

Writing (Jazz) Out of Bounds

by

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*For the ones who have made my life more musical,
and the richer for that language*

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Abstract

A number of music and semiotic theorists have argued that music and language differ in their manner of communication: where language operates referentially, music does not form a system of signs. Despite this, music is often described as “saying something,” and jazz especially has a tradition of being spoken about with recourse to discursive metaphors. *Writing (Jazz) Out of Bounds* examines descriptions of jazz in the works of four writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka, and Ralph Ellison, contending that any writer seeking to capture jazz in writing must confront the limitations of his or her medium, and that this confrontation is implicated in his or her interpretation of what jazz ultimately means.

I begin in the Introduction with an assessment of various philosophies of musical meaning, and their implications for the representation of music in language. Next, in Chapter 1, I propose a reading of Fitzgerald’s “Jazz Age” fiction that accounts for the near-absence of the word “jazz” from his texts, arguing that Fitzgerald invokes the music-language divide in order to convey a sense of the appropriation of African-American jazz music by white musicians in the 1920s. In Chapter 2, I posit that Kerouac’s notoriously vague descriptions of jazz and his somewhat unmusical “bop prosody” writing style are deliberate and self-conscious, and enable him to articulate more nearly his conceptualization of the Beat Generation. Finally, in Chapter 3, I contend that, despite polar differences in their theories of jazz, Baraka’s and Ellison’s works depict a similar process of wrestling jazz into the written text, and indeed present a similar portrait of jazz that ultimately points to limitations in each of their theories. In attempting to represent jazz adequately, each of these writers performs to some degree the act of negotiating the music-language divide, and thus simultaneously draws attention to the limitations of language. In the Conclusion of the thesis, I argue that this action has important consequences for the depiction of racial difference, which is often invoked in tandem with jazz throughout these literary works.

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Introduction On Music, Language, and Jazz

“If you have to ask what jazz is, you’ll never know.”
– Louie Armstrong

“And underneath the story it was as if a song was being played. In the silences between the words I could almost actually hear it.”
– Nat Hentoff, *Jazz Country*

When I was in third grade, I asked my parents if I could learn to play the trumpet and was told, “Asians don’t play brass instruments” (in retrospect, I suspect that they meant the comment at least somewhat humorously, but whatever the case I went on to play violin instead). Upon hearing about this years later, a friend of mine in high school gave me a copy of a children’s book entitled *Jazz Country*, by Nat Hentoff, which tells the story of Tom Curtis, a young trumpeter who wants to become a jazz musician but has difficulties owing to his being “too white” (17). While the book never did inspire me to pick up the trumpet, one episode remained with me many years after the initial reading. Early in the novel, Tom asks a well-known jazz musician, Godfrey, what he needs to do in order to get “inside” the jazz scene—essentially asking what makes jazz—and Godfrey answers with the declaration “I will tell you a story” (33). And somehow, in Godfrey’s subsequent story—“in the silences between the words,” Tom comes to understand the nature of jazz and what he must do (34). To me, Godfrey’s story seemed like a cop-out.

While to some degree, I still feel that the episode is rather convenient in the sense that Tom gets what he is looking for and the reader is none the wiser about what jazz is, there is no denying that as a jazz historian and biographer, Hentoff probably had his reasons. Certainly the passage calls into mind the celebrated statement by Louis Armstrong, “If you have to ask what jazz is, you’ll never know.” The legacy of writing

about jazz, both fiction and nonfiction, certainly seems to support this claim. Perhaps David Meltzer articulates it best when he summarizes his collection of excerpts from essays written on jazz, *Reading Jazz*, this way:

Jazz has been celebrated and damned for the same reasons: for possessing the body, for restoring a person momentarily to a state of noble and innocent savagery, for inflaming sexual jungle fantasies, for being archaic, detrimental to modernity and progress, for being the absolute acme of all that's new and modern, for being America's only "authentic" art, for being a hypnagogic web sucking brains out of robotized consumers sedated by Mass Culture turning everyone into hopeless zombie cipher consumers, for being a model of pragmatic socialism . . . jazz as religion, jazz as Devil-dealt spore, jazz as ecstasy, jazz as danger. (21-22)

Do any of these descriptions capture jazz better than any of the others, or do any succeed at all? Meltzer offers the following reason for the discrepancies: "music can't be described; it can be played, heard, lived within, experienced, but remains immune to language." Language, he argues, reduces music to "a ghetto of ghosts made up of words" (*Reading Jazz* 18).

Others would argue that Meltzer is overly pessimistic (or dramatic), in alternate formulations I will explore momentarily, but regardless he points to a very palpable divide between jazz and writers' descriptions of it—a divide that is essentially *musical* in nature. It is the musical qualities of jazz, he argues, that language cannot fully articulate. How, then, do writers such as Nat Hentoff attempt to represent jazz, and how does this divide between music and language shape the perception of jazz they attempt to create? This thesis explores that divide, contending that writers of jazz in literature are forced to

confront the limitations of their medium, and that this confrontation is implicated not only in their descriptions of jazz, but also in their interpretations of what jazz means. To ignore its presence, as many literary critics have done in the past, is either to misunderstand these writers' uses jazz, or to fall short of a more complete understanding of the texts. But before I launch into an exploration of a number of writers and texts, it will be useful to press further at the nature of this divide, and investigate its effect upon much of jazz criticism. In what ways can music be communicated through language, and in what ways does it fall short?

Two approaches to musical semiotics attempt to negotiate the divide between music and language, both recognizing the irresistible urge a listener feels to "hear" the music as a kind of language. The first approach is the one taken by Meltzer above, a structuralist approach indebted to the work of anthropologist Lévi-Strauss and one that calls for a strict divide between what is musical and what is linguistic. "Music is a language without meaning," proclaims music philosopher Eero Tarasti in his early work *Myth and Music* (1979), "therefore it is easy to explain why a listener feels an irresistible need to fill this gap with meanings provided by himself" (29). Likewise, critical theorist Theodor Adorno's distinction in "Music, Language, and Composition" (1956) that "music is similar to language in that it is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound. . . . But what is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs" (113).

If this is the case, and language, as a system of signs, can only communicate something external to the music, i.e. an interpretation of music that is socially and historically constructed, the best a writer can do is describe the musical structures

themselves which give rise to interpretation. This understanding of music leads to perhaps one of the most common methods of writing about jazz, which I will refer to in this thesis as an *aesthetic* method, which focuses on such musical elements as rhythm, melody, harmony, texture, or form. Believing that the only accurate, objective way to communicate jazz is through a description of these musical structures, such critics as Virgil Thomson and J. W. Henderson have defined jazz as “a compound of (a) the fox-trot rhythm, a four-four measure (*alla breve*) with a double accent, and (b) a syncopated melody over this rhythm” (“Jazz” 465) or simply “portamento effects [a slide between notes] in wind instruments” (“Jazz Comes to Stay” 337), respectively. While throughout the Twentieth Century such descriptions have become more and more complex and detailed, they are still very present, and can be found for example in André Hodeir’s book *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*, which explicates the work of many jazz “greats” in great detail, note by note and phrase by phrase.

The degree to which such a description falls short of capturing jazz, or any kind of music, should be immediately apparent. Reading about portamento effects and double accents will communicate only a limited idea of the sound, and certainly little sense of the experience. Indeed, in the introduction to his collection of essays entitled *Representing Jazz*, Krin Gabbard criticizes the way this kind of writing severs jazz from its context, noting that “jazz writers tend to ignore these extramusical aspects of jazz by conceptualizing it as a safely autonomous domain, more dependent on rhythmic innovation than on social change” (Gabbard 3).

In more recent works, Tarasti, influenced by the work of French theorist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, has turned to a more iconic approach, which allows for certain universal

meanings within the actual sound patterns of the music. In his influential work, *Music and Discourse* (1990), Nattiez argues that “music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative,” and that the “narrative impulse” occurs because “he or she hears (on the level of strictly musical discourse) recollections, expectations, and resolutions, but does not know what is expected, what resolved” (128). While Nattiez hastens to qualify, “Music symbolism is *polysemic*, because when we listen to music, the meanings it takes on, the emotions that it evokes, are multiple, varied, and confused” (37), he gestures that within a specific socio-cultural context the narrative generated is not entirely arbitrary.

Both jazz criticism as well as fictional representations of jazz are full of such narratives, often betraying a writer’s hope that such a narrative contains some sort of universality. In his essay “Improvising and Mythmaking,” however, Leland Chambers notes that such “impressionistic” narratives tend to distort the music more than they represent it, necessarily “focusing on how the listener reacts while listening or else what the player feels while playing” (56), frequently without acknowledgment of the subjectivity involved.

A third, albeit non-semiotic, theory of musical meaning has been proposed recently by music philosopher Christopher Small, who proposes in *Musicking* (1998) that musical meaning is inseparable from the context in which it is being produced or listened to, a total act he calls *musicking*:

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between

the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance.

(*Musicking* 13)

Similarly, jazz critic Amiri Baraka argues that “the notes of a jazz solo . . . exist as they do for reasons that are only concomitantly musical” (“Jazz and the White Critic” 15). This focus on the context of jazz as integral to the construction of its meaning has led a number of jazz critics to implicate the history of jazz in their interpretation of its meaning. Thus, for example, literary critic Kimberly Benston’s perception of the Coltrane “sound” as “an irrepressible dislocating of the ‘standard’ . . . a quality of discontinuous repetition, an insistence on breaking the very patterns that he discovered” in relation to the struggle of African Americans to “assert significance against the grain of dominant idioms” (*Performing Blackness* 123 & 117). Or Theodor Adorno’s universally lamented description of jazz in the essay “On Jazz,” referenced by Meltzer as a reduction of jazz to a “hypnagogic web sucking brains out of robotized consumers sedated by Mass Culture turning everyone into hopeless zombie cipher consumers” (*Reading Jazz* 22). “Jazz is not what it ‘is,’” proclaims Adorno, but “what it is used for” (472).

But here, in what I refer to as a *functional* method of representing jazz, some limitations immediately present themselves. Must all jazz “mean” in relation to its history as an African-American, a Twentieth-Century, a Modernist, or commodified art form, to name a few? Is jazz simply captured via a description of the context in which it is performed or heard, and the effects of its sound? In this kind of reading, not only must one contextual/historical interpretation be privileged over others, but the extramusical often become privileged over the musical qualities. And can jazz, with the varied

meanings it seems to produce, be adequately captured in such a depiction? The divide between music and language reasserts itself, and aesthetic, narrative, and functional attempts to capture music all fall short.

In literature, depictions of jazz serve as a particularly dynamic site at which writers continuously struggle against this divide, and they figure prominently in works by authors as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Julio Cortázar, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Ntzoke Shange, and Gayl Jones, not to mention F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ralph Ellison, Jack Kerouac, and Amiri Baraka, whose writings are central to this thesis. While this can be explained in part by the resonance the music carries in relation to issues of race, ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson also argues in her remarkable book *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* that jazz, in its improvisatory and interactive core, particularly draws attention to the process of its meaning-making, its attempt at “saying something”:

When a [jazz] musician successfully reaches a discerning audience, moves its members to applaud or shout praises, raises the energy to dramatic proportions, and leaves a sonorous memory that lingers long after, he or she has moved beyond technical competence, beyond the chord changes, and into the realm of “saying something.” (1-2)

The metaphor of conversation, Monson observes, is one used commonly by jazz musicians and suggests not only “structural analogies between music and talk” but also “emphasizes the sociability of jazz performance” (73). Because of this, jazz more than any other music seems to invite attempts to capture it in language, to write what it “says.”

Writing (Jazz) Out of Bounds can be read not only as an examination of how four very different writers sought to capture jazz, but also as a continued exploration of the nature of the divide between music and language, and in the process an exploration of how race is implicated in that divide. I have intentionally restricted the scope of this analysis to prose texts, despite the presence of “jazz” poems by both Kerouac and Baraka, not only because representations of jazz in poetry have proved the subject of much criticism already,¹ but also because prose, I would argue, expresses language’s conceit of referentiality in a manner much less disguised and mystified than does poetry. By this, I do not mean to say that poetry transgresses the music-language divide and reduces its significance, for even when poetry attempts to communicate non-symbolically it calls attention to the degree to which it falls short, inevitably relying upon rhetorical figures such as metaphor or allusion to grant it meaning. Instead, I contend that an analysis of jazz in prose implicates similar concerns for poetry, and serves synecdochically for language.

“In fiction about jazz,” writes Chambers, “one often finds the music interpreted to support nonmusical ideas or experiences. This is one effect of applying the referential aspects of language to the nonreferential sounds of music” (58). Indeed, each of the four writers in this study engage with jazz as a symbol of some sort, and in doing so are forced to negotiate the divide.

Chapter one begins with the recognition of the near-absence of references to jazz from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Jazz Age” fiction. In light of this, I proceed to read the

¹ Brent Edwards’s and John Szwed’s “A Bibliography of Jazz Poetry Criticism” (2002) provides an exhaustive list of anthologies, books, dissertations, jazz journalism, critical essays, interviews, liner notes, and reviews that address the relationship between jazz and poetry.

handful of references to jazz in his texts as enacting a substitution, not only of words for jazz but of jazz-influenced popular music for the African-American jazz tradition marginalized from the public sphere. In this way, jazz comes to symbolize not only the new cultural values popularly associated with the 1920s, but also the tension implicit in that change, gesturing toward a reassessment of what Fitzgerald meant by the term “Jazz Age.”

In chapter two I turn to the work of Jack Kerouac, whose descriptions of jazz are often dismissed in connection with the racism many of his works exude. By pointing to a set of passages that demonstrate Kerouac’s awareness of his own limitations in representing jazz, I attempt a recuperation of both his descriptions as well as his so-called “bop prosody” writing style. In *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac flirts at the divide between language and music, ultimately communicating through it the state of *beatness* whose articulation named him as spokesperson for the 1950s Beat Generation.

Chapter three positions itself in the midst of the Baraka-Ellison debate over the nature and meaning of jazz foregrounded in the 1960s Black Arts Movement. For Baraka, jazz was a realization of an essential *blackness* in African-American life; for Ellison, it communicated the pluralism of American society. In reading their depictions of jazz against the theories presented in their nonfiction writings, I argue for a similarity between the two writers that exists in their methods of confronting the music-language divide. Throughout Baraka’s plays and fiction, and especially Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the divide figures prominently in a process of negotiation the authors enact as they are forced to compromise their theories in an effort to represent jazz adequately.

Each of these writers, I suggest in the following chapters, engages in a self-conscious performance of jazz's reduction into language in an effort to capture jazz more fully. Additionally, the divide between music and language becomes central to the meanings the writers ascribe to jazz. Somewhere in these texts, then, in gaps and silences, missed meanings and mixed metaphors, stands a jazz that refuses to appear in print but, above all, refuses to be silenced.

Chapter 1

F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Jazzless “Jazz Age”

In *The Beautiful and the Damned*, the word “jazz” appears a total of five times in three separate passages. In *The Great Gatsby*, it appears only four, on par with the distinctive adjective “owl-eyed.” In *Tender is the Night*, it appears three times, and in *This Side of Paradise* the only word that might suggest jazz is “rag-time,” invoked once and in passing. Fitzgerald’s short stories fare no better, and only in two or three of his more than one hundred-sixty short stories does he use the word in more than a passing gesture.

Given that Fitzgerald is infamous for coining the phrase “Jazz Age” to describe the 1920s, where are the jazz orchestras, the jazz musicians, or the jazz music in his writings? Certainly jazz wasn’t absent from the time and place he wrote about in his fiction: countless studies have been written about the so-called “jazz controversy” of the 1920s, most notably Kathy Ogren’s *The Jazz Revolution*, wherein she argues:

The centrality of jazz in our historical memory is neither an accident nor a facile convention derived from the “roaring twenties” stereotype. Jazz and its practitioners were directly affected by or participated themselves in major changes taking place in the teens and 1920s. (6)

From Louis Armstrong’s improvised jazz and the jazz of Harlem nightclubs to the orchestrated jazz of Paul Whiteman and Broadway pop tunes that were being recorded and disseminated widely, the music indiscriminately called “jazz” “communicated change across vast racial and cultural dividing lines,” symbolizing the postwar divide between a conservative older generation and a more progressive younger one (Ogren, 6-7). Certainly Fitzgerald was aware of this, and in his well-known retrospective on the

decade, "Echoes of the Jazz Age" (1931), he declares "it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were" (14).

