactyls. The emphasis on the word’s coined-ness—the fact that “fartherest” is non-standard English—points to the way these whispers carry in unrecognized, localized ways. “Sometimes,” too, indicates the ways that such dissemination is not always recognized as such, a technique we see enacted in the next line, where “NOW” repeats within “KNOWN,” though it is relatively hidden in doing so.

But the overall point of these words is to impart a sense of doubt into the proceedings. “Furtherest,” “sometimes,” “the now known world”: all convey a limitation in the poem’s descriptive abilities, or even a limitation in the poem’s ability to account for the existence of these “whispers” it describes. There is—perhaps—more to know about them, though it is not at all clear whether *Ask Your Mama* possesses this knowledge

and cannot communicate it, or if the poem is conveying its own uncertainty about its belief in these sounds.

The mood continues by describing these whispers as being

UNDECIPHERED AND UNLETTERED
UNCODIFIED UNPARSED
IN TONGUES UNANALYZED UNECHOED
UNTAKEN DOWN ON TAPE –

The proliferation of “UN”s here, of course, highlights the fact that these whispers evade recognized modes of reception; this idea is further emphasized by the poem’s specifying no music to be heard at this moment, its right-hand column calling only for “TACIT,” which means “don’t play,” or, more literally, “silent,” and therefore unworded. Yet these repeated negatives also represent the mood’s big gambit. It is this: if these “whispers” are truly “unechoed,” “uncodified,” and “unlettered,” then the poem would have no way to represent them. Even more: this description functionally *prevents* the poem from sonically reproducing them, recreating them conceptually, or even describing them accurately. To do any of these things would be to render these sounds lettered and echoed, and therefore to negate the non-representable characteristics that lend them their representative power. Pushed to the extreme, the poem cannot even verify their existence. All it can do is maintain that they do, in fact, exist and circulate, “CARRYING” from one location to another.

Yet notice, also, what *Ask Your Mama* gains by describing these sounds in these terms. The word “shadows” is key here, since these sounds need to come from the “shadows,” in both senses of the word: they come from black people, but also from the darkest, most remote regions of the “quarters.” Their source, that is, is obscure, even unlocatable. And insofar as these sounds remain uncaptured and unanalyzed, they offer

the tantalizing possibility of pure *authenticity*—a cultural expression that evades the economic apprehension described in “ODE TO DINAH,” avoids the representational problems of poetry, and permanently maintains itself outside of the problems of commodification or contamination. From this perspective, the poem’s *inability* to reproduce these sounds serves as evidence of their existence, since the very possibility of these “whispers” travelling in the manner the poem describes necessarily depends on their evading capture by *any* sort of imitative representation. This idea is well-captured by the assonance between “tongues” and “un” in the lines above. As a literal echo, this assonance serves as evidence that the “tongues” in this line are not the “tongues” it is discussing, that there remains an insurmountable gap separating the *word* “tongues”—which can be echoed—and the sounds that word is meant to describe.

This is, of course, a dangerous game: by posing the existence of these “authentic” sounds, *Ask Your Mama* flirts here with the idea of an “authentic African American expression,” and therefore leans into a notion of racial essentialism the rest of the poem, with its high level of fragmentation, as well as its summoning figures from across the diaspora, seems at very least to complicate considerably, if not reject entirely. Furthermore, while the gesture is dramatic, it is also, perhaps, desperate: when all claims to imitate black music have been abandoned, the one move left is to push for a music whose authenticity depends on its *not* falling into representation.

At the same time, however, by repeatedly insisting on both the existence and the unhearability of these sounds, *Ask Your Mama* does manage to produce their *effect* without producing their presence. As every good post-structuralist knows, of course, the idea of a sign that evades representation is a permanent fiction, necessary for

communication to take place but conceptually unsustainable. From this perspective, even the claim to the existence of these “whispers” remains fraught. And even if they did exist, were they truly “unechoed” and “uncodified” in the manner this mood names, they would not even be nameable obliquely, or through their negative, as they are here. Yet *Ask Your Mama*’s overall strategy is less to argue for the existence of these sounds than to substitute the poem’s claim *that* they exist for their phenomenological presence.

The issue, that is, becomes less the actuality of these whispers than the uses of *Ask Your Mama*’s assertions of their existence. By posing the possibility, forever unverifiable, of its having secreted something important, *Ask Your Mama* is able to both work within and avoid the economies of codification and representation that are described so acutely in “ODE TO DINAH.” It does this by a logic of effects, rather than causes: to the degree that readers and listeners *believe* the claim that these unrepresentable experiences represent the authentic experience of African American culture, the poem will have succeeded in creating the very sense of commonality it describes. Whether or not any given reader can hear these specific whispers, that is, the mere experience of shared belief in them would function as the point of possible community. That the poem cannot ostensibly recreate these “shouts” and “whispers,” then, is what allows it to achieve this goal; were it to succeed, the poem will have created its own foundational myth by soliciting identification, rather than phenomenological proof.

It is this idea, then—that an assertion of authenticity, when tied to a specific mode of address, can achieve the effects of music without having to rely on music itself—that resituates *Ask Your Mama*’s relation to musical representation. At stake is the role of

poetic language itself in conveying this idea of musicality. The next few lines help trace this idea out.

NOT EVEN FOLKWAYS CAPTURED
BY MOE ASCH OR ALAN LOMAX
NOT YET ON SAFARI.
WHERE GAME TO BAG'S ILLUSIVE
AS A SILVER UNICORN

This is a nice sleight of hand: the expected, almost cliché word in the fourth line above would be “elusive.” And this homophonic substitution itself is enabled by the lines’ governing metaphor, which poses Asch and Lomax as hunters searching for “game to bag.”¹⁹⁶ This description of the folklorists working to capture the “unechoed” music thus revisits the earlier account of Dinah Washington’s music, but substitutes poetic representation for economics. While economic activities undermined the communal force of Washington’s voice in the earlier mood, here it is the possibility of being recorded, disseminated, even being named as “folklore,” that threatens these sounds with the loss of vitality. (The passage also subtly indicts Asch and Lomax for indulging in a version of primitivism, with music being animalistic “game,” as opposed to cultivated sound.)

Hughes’s use of the homophone “illusive,” however, provides a sly end-run around this problem. For despite these words’ sounding the same, the dictional shift smuggles in a considerable change of perspective. This is because the word dramatically changes the meaning of the sentence. “Game to bag’s *elusive*”: the clichéd phrase suggests that this ephemeral, ur-music is available, but difficult to capture (even permanently). “Game to bag’s *illusive*”: this phrase offers a much bigger idea, which is

¹⁹⁶ Moses Asch was the founder of Folkways records; Alan Lomax is the famous field collector of American folk music, and later what would come to be called “world music.”

that the whole idea that there is “game to bag” is an illusion. The story is not that the “game” is present but merely difficult to “bag”; rather, viewing these cultural artifacts *as* “game to bag”—as cultural artifacts, even—is the problem. This is why the next line reads “AS A SILVER UNICORN.” “Silver unicorns” are not elusive; they are impossible creatures. To see them as “game to bag” is to miss the fact that one will never “bag” them; it is to conceptualize them the wrong way.

In some ways this is a hint from *Ask Your Mama* that the sounds it is describing here are *never* actual. For to be on the lookout for a paradigmatic example of this music, as Asch and Lomax were, is to see it as “game to bag”—capturable and real—rather than a “silver unicorn,” a fiction that is perhaps useful, but never extant in the real world. In an extraordinarily subtle way, *Ask Your Mama* indicates here that these “shouts” and “whispers” can never materialize as sounded, for to have them do so would be for them to be echo-able, analyze-able, and codify-able. They are, that is, available as sound only in *Ask Your Mama*’s description of them as such. Which is to say, never. Or, never insofar as one expects these sounds to take sonic form, rather than remaining in the realm of figure, or rhetoric.

In these lines we thus see the implications of Hughes’s having separated word from sound played out in miniature. To see word and sound as the same here—to hear “elusive” in the line—is to reinforce a stereotype that the poem aims to combat. To *read* the poem by separating one’s visual encounter with it from one’s aural encounter with it, however, provides a different explanation, one in which word comes to substitute *for* sound, but only by being distinct from it.

The endnote that corresponds to “IS IT TRUE?” plays out the same game: “It seems as if everything is annotated one way or another, but the subtler nuances remain to be captured,” it reads. The trick, however, is that “the subtler nuances remain to be captured” because they are fundamentally not something that can be captured; to see them as such is to preserve an unsustainable stereotype. As the note continues, “everybody thinks that Negroes have the *most* fun, but, of course, secretly hopes they do not—although curious to find out if they do.” Now, on one hand, the clear sarcasm in “everybody thinks Negroes have *more* fun” separates the poem’s audience from this implied “everybody,” generating a community out of the easy disparaging of an implied enemy. This mode of identification, in fact, is cultivated throughout the poem; the very force of the poem’s “ask your mama” lines depends on it, since they encourage the reader to see the “you” as addressed not to oneself, but to a different “you.” In this sense, calling *Ask Your Mama* an indictment of the reader is somewhat false, since the “reader” in this interpretation can always be identified as a different “reader,” not oneself.

On the other, it is not as clear that the dynamic posed as ludicrous here is not itself a version of the one Hughes uses. That “everybody thinks Negroes have *more* fun” is a product of the long history of minstrel performance, in which African Americans played up the smiling mask. Whether or not such performers were actually happy thus remained a mystery to its audience, who, though clearly aware of the social circumstances surrounding black performance, could not be quite sure that this performance did not actually bear a degree of truth. Put differently, in this note *Ask Your Mama* invokes the long history of blackness representing the “dark continent,” the perennially unknowable. And it clearly mocks its enduring presence, the fact that people *still* think that “Negroes

have more fun.” Yet insofar as the use of music I have been describing depends on *Ask Your Mama*’s keeping that music unheard, it too utilizes the strategy where the assertions about this music (the poem’s insistence on describing these sounds as indescribable) come to stand for the music’s phenomenal presence. In this, *Ask Your Mama* reverses the dynamic that poses blackness as the unknowable by itself posing these “shouts” and “whispers” as the unknowable. The difference, however, is that the poem’s doing so generates the experience of commonality for the African American community, rather than generating an experience of commonality on the backs of it. In this sense, the description offers an extraordinarily subtle play on the word “game”: while the quote ostensibly critiques the idea of understanding black music posed as “game to bag,” in so doing the poem ends up playing a game with us.

