Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space: The Music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir "Nas" Jones

by

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Defense Date: March 27, 2025

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in The Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space: The Music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir "Nas" Jones attempts to examine the authorial use of musical and literary tropes to clarify how characters enter a state of introspection. In this state, I argue protagonists can reflect on their existence, enabling them to adjust to or resist societal constraints. This dissertation is therefore about the advantages of speculative space as a site of transformation and world-building. *Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space* relies on literary examples of musically infused literature as a reflection of African American oral tradition. I focus on Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir Jones' work because their literature and poetry offer a summation of the entanglement of musical and literary genres in African American literature throughout the 20th-century.

The authors of the texts in *Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space* draw on blues, jazz, and hip-hop archetypes and tropes to unveil a phantasmic realm that reflects the interiority of black life, guiding readers in conceptualizing an aesthetic world where trauma is navigable. The Great Migration and its legacy serve as a through line of the dissertation, revealing circumstances that Nas calls illmatic. The work of Ellison, Morrison, and Nas reveals the interplay of music, literature, identity, and memory. As they conflate time and space through their protagonists' entry into speculative space, readers are allowed to sonically travel too. This way of reading offers a variety of benefits, chief among them is the ability to engage with the full emotional and psychological landscapes of characters.

Dedication

To Alice Walker,

I believe I understand now.

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Acknowledgments

Long ago, when I began thinking about rap music's impact on me, I wondered how that sound deeply shaped my memories, emotions, and sense of identity. I realized how grateful I am for the many people whose time, words, and support guided me in the pursuit of answers to questions that shape my understanding of the narratives defining our American experience. I am grateful to the many writers, musicians, and thinkers who have, in various ways, challenged me to spend time with their words and literary and sonic creations.

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Winters' writing advice and focused attention in his "Black Marxism" seminar fostered solidarity. I am thankful for his passion and inquisitiveness.

I am also grateful that Professor Taylor Black suggested the title of this dissertation: *Beyond Trope and into Speculative Space: The Music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir Jones.* I thank him for the many conversations and after-hours text message exchanges of musical and literary genius, his advice to "listen to Miles Davis, he will guide you," changed everything! Professor Black's willingness to listen mirrors the support from other important intellectual companions. I cherish time spent with Olivia Simoni, Amber Manning, Anya Meeks, and Joelle Troiano because their presence and support at Duke University gave me a deep sense of belonging within a meaningful community. I thank them for reading drafts and listening to my inner dialogue, helping me to articulate the literary voices inside my head.

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I conducted archival research at the Library of Congress and Princeton University, respectively. I have exercised my thinking at national conferences and universities throughout the country. My time with the Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison papers proved valuable in helping me understand the stakes of archival research and the vast constellation of relationships, writings, and special projects they both enjoyed. I am thankful for those scholars who applied rigor to my speculation—Ta-Nehisi Coates, Herman Beavers, Chris Ouma, Nicole Furlonge, and others. Furthermore, I am fortunate to have had the ability to understand their relationship through

correspondence that breathed life into their relationship with notable writers comprising the African American literary tradition.

My musical and literary journey began in grade school at Alonzo A. Crim High School in Atlanta, Georgia. I am thankful for Mrs. Carrie MacBrien and Olympia Jenkins, English teachers and mentors who demonstrated the value of studying rap lyrics as literature. At Tuskegee University, Drs. Caroline Gebhard, Barbara Baker, and Xavier Nicholas continued the work of educating me toward a literary listening praxis; I am thankful for their time and tutelage. Drs. Erich Nunn, Chad Wickman, and Marc Silverstein, at Auburn University, are educators whose mentorship helped me to understand the nexus between military service and a life of the mind. I am also fortunate to have worked alongside colleagues who nurtured my imagination while teaching Literature and Composition at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Many thanks to Drs. Maria Seger, Cassandra Nelson, Katie Daily, Tony McGowan, Elizabeth Samet, Winston Willams, Robert Goldstein, Sean Morrow, David Harper, John Baskerville and Gary Gregg.