There is no doubt that for Fitzgerald jazz, in its manifestations as music, dance, or simply a way of life, spoke to the changing times in some fashion. In fact, literary critic Kristen Henson devotes a chapter of her book *Beyond the Sound Barrier* (2003) to an explication of Fitzgerald's portrayals of jazz and popular music, contending that in his writings "jazz-influenced popular music symbolizes a threat to the notion of a cultural hierarchy of value" (68). But Henson, and other critics who have explored Fitzgerald's relationship with jazz, miss the fundamental rarity of jazz in his works. Nor do they find it striking that all of Fitzgerald's descriptions of jazz in his fiction refer to the kind of popular music associated with white musicians such as Whiteman or Gershwin, whom many jazz critics (most notably Amiri Baraka) have criticized for severing the music from its African-American origins, reducing it to a set of ornamentations and doing away with its improvisatory qualities. While both Henson and Ogren dismiss the significance of this characteristic of Fitzgerald's work, concluding that his exposure to the music must have been limited to the white popular music easily accessible at the time (Henson 50; Ogren 150), they also both ignore evidence in passages excised from the texts as well as evidence implicit in Fitzgerald's descriptions of jazz that indicate otherwise.

The conspicuous absence of jazz from Fitzgerald's "Jazz Age" texts, I am contending, is no accident. This absence and the limited depictions of jazz within his works as well as outside of them, indicate an attempt to communicate more exactly the

nature of jazz as a kind of music and simultaneously the 1920s “jazz controversy” as a complex conflict both of generations and of race.

The “Jazz History of the World”

Two of the four appearances of the word “jazz” in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) surface at an unusual moment in Chapter 3 of the novel, when the narrator Nick Carraway attends a lavish party thrown by Gatsby, complete with a full orchestra. At some time in the evening, the orchestra leader announces that, “at the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff’s latest work which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May . . . ‘Vladimir Tostoff’s Jazz History of the World’” (54). But where the reader might expect a description of this piece—one that, we are told, caused “a big sensation,” there is only a narrative gap. “The nature of Mr. Tostoff’s composition eluded me,” notes Nick, “because just as it began my eyes fell on Gatsby” (54). After spending a considerable effort setting up the piece as one of the evening’s main events, Fitzgerald dismisses it with a redirection of Nick’s eyesight, an inadequate gesture when we consider that Nick would still be hearing the music.

As it stands in the text, the invocation of a jazz piece being performed in Carnegie Hall seems, consistent with Ogren’s or Henson’s analyses, a reference to the popular kinds of jazz being performed by white musicians across the nation. Indeed, many critics have guessed that the piece alludes either to Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” performed at Aeolian Hall in 1924 by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra (Henson 43) or Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* at Carnegie Hall in 1921 (Mansell 60).

However, the manuscript of the novel reveals a different story, as well as an explanation for the narrative gap. Here, six lengthy paragraphs describing the nature of the composition have been cut from the published version, and in the first of these paragraphs Fitzgerald reveals that he is writing about a kind of jazz different from the popular music of the time: “It fascinated me,” observes Nick. “For about fifteen minutes I don’t think anyone stirred in their chairs—except to laugh now and then in a curious puzzled way when they came to the end of a movement” (54). In the manuscript, then, amidst the gaiety of a party whose exuberance displays the youthful abandon of the age, lies this sudden moment of silence. A jazz unheard of before, whose presence is unsettling and perhaps incongruous with this setting, has emerged.¹

Having noted this, Nick attempts to describe the piece, whose syntax he seems unable to decipher yet which compels him to try through four movements of the work, fifteen minutes, and five paragraphs. Regarding the third movement, he narrates:

There would be a series of interruptive notes that seemed to fall together accidentally [sic] and colored everything that came after them until before you knew it they became the theme and new discords were opposed to it outside. But what struck me particularly was that just as you’d get used to the new discord business there’d be one of the old *themes* rung in this time as a discord until you’d get a ghastly sense it was all a cycle after all, purposeless and sardonic. (55, emphasis his)

Certainly this description is one alien to the relatively well-ordered, popular music of the decade’s jazz orchestras, and instead aligns itself more closely with the improvised jazz

¹ The entirety of the excised “Jazz History of the World” passage is included in the Extracts section of this thesis on p. 86.

of smaller ensembles in venues smaller than Carnegie Hall. The description of interruptions and seeming accidents coming together into a sort of presence parallels the idea of improvised variations upon choruses. Additionally, the change of a theme from consonance to dissonance, or discord, might indicate a change in either the melody or the harmonic structure underneath, practices familiar to the kinds of jazz championed by Louis Armstrong and other African-American musicians performing in Chicago or Harlem nightclubs at the time. In fact, jazz historian André Hodeir has commented upon the brilliance of Armstrong's work as stemming from his ability to spread his "paraphrase . . . out, becoming freer and livelier" while "clinging to the essential notes of the theme" (57), a description which resonates with Fitzgerald's above.

Elsewhere in his narrative, Nick remarks upon a "repetition of [a] spinning sound" which pulls him in so that as it was "trying to establish itself, to get a foothold, something soft and persistent and profound . . . you yourself were trying to help it, struggling, praying for it—until suddenly it was *there*" (55). The repetition of a single motive, or sound, might again find a parallel in the idea of a riff that a jazz musician will improvise upon and wrestle with. Here, too, the idea of improvisation is emphasized by the connection Nick feels with this single sound, which he personifies as attempting to assert itself. A number of jazz critics, most notably Ralph Ellison, have similarly described the act of improvisation, which according to Ellison found its epitome in Louis Armstrong, as "an art of individual assertion within and against the group" ("The Charlie Christian Story" 36). Could it be that in this passage Fitzgerald is moving past descriptions of popular, orchestrated jazz? In his striking essay "Jazz Fractures," literary critic Mitchell Breitwieser argues just this from his reading of the passage, noting that in

the way the piece “seems to have a core, but . . . veers off just when about to present itself,” Fitzgerald recognizes “that jazz by design offers no reunion with the already known, but rather, by way of improvisation, disconnects the familiar from its familiarity” (364-67). By “jazz,” I should note, Breitwieser refers here only to the improvised tradition largely carried on by African Americans at the time.

That Fitzgerald intends to refer to the tradition of jazz championed by African-American musicians as opposed to written-out jazz popularized by white musicians at the time becomes clear in Nick’s comments about the final movement of the piece: “The last was weak I thought though most of the people seemed to like it best of all. It had recognizable strains of famous jazz in it—Alexander’s Ragtime Band and the Darktown Strutter’s Ball and recurrent hint [sic] of The Beale Street Blues” (55). By contrasting the music that came before to the “famous jazz” of the final movement, Fitzgerald gestures toward a kind of jazz separate from the popular music being circulated at the time. Furthermore, Nick’s statement that this last kind of jazz was “weak” brings a certain amount of tension upon Fitzgerald’s seemingly straightforward depictions of popular jazz in his other works, which I will explore in the next section. Indeed, if we take this final part of the “Jazz History of the World” to be a representation of the current state of jazz history, the piece might stand as a critique of the 1920s popular appropriations of an older jazz tradition that came before.

But why is the passage cut from the published version of the novel, when it might reveal clues not apparent elsewhere in Fitzgerald’s canon? In a letter to his editor, Max Perkins, Fitzgerald writes, “I thought that the whole episode . . . was rotten” (qtd. in Mansell 59). That he was frustrated in his attempt to communicate the *sound* of jazz

through writing might be paralleled in his description of Nick's frustrations in narrating the piece: "I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it" (*Facsimile* 55). Indeed, rather than getting at the music itself, Fitzgerald can only describe the effect it has upon the audience (their silence) or Nick's subjective interpretation of it via the narrative he is compelled to generate. Nick's statement of his frustration reveals that a substitution that has been made, a substitution of language for music in a way that recalls music theorist Jean-Jacques Nattiez's statement, "Music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative" (*Music and Discourse* 128). Yet the act of performing that substitution allows Fitzgerald not only to avoid describing the music in terms of absolute structures, but also in some sense to capture music in writing, if only by pointing the reader outside of the writing itself. This gap between writing and music is further accentuated by the fact the piece professes to be a "jazz history of the world," yet seems incomprehensible as a history of any sort—chronological, representational, or otherwise. The title, indeed, serves only to compel the listener to attempt to understand the music symbolically or representationally, an understanding that music in general defies, and Nick's description as well.

By cutting this passage altogether for its failure to communicate the jazz he wished to capture, Fitzgerald draws attention to his awareness of the difficulty in capturing music in language, an awareness that also marks the descriptions of jazz that appear elsewhere in his texts. Additionally, the "Jazz History of the World" passage reveals Fitzgerald's knowledge of a tradition of jazz absent from the surface in his other descriptions of jazz and the "Jazz Age," thus placing pressure on readings of these descriptions by critics such as Kristen Henson. It is crucial to note that had this passage

remained in *The Great Gatsby*, it would have created not a little degree of tension in its depiction of a “jazz orchestra,” the ensemble associated with popular jazz, playing a kind of improvised jazz associated with African Americans to a silenced audience. By silencing the description of the piece altogether, the tension has been removed, but with it the jazz’s African-American influences. In a way, the act of silencing, which remains only in the narrative gap depicted in the published work, reflects the acts of jazz’s appropriation from the African-American community and its subsequent “legitimization” at the hands of white musicians, and simultaneously reflects the silence in translating music into prose. Here, then, Fitzgerald begins to capture a more complete portrait of jazz, both as a musical and social phenomenon, than he has previously been given credit for, and one that, read with the insights of this passage in mind, can be found in the descriptions of jazz elsewhere in his writings.

Jazz Substitutes

As noted earlier, all the descriptions of jazz present in Fitzgerald’s novels and short stories, with the exception of a singular passage in the unfinished novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon* which will be explored toward the end of this chapter, are references to a jazz-influenced popular music (a term I will use heretofore to describe the “jazz” of musicians such as Whiteman and jazz Broadway songs, in order to distinguish it from the African-American improvised jazz tradition). As such, they seemingly give little indication that Fitzgerald was aware of an African-American tradition that also thrived, though less prominently, in the 1920s. However, upon closer inspection, these descriptions of jazz-influenced popular music reveal themselves to be performances of

substitutions and appropriations of the latter, frequently enacted by analogy to music's inarticulacy in the written text. As the writing becomes a substitution for music, so does jazz-influenced popular music become a substitution for jazz.

In "Echoes of the Jazz Age," Fitzgerald's clearest statement of the connection between jazz and the 1920s, he introduces jazz by writing, "the word jazz in its progress toward respectability has meant first sex, then dancing, then music. It is associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of a war" (6). In this often-quoted "definition" of his use of jazz, it is important to note that what jazz is has not been addressed. Instead, the reader is told what it has been made to mean, what it has been appropriated for, and what it is associated with. The phrase "progress toward respectability," in fact, implies an original meaning that has been lost through attempts to legitimize it. Likewise, by describing "the word jazz" instead of jazz itself, Fitzgerald acknowledges that he is capturing an image, a word, rather than the thing itself.

The word jazz also fails to make an appearance in reference to music anywhere else in the essay—as if jazz itself can only be captured obliquely by describing the decade historically, though Fitzgerald does write that at the time "bootleg Negro records with their phallic euphemisms made everything suggestive" (9). Here, then, he demonstrates in an underhanded way an awareness of the presence of African-American music in the decade, and according to Breitwieser, declares its authority: "you have to go outside the popular, into the esoterica of the bootleg, if you want the real thing" (*The Great Gatsby: Grief, Jazz, and the Eye Witness* 59). Fitzgerald's choice of the word "euphemisms" also gestures toward a silenced substitution inherent in the evolution of jazz. At the forefront of this essay, however, are only invocations of "chorus girls" (13)

and the comic song “Yes, we have no bananas” (14) popularized by Paul Whiteman—invocations whose prominence reflect the appropriation of “Negro records” that took place throughout the decade.

The three uses of the word “jazz” in the novel *Tender is the Night* (1934) are also telling. In the first of these, Fitzgerald describes a song presented by the pianist from a jazz orchestra, “The Ragtime Jazzes of Edinboro,” who sings “In a Danny Deever monotone”:

*There was a young lady from hell,
Who jumped at the sound of a bell
Because she was bad—bad—bad,
She jumped at the sound of a bell,
From hell (BOOMBOOM)
From hell (TOOTTOOT)
There was a young lady from hell— (272)*

Here, in this song, the lyrics are absurd, the music is reduced to a set of ornamentations created by drums (“BOOMBOOM”) and probably clarinets (“TOOTTOOT”), and we are told the words are written by a British aristocrat, sung by a Scottish pianist, and performed for dinner guests on a yacht in France. Not to mention “Danny Deever” refers to the title of one of Rudyard Kipling’s *Barrack-Room Ballads*, a verse to be sung by colonialist officers in the British military. There are no Americans involved, certainly no African-Americans. Given this depiction of jazz, it certainly would seem difficult to take Fitzgerald’s use of the music as a reference to anything other than popular music.

However, the absurdity of the invocation is telling: the passage is clearly meant to ridicule the reduction of jazz that has emerged through its appropriations. The representation of the music as a set of ornamentations alludes to the work of those like Whiteman, whom Ogren describes as “explain[ing] away certain characteristics and performance practices original to the music . . . to disassociate jazz from its Afro-American traditions” (159-60). The adoption of jazz by the Scottish and French, not to mention the high-society Lady Caroline Sibly-Biers, whom Fitzgerald describes as “fragile, tubercular . . . the pennon of decadence, last ensign of a fading empire” (270-71), presents a parallel to jazz’s adoption by white musicians from African Americans. Finally, the reference to colonialism via “Danny Deever” draws a clear connection to the colonialist policies of white Americans in the New World, with their appropriation of jazz being one example. The lyrics, which cannot possibly be taken seriously, also indicate a loss of meaning—a loss that even the presence of lyrics, which reduce the possibility of meanings purely instrumental music could generate (the music of the African-American jazz tradition was primarily instrumental), betrays.

The second use of the word “jazz” in *Tender is the Night* is problematic in a different way. Here, the protagonist Dick Diver plays “some new jazz from America” (290) on the piano for his wife Nicole. While the music’s American origins are recognized, it is again characterized by silly, simple lyrics:

Thank y’ father-r

Thank y’ mother-r

Thanks for meetingup [sic] with one another— (290)

After singing these words, however, Dick abruptly cuts off the song, exclaiming, "I don't like that one" (290). The reason for this action is left unclear until Nicole interprets it, saying "Oh play it! . . . Am I going through the rest of my life flinching at the word 'father'?" (290). Given Nicole's history of abuse at the hands of her father, this might initially seem believable. However, some questions remain. Why does Dick break off the song here when the next verse (which he continues singing after Nicole reprimands him) is about horses? By interrupting the song, Dick only draws attention to Nicole's situation. And why does Dick, a psychiatrist, not respond to Nicole's comment at all? There is a sense that Nicole's interpretation has fallen short of satisfying—a sense that Dick's distaste arises from a more deeply-rooted motivation, one that causes him to "turn the page" immediately when he first breaks the song off (290). In light of Fitzgerald's complex relationship with jazz, could it be that this episode again serves as a critique of the thin substitution of "new jazz from America" for older jazz forms? Dick's distaste for the music could easily indicate Fitzgerald's own—a gesture of impatience at such a ridiculous song that overshadows the older jazz traditions of African Americans.

The third and final reference to "jazz" in the novel performs a kind of silence in its very invocation: "On the way back to the hotel old Gausse said not a word, until they passed the Juan-les-Pins Casino, still sobbing and coughing with jazz" (306). The construction of the sentence is awkward; what does the final clause modify? On one hand, it would be simple enough to assume Fitzgerald is personifying the Casino, as jazz-influenced popular music was frequently played at such venues. However, the word "still" is puzzling, for this is the first time the Casino makes its appearance in this novel. Also, on some level it would make more sense to attribute the "sobbing and coughing" to

either Gausse or “they,” referring to Gausse and Dick Diver, as human beings, if not for the difficulty of explaining what “jazz” would mean if this were the case. The meaning of the word has, in effect, been silenced in the construction of the sentence, as if Fitzgerald is refusing to link it to the Casino and popular music by problematizing this interpretation syntactically.

In the next paragraph, Fitzgerald solidifies the possible link between “jazz” and “Gausse” by mentioning that Gausse “sighed forth” a complaint over the night’s proceedings (306). His sigh is the most immediate connection to the “sobbing and coughing,” and reveals that he might be in such a mood as to sob and cough. In fact, he has just finished lending five thousand francs to bribe some guards to free two women (including the Lady Caroline) from jail who have been impersonating French sailors and picking up girls. Upon her release, the wealthy Lady Caroline proves thankless, refusing to pay Gausse back, and he responds, unexpectedly even to himself, by kicking her “forward on the sidewalk” (306). If nothing else, he is confused by the strangeness of the entire episode: “women like these women I have never seen before” (306). The reader is equally confused. On one hand, the episode begs to be read as some sort of statement on gender-bending, or sexual and social transgression, but on the other it stands most completely as a narrative, irreducible to symbolic meanings. Could this be the “jazz” that is sobbed and coughed? One can imagine Fitzgerald searching for a word to describe the way this episode means, in its multiplicity of gestures, and arriving simply at “jazz.” Again, a substitution or appropriation has been enacted, a word for a narrative, or a narrative for a kind of music, all under the rubric of “jazz.” And, consistent with the “lady from hell” episode, this one also associates jazz with a kind of racial substitution,

with a British aristocrat attempting unsuccessfully to impersonate a French sailor. The connection to white American appropriations of jazz lurks in the distance of this passage as well.