And let us also notice what the posing of this music *sans* sound allows the poem to conceptually unify: its own catalog of references. As we saw with both “ODE TO DINAH” and with the Asch and Lomax quotes, *Ask Your Mama* sees the prospect of *naming* the shared experience that ties together the various strands of the poem—the musical experience that can “make a spangle,” that is—inherently threatening. For to name it is to cede its authority. Allowing this music to remain unheard, however, formally incorporates the possibility of a shared experience that *cannot* be named as such. Earlier, I argued that from a formal perspective, the “music” that links the varied names, locations, and languages in the poem can be provided only in *Ask Your Mama*’s “poetic” column, and therefore must arrive in the guise of not being music proper. The idea that *Ask Your Mama*’s most authentic music remains unheard pushes this idea even further, for it suggests that these “shouts” and “whispers” must necessarily travel (or “carry”) in

ways that resist standardization. Which means here that insofar as the poem *can* invoke them, it has to do so by offering a new idea of what “carrying” means. And this version of “carrying” would have to avoid repetition and thematic obviousness, so as to remain unheard and unimitated. It would, in other words, need to link various experiences without posing themselves as *the* link.

Reading *Ask Your Mama* in this manner thus helps explain the poem’s multiple but simultaneous modes of representation. By separating visual, musical, rhythmic, and organizational experiences from one another, the poem allows for being read on multiple levels, without necessarily providing a single concept that unifies them all. Or, it would provide a single concept, but that concept would necessarily remain unknowable. In this sense, the poem creates a new sense of non-mimetic representation. For these “shouts” and “whispers” clearly cannot register as such. They can, rather, register only as the implied unity that bands the poem’s diverse elements to one another.

What “musicality” comes to mean here, then, is less the experience of listening, or even the phenomenological similarity of *Ask Your Mama* to music, than the ability of the poem to achieve the same effect as the music it describes does. On a conceptual level, *Ask Your Mama*’s “music” is the reference to music that enables the same sort of collectivity Dinah Washington’s music produces, but without the economic corollaries attached to it. Insofar as the poem asks its readers to see its fragmented features as enabling a common goal, that is, it will have succeeded in *being* musical, without *sounding* musical.

Now, this is, it must be admitted, a relatively sanguine reading. For the success of this new version of musicality clearly depends on *Ask Your Mama*’s producing an

identificatory relationship with its audience, one potentially threatened by the possibility of its readers simply not believing. To accept that there *is* a unifying theme to the poem's disparate parts, but that this unifying theme cannot be phenomenally recognized *as* unifying, may simply be too difficult of a pill to swallow. And the poem offers hints that to have to resort to the position of posing it leaves the poem less energized than pessimistic. Such aesthetic contortions enervate. Even though "IS IT TRUE?" offers this new version of musicality traced out above, then, it nonetheless ends with lines that register only weariness and repetition: "THEY ASKED ME AT THE PTA / IS IT TRUE THAT NEGROES ---- ? / I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA." Rather than a sign of provocation, "ask your Mama" here is much more a sign of fatigue. One needn't even hear the setup to this question ("is it true that Negroes *what?*"); its mere form already betrays a perception that Negroes are fundamentally different, and fundamentally unknowable.

The other option is simply that *Ask Your Mama* risks throughout the possibility that its gamble will fall through. While this poem works hard to conceptually articulate a mode of unification that *Ask Your Mama*'s very phenomenal presence seems to betray, it does so in the spirit of a final gesture held out against the potential of its own collapse. When the poem's penultimate mood, "JAZZTET MUTED," describes "SMOLDERING SHADOWS / THAT SOMETIMES TURN TO FIRE," the phrase seems as much to portend the urban riots that would arise in the ensuing years as it does to describe the possibility of the poem's own immolation.

This, too, is in part the goal: *Ask Your Mama* does promote the idea that only an experimental, non-linear poetics is pliable enough to capture the contradictions, and the

deep feelings of loss, that structure black life in 1961. But insofar as the result puts one over on his readers, affronting them with parody and sarcasm, it does so as a gesture of deep uncertainty, rather than power. The final lines of the poem play out this deep worry about the future. Inverting the poem's opening—"IN / IN THE / IN THE QUARTER / IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGRO"—which adopts a third-person point of voice in order to describe a generalized condition, these lines—"SHOW FARE, MAMA, PLEASE. / SHOW FARE, MAMA . . . / SHOW FARE!"—turn the poem's opening expansion upside down, rendering it as a series of dwindling, personified pleas. Literally "[asking] his mama" for something she cannot provide, all this child can do is name the object of his desire, forever unable to obtain it. Sad and desperate, *Ask Your Mama* is undoubtedly, as Saul describes, "a devastating dialogue of insult."¹⁹⁷ As these lines suggest, however, in the end the devastation it describes may only be its own.

¹⁹⁷ Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 7.

CHAPTER FIVE

“A tall sense of enclosure”:
Robert Creeley’s Words and the Music of Mere-ness

If Langston Hughes figures poetry after Charlie Parker as the explicit separation of word and sound, of poetry from the music it evokes, Robert Creeley takes an approach that is nearly the direct opposite: articulating a poetics that aims to capture the human body as it plays out a fundamentally musical relationship to the world, Creeley figures the poem as the *site*, not merely the record, of an authentically improvised musicality.¹⁹⁸ Creeley thus moves from figuring lyric as a reading of the extant, citable sounds of bebop, towards seeing poetry as an engaged component of the physical, even ontological processes by which jazz-inspired sound is created in the first place. This is a somewhat unorthodox view of poetic musicality, one in which a poem becomes most properly musical *not* when it phenomenologically resembles music, but when it is realized in the same way music is—by being a product of the music-making faculties of the human

¹⁹⁸ Indeed, in a 2001 interview with *JazzTimes* following the release of his spoken word and music album *So There, Have We Told You All You’d Thought to Know?*, Creeley offered the following description of his own musical poetics: “For me poetry is, like music, a “form cut in time,” an art that depends on a sequence of sounds, having a rhythmic thread. I hear poetry—and far more to me than what it may mean otherwise is the sound that it makes. In fact, its physical sound and rhythm are for me an integral part of its meaning. I know there are many kinds of poetry—and concrete poetry, for one, is there to be seen, not heard. But mine is based on a poetics, which my great elder, Louis Zukofsky, put as a function: ‘upper limit music, lower limit speech.’ So one wants people to hear it, how it sounds, the same way someone composing wants people to hear it, not just read the score” (Creeley, “Taking Five”).

body. Accordingly, “jazz” for Creeley signifies less a set of sounds or codes identifiable as “jazzy” (and therefore referential) than a particularly musical mode of the body’s participation in the world.

Slippery and fine-tuned, Creeley’s poetry has always seemed to skate the edges of the categories imposed on American poetry.¹⁹⁹ Black Mountain, projectivism, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, jazz poetry, the San Francisco renaissance, confessionalism: Creeley has arguably been as critical for each of these as he has been emblematic of none. Indeed, though Creeley is by now widely acknowledged as a major figure of American poetics, figuring out what, exactly, he leaves us with has proven a more difficult task.

There are, perhaps, some relatively straightforward explanations for this situation. One might cite, for example, Creeley’s longevity (more than fifty years of publishing), extensive output (more than forty books of poetry and prose), and relatively recent death (2005). Yet above all, the most direct answer seems to be that the ostensible simplicity of Creeley’s work leaves readers with so many versions of Creeley. In hindsight, we can appreciate Creeley for having pulled off a double-trick unique among his generation, plumbing the subtleties of delicate emotional states while simultaneously, and insistently, putting a magnifying glass to the materiality of his work. Hesitant and restrained, the

¹⁹⁹ Though I do not quote all of them in this chapter, there are a number of readings of Creeley that have assisted my analysis. Charles Altieri remains, arguably, our greatest interpreter of Creeley; his writings about the poet include both stand-alone articles and chapters or sections in his books *Enlarging the Temple, Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, and *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. The other major resource on Creeley is the special double issue of *boundary 2* from 1978, edited by William Spanos. Entitled “Robert Creeley: A Gathering,” it includes essays by Altieri, Robert Duncan, Sherman Paul, Marjorie Perloff, and others.

typical Creeley poem is ruthless in its self-questioning. Almost pathologically compelled to turn over and over again the grounds—linguistic, formal, emotional, conceptual—on which any emotional or interpretive commitment might be made, his poems over and over again seem drawn by gravity to undercut themselves. “What I come to do / is partial, partially kept,” announces an early poem (appropriately titled “The Innocence”). Fair enough; poems often withhold as much as they give. Yet even this attempt at qualification comes across as partially realized. Is what is to be secreted here something kept *by* the poem or kept *from* the poem? Is “come to do” a claim about habit or intention? In Creeley’s hands, it seems, even partiality remains incomplete.

Yet this partiality also offers a number of intriguing suggestions about the possibilities of poetic language, particularly as it responds to the aesthetic tradition I am trying to outline. Most specifically, it offers a mode of poetizing in which the fact that a poem is constituted by language leads it to evade whatever communicative coherence it may be ostensibly seeking. Stripping words and images of the contexts—linguistic and conceptual—that would normally make sense of them, Creeley’s work often reduces language to its merest state. Then, having set language loose in this environment, the poetry charts the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and sensations that ensue. Indeed, the repeated wonder of Creeley’s work is that its apparent banality of content—the fact that his poems are often not *about* much, at least if that “about” names something external to the poem—engenders a disjunctive, multi-layered web of intention, reference, and meaning. And to the degree Creeley’s poems exhibit a “voice,” they forge that “voice” less as a unified entity or experience than an assemblage of unstable parts, parts that simultaneously comprise the linguistic, the semantic, the affective, and the narrative.