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With an abundance of love, respect, admiration, and joy, I thank my partner and friend Dorthea, son Joshua, and daughter Kayla. Thank you for conversation and care, hugs and smiles, directness and curiosity. Thank you for the space to think when needed and the confinement of company and love when necessary.

1. Introduction

This dissertation is propelled by a spirit of humble curiosity. I begin by recalling a brief, yet powerful statement Alice Walker made nearly twenty years ago about the connection between loud music and adolescent experience. I remember asking Walker about that sound, specifically requesting an explanation about the African American Vernacular Tradition (AAVT) and the epistemological construction of young black males. I remember feeling proud while hearing myself string together those loaded academic terms. A portion of Walker's reply was shown on her face as her body language screamed "there's gotta be a show-off!" before answering my question in an instructive yet soft tone. Walker told me, "Young black men listen to their music loud because they do not feel heard or seen."[1] That was 2005, and at the time I did not understand her cryptic reply because I assumed she ignored the question and spoke of her prerogative; on the contrary, her retort offered a profound explanation before I understood it completely. Nearly thirty years later, I still play the music of my youth loud because rap artists like Nasir "Nas" Jones remind me that at one time, I too felt invisible.

My brief interaction with Walker initiated a career-long inquiry into the way sound and literature inspire and replicate life experiences, especially for marginalized people. Since attending Tuskegee University long ago, I have been haunted by that sentimental lyric of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Tuskegee Song"—the "Pride of the Swift Growing South" loops in my head each time I travel Interstate 85 South from Atlanta, Georgia to Tuskegee, Alabama. Although Dunbar acknowledged the atrocities in the South at the turn of the 20th-century, he relished the idea that the South was a place of promise and pride. The poet described the South as a kind of oasis in his 1903 poem "Summer in the South." Notably, his rendering of nature does not account

[1] This conversation took place at the University of Alabama on March 17, 2005. Walker's comments occurred during a Q&A session following her keynote address for a conference titled, "The Signs of Race Series: Women and Others, Racial and Gender Difference in Anglo-American Literature and Culture."

for spaces like Tuskegee as a mechanized haven, "the Tuskegee Machine" as W.E.B. Du Bois called it. By 2006, at Tuskegee, blackness seemed contained yet held secret in the valley of that rural landscape; the song reminds students there that self-sufficiency required toil. Indeed, blackness is celebrated daily at many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Tuskegee University is no exception. At high noon on the yard, music sounded the cadence of lunch-goers and fraternity and sorority steppers. The town's local young men and women, those who could not enjoy the affable moniker of Golden Tiger, drove along the street adjacent to a black metal fence; that fence eerily reminded me of the black bars *securing* my old housing project in West Atlanta. That fence also stretched adjacent to "the Oaks," the former home of Booker T. Washington. At noon, on the yard, Tuskegeeians sounded their near-rusted Oldsmobiles, Cadillacs, and Chevys, blasting bass music as they battled the campus DJ on the yard for sound superiority. Walker had indeed prophesized the sound.

The clashing sound reminds me of those cars whose trunks rattled bass and metal throughout the community of my youth in West Atlanta. And that pulsation is still with me, facilitating my understanding of authors like Ralph Ellison and his depiction of the hero Invisible in his basement—his body vibrating to the sound of Louis Armstrong's horn through similar speakers sounding the voicelessness of marginalized people lacking the words to describe themselves. Now, I feel I am attuned to Ellison's music of invisibility, enough to notice *how* that condition informed his being. Ellison's novel has since guided me through peace and war as I too have served my country in times of calamity. I now interpret the rattling of those trunks with cathartic charged and explicit lyrics as sound proxies. According to Walker, they serve as blueprints for my and other seemingly invisible people's intellectual formation.