A final site in Fitzgerald's writings where a substitution of jazz-influenced popular music for the African-American jazz tradition is being performed is the short story, "Dice, Brassknuckles and Guitar" (1923), which describes the efforts of James Powell and his African-American body-servant Hugo to launch a "Jazz School" in Southampton (248). The school is designed for young society men and women whom James and Hugo teach to gamble, defend themselves, play guitar so "you'd think some of 'em was colored" (246), and speak in southern accents, including "straight nigger" (247). Here, the word "jazz" in "jazz school" clearly refers not only to the guitar music, but rather to all the subjects and a kind of cultural transgressiveness wherein white society youth are introduced to actions generally associated with lower-class people and African Americans. Fitzgerald presents the school not without some degree of playfulness, and the comedy involved in his depiction of it arises from the tacit assumption that such men and women will never really be able to play guitar in a way indistinguishable from a black man, any more than they will be able to speak "straight nigger." By satirizing the desires of society youth in this story, including one whose name, Martin Van Vleck, alludes to a white patron of the Harlem Renaissance well known for his tendency to exoticize African Americans, Fitzgerald draws a parallel to the white musicians of the decade who would also attempt to appropriate the African-American jazz idiom.²

² Indeed, upon the publication of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) Fitzgerald wrote to him about how much he "adored the novel because . . . it confirmed the Afro-American grotesqueries produced by civilization of the peasant—the 'unspoiled Negro'"

But troubling about the story, given this allusion to Van Vechten, is the absence of an African-American jazz, which the students could presumably learn. Jim, the “Jazz Master” (245), is white, and the guitar which he teaches (Hugo does not teach the guitar) was not a representative jazz instrument at the time. Furthermore, Hugo’s role in the story is one of a silenced servant, and he speaks and does very little outside of being an African-American presence in the school. Yet Fitzgerald makes it clear that Hugo’s jazz, the jazz of this “silenced” man is the authentic one when Martin Van Vleck attempts to sever what he has learned from those who have taught him, a gesture consistent with the history of jazz in the U.S. An odious student “spiritually exhausted by his educational failures” (249), Van Vleck proclaims to Jim, “My God, can’t you see you’re just a servant?” (250). But it is Hugo who is the servant, not Jim, whose selfhood in the story has never been questioned. Ironically, it is the odious Van Vleck’s indirect dismissal of Hugo, not even addressed to him, that forces the reader to sympathize with Hugo, and thus allows Fitzgerald to recuperate both Hugo’s presence as well as his ownership of the school’s materials. Where Hugo has been silenced, so has jazz, and the reader is conveyed a sense that jazz music has been left out of the “jazz school” because of Hugo’s servitude. All that remains is a place where men and women come to learn substitutions.

Jazz Character

The theme of substitution and appropriation is not one limited exclusively to Fitzgerald’s invocations of jazz, but in fact seems to be one he associates heavily with the

(Lewis, 188). While potentially revealing of Fitzgerald’s own tendency to primitivize, the passage also reveals his belief in an essential “Negro” spoiled by American civilization, mirrored in his depictions of a jazz that is being appropriated.

1920s as a whole. While jazz may “speak” only rarely in his works, Fitzgerald’s intentions for the name “Jazz Age” are also to be found in his perception of the people who inhabited it. Characteristic of his protagonists is a self-conscious performance of personality, a continuous substitution of an image for substance, an action that becomes correlated with jazz as these characters, such as Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* and Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, become principle players in Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age.

In *This Side of Paradise* (1920), an episodic novel recounting the development of Amory Blaine through World War I into the beginnings of the Jazz Age, the idea of appropriation becomes apparent in the protagonist’s rejection of a personality in favor of a *personage*:

Personality is a physical matter almost entirely; it lowers the people it acts on—I’ve seen it vanish in a long sickness. But while a personality is active, it overrides “the next thing.” Now a personage, on the other hand, gathers. He is never thought of apart from what he’s done. He’s a bar on which a thousand things have been hung—glittering things sometimes, as ours are, but he uses those things with a cold mentality back of them. (104)

Who Amory is at any given point in the novel is a performance, a creation of the self that is continuously changing in his commitment to “the next thing.” There is no “core” to his character aside from a “cold mentality” that gathers personalities for his posturing.

Likewise, the mystery that surrounds who Gatsby is in Fitzgerald’s second novel, a mystery captured in the whispers of girls that “somebody told me they thought he killed a man once” (48) or Nick’s assertion of disbelief in the personal history Gatsby recounts,

which is so incredulous and hurried through that the “whole statement fell to pieces” (69).

A connection between this kind of character and jazz is made strongly in *This Side of Paradise*, when Fitzgerald draws attention to the novel’s structure as capturing Amory’s life in “a succession of quick, unrelated scenes” rather than an “even progress along a road stretching ever in sight” (233). Instead of explicitly describing Amory’s character and life, Fitzgerald presents the reader with a narrative, claiming that it captures Amory best. In a way, this kind of logic is a musical logic, wherein the reader is forced to make sense of a collection of episodes/notes that do not communicate a sense of unified meaning. Fitzgerald’s work here seems to prefigure the “Jazz History of the World” episode in manuscript of *Gatsby*, wherein Nick can only capture the music via a narrative and describes a part of the music as a “series of interruptive notes that seemed to fall together” (55), echoing the “succession of quick, unrelated scenes” in *Paradise*. Fundamentally, Amory’s “personage” refuses to be reduced to a personality in the way music refuses to be tied down to a single symbolic meaning.

As in passages from *Tender is the Night* and “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” this attention to the substitutions that must take place when communicating a musical idea in writing becomes implicated in jazz’s appropriation by writers of popular music. In the single invocation of a jazz-related music in *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald writes that “artists draw your magazine covers, write your advertisements, hash out rag-time for your theaters. By the great commercializing of printing you’ve found a harmless, polite occupation for every genius who might have carved his own niche” (269). Here, in a critique of the culture industry that takes place when Amory laments the loss of

originality and authenticity in art, jazz, unsurprisingly, appears. Through Amory, Fitzgerald points out that the ragtime music of theatres is just a “harmless, polite” substitution for something that contains real “genius.” And sure enough, in this novel’s depiction of the Jazz Age, the only jazz that appears is just this “harmless, polite” music, the jazz-influenced popular music that permeates his other works.

The jazz described in Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age writings, like the characters that represent it, are marked by their performative nature, perhaps even a sense of inauthenticity. “It’s all a poor substitute at best,” Amory proclaims “sadly” at the conclusion of *This Side of Paradise* (282), in a celebrated declaration whose meaning is left unclear in the text. Perhaps he is left disillusioned with the poses and personalities he has adopted, the music of the Age he has inhabited, or perhaps here Fitzgerald is expressing frustration over his inability to capture music in his writing. Clearly the Jazz Age wasn’t all exuberance or the BOOMBOOMS that came from a wandering drum.

Conclusion: Recovering the Jazz Age

In contrast to the descriptions of jazz-influenced popular music in Fitzgerald’s texts, which are almost always marked by their own inadequacy, there is single a passage in his last, unfinished novel, wherein a depiction of music is brought to central importance at the story’s turning point. Located at a spot Fitzgerald labels “DEAD MIDDLE” in his outline plan of *Love of the Last Tycoon* (printed in Bruccoli, xviii), he writes of the protagonist Monroe Stahr:

Winding down the hill he listened inside himself as if something by an unknown composer, powerful and strange and strong, was about to be played for the first

time. The theme would be stated presently but because the composer was always new, he would not recognize the theme right away. . . . He strained to hear it, knowing only that music was beginning, new music that he liked and did not understand. It was hard to react to what one could entirely compass—this was new and confusing, nothing one could shut off in the middle and supply the rest from an old score. (95-96).

The description of an improvised, instrumental jazz is unmistakable, even if the word “jazz” has been silenced from the text—as if Fitzgerald were afraid the word would not communicate the kind of music he was interested in invoking. The images of a composer that “was always new,” a theme that would not be recognized “right away,” and a music that could not be “shut off in the middle” because it had not been written down, clearly gesture toward an improvised tradition. That the music was “new music” would mark it as jazz, as opposed to some kind of folk music. Furthermore, Stahr’s narration of the music as something “he liked and did not understand” strongly echoes Nick’s relationship of fascination and inarticulation to the “Jazz History” piece of *Gatsby*. And as if this were not enough, Fitzgerald follows this passage in *Last Tycoon* immediately with the sentence “also, and persistently, and bound up with the other, there was a Negro on the sand” (96). It is interesting to note that here, more than in any of his completed works, the connection between jazz and the African-American community is made clear though in other works the connection “persists” as well. One wonders if, in subsequent edits, this passage too would be silenced in the manner of the “Jazz History of the World.”

That this passage is of central importance to the novel, taking place at the moment that Stahr, a famous movie producer, has his faith in his profession shaken, indicates

beyond any shred of a doubt that the African-American tradition has a prominent place in Fitzgerald's conception of the Jazz Age, if not one more prominent than that of jazz-influenced popular music. But why the absence of this kind of music from his writings, and why the near-absence of the word "jazz" as a whole from his canon?

The word "Jazz Age," I have argued here, refers for Fitzgerald not merely to jazz-influenced popular music, but rather to the controversy over jazz that marked the decade—the acts of appropriation and legitimization that took place while most of the public was aware only of the popular jazz appropriated by white musicians. In performing not only the absence of a silenced jazz tradition through the conspicuous silence of jazz in these texts, but also the appropriation of that same tradition in the handful of problematic references to a jazz-influenced popular music, Fitzgerald manages to communicate more nearly the tensions of the decade that came to be symbolized in jazz. This tension and silence, however, is not only historically accurate but musically so. That many of these references, not to mention the use of character and narrative as substitutes for jazz, simultaneously problematize the act of capturing jazz in writing while drawing attention to their own reductions in this sense indicates Fitzgerald's concern with the gap between music and language and his solution in representing that gap.

Ultimately, it is these gestures toward substitutions enacted continuously in his text that capture simultaneously both jazz and the "Jazz Age." In these acts of substitution, performed reductions, forced narratives, and posturing personalities, Fitzgerald manages to recuperate a jazz he can't represent, and inaugurate a canon of jazz writers marked similarly by their use of silence.

Chapter 2

Wrestling With Impossibility: Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation

“Words cannot explain the meaning of Basie’s music, both to the listener, and to the good name of swing,” wrote a young Kerouac at age seventeen in his school newspaper (“Count Basie’s Band” 23). Eighteen years later in 1958, Kerouac, now the spokesperson for the Beat Generation and a bebop enthusiast, wrote in his novel *The Subterraneans* the following attributed to girl who could “really understand bop”: “I can’t describe it,” she says, “I can’t, like, *make* it, in telling it in words, you know?” (67). For a writer attempting at numerous points in his novels to describe jazz, as well as to capture its spirit in his writing (Charters 197), these statements make profound claims regarding the expectations and limitations of his project. On one hand, Kerouac professes that jazz is something that has meaning—that communicates something, but on the other hand what it “says” cannot be written down.

Yet despite these declarations, the few critics who have sought to examine Kerouac’s relationship with jazz critically—that is, questioned the validity of his use of it as a stylistic model or the authenticity of his representations—insist upon judging his work in terms of how realistically it captures jazz, and often point vindictively at the shortcomings. Thus literary critic Douglas Malcolm’s dismissal of the use of jazz in structuring Kerouac’s prose as “less formal than it was inspirational” because prose does not have harmonic equivalents, among other things (91-93). Or Jon Panish’s alternative criticisms of his representations as “individualistic, ahistorical, and ‘naive,’” not to mention characterized by a “vagueness” he considers typical of the “Euro American author” (*Color* 110 & 109). That these characteristics might be intentional falls to the side of Panish’s analysis. And somewhere at the core of these examinations also lies a

discussion of Kerouac's undeniable tendency to "primitivize" and stereotype African Americans in his work, which is often used to read his depictions of jazz as similarly primitive (Malcolm 94-9; Panish, "Kerouac" 107). For example, Kenneth Rexroth writes in a review of Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, "The story is all about jazz and Negroes. Now there are two things Jack knows nothing about—jazz and Negroes" (qtd in Nicosia 568).

What each of these writers ignore, Rexroth perhaps most of all, is the extent to which Kerouac studied and listened to jazz, not to mention interacted with African Americans. It would be, after all, quite difficult to write a story "all about jazz and Negroes" if he truly knew nothing about the subject. As far as jazz is concerned, Gerald Nicosia writes in his biography of Kerouac about Kerouac's frequent attendance to Harlem hot spots like the Savoy, Minton's, and the Apollo Theater while at Horace Mann, experiences which led him to interview Count Basie himself and write critically on jazz for a music column in the school's newspaper (65-66). At the advent of bop on the Harlem scene, Kerouac also befriended Jerry Newman, who recorded a number of the leading artists, and from him and a number of other jazz aficionados Kerouac learned the intricacies of bop (Nicosia 124-25).

If the claims of critics such as Malcolm and Panish are true, and Kerouac's writings display a seeming lack of knowledge about jazz, then the question becomes one of why. One reason has been gestured at already: that the jazz Kerouac wished to speak on simply couldn't be written down—he couldn't "make it" in "telling it in words" (*Subterraneans*¹ 67). His attempt to write around this incompatibility of musical

¹ Hereafter referred to when cited in the text as *S*.

semiotics with the written word, I will argue, accounts partially for certain characteristics in his depictions of jazz, such as the vagueness Panish describes. Perhaps more importantly, however, is that his depictions of jazz point to a larger project, one that trumps the claims of primitivism: the performance of jazz, and the impossibility of its speaking within the text, allow Kerouac to capture the sense of incomprehensible possibility which to him ultimately communicated the state of *beat*.

Unspeaking Jazz

Kerouac's difficulties in negotiating the divide between music and language become apparent immediately in an examination of two of his novels saturated with descriptions of jazz, *On the Road* (1957) and *The Subterraneans* (1958), as well as two short essays, "Jazz of the Beat Generation" (1949) and "The Beginning of Bop" (1959). But where ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson has commented, "While the physical aspects of sound are nonlinguistic, they very quickly become implicated in relational discursive processes" (209), Kerouac is intent upon foreclosing the human tendency to reduce the music into linguistic representations.

Characteristic of Kerouac's descriptions of jazz is a focus on its performance context, on the setting of the performance as well as the interaction between the musicians and audience. For example, in by far the largest description of a jazz performance in *On the Road* (pp. 197-212)², Kerouac opens with this description of a tenor sax player after first describing the appearance of the jazz club:

² A large excerpt from this passage is included in the Extracts section of this thesis on p. 88.

The behatted tenorman was blowing at the peak of a wonderfully satisfactory free idea, a rising and falling riff that went from "EE-yah!" to a crazier "EE-de-lee-yah!" and blasted along to the rolling crash of butt-scarred drums hammered by a big brutal Negro with a bullneck who didn't give a damn about anything but punishing his busted tubs, crash, rattle-ti-boom, crash. Uproars of music and the tenorman *had it* and everybody knew he had it. Dean was clutching his head in the crowd, and it was a mad crowd. They were all urging that tenorman to hold it and keep it with cries and wild eyes, and he was raising himself from a crouch and going down again with his horn, looping it up in a clear cry above the furor. A six-foot skinny Negro woman was rolling her bones at the man's hornbell, and he just jabbed it at her, "Ee! ee! ee!" (197-98, italics his)

While Kerouac does begin by describing the music via the tenorman's riff, he quickly moves to a description of the drummer's appearance and his playing style of "punishing his busted tubs," which gives the reader little sense of what the music actually sounds like. From this point, the focus moves to the reactions of the audience and Dean, the novel's hero and jazz enthusiast. When Kerouac turns his attention back to the tenorman, it is no longer to describe the sound of his music but his physical gestures and interaction with the woman standing in front of him.