Yet even as these various modalities of poetic utterance tend to undermine one another, what often remains is the fact of their sensuousness, the fact of their being present and available to the senses. And the sensuous form of this remainder is, often, what Creeley's poems can be said to be "about." That they are hear-able, that they can be seen: this sensuous "that-ness" is what Creeley's linguistic experiments often most directly put on display.

In this, this chapter will argue, Creeley's work often pushes the advances of Charlie Parker into the realm of language. As we'll remember, much of the force of Parker's music lay in his ability to present sounds that constantly evade whatever contexts would make sense of them. That is to say, Parker works to challenge the hermeneutic expectation that takes an improvised solo to be, definitively, an unmediated outpouring of the inner emotional life of the musician performing it. What Parker's music in particular shows us, I argued, is that these interpretations—interpretations that assume an improvised solo to be a musician's "telling a story" about oneself—rely on an improvised solo's conforming to the prescriptions of an underlying form in a particular way. By upsetting these conventional relations of improvised sound to underlying form, Parker's music illustrates that this hermeneutic depends on those conventional relations, and, consequently, that there are other modes by which improvised sound might signify relative to the body of the musician producing them. More specifically, by undermining the normative descriptions of these forms while keeping those prescriptions audible, Parker's improvisational strategies transform "form" itself into a multi-layered, dialectical phenomenon, thereby ensuring that any easy association between statement and meaning will be neither adequate nor sufficient.

As the paragraphs above are meant to indicate, Creeley's work engages a similar problem, though approaching it in a manner more germane to poetry. Because the contexts into which Creeley's work put its words, images, and sounds often keep those words, images, and sounds from ossifying, communicatively speaking, his work endows language itself with a form of indeterminacy similar to that which Parker lent to musical statements. What Creeley's work adds to the situation, however, is the fact that it nearly always proceeds on two levels: on one hand a set of words that act in the world, and on the other a meta-commentary on the way those words act in the world. Their commitment to self-reflection, that is, means that as Creeley's poems proceed, they also proceed as examinations of this procession. Their "voice" is nearly always that of a poem observing itself as it takes place in the world. This complicates things immensely. For not only are his poems often unclear about who or what is speaking, and upon what grounds that speaking is authorized; that they concurrently meditate *on* the fact that they are unclear in this manner, and take that lack of clarity as one of their subjects, makes whatever they might say constitutively unstable.

Thus while Parker's music offered evasion of certainty as a response to the potential for being read from the outside, Creeley's, in contrast, portrays the evasion of certainty as the ever-present condition of a poem's reading itself. Indeed, if Creeley's poems are certain of anything, it is often that they are uncertain. From the perspective of the concept of "voice" I am trying to articulate in this dissertation, then, Creeley's poetry poses a new dilemma. On one hand it succeeds, rather easily, in frustrating the idea of a voice that exists prior to the poem, one to which the poem's enunciation can retroactively refer. On the other, it frustrates the idea of a voice that emerges out of the poem: insofar

as “voice” refers to a perspective on the world, “voice” here is dispersed and disjunctive. Yet what is left is still the poem itself. And it is this “still-ness”—the fact that the poem remains—that forms the real subject of Creeley’s work. Regardless of what it says, that is, Creeley’s work tends to foreground the fact of its *saying*. And the key is that this *saying* comprises both a semantic and a phenomenological experience. While the semantic content of this saying may be intellectually or affectively self-effacing, this is often in order to foreground its phenomenological presence, the way it works itself out in the visual and sonic realm. What I am interested in is the second of these, sound, since what the banality of content and insistent self-referentiality of Creeley’s work often paradoxically aims to foreground is the fact of its sonicity. That is, its music.

It is this relationship between the evasion of meaning and the persistence of sound that this chapter aims to address. For it helps situate Creeley as a jazz poet, or at least a poet whose interest in jazz helped develop a unique and later quite influential approach to voice. That Creeley sustained a life-long interest in jazz is, of course, well documented. Creeley’s infatuation with Charlie Parker remains a constant of his career, as testified to by many, many interviews. Indeed, as early as 1955, Creeley observed that “line-wise, the most complementary sense I have found is that of musicians like Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis. I am interested in how that is done, how ‘time’ there is held to a measure peculiarly an evidence (a hand) of the emotion which prompts (drives) the poem in the first place.”²⁰⁰ In the 1950’s, Creeley became one of the earliest white poets to give readings with jazz musicians. This interest in musical collaboration was to express itself

²⁰⁰ Creeley, Preface to *All That is Lovely in Men*.

throughout Creeley's career, which saw Creeley well into the new millennium continuing to produce recordings with musicians, including both Steve Swallow and Steve Lacy.²⁰¹

Yet, while critical evaluations often enthusiastically report Creeley's interest in the music, far rarer have been accounts that actually pinpoint what about Creeley's poems might suggest "jazz."²⁰² Creeley's poems don't sound particularly "jazzy," at least insofar as that term designates the use of identifiable codes that signify "jazz." Moreover, Creeley's work rarely mentions race. (One can perhaps speculate, and to this degree, the limits on racial interaction do seem to have been operative. It is perhaps worth noting, for example, that nearly all of Creeley's musical collaborations were made with white musicians.) While Creeley's 1969 serial experiment *Pieces* employs a largely spontaneous approach to composition, we have by now learned enough to not confuse simple spontaneity with the sort of improvisation operative in jazz.

This chapter aims to address this gap, reading Creeley as a contributor to the jazz-inspired concept of "voice" I have been tracing out. The book it turns to in order to do this is Creeley's second major volume, *Words*, which collects poems written between

²⁰¹ The CD's recorded with Swallow include *So There, Have We Told You All You'd Thought to Know?*, and *The Way Out is Via the Door*. Swallow also made a CD of his own, *Home*, that set Creeley's poems to music, sung by jazz vocalist Sheila Jordan. Lacy, too, set Creeley's work to music, creating the rare but fascinating albums *Futurities* and *Futurities II*. Interestingly, the positions Swallow and Lacy occupy in the jazz world largely mirror Creeley's in the poetic, with the careers of all three having toed the line between the mainstream and the avant-garde.

²⁰² As far as I am aware, Charles Hartman's *Jazztext* is the only examination of Creeley that directly addresses the "jazziness" of Creeley's work. More typical are descriptions like this one, from Tom Clark: "the imagination of a cool, angular, driving jazz, punctuated with anxious, staccato accents and playing at moderated volume somewhere off in the backdrop, is an important element in the existential ambience of much of Creeley's earliest serious writing" (*italics in original*) (Clark, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place: Together With the Poet's Own Autobiography*, 47). While evocative, such descriptions give us little critical purchase on the poetry itself.

1961 and 1965. There are conceptual reasons for this choice. Namely, the emphasis on *Words* reflects that book's having captured a transitional moment in Creeley's career, one in which, as Charles Altieri puts it, "Creeley's general resolution has begun to crumble."²⁰³ Increasingly dubious of the idea that poetry can communicate the experiences of conceptual or phenomenological stability, yet still committed to the individualized lyric, *Words* spells out a poetics that lies between the more direct confessionalism of Creeley's first volume, *For Love*, and the experiments with seriality the poet developed in *Pieces*. This state of transition has its advantages, however, the major one being that *Words* ends up working much like the music of Charlie Parker, aiming to employ more traditional ideas of form in order to dismantle their traditional effects. Indeed, one fortunate by-product of Creeley's near-pathological hesitancy is a reading of jazz that sees the music as a thoughtful, introspective, practiced craft, rather than a raw cry from the jungle, or a space of pure freedom outside the restraints of civilization. This nuanced view sets Creeley apart from many of his generation, even if his interactions with musicians proved more traditional.

As I have already noted, the persistent vagueness of Creeley's poetry lends it a great deal of conceptual force. One of the powers of this poetry, however, is that it embeds these abstract ideas in an experience of sound and rhythm that directly engages the body. To see how this works, it is worth examining the ways Creeley takes up and modifies the strategies of his two main influences, Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams.²⁰⁴ Olson imagines experience occurring between discrete objects in a constant

²⁰³ Altieri, "The Unsure Egoist: Robert Creeley and the Theme of Nothingness," 172.

²⁰⁴ For an insightful reading of Williams' influence on Creeley, see Lynn Keller's *Re-making it new: Contemporary American poetry and the modernist tradition*. Charles

state of flux, as each object sends information out into the world while simultaneously constantly receiving information from the world. In order to remain responsive to this information, the individual must remain, as much as possible, responsive and changeable. While some of this argument is given in Olson's verse, its most explicit—and, arguably, most influential—formulation appears in Olson's critical prose, most prominently the essays "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe."²⁰⁵ Vastly influential in post-war American poetry, both essays function, as manifestos often do, by diagnosing a particular aesthetic stagnancy to which they then suggest an alternative. In "Projective Verse," this opposition is that between the "projective" or "open" verse the essay calls for and the "closed" style with which Olson condemns English poetry of the past few centuries ("In English the poetics became meubles—furniture" Olson writes in the *Maximus Poems*²⁰⁶). By "closed" forms here, Olson means poetry written by contemporary poets but in traditional verse forms, forms involving what he calls the "inherited line, stanza, over-all form" ("PV" 16).²⁰⁷ His problem with closed form is two-fold. First, reliance on closed forms encourages a laziness of attention, distracting poets away from what Olson identifies as the fundamental elements of form—syllable and line—and allowing poets to poetize by habit. These two elements, syllable and line, claim tremendous importance for

Olson called his letters with Robert Creeley "perhaps the most important correspondence of my life." These letters have been meticulously collected in *The Complete Correspondence of Charles Olson & Robert Creeley* (set of ten volumes).

²⁰⁵ "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe" will henceforth be referred to as "PV" and "HU," respectively. Olson's influence among both poets and critics, too, seems more tied to his various essays than to his poetry proper. For a quick discussion of this issue, see Charles Altieri's *Enlarging the Temple*.

²⁰⁶ Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, 249. Henceforth *MP*.