In the 1903 cultural manifesto, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois proclaimed, "The music [Negro spirituals] is far more ancient than words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of

development."[2] Considering Walker's emphasis on invisibility and sound, it occurred to me that my question about young black men was an ontological and personal one; furthermore, Walker's response regarding listening had to do with inheritance. African American literature is, among other things, an audible legacy, carrying the sounds and rhythm of voices of history. Specifically, much of 20th-century African American literature riffs on the Du Boisian question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" and inherits a legacy of resilience, cultural memory, and resistance, drawing from spirituals, blues, jazz, and spoken word in the creation of narratives challenging and redefining American identity.[3] Somewhere in this milieu lies echoes from other young people seeking visibility and understanding, as well as the evolving sounds of people speaking, singing, and writing themselves into being. I wish to interrogate, for that audience of identity seekers, how the soundscapes emerging from African American literature help make those echoes intelligible; to seek the source of their resonance, and to identify and parse the literary life of protagonists who employ music as a proxy for agency. I feel deeply that the traumatic experience of their invisibility is better articulated than screamed. This dissertation is my attempt to go inside the music and into speculative space; this is where writers and protagonists dwell during artistic conception.

Nasir Olu Dara "Nas" Jones is one such artist. His 1994 album, *Illmatic*, was a source of my early sonic curiosity. Notably, I read *Illmatic* as lyric poetry before I listened to the album. At the time, I was unaware of the loud and varied sounds of my experiences, which were sonically rendered through a subvocal listening act as I read Nas's rap lyrics. In other words, I inherited Invisible's "new analytical way of listening to music…hearing not only in time but in space as well."[4] *Illmatic* embodies the kind of sound Walker described; its soundscape sustains an

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[2] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (A.C. McClurg & Company, 1903; repr., Penguin Books, 2018), 6. Citations refer to the Penguin Books edition.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Random House, 1952; repr., Vintage Books, 1995) 8. Citations refer to the Vintage Books edition.

immersive auditory environment, layered with textures, rhythms, and social and cultural themes, transforming my cloistered experience of West Atlanta into a rich and phantasmic sonic realm of black pathology. In other words, by experiencing Nas examine the abnormal conditions in his neighborhood, I could begin reflecting on the challenges and complexities of my environment. My dissertation, *Beyond Trope and into Speculative Space*, describes this realm by examining how specific African American writers use musical tropes to facilitate entry into a speculative space—an ephemeral, sometimes physical, and always cognitive site of transcendence.

Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir Jones are three artists who effectively merge their cultural and musical inheritance into narrative form. Each writer, in their own way, equips their protagonists with musical stimuli guiding entry into speculative space. As a result, it is possible to conceive of their work as transformative, serving as a kind of model for future artists with similar intentions of understanding their circumstances because of systemic racism. My inquiry considers Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Morrison's *Jazz,* and Nas's *Illmatic* as a style of music.[5] Take Nas's *Illmatic,* for example. The album can be considered a compilation of true folk songs in the Du Boisian sense. That is, the sound channels a collective consciousness by representing the life experiences of marginalized people. Arguably, Nas's poetry riffs on jazz and blues elements that signify a broader African American oral tradition. Morrison and Ellison riff similarly in their oeuvres. Ellison, Morrison, and Nas's work reflects a continuation of the AAVT, and I contend that the product of that extension can be perceived within the term illmatic as a pregnant descriptor. Taken together, these works form a polytemporal and dialogic phenomenon, meaning, they engage in a dynamic exchange across time and space. This dissertation will show how these works interact with and reframe contemporary narratives about

[5] Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Nas's *Illmatic* adhere to extended definitions of music according to the Oxford English Dictionary, wherein sense is a feature classifying their work as musically inclined. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "music (*n.*), sense II.9.a," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6196781227. And *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "music (n.), sense II.11.a," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1071107599.

the complexity of identity and being marginalized. This interaction constructs a speculative space where memory, identity, and sound converge using a variety of literary and musical tropes.