Indeed, in all his descriptions of jazz the reader is hard-pressed to find any formal or analytical description of the music itself. There is no talk of choruses structuring a performance, of harmonic progressions, rhythmic motifs, or even melodic lines. The closest Kerouac gets in *On the Road* to this is, in fact, the brief sentence noted above regarding the tenorman's "rising and falling riff that went from 'EE-yah!' to a crazier

‘EE-de-lee-yah!’” (197), which outlines in some sense the musical contour of the riff and gives the reader an idea of the variation taking place. Elsewhere, in “The Beginning of Bop,” he notes a solo that threatens to go “atonal at any minute” (556), and perhaps we might include references to “birdlike phrases and architectural Miles Davis logics” (*On the Road*³ 240-41), or “Bartok modern chords” and “Billy Eckstine’s bop phrasing” (S 67-68) as analytically descriptive as well. But even these latter references are vague, and give the reader less a sense of the sound and more a sense of place in time—the time of jazz musicians Charlie “Bird” Parker, Miles Davis, and Billy Eckstine, or twentieth-century Hungarian composer Béla Bartók. Nowhere in these performances does the name of a piece even come up to indicate something of the character of the piece, save the song “Close Your Eyes” which a tenorman sings at the end of a set (*OTR* 199).

In this sense, Kerouac has conspicuously evaded what I have called “aesthetic” representations of jazz, the attention to formal structures which has dominated descriptions of jazz in much criticism but which also has a tendency to reduce music into a set of isolated sounds referenced by words. But nor does Kerouac take a more historical approach, one that would direct the reader’s perception to jazz’s historical relation to the African American population while invoking issues of race and racism. Though most of the jazz performers in Kerouac’s novels are indeed African American, their race is not particularly emphasized, and indeed race is foregrounded only in his descriptions of the few performers who are not African American.

For example, the jazz descriptions in *On the Road* are framed by two performances by blind pianist George Shearing, whom Kerouac takes care to note is “a

³ Hereafter referred to when cited in the text as *OTR*.

distinguished-looking Englishman with a stiff white collar, slightly beefy, blond, with a delicate English-summer's-night air about him" (127). While his race and description might lead the reader to believe Kerouac is critiquing white control over African-American music, this interpretation is quickly undercut by the audience's enthusiasm and Dean's nickname for him, "Old God Shearing" (128). That Shearing is playing in Birdland, a place that might evoke memories of Charlie Parker's victimization at the hands of white recording contractors,⁴ is also utterly devoid of irony in Kerouac's text. Indeed, Kerouac seems to have chosen Shearing particularly to frame the text because of his blindness, his inability to see race and hence his lack of self-consciousness of his "beefy, blond," un-jazz-musician-like appearance.

Likewise, in his essay "Jazz of the Beat Generation," drawn from an early draft of *On the Road*, Kerouac describes a group of young bop musicians whom he calls "the children of the great bop innovators," comparing in turn five white teenagers, including a "handsome blond," "wiry redhead," and "husky Italian truck-driving kid," as well as one African American who "reads Homer," to Louie Armstrong, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker (228-231). Explicitly a retelling of the history of jazz, with the experiences of Armstrong, Young, and Parker juxtaposed against the playing of these six young men, the passage has the potential for a devastating critique of race politics in jazz much in the manner of the episode with Englishwoman Caroline Sibly-Biers in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*. Instead, however, both the narrator and Dean, presumably serious jazz followers, react so enthusiastically ("There ain't nothing left after that" (232)) as to

4 For a discussion of white control over the jazz industry, as well as of Charlie Parker's victimization, see Frank Kofsky's *Black Music, White Business: Illuminating the History and Political Economy of Jazz*. New York: Pathfinder, 1998.

displace the idea of an African-American ownership of jazz, forcing the reader to seek meaning elsewhere. The symbolic weight that jazz carries with it because of its history has been suppressed from the text.

Kerouac's descriptions of jazz are also marked by one final absence: that of the subjective narratives that pervade Fitzgerald's descriptions of jazz and which music theorists Nattiez and Monson have argued characterize a discursive response to music (Nattiez 128; Monson 209). In two separate passages in *On the Road*, this absence is made palpable. The first is the description of a tenorman singing the song "Close Your Eyes," mentioned earlier, which Sal describes as being sung "slowly and with long, thoughtful pauses" (199). But if the song should cause the listener to pause reflectively, the narrator does anything but this, recording almost mechanically the singer's every action, word, and inflection:

"Mu-u-u-usic, pla-a-a-a-a-a-ay!" He leaned back with his face to the ceiling, mike held below. He shook, he swayed. Then he leaned in, almost falling with his face against the mike. "Ma-a-a-ake it dream-y for dan-cing"—and he looked at the street outside with his lips curled in scorn . . . (199)

Each "thoughtful pause" between the lines is filled with Sal's observations of the tenorman's gestures and facial expressions. If the music is registering in Sal's mind in any way, he certainly is not communicating this to the reader. In another description of jazz, this time with George Shearing at the piano, the opposite occurs. Here, Sal appears to generate a narrative of some sorts upon the music's completion, soliloquizing impressionistically about a horn left on the piano and "its golden shadow [that] made a strange reflection along the desert caravan painted on the wall behind the drums" and the

absence of God—"God was gone; it was the silence of his departure" (128). But quickly after this, Sal dismisses the possibility that these thoughts were inspired somehow by the music: "I suddenly realized it was only the tea that we were smoking" (128). What Kerouac has done, then, is written jazz into his novels in such a way as to noticeably exclude not only its musical sounds, but also any possibility of meaning it might carry either historically or subjectively. The narrator in Kerouac's writings insists upon focusing on the present, performance context at all times and often in a way that proves profoundly unsettling.

One such unsettling passage takes place in the novel *The Subterraneans*, a novel which explicitly takes up themes of race in its central concern of an affair between the narrator Leo, a stand-in for Kerouac, and an mixed African-American, Native-American woman named Mardou. Early in the book, Leo and Mardou visit the Red Drum, a bar in San Francisco, where they hear that Charlie Parker is playing:

groups of all kinds, and Ross Wallenstein, the crowd, and up on the stand Bird Parker with solemn eyes who'd been busted fairly recently and had now returned to a kind of bop dead Frisco but had just discovered or been told about the Red Drum, the great new generation gang wailing and gathering there, so here he was on the stand, examining them with his eyes as he blew his now-settled-down-into-regulated-design "crazy" notes—the booming drums, the high ceiling . . . Bird, whom I saw distinctly digging Mardou several times also myself directly into my eye looking to search if I really was that great writer I thought myself to be as if he knew my thoughts and ambitions or remembered me from other night clubs and other coasts, other Chicagos—not a challenging look but the king and founder

of the bop generation at least the sound of it in digging his audience digging the eyes[.] (13-14)

Where the reader, anticipating the entrance of jazz legend Charlie “Bird” Parker, might expect a torrential description of music or at least some recognition of Parker’s historical significance, the only description of music is the tossed-off “‘crazy’ notes” and the only mention of history is that Parker has been “busted fairly recently,” which invokes images of universal suffering more than racial tension. Instead, the opening focus is on the crowd, and the introduction of Parker—“up on the stand Bird Parker”—sits indifferently between this description and the one of “the great new generation gang wailing and gathering.” Again, the immediate context has been privileged before any abstraction of meaning from the music. In the bulk of the passage, then (much of which has not been included here), the focus is on Parker’s gaze, as if he were not a jazz musician at all, but some anonymous mute prophet who is here to predict the conclusion of Leo and Mardou’s relationship. Certainly the audience is described as “digging the eyes,” as opposed to the sound. The silence of jazz in this passage about Parker is as clear as it is loud. Here, as in the other passages, Kerouac has avoided interpreting jazz past acknowledging its presence, thus preventing it from meaning symbolically.

The symbolic meaning often associated with music is not a product of the music itself, but language, as many music theorists have argued, and Kerouac is very aware of this. Again, I refer to Mardou’s statement regarding bop that “I can’t describe it, it not only sent waves—went through me—I can’t, like, *make* it, in telling it in words, you know? OO dee bee dee dee” (S 67). This from a girl whom Kerouac as the narrator emphasizes is “the only girl I’ve ever known who could really understand bop and sing

it" (67). Notice how when words fail her Mardou turns to scat syllables, as if the inarticulacy, the loss of meaning, will somehow capture and describe jazz. Likewise, it seems Kerouac turns to a similar inarticulacy wherever he describes jazz, in the passages where everything has a place—from the musicians gesculating and blowing to the audience members wailing—everything but the music. But in silencing the music so deftly, he also draws attention to its presence, as something very much included in though unspeaking through the text.

Sounding Beatness

Ingrid Monson reports a tradition of speaking about jazz with recourse to such discursive metaphors as "jazz as a musical language, improvisation as a musical conversation, and good improvisation as talking or 'saying something'" (73), and Kerouac's writing about jazz demonstrates that he was profoundly aware of, if not attracted to, the tension between jazz's seeming ability to speak yet its ultimate inarticulacy in language. Indeed, the value of jazz to his texts seems to arise from his determination not to reduce it into linguistic terms. The effect of this is the communication of the existence of something that exists outside of the limits of language, a kind of transcendental possibility that is fundamentally congruent with Kerouac's project of communicating the nature of being *beat*, the problematic word with which he defined a generation.

"[B]eat, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction" (559), wrote Kerouac in his essay "About the Beat Generation" (1957), the first of three essays written in three years trying to define the meaning of "beat" in the phrase "Beat Generation,"

which he coined. Already, in this first attempt to define it, the word asserts itself in something of a contradiction, being both “down and out” but “full of intense conviction.” Indeed, in the opening sentence of the essay, Kerouac speaks of the Beat Generation as “beautiful in an ugly graceful new way” (559). Something hasn’t quite been articulated properly, something that can only be communicated in this play between opposites. As if in response to this shortcoming, he tries again in his second essay, “Lamb, No Lion” (1958), beginning with the negative statement, “The Beat Generation is no hoodlumism” (562), and then proceeding to elaborate: “Beat doesn’t mean tired, or bushed, so much as it means *beato*, the Italian for beatific: to be in a state of beatitude, like St. Francis, trying to love all life” (563). The word has become almost further obfuscated in this series of appositives, with Kerouac gesturing first towards an Italian word and then a Catholic saint before moving on later in the essay to descriptions of “nutty nihilism” and a dream of a lion and lamb (564-65). His third and most lengthy explication of the word takes place in the essay “*Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation*” (1959), in which he describes a visit to a childhood church where “suddenly with tears in my eyes [I] had a vision of what I must have really meant with ‘Beat’ anyhow when I heard the holy silence of the church” (571). The phrase “what I must have really meant” stands out, and draws attention to the fact that Kerouac first used the word first without fully understanding its meaning—said something without being able to articulate it except in moments and fleeting. Also, a final contradiction stands out: the image of “hearing” a “holy silence” forcefully invokes the idea of presence in absence, or meaning in something that cannot be said.

“Beat,” it appears, is ultimately a word used to describe a way of being that can only be captured incompletely in a narrative, such as that holy silence, or partially by analogy to such images as St. Francis, but never completely in words. Still, it communicates a sense of transcendence, of sudden or complete understanding, of meaning—but in a way that is laden with possibility, perhaps because it can be described only incompletely. In a way, Kerouac’s investment in jazz can be seen as an extension of the investment many of his Beat Generation colleagues had in such drugs as Benzadrine, marijuana, or Psilocybin, which Allen Ginsberg reported communicated a sense of “greater reality” (Miles 272). The Beat Generation, writes Kerouac without desire, is a step to “that last, pale generation which will not know the answers either” (562). The idea of a “greater reality” or place in which “answers” are irrelevant is echoed strikingly in Kerouac’s inarticulate representations of jazz.

In a conversation between Dean and Sal in *On the Road*, for example, the best Dean can come up with as an “answer” to the meaning in jazz is the word “IT,” which of course is no answer at all: “that alto man last night had IT—he held it once he found it” (207). When Sal questions what “IT” is, Dean replies “now you’re asking me impon-de-rables” though this does not stop him from making the attempt, via a story that concludes circularly with the explanation that IT is in “the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT” (207-8). While Panish argues that this passage illustrates Kerouac’s “failure to concretize jazz performance in a way that could generate the kind of value and meaning that would sustain his readers” (Panish 1997, 111-12), I would contend that it is precisely this refusal to mean that allows Kerouac to capture a

sense of value that does not limit the music to a single value, but instead opens it up to the possibility and transcendence that he seeks.

An earlier passage describing the saxophonist Dean refers to above (here Sal identifies him as a tenor player) also proves revealing:

Dean was in a trance. The tenorman's eyes were fixed straight on him; he had a madman who not only understood but cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was, and they began dueling for this; everything came out of the horn . . . he tried everything up, down, sideways, upside down, horizontal, thirty degrees, forty degrees, and finally he fell back in somebody's arms and gave up and everybody pushed around and yelled, "Yes! Yes! He blowed that one!" (199-200)

Here, in the playing of a man who has grasped Dean and Sal's aspiration for "IT," the communication of jazz as a vision of possibility is emphasized. By asking the saxophonist to help him "understand more and much more than there was," Dean posits the existence of a transcendence above strict reality and context, which the tenorman acknowledges as possible in the realm of jazz. The saxophonist then rushes into a realization of this possibility, which Kerouac can only communicate as a string of impossible musical acts made possible in prose: the horn player takes sounds and positions them spatially—"up, down, sideways, upside down," and in other positions. Interestingly enough, in this last passage Kerouac does actually profess to describe the sound of the music being played, only the adjectives he uses make no sense in a musical context. The end result is that the divide between music and language is again reinforced, only music stretches beyond the divide into possibility.

Indeed, it is this wrestling with impossibility, this simultaneous desire on Kerouac's part to capture transcendence in music and communicate it in the attempt to capture music in language, that ultimately characterizes Kerouac's depictions of jazz. In one final passage describing jazz from *On the Road*, the attempt of a group of young musicians to play after George Shearing produces an explosion of "innumerable choruses with amazing chords that mounted higher and higher" (242) might well serve as a parallel for Kerouac's attempt to write after experiencing jazz. While one of the young musicians comments, "There ain't nothin left after that," the leader replies, "Let's blow anyway":

Something would come of it yet. There's always more, a little further—it never ends. They sought to find new phrases after Shearing's explorations; they tried hard. They writhed and twisted and blew. Every now and then a clear harmonic cry gave new suggestions of a tune that would someday be the only tune in the world and would raise men's souls to joy. They found it, they lost, they wrestled for it, they found it again, they laughed, they moaned—and Dean sweated at the table and told them to go, go, go. (243)

One imagines Kerouac behind his typewriter in his now-famous, three-week Benzedrine-supported stretch of typing for *On the Road* (Charters 133) or three-day stretch for *The Subterraneans* (Charters 194), writhing and twisting to write jazz and finally coming up with something that describes the writhing and twisting more than anything else. Here at last jazz emerges as a symbol for the Beat Generation, but only as it refuses to speak.

Referencing Bop, Writing Possibility

This conception of Kerouac's use of jazz in his novels also provides a way in which to read his "bop prosody" style that has spurred not a small degree of controversy among his critics. On one side are critics such as Malcolm Cowley and Regina Weinreich, the latter who argues in *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac* that the "notion of improvisation informs the language of Kerouac's writing at an exact technical level" (8). On the other hand, Douglas Malcolm rightly observes that these critics have "tended to explicate Kerouac's goals rather than to ask fundamental generic questions about what constitutes jazz and whether it might reasonably serve as a literary model" (85). Having noted this, however, Malcolm easily dismisses Kerouac's writing style as fundamentally different from music both formally and—well—musically, arguing that it is better linked to "the techniques of modernists" such as Joyce and Woolf and that his claim that his style is founded in jazz "has caused more obfuscation than it has brought clarity" (193).

But these critics all make the mistake of assuming that Kerouac's end goal is to convey something of jazz, rather than something he has found in or through jazz. In fact, consistent with the unspeaking descriptions of jazz in his prose, his invocations of jazz in his statement of technique, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1957) indicate that jazz is clearly meant as an evocation of something that is not fully linguistic, rather than a controlling element. Regarding his procedure, he writes that "sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image" (484). Or when explaining his use of the dash, he draws an analogy to "rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown

phrases)" (484). In both cases, jazz is presented as a parenthetical image, something that hints more than it means. Certainly a later statement about Kerouac's writing, "Belief & Technique For Modern Prose," which does not contain the words "bop" or "jazz" even once, would indicate that the function of "bop prosody" was not to imitate bop in language.

Yet jazz is implicated in the struggle of Kerouac's language to move past the restrictions of language, toward something less referential and less linear. Though Malcolm, and also Panish, are right in arguing that "there is nothing *inherently* musical or jazz-like in Kerouac's writing" (Panish, *Color of Jazz* 136), Kerouac forces the association by comparing the act of writing to performing jazz in numerous places in his novels, even as he acknowledges the impossibility of writing jazz. In *The Subterraneans*, for example, he speaks of getting the "direct word from the vibration" of a jukebox playing bop (34, emphasis his), and later protests, through the voice of Leo, that "I'm the bop writer" (98, emphasis his). That his writing doesn't necessarily stand up to this claim only serves to further emphasize the gap between jazz and writing, and the struggle towards possibility that marks his conception of the Beat Generation.