²⁰⁷ The phrase "contemporary poets" here is exclusive of what we now call "modernist" poets, since these writers—Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and especially Pound—in Olson's account already represent the beginnings of the movement toward open form.

Olson, since it is out of these two that all poetry comes. The first, syllable, as the smallest, most self-contained element of form, links “particles of sound” with the “words they compose” (“PV” 17-18). The second, line, secures the basic arena of the syllable’s deployment, forming what Olson calls “the threshing floor for the dance” (“PV” 19).

This emphasis on syllable and line as poetic sources then reveals Olson’s deeper ontological problem with closed form. This problem is one of meaning. One of the key beliefs animating Olson’s “system” is that objects and other phenomena in the world possess what one would call an *inherent* meaning, one generated non-relationally, outside of epistemological, economic, or ontological kinship with other phenomena in the world: “not a thing’s class . . . but the thing itself” (“HU” 56). While this view may strike those of us accustomed to post-Saussurian analytical frameworks (and those of us used to associating “postmodernism” as a whole with the *loss* of inherent meaning) as somewhat outmoded, it is this belief that implies the rejection of closed form. For if meaning (and, by extension, musicality) are inherent qualities of objects, then the traditionally musical elements of form—“rime and meter”—being essentially qualities of comparison and relationality, suppress rather than cultivate musicality, imposing meaning rather than assisting it.²⁰⁸ Rather than working inwards from these larger structures, poetry should therefore begin with the syllable, the place where speech “is least careless” (“PV” 18).

²⁰⁸ The structure of this argument is similar, in fact, to Marx’s critique of commodity exchange, a critique that itself surfaces occasionally in the Maximus sequence. In Marx’s account, the replacement of use-value by exchange-value too substitutes for the inherent value of objects a relational value determined according to a universal standard of exchange. This universal standard then renders all objects potentially equivalent. See *Das Kapital*. “We don’t even own / our labor,” Olson notes, “we do it all / by quantity and / machine” (MP 129).

These in themselves are not necessarily new ideas. That syllables enact both semantic and sonic effects is of course a poetic truism, and poets prior to 1950 were certainly working to detach poetic musicality from both rhyme and meter. One might recall here Pound's call to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."²⁰⁹ What makes Olson's particular prescription useful for our discussion, however, is that for him syllable and line are ultimately important because they above all other formal elements represent the points of connection a poem maintains with its bodily, kinetic sources. Linking words to bodies, syllable and line become the primary points at which energy is circulated between world, poet, and reader. As he explains: "Let me put it baldly. The two halves are: / the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE" ("PV" 19).

As this schema succinctly demonstrates, Olson figures progressive verse as a sort of embodied poetics, one in which the presence and capabilities of the poet's body, both intellectual and musical, are at all points accessible. Given this bodily approach, it is therefore no surprise that Olson focuses the bulk of attention on the two middle terms here, ear and breath. First, breath: the figuring of breath as genesis and measure of poetic line has a long history, one whose American lineage extends back at least to Whitman. Olson appropriates this tradition on a quite literal level: according to his precepts, the length of each line in a poem should ideally reflect "the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment he writes" ("PV" 19). Lines should likewise end, regardless of sentence length, at the exact point "where [the poet's] breathing, shall come to termination" ("PV" 19). These prescriptions reflect ontological considerations, and his claim that "the

²⁰⁹ Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 3.

beginning and the end is breath” (“PV” 24) is clearly meant to resonate in poetic, biological, and spiritual directions. As both *the* activity that gives and sustains life and the fundamental mode by which a distinctly human sound is made (“breath is man’s special qualification as an animal” he writes (“PV” 25)), breath makes poetry possible on both localized and general levels.

As this enabling activity, however, breath crucially describes a constant exchange between inner and outer, the taking in of and giving back to the external world. Given Olson’s persistent interest in etymology, it is important to note that this account of breath also forms a literal description of the process of poetic *inspiration* (“in” - in, “spirare” - to breathe). As one of the oldest poetic topoi in existence, inspiration is clearly an instrumental concept for Olson, and Olson’s literalization of the term in turn ties the biological to the historical. This tie works by way of Olson’s re-rooting poetry in the breath, which, in dispensing with abstracted ideas about form, aims at reviving an experience of language lost to the modern age. This experience is one in which language is an active, present, *felt* experience, as opposed to an intellectual concept, an experience of language’s being deeply integrated into human activity: “There may be no more names than there are objects, /” he writes, “There can be no more verbs than there are actions” (MP 40). The goal in reclaiming this ancient topos (“inspiration”) is therefore to have verse again ratify humankind’s fundamental embedded-ness in the world.

Second, ear: just as breath simultaneously marks both the production of sound and an exchange of energy with the world, “ear” for Olson likewise holds a two-fold meaning. On the one hand the ear is the principle site of sonic and semantic acquisition, the place where the syllable registers its musical and etymological capacities. As such the

ear is rightly tied to the “HEAD,” and “is so close to the mind . . . that it has the mind’s speed” (“PV” 18). Yet on the other hand “ear” metonymically identifies an appropriately receptive “stance toward the reality of a poem itself” (“PV” 24), whereby the process of listening is, like breath, one of participation in the world. For “listening” also describes the way the world reaches fruition in the ongoing process of observation and internalization through which objects become real and meaningful: “that we are only / as we find out we are” (*MP* 99), *Maximus* notes. Like breath, this process is both general and local; truly listening to the world means simultaneously attending to objects *and* attending to the particular way those external objects become meaningful by entering one’s being.

This doubled mode of attention gives poetry both particularity and wider relevance, allowing it to express both the world in its fullness and the poet’s unique place in it: “if [a poet] stays inside himself,” Olson argues, “. . . he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way” (“PV” 25). The resulting mode of attention is intuitive, reflective, adroit in responding to the constantly changing world; the knowing it involves is less one described by the accumulation of facts than a “knowing as a halibut knows its grounds” (*MP* 23). With this logic in mind, Olson uses the word “objectism” to describe his poetics, arguing that they finally dispense with “the lyrical interference of the ego . . . [that] Western man has interposed” (“PV” 24) between himself as subject and himself as object.

Deconstruction of Western metaphysics aside, this account of the world as a field of energy out of which the sounded/sounding body comes and to which it contributes

helps us begin to understand the deep affinities that turn Creeley's version of poetic musicality into a proto-jazz poetics. Whether or not the new projective verse Olson calls for ends up sounding like jazz, in one sense the temporality of poetic creation he describes—the self as a mode of sonic response to a dynamic world—turns poetizing into an improvisatory act aspiring to the open-ended temporality of jazz. The more important similarities, however, lie in Olson's account of breath and ear. For, if I invoke the image of a jazz saxophonist, we might notice that limiting a poetic line to the duration of the breath is the *exact* process by which a saxophone player specifies the length of an improvised phrase. Indeed, for a saxophone player, breath provides both the support for musical phrasing and dynamics *and* the physiological limit of what can be played. In jazz, it seems, breath is also the beginning and the end. This is in fact true in a manner even more extreme than that of Olson's poetics, since while a poet can take time to study the changing contours of her breath, a saxophone player phrasing in the moment must rely on the shape of the breath exactly as that breath occurs; for this reason (among others) the content of her improvisations, as I earlier noted, will literally always reflect the lineaments of her physiology.²¹⁰

The situation with “ear” is uncannily similar, since an improviser's identity as a sound *maker* also, as every musician knows, rests on her inhabiting the role of *listener*. This happens in multiple ways: as a member of a collective ensemble, every note or silence an improviser plays ideally speaks or responds to the other musicians on the

²¹⁰ It is worth noting here that even instrumentalists whose playing does not appear to depend on breath—piano, guitar, bass—are still encouraged to phrase according to what they can sing. One could perhaps even say that the jazz vocabulary is so deeply saxophone-based that the majority of phrases that “make sense” in jazz still reflect, regardless of instrument, the sort of breathing required for saxophone playing.

bandstand, and as such contributes to a group's collective sound. It is in this sense that having "big ears" is one of the highest compliments a jazz musician can be paid.²¹¹ Yet improvisation also involves the more personal, individual mode of listening that Olson describes. For, as any improviser will tell you, a great majority of the improvisatory process takes place not on one's instrument, but in one's head, what Paul Berliner calls "the singing mind."²¹² Indeed, while jazz improvisation is only realized as instrumentally-produced sound, in actuality there are *two* primary skills required for successful improvising: being able to *hear* interesting ideas in one's head and then being able to *play* those ideas on one's instrument. While successful improvising certainly requires sufficient ability in manipulating one's instrument, improvisers generally develop this ability not for its own sake, but to be able to play what one hears in one's head, as one hears it. What makes great improvisers great from this perspective is not only that they can play things nobody else can, but that they can hear melodies and rhythms that nobody else can, that they can hear themselves out of moments of improvisatory suspense in interesting and creative ways.

Like Olson, Creeley views poetry as a direct instantiation of the body and its history. Yet unlike Olson, Creeley's poems see that body as constituted as much by *affect* as by physiology. For Olson, the guiding principle was always "form is never more than an extension of content." (That this principle was initially proposed by Creeley lends the situation no small degree of irony.) This phrase's crucial word is "extension," which

²¹¹ Duke Ellington is on record as saying, "The most important thing I look for in a musician is whether he knows how to listen" (Monroe 18).

²¹² See Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, particularly pp. 180-191 and 208-09.

renders the terms of poetic ontology essentially *spatial*.²¹³ For Creeley, in contrast, the more representative phrase comes from *Pieces*: “no forms less / than activity.”²¹⁴ This phrase, as we can see, responds both to Olson and to Williams’s famous “no ideas but in things.” On one hand, it assimilates Olson’s emphasis on change and his insistence that the body be seen only in its interaction with the world, but does so without limiting the field of this interaction to the spatial realm. On the other, it updates Williams: while “no ideas but in things” externalizes the world, cleaving the self from things in order to pose poetizing as the potential of their reunification, Creeley binds poetry to the world without maintaining the partitions implied in Williams’ dictum. While “things” have discrete boundaries, “activities” do not; the difference between the two is both a source of power (since it more primally unifies body and world) and, potentially, of confusion (since one can no longer rely on these discrete boundaries to help organize one’s experience).