Consider illmatic as not simply a musical album but rather a descriptive experience; much like jazz or the blues, the phenomenon is not easily explained. Given its etymology, illmatic describes a dubious sense. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the prefix *-ill* describes a manner of performance.[6] As an adverb, the term describes circumstances as "not well, defective, imperfect, poorly; hardly, [and] scarcely."[7] Nas invokes the signifier *ill* to describe a variety of situations, most notably his existence in the Queensbridge Housing Projects of Queens, New York. The term is also widespread in its colloquial use. Its conversational practice signifies the very opposite of not well. Instead, ill is widely known as describing something as cool or favorable. In many instances, to be ill is to be respectable, particularly in subcultures like hip-hop where the term denotes something or someone as exceptional. Such a definition is notably absent in the OED but exists in the archive of street vernacular. Now take the suffix *-matic*, a combining form "denoting devices which work automatically or mechanically."[8] Nas invokes *-matic* to describe the routine nature of an ill existence, both sick and colloquially cool. In other words, the automatic cycle of plight and promise encapsulates those subjects within its grip. In short, illmatic can be considered a self-contained philosophy—its own epistemology capturing the paradoxes of life in Queensbridge as hardship and persistence coexists in a constant loop with artistry and transcendence.

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[6] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "ill (*adj.* & *n.*), Etymology," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4342086647 : Specifically, "As an adjective, ill is now much less used in general English than as an adverb, and survives chiefly in certain connections, as ill health, ill humour, ill temper, ill success; as an adverb (the opposite of well), it is, in certain constructions, regularly hyphenated to the word which it qualifies, e.g. ill-advised, ill-bred, ill-conditioned, ill-spelt, etc.: in imitation of these, apparently, and from the feeling that it is not a general adjective, but one that goes only with particular substantives, the adjective is also often hyphenated to its noun, as in ill-humour, ill-will, etc.; but this is quite unnecessary; ill humour stands to ill-humoured just as grey hair to grey-haired."

[7] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "ill (adv.), sense 1," September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5211398409.

[8] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "-matic (comb. form)," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1117173504.

Illmatic constitutes a knowledge system reflecting a narrative loaded with emotional turmoil and moral ambiguity, yet simultaneously hopeful in its subjunctive positioning. Illmatic transcends musicality in the broader sense; it is a way of moving past the standard conventions of music. Illmatic is also concerned with seeing, hearing, and thinking. It can also be considered a heuristic tool functioning as its own epistemology; it transforms listeners into readers and vice versa, requiring them to acknowledge a depiction of life on the margins within a chaotic yet cool, transient, and hypnotic soundscape—an *illmatic* realm. To analyze the way musical tropes propel characters into speculative space is to engage in literary analysis as a sonically inclined and discursive approach to interpreting texts. This dissertation explores the soundscapes Ellison, Morrison, and Nas construct to reflect, shape, and resist social conditions. Their work identifies how the spaces are shaped by distinct historical and cultural factors as pathways to speculative space, wherein music propels characters into ontological and epistemic inquiry. Entering speculative space demands tracing how sound, memory, and temporality collapse and reconfigure, allowing characters to navigate alternative possibilities beyond their immediate realities. To borrow from the Avant Garde jazz artist Henry Threadgill, "music is about listening," and listening to the *music* of Ellison, Morrison, and Nas means having some understanding from whence it came.[9]

1.1 Beyond Trope

This section extends beyond a discussion of musical tropes and archetypes in literature. Instead, it theorizes how language as music itself creates an immersive and navigable space where characters—and listeners—negotiate their existence, bridging the gaps between sound, text, and identity. This is the essence of speculative space: an experiential, epistemological, and

[9] Henry Threadgill and Brent Hayes Edwards, *Easily Slip Into Another World: A Life in Music* (Alfred Knopf 2003), 259.

aesthetic realm where the boundaries of self, society, and narrative blur, allowing for resistance, reinvention, and reconciliation. To go beyond tropes and into speculative space is to recognize how music and sound function as a conduit for reimagining reality.