At the core of this analogy to jazz, then, is Kerouac's desire to evoke a sense of transcendent truth, unmediated through language. Though to claim jazz possesses this is clearly preposterous, its refusal to signify in the way of language serves as a substitute of sorts for Kerouac, evoking something expansive and limitless—with the qualities of sound, perhaps, compared to the confines of the written word. "Do you believe in freedom?" a writer asks of Leo. "Then say what you want, it's poetry, poetry, all of it is poetry" (S 83). More so than *On the Road*, *The Subterraneans* experiments with prose in

such a way as to draw the reader's attention to the style. For example, at the core of the novel is a lengthy 24-paged story Mardou relates to Leo (19-42), but as Leo retells it the story moves continuously between Mardou's actual telling (in quotes), Leo's retelling (also in quotes), Leo's paraphrases (not in quotes), and various tangents and associations that arise, sometimes for pages:

“I had no clothes on in the alley, it didn't disturb me, I was so intent on this realization of everything I knew I was an innocent child.”—“The naked babe, wow.”—(And to myself: “My God, this girl, Adam's right she's crazy, like I'll do that, I'd flip like I did on Benzedrine with Honey in 1945 . . .”) and I looked at her wondering if she, was she telling the truth.—She was in the alley, wondering who she was, night, a thin drizzle of mist, silence of sleeping Frisco . . . (24)

Here, Mardou begins telling the story, but by the end of the passage Leo has taken up the narrative in the third person, having taken a detour in the middle to describe a past experience (continued through my ellipses above). Though coherent associatively, the linearity of the overreaching story is hopelessly confounded, as if to draw attention to the limitations of writing and its inability to stretch past its structure—a limitation that only Kerouac's invocation of jazz can bring into perspective.

In constructing an analogy to jazz, Kerouac restores a sense of honesty to a technique that, especially in its similarity to the heavily stylized work of the modernists, sometimes appears contrived. “The details are the life of it,” Leo recalls when critiquing a letter written by Mardou, “I insist, say everything on your mind, don't hold back, don't analyze or anything as you go along, say it out” (58). The apparent contrivance becomes a fault of the language, rather than the writer. Thus, possibility arises in the gap between

the intent and the realization, and it is by referencing jazz in relation to the intent that the realization moves toward the transcendence Kerouac so desperately wished to capture. At one point in *The Subterraneans*, Leo observes the following about his perception of another writer's somewhat unnatural phrase "seldom nocturne": "his saying 'seldom nocturne' came to him spontaneously made me suddenly respect it more" (83). This, in a word, is exactly what the comparison to jazz does for Kerouac's prose.

Conclusion

An investigation of Kerouac's writings with attention to how he negotiates the divide between music and language reveals an intensely performative quality in his use of jazz. From the silences in his text with respect to descriptions of jazz to the radical design of his prose style, his words call attention to what can or cannot be captured in language. Coupled with an understanding of Kerouac's conception of the Beat Generation and beatness, the latter a quality of simultaneous and transcendental possibility, it becomes clear that these apparent limitations serve a larger function in the text. Where it seems his prose falls short of being jazz, or his descriptions fall short of capturing jazz, something more meaningful begins to surface. In jazz's illusion of saying something, yet also its maddening refusal to do so, Kerouac found the perfect symbol for his project: a vision of unspeakable possibility.

Chapter 3 Jazz Negotiations: Mediating the Baraka-Ellison Debate

“True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment . . . represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of [the artist’s] identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.”

– Ralph Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story”

“New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it.”

– Amiri Baraka, “New Black Music”

In stark contrast to both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jack Kerouac, neither Ralph Ellison nor Amiri Baraka had any hesitations about making “jazz is” statements (in the second quote above, Baraka is referring to the post-bop jazz of such musicians as Coltrane, Ayler, and Sun-Ra). Where the former consciously refrain from defining jazz in their writing, it is difficult to locate an essay on jazz by the latter that *doesn’t* contain such a definition or gesture towards one. While this difference might be accounted for in noting that both Ellison and Baraka were jazz theorists and critics in addition to writers of fiction, still their determination to define what could and could not be considered “true jazz” stands out when we consider that Fitzgerald and Kerouac had similar investments in the music as a symbol of some sort.

Fundamentally, Ellison and Baraka both perceive jazz to be quintessentially representative of the negotiation or expression of an identity, though American in the case of Ellison and strictly African-American in the case of Baraka. “For Ellison, jazz represents a working out of an American vernacular, a national style,” writes literary critic Berndt Ostendorf. “Jazz is an example and chief exhibit for Ellison’s conception of a pluralist culture that . . . knows no frontiers” (96-97). Similarly, Kimberly Benston notes in his book *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* that for Baraka, jazz music “is the

surest way of making contact with the uniform and coherent sequences of Afro-American life" (95). However, in addition to outlining a similar concern between these writers with identity and jazz, these summations also betray a hint of the writers' differences in their perceptions of the music: where to Ellison jazz represents a "working out" of an American style, as the opening epigraph might also suggest, to Baraka it is an immediate reflection and expression of "Afro-American life." Such differences, indeed, form the basis of two very distinct and highly polarized theories of jazz which, heightened by dissenting essays by Baraka and Ellison against each other's works, have been the subject of much of the critical writing exploring the relationship between these writers and jazz.

What hasn't yet been clearly explored are the consequences of an important similarity shared by these two writers: both Baraka and Ellison invest their music with symbolic meaning—an investment, I would argue, that allows them to create such definitions of jazz noted above. Yet, as their conflicting ideologies might suggest, and as I have suggested throughout this thesis, at some level jazz as a kind of music is fundamentally incompatible with such symbolic constructions of it. Thus, both Ellison's and Baraka's writings betray a process of negotiation in which the authors are forced to compromise their goals in an effort to represent jazz adequately in the text—a process that, in contrast to their differing theories, manifests itself in surprisingly similar ways.

Amiri Baraka: In Theory and In Fact

Baraka's theory of jazz is clearly articulated and uncompromising, chronicled in three books of essays and four decades of criticism. From his 1963 manifesto of sorts, "Jazz and the White Critic," to his 2001 recapitulation of the theme, "Jazz and the White

Critic: 30 Years Later,” Baraka has argued against an aesthetic understanding of the music, contending that “‘pure’ music . . . [is] an impossible abstraction of an abstraction” (“Jay Hoggard” 221) and “Negro music is essentially an expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made” (“Jazz and the White Critic” 13). This attitude, he asserts, is communicated in an unchanging “blues impulse” that stands in all true jazz as an “exact replication of The Black Man In The West” (“The Changing Same” 180), “literally . . . *separate*” from white society “in the same way that U.S. society itself is separate and divided” (“Blues, Poetry...” 265, emphasis his). Furthermore, according to Baraka, jazz is continuously engaged in the act of positioning and repositioning itself as a revolutionary element against White America’s (in his earlier nationalist works) or capitalism’s (in his later socialist works) efforts to sterilize and dilute it (*Blues People* 220-21; “Blues, Poetry...” 264-65). In the context of the 1960s Black Arts Movement in which Baraka took a pioneering role, jazz functioned as a direct realization of the “blackness” the movement was concerned with—an “essential, empowered meaning to African-American being” (Benston, *Performing Blackness* 11).

Given this kind of criteria, which is largely sociologically and historically grounded, it is unsurprising that in Baraka’s theoretical works, he avoids specific aesthetic descriptions of jazz, instead making generalizations based upon the music’s functional value. In his discussions of bebop, for example, instead of speaking of bebop’s characteristic fast tempos and surprising harmonies, he marks the music’s “elements of nonconformity” (“Greenwich Village” 184) and its “willfully harsh, *anti-assimilationist* sound” (*Blues People* 181). Likewise, instead of describing its complex

rhythmic patterns, he explicates the music as an attempt “to restore the polyrhythms of Africa, the primacy of improvisation and the blues, and the fundamental AFRICAN-American reidentification of ourself back to ourselves” (“Masters in Collaboration” 209). Regarding 1950s free jazz, with its departure from Western standards of form, harmony, and melody, Baraka simply writes that “New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it” (“New Black Music” 176). By this, he means that free jazz enacts a recognition of the self constructed by white society and its subsequent destruction. And he is absolutely convinced of jazz’s potential to incite its listeners into such reflective action. In “Class Struggle in Music,” an essay strongly reminiscent of the work of cultural theorist Theodor Adorno, Baraka declares:

The music will build up people’s consciousness because it is talking about the particular social and political happenings in the country and its relationship to black people. . . . Now if you put certain music on the radio, people’s head-space will open up and they’ll start to see. (324-25)

Here, not only does Baraka assert jazz’s ability to communicate and “talk” about certain social and political happenings, but also its capacity to endow people with consciousness. Clearly, jazz means for Baraka insofar as it serves specific political and social functions.

A number of literary critics have attempted to connect this vision of jazz Baraka communicates in his theoretical works to his prose, poetry, and drama. William Harris’s comprehensive study, *The Poetry and Politics of Amiri Baraka*, for example, offers one of the first such attempts, in which he theorizes that Baraka employs jazz’s “symmetrical inversions or formal assassinations” and “creative destructions” to structure his own work (18). While it is certainly the case that Baraka recognizes these qualities in jazz and

employs such techniques in his prose and poetry, it is interesting to note that Harris all but avoids the actual descriptions of jazz that exist in Baraka's writings, focusing instead upon other sites where such "jazz techniques" are used. This absence of a consideration of Baraka's jazz descriptions is also quite marked in John Gennari's more recent study, "Baraka's Bohemian Blues," in which he argues that in Baraka's observations of various musicians, "surface stylistic differences among James Brown, John Coltrane, the Supremes, and Albert Ayler are insignificant compared to the platonic blackness they shared" (258). Yet Gennari's examination avoids entirely the portraits of these musicians' playing found in Baraka's jazz criticism. Other analyses, notably Mary Ellison's "Jazz in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka and Roy Fisher," explore the relationship of jazz to Baraka's writings, but tend also to ignore his invocations of jazz in favor of correlations between his stylistic innovations and jazz's aesthetic structures.

The reason for this absence, I am arguing, stems from a distinct incongruity between Baraka's numerous descriptions of jazz and the theory he set forth in great detail. This incongruity is most marked in his body of jazz criticism, by which I mean his liner notes for and reviews of various jazz recordings and performances, in which his descriptions take decidedly aesthetic and narrative, rather than functional, approaches to communicating the music.

Consider, for example, his "Three Ways to Play the Saxophone," in which Baraka distinguishes between the playing of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman by noting "while Coltrane strings seemingly endless notes and scales together . . . as if he would like to take each note of a chord and sound it singly, but at the same time as the overall chord . . . Coleman's music has been described as 'non-chordal'" (40). Or the assertion

that what distinguishes Cecil Taylor's playing on his *The World of Cecil Taylor* album is "Taylor's rhythmic sense. . . . He seems to get the rhythm right up in the melodic surface of his music" ("Cecil Taylor" 111). In almost all of Baraka's criticism collected in *Black Music* and *The Music*, the political polemics a reader of Baraka might expect have been substituted for descriptions of music which are comparable to the work of other music reviewers.

Characteristic of these reviews are also large run-on passages in which Baraka engages in narrative interpretations of the music. For example, regarding the title piece on Cecil McBee's album *Flying Out*, he writes:

there is a rushing, rumbling evocative quality to this piece that gives it a "flying" feeling. The solo violin over running bass line with Hart under and then the emotional almost percussive attack of the cello with its spreading overtones, still underpinned by bass and drums make this one of the album's high points. ("Cecil McBee/*Flying Out*" 215)

Here, he attaches images and emotions to the music. At other points, where such a narrative might allow for an "reading" of essential blackness in the music, Baraka sticks to vague generalities such as "This is deep music. . . . It goes through you, makes the circle of excitement and adventure, from earth to heaven, man in between going both ways" ("Sonny's Time Now" 179). Characteristic of a number of reviews, such as "Jay Hoggard/SoloAlbum/*India Navigation*" or "Woody Shaw/*Woody Three!*", are also extended biographical passages, but these seem more concerned with positioning the music in the context of its influences rather than in the context of black national identity. Indeed, Baraka seems to have betrayed his call for a more historical and sociological

understanding of jazz in criticism, falling into the trap of describing his “*appreciation of the music*” rather than an “understanding of the attitude which produced it,” a trap which he accuses other critics of (“Jazz and the White Critic” 13, emphasis his).

In contrast, Baraka’s drama and fiction generally capture the vision of jazz outlined in his theoretical works much better than his criticism does, but not without some difficulties. Most successful perhaps is the infamous soliloquy that takes place at the end of his play, *Dutchman*, wherein the African-American character, Clay, asserts his “pure heart, the pumping black heart” (34) against a white antagonist:

Old bald-headed four-eyed ofays popping their fingers. . . . They say “I love Bessie Smith.” And don’t even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, “Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass.” Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain, she’s saying, and very plainly, “Kiss my black ass.” . . . Charlie Parker? Charlie Parker. All the hip white boys scream for Bird. And Bird saying, “Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay! Up your ass.” And they sit there talking about the tortured genius of Charlie Parker. Bird would’ve played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-Seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note! . . . If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors.” (34-35).

Here, very prominently, jazz *speaks*. Where Baraka engages in aesthetic descriptions and narrative interpretations in his criticism, he has no trouble asserting here that jazz communicates something beyond its sound, and does so “very plainly.” This gives him a means through which he can pronounce jazz’s essential attitudes, as he perceives them, as

well as jazz's distinct separateness from white society: "Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay!" Furthermore, Baraka proposes here that jazz is a kind of sublimated murder, a substitute for action, and in doing so forecloses its interpretation as an aesthetic entity abstracted from its means of creation.

But the shocking violence the soliloquy expresses toward white America hides another violence being done upon jazz music. It is important to note that nowhere in this passage does Baraka even attempt to describe jazz in his writing. There is no music involved, and if it weren't for the references to Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, and "that music" at the end of the passage, this could very well be a passage talking about speakers and speeches. The implicit "jazz," then, speaks only via a metaphorical leap that Baraka makes between music and language, accented by his proclamation that "love, suffering, desire" too are similarly "explainable." He succeeds in communicating his theory of jazz as a functional entity, but at the expense of communicating anything about "jazz" as a kind of music.

In some sense, this passage explicates the seeming betrayal of Baraka's ideological aims in the jazz criticism. Because the form of a jazz review requires the critic to engage and respond to the actual music being criticized in some fashion, Baraka is severely limited in the degree to which he can press his symbolic vision of jazz upon the music and consequently falls back upon the aesthetic and narrative descriptions absent from the *Dutchman* soliloquy. These descriptions, however, must be read as inadequate by any reader familiar with his rejection of jazz as pure aesthetics. Baraka's situation, then, recalls those music philosophers in the Introduction who observe that sound is non-referential, and cannot be expressed fully through language. As a guideline

for writing jazz, Baraka's symbolic theory of jazz must necessarily fall short. *Dutchman*, however, does not mark the end of his attempts to describe jazz in union with his vision of it, and a number of his later works offer partial solutions to this conundrum even as they affirm its existence.

Jazz, Fantasy, and Fudging Reality

In a book of short stories, *Tales* (1967), published three years after *Dutchman*, Baraka again attempts to communicate the nature of jazz in "The Screamers," "Now and Then," and "Answers in Progress." In the latter two stories, Baraka's method is very clear, and jazz is given its historical function through use of a fantastical premise. In "Answers in Progress," blue aliens with a craving for jazz land on Earth and begin murdering white people: "The next day the spaceships landed. Art Blakey records is what they were looking for" (127). By juxtaposing images of the aliens listening to jazz or singing in "perfect harmony" (131) with images of white people being killed, Baraka makes his point very clear: jazz is not intended for white people, and expresses the revolution that is African American culture. Similarly, in "Now and Then," a pair of musician-brothers enact miracles through performances of their music. "The music would climb," Baraka writes, and "and bombard everything, destroying whole civilizations, it seemed. And then I suppose, while they played, whole civilizations, actually *were* destroyed. . . . Blind blond babies bled and bled." (117). Furthermore, on the wings of music, "his own invisible energy," one of the brothers even manages to grow "into something he'd never be" (119)—a "perfect projection" of himself (117). Music here literally *is* energy, not just a reflection of it, and the last image echoes

Baraka's declaration noted earlier that jazz "expresses the highest consciousness of the people itself . . . the African-American nation" ("Blues, Poetry.." 263).