This idea helps flesh out another key difference between Creeley and Olson. It is this: while Creeley adopts an Olsonic approach to breath, writing lines no longer than a single breath can accommodate, he also largely abandons Olson’s emphasis on rhythmic irregularity, in part because his poetry is less comfortable seeing irregularity as hard evidence of having done something new.²¹⁵ Despite Olson’s considerable influence in having made *activity* a critical component of poetizing, the major difference between Olson and Creeley is that Creeley is far less willing than Olson to confidently assert that *any* aspect of the poetic process—breath, body, idea, mind, feeling—can be counted on to stably ground poetic experience. Given this, Creeley’s short lines and frequent breath-

²¹³ Olson, “Projective Verse” (1950).

²¹⁴ Creeley, “Pieces,” 379.

²¹⁵ Olson, “Projective Verse.”

breaks work in two capacities. On one hand, they keep ideas, thoughts, and images from progressing without examination. By actively preventing words from blithely flowing by (as, say, prose writing often does), Creeley's rhythms ensure that one attends not only to *what* those words say, but to the ever-present fact *that* they say.²¹⁶ And necessarily bound up in this "that" is the body, an entity whose raw physical experiences (breath, eyes, ears), Creeley's poems remind us, always subtend whatever any given poem might do.

To show how this works, I start with Creeley's well-known poem, "The Pattern":

As soon as
I speak, I
speaks. It

wants to
be free but
impassive lies

in the direction
of its
words. Let

x equal x, x
also
equals x. I

speak to
hear myself
speak? I

had not thought
that some-
thing had such

undone. It
was an idea
of mine.

²¹⁶ As Kenneth Cox explains, Creeley's poems "prefer to stop short rather than go wrong" ("Address and Posture in the Early Poetry of Robert Creeley," 243).

A favorite of critics, this poem has often served as an introduction to some of the larger themes of Creeley's poetry.²¹⁷ This is fair: the poem does confirm a popular, abstract, and by now quite familiar theory of subjectivity. Moreover, this idea is familiar from multiple sources, though its crucial early articulator might be the mid-century linguist Emile Benveniste. More specifically, Benveniste showed how the subject could be read as a product of its own discursive construction. As Kaja Silverman explains, the force of Benveniste's work is to "[show] three terms . . . to be theoretically inseparable: language, discourse, and subjectivity."²¹⁸ In Benveniste's account, the use of "I" in a discursive situation does not so much refer to a previously extant "I," but rather to the discursive context within which this "I" obtains legibility. As he argues: "Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker . . . the reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse."²¹⁹

One can easily see this idea played out in the poem above. "As soon as / I speak, I / speaks": the subject (the "I") is as much effect as source of language. Rather than being the vehicle for communicating the thoughts of a self that exists prior to it, speaking speaks us, retroactively engendering both the idea and the experience of that self. This idea is visually announced in the way the word "speak" is surrounded by "I"s in line 2. This line thus provides a short narrative of the predicament ("I speak I": I speak the thing that is then read as the I who speaks), and significantly poses *speaking*—a temporal, bodied activity—as the experience that cleaves the experience of "I" into speaker and

²¹⁷ See, for example, Sylvester (1978), Foster (1995), or Vernon (1978).

²¹⁸ Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 43.

²¹⁹ Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 226.

spoken, or, more accurately, the experience that underlines the fact that the “I” is always divided as such.

Yet as important as this idea is for Creeley, more important is the fact of its being rendered in and as poetic form, since this mode of developing the idea necessarily engages the “I” as it is experienced in its affective and bodied states. To show this, one might compare this poem’s first sentence with the same words unlineated:

As soon as I speak, I speaks.

As soon as
I speak, I
speaks.

As even a quick look shows, Creeley’s version draws a number of rhythmic, visual, and grammatical subtexts out of the sentence. While the sentence on the left hurls towards its conclusion, turning on the comma that separates two versions of the same phrase (“I speak” / “I speaks”), Creeley’s version uses enjambment to institute a sense of suspense, as one (perhaps Creeley) waits to see *what*, exactly, happens “as soon as,” or what the “I” does after it speaks. Pace the unlineated version, whose punch comes from the single repetition of “I speak,” Creeley’s version reveals the *many* versions of difference in sameness that, though buried in the first version, subtly animate it: there are “as” / ”as,” “I” / ”I,” and “speak” / ”speaks,” as well as the structural parallel of lines 1 and 2 (bookended “s” words, primary vowels, three stresses). The difference between these versions is that between provocation and observation: the first sentence makes an argument, while the second uncovers the analogical structures subtending that idea. While the unlineated version tells us that “I speaks,” Creeley’s version examines the feelings, intellectual and affective, attending the slow realization *that* “I speaks.”

The removal of “speaks” to the final line of the above stanza, then, highlights not only the disappointment of the observation (“that’s all that happens?”), but the replacement of the “I” (which plays a major role in the climax of the unlineated sentence) with an activity—speaking—sundered from any ascribed agency, or any ascribed speaker. “Speaks,” too, makes the grammar of the sentence difficult to parse (since we want to put a “the” before the second “I”) and, notably, disrupts the otherwise tight iambic trimeter of the sentence. And though the words “soon” / “speak” / “speaks” *visually* portray an insistent march leftwards, making the sentence’s conclusion almost pre-ordained, the fact that “speaks” is hard to get out of the mouth registers the fundamental estrangement of the experience. (This estrangement too registers in the poem’s later line (line 15), “speak? I,” which narrates the emergence of the “I” from the act of speaking, but uses punctuation to express the way it seems to run counter to common sense.)

Now, the idea that form—enjambment, lineation, rhythm, and visuality, among others—helps shape our understanding of content is a poetic truism. Yet notice what happens in this poem: form alone here refuses the reduction of an idea to an intellectual abstraction. That is, if the “idea” in this poem is that “I” is as much a product of discourse as it is a linguistic reference of a pre-existing subject, the form of the poem adds in the *body* of this “I” by making the playing out of this idea reliant on the apprehension of rhythm and visuality. The conceptual (and perhaps experiential) *loss* of a pre-existing “I,” that is, renders itself as the implicit positing of a sensing body, simply by virtue of having been enjambed, since that enjambment makes that loss sonically and visually resonant to us.

Yet there is more. For if this poem is as much about the positing of “I” as an effect of discourse as it is the undermining of the abstraction of that notion, it tempers its philosophical force as much through rhythm and visuality as by hinting that what it may be describing is in fact a different, far more mundane experience than the “loss of the ‘I.’” In this it is subtly reminiscent of Charlie Parker’s response to “The Way You Look Tonight.” “The Way You Look Tonight,” I argued, is noteworthy in part for the way it takes a small motive and develops it; Charlie Parker’s response frustrates the formal prescriptions of underlying form by resisting this sort of motivic development, offering instead a modular model of phrasing whereby smaller parts could be combined and recombined at will. And just as Parker’s improvisations transform “form” itself into a multi-layered, dialectical phenomenon, so does this poem offer a mediation on the dissolution of the “I” and a more direct description of a relatively common experience. If you will indulge me for a paragraph or two, I would like to describe a common experience. It is this: one sits down at one’s desk, blank paper ready. It is time to write. But when words show up on the page, they surprise for one reason or another. Perhaps they feel like the words one had been searching for for days, but couldn’t identify until engaged in the physical process of putting pen to paper. Perhaps one had no idea that he or she even knew those words, or could have imagined putting them together in that specific combination. Or, perhaps, it is the opposite: one sits down with visions of inspiration, but what appears are the banal words with which one is far too familiar.

The realization often attendant with this experience (I can assume familiarity, I believe) is that perhaps we did not know ourselves as well as we had imagined, that the “I” we see ourselves being looks nothing like the “I” we had felt we were. Now let us

return to the poem. As much as it seems to be about the impossibility of narrativizing, it works quite well as a description of this experience. Within this context, in fact, the lines that follow the first stanza, “It // wants to / be free but / impassive lies // in the direction / of its / words,” prove remarkably perceptive, and come to describe two things. First, they describe the way that words themselves can come to limit one’s sense of one’s “I”.

Before words come out, after all (the moment when one is sizing up a blank page) the “I” can seem to exist in a state of pure potential, free to say literally anything. Yet actual words, the moment they appear, inevitably close off possibilities, undoing the state of pure potential by implying specific semantic directions. This is one way the “I” is “impassively” led. This also explains why the pronoun here is *not* “I,” but “it.” Though “it” bears “i” within it, the relative vagueness of “it” allows it to stand as a placeholder for the sense of self that has been lost in this transaction.

Second, “impassive” captures the role of habit in this experience. Again, this is a common experience: while writing is often motivated by the idealized vision of possibility, when actually writing, one often witnesses oneself falling into decades-old patterns. And while these patterns may surface unintentionally, they often show the “I” to be a creature far less original than imagined. Thus the pun on “lies” in line 6, which exposes the multiple levels of deceit that operate here, both the way “It . . . lies” by allowing words to stand for it, and the way “It . . . lies” by imagining that “It” can somehow exist outside the realm of words.

Indeed, if one is to take these lines as a description of habit intruding into an idealized state of potential, one can hopefully see how “impassivity”—arguably the poem’s dominant emotional register—suggests that what this poem is finally reflecting

on is its own *unoriginality*. For if one takes the poem as poem describing Creeley's experience of discovering himself to be in a position of passivity relative to his writing ("I // speak to / hear myself / speak?"), watching himself fall into the dullness of habit, then there remains a lurking suggestion that this poem may at end not only describe, but *be* such an effect of habit, a falling into words rather than the active development of a new understanding. At end, that is, this meditation may only be a figment of a hyperactive mind, a passing thought ("It / was an idea / of mine"), rather than an argumentative assertion. "I" is, after all, all over the poem, both in sounds ("lies," "myself," "idea," "mine") and in look ("It"). Further hints that the grand statement the beginning has often been taken to be may, in fact, be simply impassive solipsism come from the way Creeley's reference to Eliot ("I / had not thought / that some- / thing had such / undone" being a version of Eliot's, or Dante's, "I had not thought death had undone so many") loses nearly all specificity, even sense. While the poem may play with what has become a well-developed philosophical idea, one cannot be sure how much this poem wants to commit to this idea, or how widely its implications can be generalized. Is it argument or solipsism? Without clarifying context, we cannot know.