In the Atlanta of my youth, the 1990s rap group OutKast embodied my adolescence. On their flanks were other diverse geographical sound ambassadors who carved out space for their invisible music. While the Underground Kings (UGK) laid claim to Houston, Texas; Eightball and MJG sounded Memphis, Tennessee. Master P's No Limit Records and the entourage constituting Cash Money Records spoke for New Orleans, Louisiana, and OutKast organized noise in Atlanta, Georgia. I was only 12 years of age when I inherited and distinguished their rural dialect from the slang of my environment. While navigating the Southern drawl, I remember trying to understand if my circumstances informed the "southernplayalisticadillacmuzic" Andre Benjamin and Big Boi described on their debut album. In hindsight, listening to OutKast describe my neighborhood was not at all alluring. I never felt as compelled to turn up the volume because the boys I knew who drove the Cadillacs OutKast rapped about sold drugs. I suppose listening to OutKast's music never truly resonated with me because it described a place I wanted to flee. Enter *Illmatic*, April 1994.

Around that time, I remember ditching class to print out and read the lyrics of *Illmatic*. I remember doing so after bending and contorting my wired headphones in attempts to hear through both earcups. If I bent the cord just right, I could avoid the shortage. I struggled to decipher meaning through those nearly rusted Sony headphones; the wire connecting the earcup on my right ear was always short-circuiting. Before Nas, I was obsessed with Eightball and MJG because their music was raw and lewd. I vividly remember the static buffering MJG's voice on the 1994 track, "On tha Outside Lookin' In." I remember the verse on repeat in my left ear: "The

system is my house / The system is my home / Designed to keep a brother on his back."[10] I spent a lot of time trying to parse that line, as well as my circumstance within a system he described as an ill-conceived place of refuge. I listened as Threadgill intended, but something was not registering. I turned to Nas because his voice signified something more delicate and simultaneously urgent. His voice sounded like mine; he too was a teenager.

In retrospect, I read Nas's lyrics because I was tired of trying to fix those headphones. I never truly took advantage of sound in the way Ellison's protagonist, Invisible, wished to experience it, that is, vibrationally. Literary critic and writer Paul Devlin articulated this power in his examination of acoustics when he described Invisible's wish to hear five simultaneous recordings of Louis Armstrong all at once. Devlin forwards a profound idea in philosopher Günther Anders's 1949 essay "The Acoustic Stereoscope," describing a listening practice that transformed sound into a powerful new force. Devlin noticed the ramifications of listening in specific ways, and he cites Anders' "acoustic stereoscope" as a fresh way to read Invisible's listening experience:

> *If you place one radio to your right and one to your left, and have them playing at the same time simultaneously, it will immediately assume a completely new 'look'*…When the two radios flank you, the two music-images become one; their merging produces the effect of spatial fullness; now you are actually in [the] music.[11]

This is the effect I once desired while listening through those headphones. I figured the wire shortage was a barrier to my complete entry into the music, which necessitated another listening praxis, one requiring bodily attending. I began to listen with my mind's ear as I read Nas's lyrics silently. This amplified echoes within my subconscious—the subvocal *merger* was happening in my head, despite the earcups. This reading praxis became my metaphor for entering the music.

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[10] MJG and Eightball, "On the Outside Looking In," on *Comin' Out Hard*, recorded 1993, Suave House Records, released 1993, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[11] Paul Devlin, "Ralph Ellison's Acoustic Stereoscope: Reading *Invisible Man* through Günther Anders's Phenomenology of Music," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 55, no. 2 (2022): 68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48765672.