The limitation of this approach to representing jazz is very clear: Baraka must rely upon fantastical elements in order to make the music communicate in the way he wishes it to. Still, he has moved away from the direct communication described in *Dutchman* to a more associative connection: it is the aliens that do the killing, and likewise the brothers that enact change. The music itself serves only as a correlation in one story and an instigating force in the next. "The Screamers" builds upon this method of association, but does so on a much more complex scale.

The premise of "The Screamers" is fairly simple. The narrator, a member of the black bourgeois, attends a dance at the Graham in Newark where Lynn Hope, an African-American musician, is playing. The jazz that Lynn plays begins as a backdrop against which the main action of the story takes place, but eventually becomes foregrounded as the catalyst for a number of events. Initially, the jazz seems to bring forth a sense of community to the heterogeneous black audience, as the narrator weaves descriptions of the different people, "Laundromat workers, beauticians, pregnant short-haired jail bait separated all ways from 'us' [the black bourgeois]" (72), into descriptions of jazz, from which Lynn emerges as a "common hero" (72). As the story progresses, the jazz becomes directly implicated in the realization of "the most perverted hopes sensual and possible" (72), and because of "Lynn's screams [through the horn]," the narrator's bourgeois constraints of "good grades" and his fear of "post offices, lawyer's offices, doctor's cars" are erased (74-5). In this chain of associated and causal actions related to and stemming from the music, the reader gets the sense that the music communicates a

power, a *blackness*, that purges all remnants of white socialization and propriety while simultaneously unifying the black audience in their essential qualities. Ultimately, when Lynn “got his riff, that rhythmic figure we knew he would repeat, the honked note that would be his personal evaluation of the world,” the crowd leaves the Graham “in perfect rhythm” and begins to riot (78-79):

We screamed and screamed at the clear image of ourselves as we should always be. Ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression. It would be the form of the sweetest revolution, to hucklebuck into the fallen capital, and let the oppressors lindy hop out. (79)¹

Though the music doesn’t actually do anything un-musical, for it is the audience members that riot and realize the “clear image” of themselves, not the music, the tie between jazz, revolution, and its communication of a blackness independent of white society are made clear over the course of the story. As Werner Sollers observes in *Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones*, the story is constructed upon a juxtaposition of “key words showing the systematic antagonism” between white bourgeois culture and black culture (164), out of which the music “erases false consciousness and brings about individual self-awareness” (161).

In this story, then, Baraka succeeds in communicating something of the music, alternatively describing aesthetically its musical “riffs” (78) and “rhythmic figure[s]” (76) as well as employing such narrative constructs as “it [the music] was hatred and frustration, secrecy and despair” (76) and “Uhh, yeh, Uhh, yeh, Uhh, yeh” (78). Additionally, through the accompanying action, Baraka conveys the symbolic function of

¹ A more complete excerpt of this episode from “The Screamers” is included in the Extracts section of this thesis on p. 90.

jazz he has argued for. However, in doing this he has set up a dichotomy between what jazz is and what it does, one that points to a place where the story must fall short of fully expressing his conception of jazz music as a direct and immediate vision of blackness. The multitude of aesthetic and narrative descriptions which attempt to describe what jazz is are impotent and unspeaking, while the actions taken by the audience remain distinct from jazz's musical qualities. At one point the story, these two worlds connect briefly when Baraka writes of a "horn" that "spat enraged sociologies" (77), but in order to create this description he has to rely upon the narrator's subjectivity or a false equation between music and language which reduces music's expressive potentials to that of language's referentiality. In *Tales*, then, the reader can't help but notice a battle that Baraka seems to be fighting in an attempt to create realistic descriptions of jazz that simultaneously communicate the musical and functional potentials he has invested it with in his theory.

Eulogies (1996), a recent collection of eulogies, including a number to jazz musicians, marks a radical departure from his previous work in its descriptions of jazz. As with his jazz criticism, his eulogies to Miles Davis ("When Miles Split!"), John "Dizzy" Gillespie ("Diz"), Sun Ra ("Sun Ra"), and John Coltrane ("I Love Music") are marked by attempts to describe the music accurately. Unlike the criticism, however, aesthetic descriptions are all but absent, as if inadequate for the emotional and historical demands of the eulogy to communicate the jazz Baraka heard and loved as truly as possible. In doing so, however, it is fascinating to note that he is forced to compromise much of the functional significance of jazz that dominates his earlier works.

This compromise between Baraka's ideology and his wish to describe the music fully is especially prominent in "Diz," which is marked by a continuous insistence that music communicates as a language even as the essay indicates otherwise. At the very opening of the essay, the conflict is set up when Baraka "writes" the jazz on paper: "Oop Bop sha Bam (a koo koo mop!) the language, another world" to which a horn player "answer[s]" with "wadie wadie wadie wadie . . . yo wambo . . . YO MAM-OO" (165, ellipses his). While "Oop Bop Sha Bam" references the scat course of a Gillespie tune by the same name, Baraka clearly presents the syllables as a communicative force capable of speaking past the meaning it acquires as a historical allusion. Yet the appositive "the language" and the image of a conversation between Gillespie and a horn player don't seem to apply to the scat syllables, which don't mean or signify in the way the reader would expect a language to. The qualifier, "another world," attempts to address this discrepancy, but in reality emphasizes the conflict of describing jazz as a language in trying to attribute it to something otherworldly.

Soon after, Baraka makes his first attempt to invest Gillespie's music with symbolic significance, saying it connects back to Ethiopia:

The cultural continuum even across the middle passage. Like

Oop shoobee doobee

Oop Oop

Oop shoobee doobee

Oop Oop!

You Dig?

"A lover's conversation." (166)

But again, the emphasis on “conversation” between Africa and America cannot possibly be understood in the scat syllables Baraka writes, and the question “You Dig?” seems almost to mock any attempt to “read” the scat as a language. This disjunct between the reader’s ability to comprehend jazz as a language and Baraka’s insistence that he or she do so continues as the organizing principle of the essay. At one point he discusses “that language” of jazz as “a shower of new images,” and as if hoping this clarifies things promptly asks again “Dig? The language. like Thelonius, you dig?” (167). But the reference to Thelonius Monk, another jazz musician, and the parallel to visual images only further obfuscates the idea of jazz as a language. Perhaps sympathetically, Baraka tries to explicate the idea further in a narrative description of jazz: “It scrambled me, shot some disparate colors into my mind, trying to make me understand some stuff I needed to, to grow. Things, feeling, revelations, my own acts” (167). Here, the reader is released from the demand that he or she consider jazz as a referential language in its presentation as something that compels the generation of a narrative, rather than being a narrative itself. But notice that in explaining jazz this way, Baraka has had to move away from his theory of jazz as an immediate actualization of blackness. It becomes unspeaking and subjective even as its musical qualities emerge, a state further emphasized by its capacity to be “misread”: “the lames also purposely misread Diz, being Lames” (169).

The eulogy “Sun Ra” follows this sense of jazz’s ambiguity, similarly opening with a statement that Ra “used music as language, and image” (171), which would leave room for Baraka’s functional conception of jazz. However, when describing this language, instead of discussing what it communicates he writes that “Ra’s music

unfolded, it was always, it seemed, always there. What it was. But it let us go into it further, showed us its multiple shapes, its wholeness” (171). Here, Baraka invokes an idea of wholeness in multiplicity that seems anathema to his theory of jazz expressing an essential blackness. Similarly the inarticulateness of the passage—“it was always, it seemed, always there. What it was”—complicates the conception of jazz as a language. Upon such initial attempts to communicate Sun Ra’s jazz, Baraka builds other such sentences as “The possible is obvious, what is desired and described, is the **impossible**” and “What is not is what drives what is, and transforms it into itself” (174, emphasis his). Again, this idea of impossibility seems to correlate best to theories of music’s inarticulacy, its refusal to signify (mean symbolically), in direct contrast to Baraka’s insistence on what Benston calls “the *signifying potential* of the new music’s supra-mimetic phenomenology” (*Performing Backness* 119).

In her essay “Politics, Process & (Jazz) Performance,” literary critic Meta Jones observes that much of Baraka’s poetry seems to strain at the page, and his “use of repetition in a visual depiction of scattling . . . is typographically and syntactically ineffectual” (249). This, she argues, is a cue that the poetry must be read *performatively*, and envisioned as music (249). Similarly, the descriptions of jazz in these eulogies seem to do the same, wishing to move past the confines of Baraka’s limiting theories of the music as symbolic—as if these theories aren’t enough to describe the depth that he clearly found when listening to these musicians and friends playing.

The eulogy to John Coltrane, “I Love Music,” certainly indicates this in that it takes a poetic form in a collection comprised almost entirely of prose and a literary

tradition of prose eulogies, as if to present itself as a kind of fractured prose. The music of Coltrane, Baraka asserts:

can be
 life itself, fire can be, heart explosion, soul explosion, brain explosion
 can be. can be. can be. aggeewheeuheageee. aeegeheooouaaa
 deep deep deep
 expression deep, can be
 capitalism dying, can be
 all, see, aggggeeeeeoooo. aggrgrrgeeeoouuuu. full full full can be
 empty too.
 nightfall by water
 round moon over slums
 shit in a dropper
 soft face under fingertips trembling
 can be

The possibility implicit in this riffing on “can be” is tremendous, and though Baraka gets his nod to “capitalism dying,” the majority of the stanza spins out images (“round moon over slums), contradictions (“full can be / empty too”), and scat cries (“aggeewheeuheagee”) that could only be interpreted as reflections of African-American identity without quite a bit of critical fudging. Instead, the poem’s collection and juxtaposition of various images and representations stands as an attempt to “speak” music in its multiple evocations. At the conclusion of the poem, Baraka ends with the words “a terrible / wholeness,” two short lines at the end of a breathless solo, perhaps

communicating a sense of absolute blackness but perhaps also describing the capacity of music to communicate beyond symbolic meaning. Indeed, in this explosive eulogy, it seems Baraka may have come the closest thus far to capturing jazz upon the page, but at the expense of his theory of jazz, and not without the claim to a non-referential use of language which at best draws attention to the music-language divide.

In the past two decades, Baraka's numerous collaborations with musicians in the production of three jazz operas/musicals (for which he wrote the book and libretti) and a number of spoken word discs, might also indicate a recognition of writing's inability to capture jazz fully, and the need for its actual presence in his work. In contrast to his historical and sociological explication of jazz in *Blues People* and the essays in *Black Music* and *The Music*, then, his attempts to describe jazz in criticism and literature tell a different story, one of wrestling and compromising in which ultimately either his theory of jazz or his desire to represent jazz fully must suffer.

Ralph Ellison: Signifying and Unsignifying

Though his theory of jazz stands in stark contrast to Baraka's, Ralph Ellison's writings on jazz reveal a similar symbolic investment in it. Where Baraka's jazz is carries with it an unchanging "blues impulse" expressing the African-American experience, Ellison's is the product of American democracy and pluralism, representing a "long history of interchanging musical styles between the races" ("Territorial Vantage" 25). Where Baraka's jazz ultimately gives voice to the violence of a revolution against bourgeois society, Ellison's is profoundly optimistic, an "assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance [that] remind[s] us of our limitations while encouraging us

to see how far we can actually go" ("Remembering Jimmy" 48). And as Baraka has criticized the tendency of jazz critics for ignoring jazz's historical associations, Ellison has also argued for greater historical exploration of the music, criticizing "early jazz reviewers, critics, and historians for providing 'a mere handful of cliches'" and pressing that "jazz is part of a total way of life" (Porter, "Jazz Beginnings" 287).

While in several instances Ellison has affirmed that jazz is ultimately "an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community" ("Blues People" 131) and has also expressed a distaste for bop because of its "the political stance" ("Territorial Vantage" 27), it is clear that this is not a call for the music's isolation or aestheticization. Indeed, fundamental to Ellison's conception of art is essentially the humanistic perception that "life is as the sea, art a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 170). Even as an art form, jazz serves a certain function, and one whose presence in jazz allows it to become for Ellison "the most authoritative rendering of America in music" ("Blues People" 129).

Thus, Ellison's theoretical works examining jazz (collected in *Shadow and Act* and *Living with Music*) also reveal a tendency toward a functional interpretation of the music, often depicting it in terms of what it allegedly expresses and communicates. In an essay on Jimmy Rushing's singing, for example, no actual music is described in the text, but instead jazz communicates "this rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it" ("Remembering Jimmy," 45). Or when considering the playing of Charlie Parker, whose music Ellison did not consider true jazz, he only notes in the sound "a great deal of loneliness, self-depreciation and self-pity" ("On Bird"

74). As expected, however, it is when Ellison leaves the realm of essay-writing and attempts to describe jazz in his literature that a dichotomy emerges between the music he tries to represent and the perception of it he attempts simultaneously to convey.

Similar to Baraka's invocation of jazz in *Dutchman*, Ellison presents visions of jazz in two short stories, "In a Strange Country" (1944) and "A Coupla Scalped Indians" (1956) in which the music is allowed to communicate unproblematically, albeit unmusically. "In a Strange Country" describes the experience of Parker, an African-American in Wales, who attends a pub and listens to Welsh folk music that evokes for him the "mixed jam sessions" of jazz in America (143). "Though he could not understand the words," writes Ellison, "he felt himself drawn closer to its web of meaning" (142). With this conceit of a "meaning" internal to the music, as well as a description of music as "gut language" (143), Ellison sets the stage for a transformation in the narrator as he listens to the music. Having been angered by an experience in which he was set upon and beaten by a group of white Americans, Parker slowly finds his spirits lifting as he listens to the music. The music, in fact, incites a debate in the narrator over the need for him to remain angry, taking voice in the narrator's thoughts and causing him to realize: "*I believe in music! Well! And in what's happening here tonight. I believe . . . I want to believe in this people*" (144). The music thus "speaks" to Parker in a voice of Ellisonian optimism (the italics throughout the passage can be read as the music's voice in his head, as opposed to Parker's surprised "Well!" in the excerpt above), and indeed the narrator finds himself singing the U.S. national anthem at the story's conclusion in a celebration of plurality, the words stripped of their ironic potential (146).

As in Baraka's *Dutchman*, the music has, however, been reduced to a kind of language so that it can communicate Ellison's theory of it. Parker's internalization of the jazz-like music as a voice of hope and belief recalls Ellison's theories more than it recalls jazz. Likewise "A Coupla Scalped Indians," a coming-of-age story in which two African-American boys hear a jazz band playing in the distance at a carnival and speak of the instruments as engaging in dialogue. The tuba, according to one of the boys, "is saying":

They don't play 'em, I know they don't.

They don't play 'em, I know they won't.

They just don't play no nasty dirty twelves . . . (70)

And the trumpet responds similarly with "So ya'll don't play 'em, hey?" while the clarinet, the reader is told, is "so sweet-talking he just *eases* you in the dozens" (71). Here, the "'em" the instruments refer to is the game of dozens, a signifying game that has its roots in Black American culture and can be perceived as a battle for respect via the exchange of insults ("Dozen," def. 1.5). But while to Ellison jazz clearly "signified" in the sense that it represented "an act of individual assertion within and against the group" ("Charlie Christian Story" 36), it is ironic that in order to convey this perception of jazz he must force the music to "signify" in the sense of a referential language. The communication of Ellison's theory of jazz is made possible only through the "dialogue" the instruments engage in and which one of the boys claims to "hear." Jazz is only present as a linguistic reduction one boy improvises, and signifies (plays the dozens) only so long as it is made to signify (speak as a language).

A much more ambitious, though again problematic, depiction of jazz emerges from Ralph Ellison's celebrated novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), whose complex relationship with jazz has been explored by numerous critics, most of whom explicate its adherence to the theory of jazz presented in Ellison's nonfiction.² Certainly the presence of Ellison's humanistic vision of jazz in the novel is undeniable, and continuously asserts itself wherever the music appears. However, such an analysis of the novel ignores many of the novel's thematic gestures, as well as most of the passages wherein Ellison attempts actual descriptions and enactments of jazz, rather than simple references to it. Indeed, in a pioneering essay, "The Embrace of Entropy: Ralph Ellison and the Freedom Principle of Jazz Invisible," literary critic Kevin Bell writes:

the novelistic work of Ellison can be argued to set into literary and philosophical motion some of the vital creative impulses that propel the music of free jazz. This, while much of his critical work . . . generates a certain neoconservative humanistic rhetoric that has helped keep free jazz publicly trivialized, indeed, all but invisible, in the United States for more than four decades now. (25)

Instead of tying *Invisible Man* to the work of musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, whose jazz Ellison sanctioned, Bell argues that the novel aligns itself

² For example, see Andrew Radford's "The Invisible Music of Ralph Ellison," in which he argues that the novel reflects Ellison's jazz sensibility in its "picaresque narrative drive, and a prose style that is as fluid and flexible, yet as disciplined and subject to the exigencies of character and plot, as jazz is unconfined yet sensitive to the necessities of rhythm and mood" (52). Likewise, Thomas Marvin's reading of specific instances of the individual's "constant struggle for identity" in the Prologue's jazz-saturated passages (600-1) and Horace Porter's book-length study *Jazz Country* wherein he asserts the presence of "imaginative riffs" as well as "solo flights" and "philosophical and descriptive cadenzas" (74).

most closely with the work of free jazzers such as John Coltrane and Sun Ra, whom Ellison vigorously denounced.