Now, I am not suggesting that this experience *is* what the poem is describing. But there are enough gestures in it to hint that it is simultaneously striving towards describing the experience of an extant "I" *and* questioning its own ability to describe that experience. And the poem is ultimately about both. In so doing, "The Pattern" registers a linguistic version of Parker's "Klaun Stance," presenting two opposed readings, neither of which ossifies into the poem's actual content.

Now, the reading I have been pressing here depends on Creeley's poems exerting a self-reflective voice whose presence troubles our ability to know whether the poem's attention lies on its relation to the world outside of it or on the world of the poem itself. And the effect of this layering of voice is to foreground the experience of self-remove that words inevitably create. Another poem, "One Way," helps trace out this development:

Of the two, one
faces one. In
the air there is

no tremor, no
odor. There is
a house around them,

of wood, of walls.
The mark is silence.
Everything hangs.

As he raises
his hand to
not strike her, as

again his hand
is raised, she has
gone, into another

room. In the room
left by her, he
cannot see himself

as in a mirror, as
a feeling of reflection.
He thinks he thinks,

of something else.
All the locked time,
all the letting go

down into it, as a
locked room, come to.

This time not changed,
but the way of feeling
secured by walls and books,
a picture hanging down,
a center shifted, dust
on all he puts his hand on,
disorder, papers and letter
and accumulations of clothing,
and bedclothes, and under his
feet the rug bunches.

Narratively, the story here resembles the sort of thing for which Raymond Carver would become famous a decade or so later: a couple fights; the woman leaves the room under threat of violence; there is a personal realization, though the main character is not quite able to parse out his feelings. The end arrives underwhelmingly, with a mundane event of hazy representative value. One can even break this story up into three acts, roughly divided at lines 9 and 22. Yet what is interesting is the way the poem pits language against raw sensory experience, locating the “I” in the unknowable chasm between the two. The main strategy involves the use of semantic ambiguity, which comes to infiltrate the very experience of selfhood captured in the poem. The title introduces this ambiguity: does “One Way” suggest one possible way that things can go? Or is it “One Way” as in a one-way street, directing its characters to an inescapable endpoint?

The opening stanza introduces the poem’s other main theme, which is the expansion of the self into multiple, often incommensurate modalities. “Of the two, one”: semantically, the line divides a couple into discrete parts. But notice what happens to the word “one.” Formally, it starts a causal chain, becoming the seed that sprouts into the poem. Thus “one” in line 1 sets up the rhyme with “in” in line 2. This “in,” however, sets

up the rhyme with “is” at the end of line 3. The “no” ending line 4 is the inverse of “one”; “is” at the end of line 5 repeats the “is” from line 3. All stem from the “one” in the first line. Even more than this: though “one / faces one” (in lines 1 and 2) ostensibly describes two people facing each other, on a formal level it shows the word “one” encountering only itself, doubled and projected back upon itself. The word’s designation is thereby betrayed by its proliferation; “one” is simultaneously “one” and more than “one,” no longer part of the “two,” but not at all singular.

From the beginning, then, “One Way” foregrounds the way the poem’s capacity for reflection (note the “feeling of reflection” in the seventh stanza) turns the poem into a simultaneous description of an experience from the world *outside* the poem and a description of that description’s being made *in* the poem. The risk here, that is, is that the proliferation of viewpoints within the poem (or the demonstration of multiple modalities within an ostensibly singular viewpoint) potentially (and paradoxically) reduces the poem to an endless hall of mirrors, whereby singularities become differences and what appear to be differences become ineffectual iterations of the same. I say “ineffectual” here because the worry is that the loss of distinction between the poem’s being an account of something different from it and the poem’s being an account only of itself dissolves, potentially, whatever opportunity intellectual or affective purchase it might otherwise offer. As Altieri describes (he is discussing a different Creeley poem, though the observation holds as well for this one): “the field of the poem . . . always threatens to show that its energies are only those of a particular self-consciousness reflecting on itself and creating the ground it wishes to find outside itself.”²²⁰ Indeed, this potential

²²⁰ Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple*, 72.

inescapability registers in the tight rhymes and short vowel sounds of the first stanza (“air,” “there,” “tremor,” “odor”; “odor,” “no”), which almost suffocate in their repetition.

This worry about the loss of purchase registers most directly in the poem’s third stanza, which offers three end-stopped lines. End-stopping is a rarity for Creeley; in this instance, it seems to suggest a brief loss of the poem’s ability to explore linguistic expressions from the inside (as Creeley’s enjambment more typically does), allowing pauses between sentences to usurp the more typical pauses within sentences. The climax arrives in the ambiguous third line, “Everything hangs.” Narratively, “everything hangs” because the moment is pregnant with irresolution; neither character knows what will happen next. The period at the end of the line and the stanza break that follows enhance this feeling of anticipation. But there is another intimation lurking here: death. When read along with the stillness of the scene (“there is / no tremor”) and its “silence,” “everything hangs” because everything has been hanged.

The threat of death registers in the poem’s multiple doublings, which make unclear whether they indicate meaningful change or simply the empty passing of time. Lines—“no tremor, no” in line 3 and “room. In the room” in line 16—repeat words, as well as structure. Narratively, he “raises his hand” two times, with the effect being a loss of agency, in which the woman in the story does not leave, but “has gone.” This experience of doubling reaches its climax in the line “he thinks he thinks.,” in which multiple interpretative possibilities confront one another. On one hand, the repetition of the phrase heightens the intensity of his thought (he *really* thinks). Or, in contrast, it suggests the vapidness of the action, the sense that he merely “thinks” and “thinks” without

necessarily thinking *about* anything; repetition here marks an empty movement of time. Or, finally, the phrase could be setting the first “he thinks” against the second, the gloss being that this character only *thinks* that he thinks about something else, with the “thinking” being not really thinking and the “something else” being not really something else. Doubling here thus cleaves words from their implied reference, simultaneously making these words signify more *and* less than they appear to.

The poem’s third act—its last five stanzas—sees the poem confronting this interpretive haziness, and the attendant specter of solipsism. After “he thinks he thinks,” he observes “all the locked time . . . come to.” “Come to” implies being awoken from a coma, nicely reversing the intimation of death implied by “everything hangs.” Notice, however, what changes: not his experiences of the relationship, not even the suppressed feelings that had been “locked” away, not, that is, any specific feelings, but instead “the way of feeling.” Here we thus see the imbrication of sensation and reflection on that sensation whose co-presence enact the poem’s hermeneutic instability. There are feelings, that is, and then there is the way one relates to or experiences those feelings; there is the initial feeling and there is the feeling of this feeling. By making them coeval, however, “the way of feeling” both distinguishes these modes of experience from each other and collapses them into a single phenomenon. For which is it? The “way” he feels, meaning the feelings he holds, or the “way” he feels, meaning the manner in which he relates to those feelings? Both implications are operative here. Yet knowing which implication the poem is referring to—and therefore what the poem’s relation to this “he” is—is made constitutively unknowable. What difference is there between sensation of the world and the self-reflection on that sensation? Can the “he” in the poem encounter the world as

such without the intercession of an overactive mind? Because the poem provides no context for us to distinguish the two, the impossibility of knowing here is thus deeply threatening to the self's standing in the world.

Indeed, that this "way of feeling" was once "secured by walls and books," as well as "a picture"—"walls," "books," and a "picture," respectively naming the spatial, the textual, and the visual—but is no longer secured in this manner captures the way the world outside the poem threatens being revealed as simply a mental or emotional projection. And the uncertain status of the world outside the poem thus extends indefinitely. Almost as if replaying Descartes' famous sequence of doubtings, the poem names item after item—"dust," "papers," "letter," "clothing," "bedclothes"—that remain present *in* the poem, but whose status relative to the world *outside* of the poem is made uncertain. This is because of "a center shifted": conceptual or affective ground moved somewhere unlocatable, transferred from a recognizable way of feeling to one whose coordinates remains unknown. The wider import of this phrase, however, emerges in what it is unable to name. For the shift of center also implies a shift in circumference. And a circle's circumference is what marks the boundary that distinguishes inside from outside, endless iterations of the self from the possibility of interaction with the outside world. With the center shifted, however, the poem cannot show where this circumference now resides. What remains is a feeling of "disorder," of "accumulations" without significance. Even the "one" seems to be lost: "on," the word that both begins and ends line 32, echoes "one," but only as an incomplete version of it.

If Descartes' path out of disorder involved grounding himself in the ego, however, the instability of the ego relative to itself prevents it from being a solution here. Instead,

the conciliatory gesture arrives by way of the senses. For despite the reduction of the world to disorder, at end we see that “Under his / feet the rug bunches.” “Under his feet”: the phrase names not only what he feels, but also, figuratively, the ground that supports him. And that it bunches suggests that there *is* a world that exceeds the endless iterations of the language that otherwise suffuse the poem. We see this most directly in the way “the rug bunches” syntactically echoes “everything hangs,” but reverses that phrase’s import. While “everything hangs” is vague and abstract, “the rug bunches” is focused and specific; while the former poses a hermeneutic problem, one about the meaning of words, the latter directs attention to the body and its sensuous experiences. Regardless of content, the phrase seems to say, the *form* of life—the fact of the body’s moving through the world—provides an indication that there is more than words; if words’ semantic meanings pose the loss of a stable self, their sensuous presence vouchsafes the existence of a world in excess of them.

It is, finally, the status of this sensuous presence—the fact of the poem’s interacting with the sensuous capacities of body—that most explicitly situates Creeley’s work within the jazz- inspired lineage I am tracing out. For if Creeley’s poems are able to verify anything, it is not what they say, but that they say. And this saying always takes place as such a sensuous engagement. A music, in part. And “music,” we might say, is both the condition of possibility of Creeley’s poems and their most significant remainder.