Listening, then, became a focal point, an emphasis on what Tsitsi Jaji describes as essential work. Jaji writes, "The essential work of listening brings affiliation, affinity, and negotiated resolution into acoustic liveness, fully resonant (or equally important, muffled [like my short-circuited earcups], across geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and technical fissures."[12]

Navigating the sound, space, and time of Nas's *Illmatic* revealed the possibility of a distinct and fresh reading praxis, one that any pensive listener of music already attends to and one wherein affinity beyond boundaries is possible. The process of resonating with musical lyrics according to one's own lived experience is to step into the music as a kind of echo chamber. In this cognitive and musical realm, the reader becomes a listener through the perusal of written-turned-aural matter. In one way, and to consider the illmatic effect as a catalyst, reading illmatically acknowledges the union of two worlds—a sonically rendered world within the lyrics-turn-texts, otherwise the phantasmic creation of images produced by words and phrases; and a recursive world wherein bars and looping breaks enables the affordances Jaji suggests. In another way, and in the real world, certain affective dynamics like violence, oppression, excessive jouissance, and a desire for retaliation to maintain reputation produce *ill* acts of chaos, driving readers and listeners into the sonic world for relief. This kind of hearing corresponds to Nicole Furlonge's claim of "listening as a means to enable cultural, social, and political conversations."[13] Thus, to illmatically read MJG's verse is to understand the sociopolitical critique of systemic racism— "the system is my house. The system is my home." This type of reading praxis is corporeal because it implicates the listener into the critique of the artist; in another way, the reader, as a listener, has a role to play, and reading and listening in this way allow me to "open sensory and imaginative channels" to those sonic realms I deem speculative.[14] I will discuss this

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[12] Tsitsi Ella Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 17.

[13] Nicole Furlonge, *Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 120.

[14] Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 19.

process at length shortly, however, it must be noted that this way of reading demonstrates Walker's statement about the subtle yet ubiquitous clarity existing in the volume of the music of my youth. Her claim is profound: such that by amplifying sound one can better enjoy catharsis as a joint venture with the sound artist. Reading as listening mediates this process while also clarifying protagonists whose engagement with music facilitates a sonic flow state or trance. This is speculative space.

In 1994, I had yet to physically venture beyond my housing project on the west side of Atlanta, until I read and listened to the Nas track "N.Y. State of Mind." When I discovered that a mere 16-year-old had penned those lines, I felt as though someone, somewhere, truly understood my circumstance. I felt, through my listening while reading praxis, that Nas's poetry was the vehicle enabling my exploration of materially unattainable places. It appears Queens, New York, despite its royal designation, was also an unwell, sick and slick space like my neighborhood in Atlanta—much like MJG's lyrics, I could hear how the system was also home for Nas. This is the exigence of my question to Walker, and like Invisible, I sought validation from someone who responded by telling me what I already felt—alone and unheard.

When I finally got the cassette, I noticed how Nas marked the flip to Side B with the fifth track, "Halftime," perfectly timed as a *break* much like the way Morrison marked the breaks between chapters in her novel *Jazz* through the inclusion of blank pages. "Halftime" was followed by the ballad "Memory Lane." I refer to the rap song "Memory Lane" as a ballad given its intimate and chronologically complex reflection on a tumultuous time in Nas's Queensbridge neighborhood. Listening to that track, I wondered: Did Nas know about my attempt to find a voice explaining project life? I searched for an explanation long before Walker verbalized my effort. Did he know about the static in my right ear? That static he claimed time kept close when

he wrote, "Time is illmatic, keep static like wool fabric."[15] I was disoriented, which is to acknowledge my adolescent questions about place and space: Where was Queensbridge anyway? And why did Nas call it a dungeon of rap? Who was this Jamaican Queen he rapped about as both a place and a person? At the time, I did not know that Jamaica, Queens was another way of naming the Caribbean, Latino, and African American melting pot in Queens, New York. I remember pondering these questions, trying to understand how a 16-year-old, whom I met sonically, piqued my curiosity more than my grade school English teacher. As a result, I've been illmatically reading *Illmatic* for nearly thirty years, observing the ways time, space, and memory reframe Nas's lyrics into a catalyst for introspection.