Bell's exploration of the novel focuses largely on the plot, arguing that the bulk of the narrator-protagonist's progress is marked by a gradual reconciliation with non-identity and chaos rather than an eventual assertion of individual identity. Instead of *becoming*, Bell argues, the narrator is *performing*: "The improvisational possibility of working or *playing* oneself into the semblance of a self, a self that becomes a self only in the performative materiality of its playing, not in any constative assertion of its substance" (35, emphasis his). Similarly, I would argue that Ellison's descriptions of jazz move past a simple symbolic vision of the music, often refusing such an "identity" of sorts in Ellison's attempt to convey the music's non-referential qualities.

In the prologue of the novel, for example, the narrator begins a description of jazz as follows:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music. (8)

The music described here seems to be one of continuous dislocation, in which the listener is never quite "on the beat." Instead of a force ordering chaos, the protagonist is confronted with something akin to chaos, an in-betweenness that might be analogous to music's refusal to mean, to be pinpointed into a specific meaning. As if conscious of this misstep, Ellison interrupts this odd, widely signifying, chain of thought, exchanging it for

a more functional interpretation of the music: “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” (8). This last description is more consistent with his vision of jazz, but compared to the previous one, it seems inauthentic and distanced in its need to equate jazz with a kind of conversation in which voices can “wait” and “speak.”

Perhaps even more telling is a narrative that the protagonist quickly finds himself relating as he “entered the music” of Armstrong and “descended . . . into its depths” (9). The use of a subjective narrative device to capture jazz, at first glance, seems consistent with Ellison’s conception of jazz as a communicative entity. However, the narrative itself works against the idea of it communicating in any direct fashion. What the protagonist “finds” in the music, among other images, is one of a preacher giving a sermon on the “Blackness of Blackness” to his congregation (9). Instead of coming to any conclusion about his subject, however, the preacher, punctuated with exclamations from the audience, ends up asserting such things as “Black will git you . . . an’ black won’t” or “Black will make you . . . or black will un-make you” (9-10). While on one hand the sermon can be read as a rejection of an essential blackness at the heart of jazz, it also conveys to the reader a sense of ambivalence in what jazz “says,” a sense of “struggle against various forms of ideological closure” (Benston, *Performing Blackness* 13). Though the preacher and congregation engage in furious dialogue, no positive statement is actually made. “I too have become acquainted with ambivalence,” remarks the protagonist. “That’s why I’m here” (10)³. But even “ambivalence” falls short of communicating jazz, and the narrator quickly qualifies that it is “a word that doesn’t

³ The complete text of the celebrated “Blackness of Blackness” sermon is included in the Extracts section of this thesis, on p. 92.

explain it" (10). Not only, then, is the meaning ambivalent, but the feeling he gets from jazz can't even be explained by such a "word," or perhaps even words in general.

The implications of the prologue's jazz narrative are recapitulated in other such narrative descriptions of music throughout the novel. In responding to the singing of spirituals in a church, the protagonist again engages in a torrent of words attempting to capture the music:

playing Ha! as upon a xylophone; words marching like the student band, up the campus and down again, blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs. Hey, Miss Susie! the sound of words that were no words, counterfeit notes singing achievements yet unachieved. (113)

Here, again, the narrative refuses to convey any sort of meaning, but sets up a string of contradictions, "triumphant sounds empty of triumphs" and "achievements yet unachieved." As with the narrator's hesitation to use words to communicate his feeling of the music in the prologue, here again he marks "the sound of words that were no words," conveying the music through a refusal to let it mean. Indeed, later in the novel when passing by a record shop "blaring a languid blues," the narrator comments upon the music as "a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words" (443). In this last passage, Ellison has left it unclear as to whether he is referring to actual words in the text, or commenting upon the notes of the instruments as "inadequate words"—words that don't mean. And even as the passage moves to describe jazz, ambiguity creeps into the language. What a radical departure from the jazz that uncompromisingly "reduced the chaos of living to form" ("Living With Music" 6) painted in Ellison's nonfiction!

What these passages in *Invisible Man* represent is Ellison's attempt to convey a sense of jazz music accurately, and though they fall short of realizing his theories, they arguably succeed better than the functional portraits found in his short stories. At the end of the Prologue, the conflict between these two desires presents itself very conspicuously when the protagonist extricates himself from the jazz narrative he has generated via Armstrong's music. At the end of the narrative he finds himself caught listening to a trumpet that "was blaring and the rhythm was too hectic" as well as "a tom-tom beating like heart-thuds [that] began drowning out the trumpet," and the next, "ascending from this underworld of sound" he hears "Louis Armstrong innocently asking":

What did I do

To be so black

And blue? (12)

Which, the reader must wonder, is the real jazz—the chaos of too-hectic rhythms and overpowering sounds captured in the jazz narrative, or the comparatively sterile description of Louis Armstrong "innocently asking" a question?⁴

This conflict and compromise that Ellison ultimately pens in his descriptions of jazz perhaps reach their most noticeable form in the public speeches the protagonist gives

4 Of course, Armstrong is being anything but innocent, and Robert O'Meally has noted the irony in Armstrong's appropriation of the tune, which was originally written as a comic number in a Broadway show, but whose lyrics marked it instead as a bold subversion of the expectations of a "colored" show tune, with words that "stopped the laughter for a moment" (128). By invoking Armstrong, who altered the tune into a "tragedy-haunted meditation on white racism" (O'Meally 129), Ellison continues the jazz tradition of signifying upon (i.e. playing on) other musical works, and indeed does so in a way that doesn't require the music to "speak." However, it is interesting to note that in *Invisible Man*, Ellison generates a conflict between this capacity of jazz to mean in the referencing act of signifying on other musical works and the refusal of jazz to signify (as a referential language) in the passage that immediately precedes Armstrong's "Black and Blue." The music-language divide asserts itself even at this point of potential meaning.

throughout the novel. That for Ellison many of these speeches are intended as parallels to, if not representations of jazz has been noted by such critics as Horace Porter (*Jazz Country* 74-75), and is made clear in the descriptions of their construction and response. For example, the first of these speeches occurs while the protagonist is witnessing the dispossession of an old couple in Harlem and the growing anger of the crowd below:

I saw [the crowd] start up the steps and felt suddenly as though my head would split. I knew that they were about to attack the man and I was both afraid and angry, repelled and fascinated. I both wanted it and feared the consequences, was outraged and angered at what I saw. . . . And beneath it all there boiled up all the shock-absorbing phrases that I had learned all my life. I seemed to totter on the edge of a great dark hole.

“No, no,” I heard myself yelling. “Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers! That’s not the way. We’re law-abiding. We’re a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people” (275)

The speech that emerges, about which the protagonist later asserts “I didn’t know what I was going to say” (290), is an improvisation of sorts built upon the conflict the narrator feels, which surfaces in the riff-like alternation between two key words: “law-abiding” and “dispossession.” Ellison’s perception of jazz as an assertion of selfhood also emerges through the speech’s origins in the narrator’s need to order the growing chaos of the scene—somehow the narrator needs to reconcile his being “afraid and angry, repelled and fascinated.” However, as Ellison gets entangled in writing this jazz speech, its likeness to his humanistic perception of jazz steadily diminishes.

In order to capture jazz and force the speech away from language, it is interesting to note that Ellison marks the speech with a refusal to mean through linguistic signification. Riffing simultaneously upon two opposites, the anger and call to action of “dispossession” and the call to nonintervention of “law-abiding,” the narrator ends up constructing a directionless ramble connected by associative logic, but without any discernable meaning. As he speaks, the crowd interprets his words however they see fit, some seeing him as preventing the crowd’s intervention, others reading him as inciting it. Not a few, indeed, comment upon the directionless quality of his non-speech of sorts: “you crazy sonofabitch,” yells one man in frustration, “get out the way!” (278). Instead of asserting his own identity with and against the crowd, or forging order from chaos, as Ellison’s vision of jazz would have him do, the narrator ends up responding lamely to the movements of the crowd, speaking a “music of invisibility” of sorts akin to his description of Armstrong’s music and the “blackness of blackness” sermon in the prologue (14). The meanings of the jazz speech refuse to be fixed.

At other points in the story, the narrator gives similar “invisible” speeches which also take on musical qualities primarily in their subversion of meaning and consequently also subvert the symbolic quality Ellison would invest in the music. Of particular interest (and coincidence, when we consider Baraka’s work), is a eulogy the narrator gives toward the end of the novel to Clifton, a friend and ex-member of the Communist Party with which the narrator becomes affiliated. Just prior to the speech at the grave, Ellison prepares the reader with an image of jazz via the spiritual “There’s Many a Thousand Gone,” which an old baritone singer and euphonium player lead. The music, he notes, moves the crowd not because of “the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne

words” and not because of any ideology, but some “transcendent emotion” that was “deepened by that something for which the theory of the Brotherhood [Communist Party] had given me no name” (453). Again, a divide seems to have appeared between the function the music serves in unifying the crowd, and what the music is—something that doesn’t communicate by words and cannot be named.

This non-functional, functioning dichotomy in the music parallels qualities in the speech to follow. “I had no words” (454) the narrator realizes before he even starts, in a significant gesture to qualify the improvisation that follows. The speech is built upon another riff, the repetition of “His name was Clifton,” and is structured in developing variations on that theme, from the brief statement, “His name was Clifton and they shot him down” (455), to large sections describing his birth and life to the “bullet entering the right ventricle of the heart, and lodging there, the other severing the spinal ganglia traveling downward to lodge in the pelvis” (458). As a eulogy, the speech stands as an affirmation of Clifton’s existence; as a description of jazz, the speech stands insofar as the words might as well be notes developing a thematic idea, for they “say” nothing aside from the reality of their saying, their sound: “They were listening intently,” the narrator observes about the crowd, “as though looking not at me, but at the pattern of my voice upon the air” (455). Again, though the speech does indeed manage to order the chaos surrounding Clifton’s death, as the music preceding it does, this function seems profoundly separated from the reality of its expression. There is nothing inherent in the string of words that carries Ellison’s faith in jazz, and the resulting effect upon the crowd has been severed from it. Though the speeches come close to capturing the jazz’s non-

referential properties, they also extricate themselves from Ellison's theories of what jazz does.

It is also notable that in this last speech, the narrator never actually asserts a sense of himself and his own identity, but only Clifton's. Indeed, as Bell has noted, Ellison makes clear that with these speeches the protagonist is always performing an identity, making them from various viewpoints but at the same time distancing himself from their meaning (29). And while this performance aspect allows for close parallels to jazz, it also makes it impossible for the narrator ever to negotiate a "true" identity through the multiplicity of those he finds himself speaking from. The "I too have become acquainted with ambivalence" (10) of the opening is matched by the "I've learned to live without direction" at the novel's close (577). Additionally, the protagonist declares, "Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough" (573), in a coupling that emphasizes jazz's impotence, its non-functionality. Though perhaps depicting the musical qualities of jazz more closely than Ellison's other writings, *Invisible Man* ultimately compromises the theory of jazz he puts forth so carefully in his essays.

Conclusion

In some sense, it is perhaps ironic that Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison, both of whom set such complete theories of jazz down in numerous collections of essays, should find themselves struggling when it came to describing and representing jazz elsewhere. Yet on the other hand, both of their theories, which invest in jazz qualities of symbolic expressiveness that can only be found in language, would necessarily have to fall short in capturing the music, with its non-referential properties. What is surprising is the

similarity of Baraka's and Ellison's solutions when it came time to negotiate the divide between the music and their theories: the effort to make jazz "speak" found in *Dutchman* and "A Coupla Scapled Indians," the attempt to generate an association between an unspeaking music and following action in "Screamers" and "In a Strange Country," and finally the exploration of a language that attempts, like jazz, to move away from symbolic meaning, as in the *Eulogies* and *Invisible Man*. However far these solutions succeed, though, a distinction between writing about jazz and writing, or representing, that same jazz stands prominently in their work. Here, as in the work of Fitzgerald and Kerouac, is a jazz that refuses to be silenced in the effort of speaking it.

Conclusion On Race

“What is important is the fact that Jazz has something to say. It speaks in many manners, talking always in original and authentic form.”

– Duke Ellington, “Duke Says Swing is Stagnant”

I have suggested throughout this work that what jazz says—what jazz means or is made to mean—is inseparable from what it is, and that fundamentally jazz is a kind of music. To read descriptions of jazz without attention to this, and attention to the approach a writer has taken to capture that music through language, is to risk misunderstanding the writer, the writing, and jazz. Acknowledgment of the divide between music and language, I have contended, leads to a more complete understanding of the way jazz functions in its literary representations. Certainly it accounts for the performed silences and substitutions of jazz in Fitzgerald’s texts, self-conscious vagueness of Kerouac’s jazz descriptions, and the tension in the work of Baraka and Ellison between what jazz is and what it does.

In my re-reading of many of these canonical texts with an eye for the performance of jazz’s reduction from music to language, I have however purposely overlooked other connections that have been historically implicated with jazz, most prominently those related to race. Is it not important, though, that Fitzgerald and Kerouac (not to mention Hentoff) are white writers, while Baraka and Ellison are African-American? Certainly issues of race and racism figure heavily in the works of all four of these writers—its presence impossible to miss even in my lack of attention to it, and it would be difficult to propose any reading of jazz which does not consider that Kerouac and Baraka would be considered racist by today’s standards. If nothing else, it would seem from my readings

that my treatment of the white writers has been more flattering than that of the African-American ones.

The choice to leave the explicit consideration of race issues for this point in the Conclusion, rather than the main body of this work, stems partly from an observation that the relationship between race and jazz in literature has been explored heavily in the past decade, and often at the cost of an analysis that takes a larger, nonlinguistic, world into consideration. Race, many postmodern theorists have contended, is constituted linguistically to a large extent (c.f. Werner Sollors's "Introduction" to *The Invention of Ethnicity*), and as such remains neatly within the confines of a linguistic setting. Confounding musical meaning with racial politics is, in one sense, to render music as something naturally explicable and do injustice to a more critical reading of the act of representing music.

Nonetheless, a consideration of race politics does offer a greater understanding of this thesis's conclusions. That both African-American writers fell short, in some sense, of communicating their perceptions of jazz in their fiction marks not their inadequacies as writers, but rather the nature of their symbolic investment in the music. Both Baraka and Ellison participated in a project to reassert the African-American presence in jazz, and one that has been historically ignored in the face of such factors as:

alienation, underemployment, and racist contempt for black music; powerlessness and the qualitatively heightened exploitation of the black artist; the double standard for black versus white art music in the recording industry; ideological mystification in the jazz world; and so on. (Kofsky, *Black Music, White Business* 18)

In a sense, the conflict and compromise I explicate from their texts serves as an indication of the degree to which both writers were forced to compromise the music in a way as to recuperate its history. Certainly Baraka would not have felt a need to declare his black nationalist stance in the 1960s if he had not felt his selfhood was at risk in white America. In this context, Baraka and Ellison's wrestling with jazz in their texts becomes nothing short of the wrestling for a voice to speak with.

Similarly, my intent in recuperating Kerouac's use of jazz is not to separate his perception of jazz from his tendency to romanticize and primitivize African Americans, but rather to reassess the critical dismissal of Kerouac's, as well as Fitzgerald's, work with jazz on account to some degree of their being white. Both of these writers' investments in jazz were substantial, though serving more, I have argued, as musical phenomena rather than racial. In the case of Kerouac, I would connect jazz and his racism together under what Jon Panish calls Kerouac's desire for "outsiderism" ("Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*" 121), a desire consistent with his conception of *beat* as a realm of possibility that would not be found in "the best the white world had offered" (Kerouac, *On the Road* 179). But here, jazz also pushes further than a mere essentialized concept of Otherness, escaping Kerouac's tendency to primitivize and moving into a realm of possibility that makes it, not the stereotyped African American, the symbol for the Beat Generation.