To elucidate this idea, I turn to a final poem, “A Picture”:

A little
house with
small
windows,

a gentle

fall of the
ground to
a small

stream. The trees
are both close
and green, a tall
sense of enclosure.

There is a sky
of blue
and a faint sun
through clouds.

Like much of Creeley's work, this poem disarms with its ostensible simplicity. But, also like much of Creeley's work, this ostensible simplicity hides a remarkably complex layering of sound, structure, and meaning. Sound, for example: the first observation to be made here is that the apparent visual stasis the poem paints is belied by the striking narrative it plays out on the level of sound. In the purely sonic realm, in fact, "A Picture" might easily be heard as emulating the narrative structure of a traditional jazz solo. The poem's four 4-line stanzas, for example, conscientiously replicate the structure of many jazz tunes, which are often built on cycles of 16 measures. In this sense, "A Picture" nicely exemplifies Creeley's avowed interest in the "intensive variation on 'foursquare' patterns" he found so captivating in Charlie Parker's music.²²¹

There is more. Notice the poem's AABB pattern, by which I refer not to its rhyme scheme, but the way it introduces and develops sounds. Sonically speaking, that is, the first stanza sets up a pattern that the second both imitates and adds to. Thus "a little" in stanza 1 mirrors "a gentle" in stanza 2, and "small" in stanza 1 sets up both "fall" and

²²¹ Creeley cites Charlie Parker's version(s) of "I've Got Rhythm" as a prime example (Creeley, "Notes Apropos 'Free Verse,'" 494).

“small” in stanza 2. As the poem progresses, one sees it carefully introducing more and more sounds into its sonic field. The transition from short, clipped lines (which we see in stanzas 1 and 2) to longer, more fluid phrases (which we see in stanzas 3 and 4) is itself typical of traditional jazz solos, which generally see phrases increase in length as the solo progresses. Thus, after the sonic restrictions of the first two stanzas, stanza 3 introduces two new vowel sounds: the “ee” of “stream” and the “oh” of “both.” It also presents a new sonic motif: a vowel doubled in a single line, then repeated once two lines later (i.e. “stream” and “trees” in line 9 are echoed by “green” in line 11; this pattern is directly replicated by “both” and “close” in line 10 and “enclosure” in line 12). This development gains momentum as the poem progresses. Like a good solo, the poem reaches its sonic climax in the fourth stanza, which nearly explodes with new vowels: “there,” “sky,” “blue,” and “faint” are all sounds we have not yet heard.

In addition to vowel sounds, there is also the matter of rhythm. Overall, the poem is marked by a preponderance of trochees—six in the first eight lines, by my count. This peculiarity performs two functions. First, it imposes similarity on words with different connotative functions (in Jakobson’s words, it “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination”²²²): simply by virtue of their shared rhythm, “little” in the first line comes to anticipate the “windows,” “gentle,” and even “house with” that follow. Second, these trochees play stress against pulse, inverting the rhythmic expectations of traditional stanza form. This point is persuasively argued by Charles Hartman in his book *Jazztext*. To Hartman, it is Creeley’s extensive use of the trochee, or falling rhythm more generally, that sets him apart as a particularly jazz-

²²² Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 71.

inspired poet. This is because falling rhythms are, to Hartman, an effective counter to the expected rhythmic climaxes set by the history of English lyric. “In English verse,” he writes, “iambic and anapestic meters dominate overwhelmingly.” For this reason, “the end of the line” tends to become “the point of maximum emphasis”; for the great majority of poems written in English, even “most free verse,” the “tendency [is] toward climactic organization.”²²³ Creeley’s falling rhythms, in contrast, repeatedly enact a “thrusting emphasis toward the beginning.”²²⁴ This reverse of expected emphasis thereby generates an “uncanny force-especially when read aloud.”²²⁵ To Hartman, this idiosyncratic use of rhythm justifies placing Creeley’s poetry alongside the music of saxophonist Lee Konitz; both, in Hartman’s analysis, operate by “[displacing] accents to mark out a distinctive shape in time.”²²⁶

In multiple ways, then, the sounds of this poem help pose it as an inheritor of the jazz tradition. And though perhaps less overt than those poems that aim to “sound like jazz,” the method employed here is one of phenomenological resemblance: though its sounds are not coded as those that signal “jazz,” their structural organization (the way they introduce and develop vowel sounds) and approach to phrasing (rhythmically playing against expected climaxes) do seem to have internalized an approach to sound that is jazz-inspired.

²²³ Hartman, *Jazztext*, 43-4.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*; Lynn Keller makes a similar observation, noting that Creeley “plays the marked rhythms of speech against the beats enforced by his lineation” (Keller, *Re-Making it New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition*, 145).

Yet what is most interesting here is not simply the fact of this jazz-inspired sonic narrative, but that the poem embeds it—almost to the point of being buried—within these specific images. For, to put it bluntly, the images in “A Picture” generally come across as extremely banal. Even strikingly so. A house, a stream, a sky, clouds: vague and commonplace, they seem to be almost designed to evade attention. They actively push towards the vapid, or intentionally evoke cliché; “a sky of blue” seems more at place in a children’s book than a vanguardist poem. Indeed, these images turn “no ideas but in things” on its head: if the presence of “things” is meant to ensure specificity, then the ideas here are so ephemeral they approach nullity.

Yet if Creeley’s response to Williams is “no forms less / than activity,” one might wonder what, exactly, counts as activity in this poem. For while “A Picture” does proceed by expanding *our* vantage point, moving from house to ground to sky, it is also worth noting that nothing *in* the poem actually does anything. The first verb, one of only two in the poem, does not arrive until the third stanza. It turns out to be “are.” The verb that follows, “is,” offers only a version of the same copula. The one word that might otherwise conjure movement—“fall” in line 6—turns out to be a noun. As a whole, the poem eschews nearly all narrative or psychological development, instead being content to describe a moment of absolute, eternal present. Now, one might note that in so doing, “A Picture” does arguably succeed at replaying the flat temporality of visual art. And this temporality of the present does contrast nicely with the linear temporality described by the poem’s sonic development, with the split between expansion on one hand and stasis on the other generating fruitful tension. Yet this quasi-visual temporality is tempered by

the poem's lack of descriptive specificity; if "A Picture" is in fact inspired by an actual picture, it is almost impossible to tell which one.

So what are we to do with these images? How are we to reconcile their banality with the detailed, well-woven pattern of sound they create? Well, one way to do so might be to read the poem in jazz terms, as a play of sorts on a jazz standard. What counts in a jazz solo, as we'll remember, is not so much the story told, but the way a player chooses to tell that story. And many famous jazz moments are the result of musicians' having created strikingly original renditions of superficial pop songs. (The most famous of these would certainly be Coltrane's version of "My Favorite Things," but there are many more—Sonny Rollins' "I'm an Old Cowhand," Art Tatum's "Tea for Two," and Miles Davis's "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" are all great examples.) Given this, the extreme cliché of image here might be valuable precisely because it causes us to focus *not* on the story being told, but on the sonic and visual components put in place by the specific telling of that story. From this perspective, "A Picture" would rather counter-intuitively be best understood as a sound poem. Or, even more abstractly, understood as working within an oral rather than a written tradition.

The problem with this reading, however, is that it loses a key effect of the poem, taking the apparent banality of this poem's images as reasons for discarding them, rather than engaging the way those images persist *as* the dissolution of specificity. For vapidness need not be read as uselessness; as I have been at pains to show, the persistently self-reflective nature of Creeley's poetry ensures that though little in it can be taken as stably communicative, the result is less an absence of communicative power than an oscillation between two possibilities. Put differently, examining the work of these images engenders

a situation reminiscent of that seen (heard) in Charlie Parker's "Klaun Stance": as much as that tune ostensibly presents itself as a succession of sonic colors,²²⁷ its conceptual power comes from its having first recognized the fact that putting *any* chords in sequence creates a narrative that engages traditional notions of tension and release, even if that engagement proceeds by way of inversion or reaction.²²⁸ The condition here is much the same: as much as we might want to demote these images in favor of their sounds, that the images are recognizable as such means that they cannot be jettisoned so easily.

Now, I am not arguing that one can remap these images onto a recognizably linear narrative, though there are hints of this. As I noted earlier, the poem does detail a movement outwards and upwards, a widening viewpoint that moves from "little" and

²²⁷ In jazz the instruments and voices take on varied tones or timbre. One can think of it as the various shades or colors of sound. Just as there are many shades of blue, there are various tones of sound that can be made on a saxophone: brassy, smooth, gravelly, piercing, mellow, etc. In jazz, a shifting range of tone colors adds a sense of mood and/or excitement to the music.

²²⁸ As I explained in Chapter Three, while common parlance often imagines "improvisation" to be something like "random outbursts of sound," in actuality jazz improvisation is the activity of creating new melodies over a loosely agreed-upon sequence of chords. This sequence of chords then provides a framework for musicians to follow; it is this underlying harmonic, rhythmic, and narrative structure that musicians call "form." Put differently, "improvisation" proceeds from an acute awareness that a piece of music that puts chords and notes in sequence together—any piece, any chords, and any notes—will necessarily and inevitably produce a series of expectations and fulfillments, a series of tensions and resolutions—a narrative, in short. And that narrative, too, will always and inevitably conform (if obliquely) to traditional harmonic frameworks. Given this, what jazz improvisation reveals is thereby less raw musical outbursts of the improviser than an individual or collective interpretation of the possibilities of form. Within this purview, every jazz solo can be understood as a *reading* of form, a localized account of what a given set of chords can be said to *mean*. That this is the case is what makes the aesthetic model "Klaun Stance" lays out so potentially generative. For even as the tune seems to separate harmony and melody, generating its soundscape out of the evolving juxtaposition of the two, from a different perspective, the tune's impressionistic presentation can be read as a ruse, a cover for "Klaun Stance"'s having merely tweaked, if in inventive fashion, a quite traditional harmonic movement.