Illmatic is an important and foundational project for my dissertation because, within the album, Nas offers a lyrical lens through which listeners might perceive history anew. In *Born To Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic,* a collection of essays on the album, literary critic and editor Sohail Daulatzai describes Nas's lyrics as "the shifting sands of race and the emergence of the global economy, the crack era and the formation of an urban police state, [and] the Post-Soul moment in black music."[16] The way Nas elucidates spatiality through various instruments, sound effects, and visual and affective language is due in part to a collective gathering of listeners as producers. Nas enlisted the genius of notable sound engineers in the construction of his distinct soundscape. He also layers melodrama on an already rich vernacular tradition, producing a sensorial experience that makes the liminal space between music and prose legible, that space Nathaniel Mackey terms as the paracritical hinge.[17] I contend that considering these aspects while

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[15] Nas, "Life's a Bitch," track 3 on *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, released 1994, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[16] Sohail Daulatzai, "A Rebel in America" in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, ed. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai (Basic *Civitas* Books, 2010), 3.

[17] Nathaniel Mackey's concept of the paracritical hinge is taken from 2018 collection of essays title *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews.* The paracritical hinge is a heuristic for acknowledging the interval between the genres of music and literature. I borrow this concept to analyze it as a component of speculative space as it describes a liminal area, allowing for the expansion and reimagining of established cultural and aesthetic boundaries. The *hinge*, as it were, mediates the liminal space where established boundaries are challenged and expanded.

reading and listening to 20th-century African American literature offers access into sonic fissures, enabling the construction of a world adjacent to and in continuation of the *break*, that space the American music critic Albert Murray calls room for individuality.[18]

Furthermore, Nas's art evokes a sense of place and space akin to the way seminal films and projects like *Wild Style*, *The Wire*, *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, and *The Battle of Algiers* present. These cinematic renderings rely on melodrama to intensify emotion and deepen viewer connection to the setting and character. I list these films as reference points because they pictorially exemplify those affective dynamics describing ill states of chaos. Colloquially ill in their reception, viewers of those films, like listeners of *Illmatic,* are seduced by visual and audible dynamics. Nas matters because his voice *is* the instrument creating the visual experience, making the recognition of lies beneath the paracritical hinge possible. The panorama is an imaginative world that replaces products of urban renewal as a response to black pathology with a future rife with hope and transcendence. A future determined by listeners as they are called to answer the Nasian question, "Who's World is This?" An appropriate reply: "It's Mine, It's Mine, It's Mine" might empower listeners to take control.[19]

There is another matter to briefly attend to. That is the question of affect, which looms throughout my dissertation. This matter is philosophical given the tension and implications concerning the interaction of sound with the mind's ear and the body. I mean to briefly discuss a certain disposition as an affectation or emotion, triggered by sound as stimuli. Some deeper explanation must center on what happens to our body and mind after an encounter with affective dynamics like the images and vignettes from reading and hearing the illmatic scenes in Ellison, Morrison, and Nas's work. More generally, I am referring to art and its ability to invoke an aspect

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[18] Albert Murray, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Columbia University Press, 1998), 111.

[19] Nas, "The World is Yours," track 4 on *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, released 1994, streaming audio, Apple Music.

of speculative thought having to do with an impulse to seek pleasure and creativity through artistic expression. Specifically, I am interested in clarifying a complex process of exchange by exploring the interplay of aspects of affect theory like volitional openness and the narrative technique of select authors spanning the 20th African American literary tradition.[20] This describes a pathway to speculative space, and the process of getting to such an ephemeral place is intimate, sonic, and aesthetic.