Finally, as such historians as Kathy Ogren have noted, the "jazz controversy" of the 1920s did not simply mark a conflict of values between generations, but also a conflict over the inviolability of the racial divide. Certainly Fitzgerald's play with appropriations and substitutions of jazz in his text are not to be read without reference to

the continuous hints at an African-American presence throughout his writings (as I have done to some extent). His mockery of Tom Buchanan's declaration of "the dominant race" that must "watch out or these other races will have control of things" (*Gatsby* 17), for example, is mirrored in his mockery of the Lady Caroline's attempt to write lyrics to a piece of "jazz" in *Tender is the Night*.

But my observation that that the exploration of jazz as a kind of music in literature has been confounded in the past by the examination of race issues in relation to musical ones accounts only partly, as I have noted, for my choice to leave the explicit consideration of race for the Conclusion. The other reason, which I gestured towards in the Introduction, is that I am arguing an analysis of race is implicated in a larger analysis of the limitations of language. And indeed, the presence of race throughout this work has been unmistakable despite my seeming neglect of it in favor of musical concerns. By arguing about the limitations of language with respect to jazz, I have also been arguing about the limitations of an essentialist position with respect to racial difference. It is no accident that the presence of jazz in their writings deconstructs Baraka's vision of an essential blackness and evades Kerouac's tendencies to romanticize African Americans, even as it expresses Fitzgerald's concerns with racial transgression and Ellison's shifting notion of self-identity. Indeed, this analysis of the music-language divide gestures powerfully toward the reification of race in language, and the impossibility of maintaining that illusion when language's ideological pretensions are uncovered and its boundaries exposed.

More than merely pointing to a site in literature where issues of race or even music are continuously being negotiated, this thesis explores a site where the idea of

language as the “general model of relationality” (Monson 209) itself is put into question. The act of representing jazz in writing, if only in silence, is also an act of confronting the limitations of language—limitations of what can actually be said in the face of what music *seems to say*. Thus, the first step to answering the question of what jazz is, as each of the authors in this thesis demonstrate, is to acknowledge and enact the incapacity of language to answer the question fully. “Jazz,” writes Nicholas Evans in his book *Writing Jazz*, “itself invites the confrontation of such indeterminacy” (289). In that confrontation, then, is a critique both of culture and language as well as a celebration of the possibilities of music and, in a sense, a celebration of language’s capacity to perform its limitations.

In Nat Hentoff’s *Jazz Country*, aspiring jazz musician Tom Curtis is told that he needs to learn how to “be himself” (33). In response to this, veteran jazz pianist Moses Godfrey replies:

Generalities. Generalities. . . . You tell the boy to be himself. What self? If he’s like most people, he’s one boy at school. He’s another boy in the street. He’s a third boy with his father. And a fourth boy with his mother. And umpteen different kinds of boys at other times and places. (33)

While it might seem like common sense, doubtless Godfrey learned this from years of playing jazz, or at least Hentoff from years of writing it. While the book may not have inspired me to pick up the trumpet as a teenager, it certainly did inspire me to listen to jazz. And that has made all the difference.



Extracts

Extract 1
The "Jazz History of the World"

[From F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby: A Facsimile of the Manuscript* (Ed. Matthew Bruccoli), pp. 54-56. I have replicated editing marks as well as spelling and typographical errors.]

Ladies and Gentleman," he began. "At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Les Epstien's latest work which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation." He smiled with jovial condescension and added "Some Sensation" whereupon everybody laughed.

"The piece is known," he continued lustily, "as Les Epstien's Jazz History of the World."

When he sat down all the members of the orchestra looked at one another and smiled as tho this was ~~after all~~ a little below them them after all. Then the conductor raised his wand—and they ~~all~~ launched into one of the most surprising pieces of music I've ever heard in my life. It fascinated me. ~~perhaps it was the champagne~~ I've never heard it since and perhaps it was the champagne but for about fifteen minutes I don't think anyone stirred in their chairs—except to laugh now and then in a curious puzzled way when they came to the end of the movement.

It started out with a wierd, spinning sound that seemed to come mostly from the cornets, very regular and measured and inevitable with a bell now and then that seemed to ring somewhere a great distance away. A rhythm became distinguishable after a while in the spinning, a sort of dull beat but as soon as you'd almost made it out it dissapeared—until finally something happened, something tremendous, you knew that, and the spinning was all awry and one of the distant bells had come alive. It had a ~~meaning and~~ and a personality somehow of its own.

That was the first movement and we all laughed and looked at teach other rather nervously as the second movement began. [new paragraph mark] The second movement was concerned with the bell only it wasn't the bell anymore but it was ~~two instrume~~ we a muted violin cello and two instruments I had never seen before. At first there was a sort of monotony about it—a little disappointing at first as if it were just a repetition of the spinning sound but pretty soon you were aware that something was trying to establish itself, to get a foothold, something soft and and persistent and profound and next you yourself were trying to help it, struggling, praying for it—until suddenly it was there, it was established rather scornfully without you and it ~~stayed there~~ seemed to look around as with a complete self-sufficiency as if it had been there all the time.

I was curiously moved and the third part of the thing was full of an even stronger emotion. I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it—which proves I've been told that it must have been pretty lowbrow stuff—but it wasn't really a story. He didn't have lovely music for the prehistoric ages with tiger-howls from the trap finishing up with a strain from Onward Christian Soldiers in the year two B.C. It wasn't like that at all. There would be a series of ^{interruptive} notes that seemed to fall together accidently and colored everything that came after them until before you knew it they became the theme and new discords were opposed to it outside. But what struck me particularly was that just as you'd get used to the new discord business there'd be one of

the old themes rung in this time as a discord until you'd get a ghastly sense that it was all a cycle after all, purposeless and sardonic until you wanted to get up and walk out of the garden. It never stopped—after they had finished playing that movement it went on and on in everybody's head until the next one started. Whenever I think of that summer I can hear it yet.

The last was weak I thought though ~~the audi~~ most of the people seemed to like it best of all. It had recognizable strains of famous jazz in it—Alexander's Ragtime Band and The Darkdown Strutter's Ball and recurrent hint of The Beale Street Blues. It made me restless and looking casually around my eye was caught by the straight, ~~graceful easy~~ figure of well-proportioned well-made figure of Gatsby who stood alone on ~~the~~ his steps looking from one group to another with a strange eagerness in his eyes. It was though he felt the necessity of supplying, physically a tthe least, a perfect measure of entertainment to his guests. He seemed absolutely alone—I never seen anyone who seemed so alone.

Extract 2
San Francisco Jazz

[From Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, pp. 197-200.]

Out we jumped in the warm, mad night, hearing a wild tenorman bawling horn across the way, going "EE-YAH! EE-YAH! EE-YAH!" and hands clapping to the beat folks yelling, "Go, go, go!" Dean was already racing across the street with his thumb in the air, yelling, "Blow, man, blow!" A bunch of colored men in Saturday-night suits were whooping it up in front. It was a sawdust saloon with a small bandstand on which the fellows huddled with their hats on, blowing over people's heads, a crazy place; crazy floppy women wandered around sometimes in their bathrobes, bottles clanked in alleys. In back of the joint in a dark corridor beyond the splattered toilets scores of men and women stood against the wall drinking wine-spodioidi and spitting at the stars—wine and whisky. The behatted tenorman was blowing at the peak of a wonderfully satisfactory free idea, a rising and falling riff that went from "EE-yah!" to a crazier "EE-de-lee-yah!" and blasted along to the rolling crash of butt-scarred drums hammered by a big brutal Negro with a bullneck who didn't give a damn about anything but punishing his busted tubs, crash, rattle-ti-boom, crash. Uproars of music and the tenorman *had it* and everybody knew he had it. Dean was clutching his head in the crowd, and it was a mad crowd. They were all urging that tenorman to hold it and keep it with cries and wild eyes, and he was raising himself from a crouch and going down again with his horn, looping it up in a clear cry above the furor. A six-foot skinny Negro woman was rolling her bones at the man's hornbell, and he just jabbed it at her, "Ee! ee! ee!"

Everybody was rocking and roaring. Galatea and Marie with beer in their hands were standing on their chairs, shaking and jumping. Groups of colored guys stumbled in from the street, falling over one another to get there. "Stay with it, man!" roared a man with a foghorn voice, and let out a big groan that must have been heard clear out in Sacramento, ah-haa! "Whoo!" said Dean. He was rubbing his chest, his belly; the sweat splashed from his face. Boom, kick, that drummer was kicking his drums down the cellar and rolling the beat upstairs with his murderous sticks, rattlety-boom! A big fat man was jumping on the platform, making it sag and creak. "Yoo!" The pianist was only pounding the keys with spread-eagled fingers, chords, at intervals when the great tenorman was drawing breath for another blast—Chinese chords, shuddering the piano in every timber, chink, and wire, boing! The tenorman jumped down from the platform and stood in the crowd, blowing around; his hat was over his eyes; somebody pushed it back for him. He just hauled back and stamped his foot and blew down a hoarse, baughing blast, and drew breath, and raised the horn and blew high, wide, and screaming in the air. Dean was directly in front of him with his face lowered to the bell of the horn, clapping his hands, pouring sweat on the man's keys, and the man noticed and laughed in his horn a long quivering crazy laugh, and everybody else laughed and they rocked and rocked; and finally the tenorman decided to blow his top and crouched down and held a note in high C for a long time as everything else crashed along and the cries increased and I thought the cops would come swarming from the nearest precinct. Dean was in a trance. The tenorman's eyes were fixed straight on him; he had a madman who not only understood but cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was, and

they began dueling for this; everything came out of the horn, no more phrases, just cries, “Baugh” and down to “Beep!” and up to “EEEEEE!” and down to clinkers and over to sideways-echoing horn-sounds. He tried everything, up, down, sideways, upside down, horizontal, thirty degrees, forty degrees, and finally he fell back in somebody's arms and gave up and everybody pushed around and yelled, “Yes! Yes! He blowed that one!” Dean wiped himself with his handkerchief.

Then up stepped the tenorman on the bandstand and asked for a slow beat and looked sadly out the open door over people's heads and began singing, “Close Your Eyes.” Things quieted down a minute. The tenorman wore a tattered suede jacket, a purple shirt, cracked shoes, and zoot pants without press; he didn't care. He looked like a Negro Hassel. His big brown eyes were concerned with sadness, and the singing of songs slowly and with long, thoughtful pauses. But in the second chorus he got excited and grabbed the mike and jumped down from the bandstand and bent to it. To sing a note he had to touch his shoetops and pull it all up to blow, and he blew so much he staggered from the effect, and only recovered himself in time for the next long slow note. “Mu-u-u-usic pla-a-a-a-a-ay!” He leaned back with his face to the ceiling, mike held below. He shook, he swayed. Then he leaned in, almost falling with his face against the mike. “Ma-a-a-ake it dream-y for dan-cing”—and he looked at the street outside with his lips curled in scorn, Billie Holiday's hip sneer—“while we go roman-n-n-cing”—he staggered sideways—“Lo-o-o-ove's holid-a-a-ay”—he shook his head with disgust and weariness at the whole world—“Will make it seem”—what would it make it seem? everybody waited; he mourned—“O-kay.” The piano hit a chord. “So baby come on just clo-o-o-ose your pretty little ey-y-y-y-yes”—his mouth quivered, he looked at us, Dean and me, with an expression that seemed to say, Hey now, what's this thing we're all doing in this sad brown world?—and then he came to the end of his song, and for this there had to be elaborate preparations, during which time you could send all the messages to Garcia around the world twelve times and what difference did it make to anybody? because here we were dealing with the pit and prune-juice of poor beat life itself in the god-awful streets of man, so he said it and sang it, “Close—your—” and blew it way up to the ceiling and through to the stars and on out—“Ey-y-y-y-y-es”—and staggered off the platform to brood. He sat in the corner with a bunch of boys and paid no attention to them. He looked down and wept. He was the greatest.

Extract 3
Destroying the Ghetto

[From Amiri Baraka's "The Screamers," pp. 78-79.]

It was some mean honking blues, and he made no attempt to hide his intentions. He was breaking bad. "Okay, baby," we all thought, "Go for yourself." I was standing at the back of the hall with one arm behind my back, so the overcoat could hang over in that casual gesture of fashion. Lynn was moving, and the camel walkers were moving in the corners. The fast dancers and practicers making the whole hall dangerous. "Off my suedes, motherfucker." Lynn was trying to move us, and even I did the one step I knew, safe at the back of the hall. The hippies ran for girls. Ugly girls danced with each other. Skippy, who ran the lights, made them move faster in that circle on the ceiling, and darkness raced around the hall. Then Lynn got his riff, that rhythmic figure we knew he would repeat, the honked note that would be his personal evaluation of the world. And he screamed it so the veins in his face stood out like neon. "Uhh, yeh, Uhh, yeh, Uhh, yeh," we all screamed to push him further. So he opened his eyes for a second, and really made his move. He looked over his shoulder at the other turbans, then marched in time with his riff, on his toes across the stage. They followed; he marched across to the other side, repeated, then finally he descended, still screaming, into the crowd, and as the sidemen followed, we made a path for them around the hall. They were strutting, and all their horns held very high, and they were only playing that one scary note. They moved near the back of the hall, chanting and swaying, and passed right in front of me. I had a little cup full of wine a murderer friend of mine made me drink, so I drank it and tossed the cup in the air, then fell in line behind the last wild horn man, strutting like the rest of them. Bubles and Rogie followed me, and four-eyed Moselle Boyd. And we strutted back and forth, pumping our arms, repeating with Lynn Hope, "Yeh, Uhh, Yeh, Uhh." Then everybody fell in behind us, yelling still. There was confusion and stumbling, but there were no real fights. The thing they wanted was right there and easily accessible. No one could stop you from getting in that line. "It's too crowded. It's too many people on the line!" some people yelled. So Lynn thought further, and made to destroy the ghetto. We went out into the lobby and in perfect rhythm down the marble steps. Some musicians laughed, but Lynn and some others kept the note, till the others fell back in. Five or six hundred hopped-up woogies tumbled out into Belmont Avenue. Lynn marched right in the center of the street. Sunday night traffic stopped, and honked. Big Red yelled at a bus driver, "Hey, baby, honk that horn in time or shut it off!" The bus driver cooled it. We screamed and screamed at the clear image of ourselves as we should always be. Ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression. It would be the form of the sweetest revolution, to huckle-buck into the fallen capital, and let the oppressors lindy hop out. We marched all the way to Spruce, weaving among the stalled cars, laughing at the dazed white men who sat behind the wheels. Then Lynn turned and we strutted back toward the hall. The late show at the National was turning out, and the big hats there jumped right in our line.

Then the Nabs came, and with them, the fire engines. What was it, a labor riot? Anarchists? A nigger strike? The paddy wagons and cruisers pulled in from both sides, and sticks and billies started flying, heavy streams of water splattering the marchers up

and down the street. America's responsible immigrants were doing her light work again. The knives came out, the razors, all the Biggers who would not be bent, counterattacked or came up behind the civil servants smashing at them with coke bottles and aerials. Belmont writhed under the dead economy and splivs floated in the gutters, disappearing under cars. But for a while, before the war had reached its peak, Lynn and his musicians, a few other fools, and I, still marched, screaming thru the maddened crowd. Onto the sidewalk, into the lobby, halfway up the stairs, then we all broke our different ways, to save whatever it was each of us thought we loved.

Extract 4
 "Blackness of Blackness" Sermon

[From Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, pp. 9-10]

I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout:*

"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 . . ."

". . . and the sun . . ."

"The sun, Lawd . . ."

". . . was bloody red . . ."

"Red . . ."

"Now black is . . ." the preacher shouted.

"Bloody . . ."

"I said black is . . ."

"Preach it, brother . . ."

". . . an' black ain't . . ."

"Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"

"Amen, brother . . ."

"Black will git you . . ."

"Yes, it will . . ."

"Yes, it will . . ."

". . . an' black won't . . ."

"Naw, it won't!"

"It do . . ."

"It do, Lawd . . ."

". . . an' it don't."

"Halleluiah . . ."

". . . It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."

"Preach it, dear brother . . ."

". . . an' make you tempt . . ."

"Good God a-mighty!"

"Old Aunt Nelly!"

"Black will make you . . ."

"Black . . ."

“ . . . or black will un-make you.”

“Ain’t it the truth, Lawd?”

And at that point a voice of trombone timbre screamed at me, “Git out of here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?”

And I tore myself away, hearing the old singer of spirituals moaning, “Go curse your God, boy, and die.”

I stopped and questioned her, asked her what was wrong.

“I dearly loved my master, son,” she said.

“You should have hated him,” I said.

“He gave me several sons,” she said, “and because I loved my sons I learned to love their father though I hated him too.”

“I too have become acquainted with ambivalence,” I said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing, a word that doesn’t explain it.”

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