“small” in the first stanza, to “sky” and “through clouds” (which suggests a something beyond the poem) in the fourth. There is also the subtle imbrication of artifice and nature, whereby “house”—a human artifact—comes to be increasingly enveloped by images of the natural world: “ground,” “stream,” “trees,” “sky,” “sun.” However, even these descriptions of nature are colored by a clearly human frame: “close” and “tall” are comparatives that, in this context at least, implicitly posit the human as their standard. From this perspective, in fact, nearly every adjective in the poem might be understood as reinforcing the existence of a human presence, despite its being unpopulated by people. For if not human experience, according to what measure is the house “little”? The windows “small”? The sun “faint”?

It is, in fact, this implied framework—the way this poem situates itself within a specifically human mode of being in the world—through which these images come to matter *as* images. In this the poem takes the strategy of “Klaun Stance” and raises it by a conceptual turn. “Klaun Stance”’s strategy, we’ll remember, was to simultaneously expose the inner workings of “The Way You Look Tonight”—how it builds and sustains interest, expands simple motives into layers of complexity, and prods listeners to unexpected places then safely shepherds them back—*and* to display Parker’s dismantling of them. It is not that Parker’s music—including his heads—made itself impossible to hear as a revision of another repertoire, but that at its most successful it performs itself precisely *as* a deeply provocative revisionist negation of a canonized repertoire, keeping many of the terms of that repertoire in place but exhausting much of its coercive potential. In a similar fashion, “A Pattern” shows how the apparent evasion of specificity can itself be a “type of specificity”—in this case, the undermining of specificity. At end,

that is, these images matter not *in spite of* their being clichéd or banal—it is not that they seem trite, but if one looks closely enough one can extract a traditional reading from them—but that their mattering proceeds precisely *by way of* their being clichéd and banal. It is not that their importance results from an implied specificity; it is rather that their force depends on their being able to void themselves *of* meaningful content. Rather than asking us to unpack their multiple layers of signification, these images foreground the fact that they eschew signification.

The argument, that is, is that these images work *as* images by absolving themselves of connotative value. By this I mean that they actively work to repudiate the sort of specificity that would allow them to crystallize as an idea. Yet the twist is that this repudiation of specificity—the way the poem seems to willfully abstract itself away from concreteness, while, importantly, staying within the world *of* image (instead of, say, becoming simply an arrangement of pronouns)—itself summons the history of poetic imagery. To read these images as banal is simultaneously to recognize that banality itself is a historically contingent category. By evoking the banal, “A Pattern” makes poetic imagery hold the opposite of what poetic imagery traditionally holds; if poetic images are supposed to be meaningful, “A Pattern” makes meaning out of meaningless-ness. If I earlier described Creeley’s work from this period as working within traditional models of form to dismantle their traditional effects, this is in part what I meant. Just as this poem’s falling rhythms upset the rhythmic conventions of English lyric, so the connotative emptiness of its images mobilizes literary history to render that history in negative. Interested neither in crystallizing a concrete image in a form unique to that image (as in Williams), nor in eschewing reference altogether (as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry

Creeley in part inspired would aim to do), this poem blazes a middle path, focusing attention—slightly, almost without our noticing—less on the content these images enable than on the fact that they are there *to* enable this content, but do not do so.

Put still differently, what this poem provides at its most extreme is the *experience* of image without the content that usually accompanies that experience. Much as Creeley's idiosyncratic enjambments emphasize the materiality of language, ensuring we do not fall into an unexamined flow of words, so these images' content-less content arrests the process by which *what* images usually mean comes to paper over the fact *that* they mean. And this "*that*" is what I was referring to above when I described the poem's having explicitly situated itself "within a specifically human mode of being in the world." As with "One Way," which at end grounded itself in the *form* of life that it could not name but only obliquely reference, for the simple reason that language always potentially offers the threat of its own instability, this poem's self-undermining ultimately foregrounds the *that-ness* that enables the poetic experience. The description of this condition appears in lines 11 and 12, and marks the poem's single moment of abstract reflection: "a tall / sense of enclosure."

Floating in the middle of the poem, the phrase is as enigmatic as it is revealing. "Tall" itself plays sound against sense: sonically, it completes the theme set up by "small" and "fall," providing the last instance both of this vowel sound and of the terminal "l"; conceptually, however, it provides the opposite of "small," and a counter to "fall. Riddles continue. From what does this sense of enclosure issue? The "trees"? Their closeness (given that "close" sits inside of "enclosure")? Their being "both" close *and* green (as the assonance between "both" and "close" suggests)? More inscrutably, the

phrase names no concrete object or experience, but instead only a “*sense* of enclosure,” an unverifiable feeling that need not correspond to the actual existence of an enclosing object. “Sense” bears multiple overtones. While its most direct connotation is “hint” or “intimation,” the word also suggests the *senses*. As such, it is not clear whether the experience here is meant to name an embodied, physical resonance or merely a psychological one.

As with “the way of feeling” in the last poem, this move to meta-level description raises the poem’s conceptual stakes. For, again, it confuses the ontological status of the poem’s description. Is this “sense of enclosure” provided *by* the poem, or is it something realized *in* the poem? There are hints (“senses”) of both. A small grove of trees might easily furnish an secure space, their tall-ness encouraging a look upwards towards the “sky.” Within the poem, one could, in fact, read the connotatively empty images that surround this phrase as enabling the “sense of enclosure” that shelters this one direct moment of reflection. But, if one follows the reading I was arguing for above, it is arguably the fact of these images’ voiding themselves of meaningful content that allows them to provide a “sense of enclosure”—an experience of image without the traditionally attendant content. The connotative emptiness offered by the poem, that is, turns the poem into an expression of *form*, in a fundamental sense: a structure in which meaning and experience happen. And that it is rendered as a “sense” highlights the fact that form, in this capacity, is felt on a physical and conceptual level. The possibility of expressing *only* this form is always an impossibility. As “The Pattern” showed us, once words are introduced, the condition of potential that enabled them is closed off. Yet in evacuating its content of traditional content, “A Picture” foregrounds its essential *formed-ness*.

To this degree, this poem helps trace out Olson's famous dictum that "Limits / are what any of us / are inside of"²²⁹; focusing on poetic structuring rather than poetic structure, "A Picture" points us to the process that generates Olson's "us." If "One Way" played out a Descartes-inspired disavowal of item after precarious item, this poem reveals what is left: not an atemporal point of indivisible being, but an ongoing experience that implies the existence of both time and the body without being able to absolutely confirm the existence of either.

Part of what makes this poem so complicated, however, is the fact that this move towards a content emptied of content simultaneously takes place as a sonic narrative, one that corresponds to the loose conventions of improvised solos. In some ways, this is as it should be: while an "enclosure" can be a static object, a "sense" always occurs in time, regardless of what one takes "sense" to mean. In this manner, the poem foregrounds the fact of both time and embodiment, showing that even the most resolute anti-narrative—like that of the poem's images—nonetheless inevitably registers *as* narrative, if only in the sensory realm. And in so doing, it suggests that sound represents a constitutive precondition for poetic experience, but also, crucially, that *music* is what endures through the vagueness of content. Regardless of what a poem is about, *that* it can be about something, even if that something is its own dissolution, registers in the presence of its music.

If I earlier described Creeley's relation to jazz as occurring primarily on the level of form, it is here where we see this relationship playing out. For, at bottom, poems like this one help us see jazz improvisation neither as a moment of pure and free self-creation,

²²⁹ Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, I.17.

nor as a moment of rigid adherence to form, but rather, when done right, a mode of revealing the fundamental work *of* form, the fundamental formed-ness of the world. In this sense, what a poem like “A Pattern” teaches us about the music of Charlie Parker is that the opacity or hermeneutic uncertainty he generated out of his sounds can alternatively be heard as the uncovering of the fact *that* the music is made of sound, regardless of what those sounds might come to mean. That the instability of musical connotation that musician was able to realize too helps us hear sound not only as a signifying gesture, but as a gesture emptied of signification. Indeed, if Charlie Parker’s music aimed to introduce a degree of unknowability into the “I” that resulted from his music, Creeley’s work assures us that unknowability lies at the core of this process.

There is, of course, a difference. For Parker the issue was the presentation of an “I,” and his work with form was meant to undermine the expectations set by that form. Creeley, in contrast, is more interested in observation; his poetry cares less about ensuring that the “I” remains hermeneutically unstable for the reader than observing the way that “I”’s inherent instability necessarily impacts the shape and sounds of his poetry. To this end, Creeley’s musicality is as much a result of his poetry’s thinking about itself as it is a means of self-representation. This is especially true rhythmically: on one level, the stuttering rhythms and hesitant cadences of Creeley’s work emerge as the residue of an observational commitment on his poems’ part, a commitment to observing themselves as they proceed, so as not to get lost in the mindless flow of words. The irony is that this restraint acquires materiality as a productive activity, since it is the impetus that creates a distinct sonic and visual experience for the reader; the drive towards emptiness is here a mode of creation, of *poesy* in the classic sense (i.e. *poesy* as making). What is on one

level an engagement with form that comes to produce sound emerges on another as an intentionally sonic story.

Yet the “I” that results is equivalently enigmatic. And the fact that the sounds of “A Picture” resemble a jazz improvisation signal that what Creeley takes from jazz is less a set of sounds than a set of aesthetic tools, tools that bring us closer to the emergence of the poetic “I.” This emergence, Creeley shows us, is hermeneutically unstable at its core. Such an experience leaves the world an essentially mysterious place. As with Parker, the point is not outright rejection. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the world’s essential formed-ness occurs on the level of “sense,” understood in all its capacities—linguistic, embodied, psychological. And whatever musicality one could read into a Creeley poem at bottom remains the residue of this fact, that of the “I”’s being at once the speaker and the spoken. The sounds and look of a poem, which induce the *feeling* that allows us to know we are in the world—these are the only forms of verification available. The tools Creeley gets from jazz, that is, are those that work to obscure the “I” without obliterating it, leaving an “I” present but ever-flickering, ever unsure, a wind knowable only through the ripples it raises on one’s skin.

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