1.2 Into Speculative Space

In 2019, at a public gathering commemorating the life of Toni Morrison, several esteemed writers, activists, philanthropists, and former President Barack Obama reflected on the power of Morrison's work. Each, in their own way, eulogized the prolific author. With reverence, the acclaimed writer Ta-Nehisi Coates recollected his encounter with *The Black Book,* a 1974 collage-like encyclopedia exploring the experiences of black folks in America through a montage of multimodal images. Morrison served as the book's editor. In a short tribute, Coates reflected on a key juxtaposition in the book, conveying the beautifully tragic account of black life through its visual art as a kind of "magic." He expressed, "Black is beautiful, but it ain't always pretty. Indeed, for black to be beautiful, it must very often not be pretty. That beauty must ache, that beauty must sometimes repulse; even as it enchants, even as it enthralls, even as it arrests."[21] Coates spoke plainly and beautifully while conjuring a strikingly similar message of the

[20] My interest in volitional openness assumes the philosopher Friedrich Schiller's assertation about attaining freedom through aesthetics. See Samantha Matherne and Nick Riggle's essay "Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Value: Part I" from *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* vol. 60. Issue 4, pp. 372-402. Schiller views aesthetic value as a force that expands possibilities beyond rigid behavioral structures. While normative frameworks persist, play mediates between form and sense, reshaping perception through a recursive process akin to a dialectical spiral—an *illmatic* conception of freedom. Matherne and Riggle argues that play, driven by aesthetic beauty like music, fosters an evolving engagement between sense and reason. Each aesthetic encounter, or listening act, generates a new perceptual framework, keeping listeners in a state of volitional openness—what I call speculative space—where beauty guides toward freedom or transcendence.

[21] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "A Celebration of the Life of Toni Morrison," Penguin Random House YouTube video, New York City, NY, November 26, 2019, 1 hour, 12 min., 5 sec., https://youtu.be/bkr0wRuPCAQ?si=L9DYgGtXa7Oy61Vb.

Ellisonian preacher in Invisible's underground hallucination early in *Invisible Man*: "Black is, and Black ain't…"[22] Coates's message signals the exigence of black art *writ* large*,* created from underground sites where tradition and inheritance motivate expression.

In the profound study *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson explains the Black Radical Tradition as an "accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle."[23] The scope of the struggle spans a spectrum of despair, hope, endurance, and transcendence. Although the prime subjects of Robinson's inquiry, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright, constitute the germ of 20th-century critical discourse surrounding that struggle, thinkers like Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Ta-Nehisi Coates represent the bearers of a tradition of resistance whose development contributes to new environments and challenges to address. It is necessary here to make a distinction regarding the terms *radical* and *resistant* as both imply antagonism as a distinguishing characteristic. I am interested in how the work of Ellison, Morrison, and Nas, among other 20th-century African American artists, disrupt social, political, economic, and cultural norms originating from anticolonial and antislavery efforts. Their work is epistemologically charged and aims at the status quo as a product of coloniality and the legacies of slavery. I argue that their work is counter-hegemonic and sonic as it resists as it instructs.

I am particularly interested in specific works by Ellison, Morrison, and Nas that use musicality to trigger entry into sonic landscapes and spaces of transcendence—speculative space—revealing the potential of so-called nowhere sites as foundations for future possibilities. I believe these nowhere sites are also sites of material production. I borrow the term from Ellison's 1948 essay "Harlem is Nowhere." In that scathing critique of the city, Ellison describes Harlem

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[22] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 9.

[23] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxx.

through a lens of abject poverty. He notes the paradox of the city in its capacity as both the epicenter of black creative expression and the location of plunder. In Ellison's terms, the nowhere space is populated by those black folks who exist in a liminal space, beneath Mackey's hinge as it were. Ellison remarks on the Harlemites: they are "Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity."[24] Although I understand Ellison's intent to classify Harlem as nowhere, I struggle with the idea of the inhabitants of the city as existing nowhere. If Harlem is nowhere, then its citizens are nothing. On the contrary, the art produced in Ellison's nowhere speaks for its inhabitants. Therefore, I prefer to classify that seemingly abject place by another term—Erehwon. Erehwon (an anagram of nowhere) denotes the nowhere space as a site of substance, antithetical to Ellison's description and able to withstand critiques of the identity frustrations felt in that place. Throughout this dissertation, Erehwon will be used to describe sites of creativity, notably inspired by similar conditions Ellison refers to in his essay on Harlem. As we will see later, Erehwon is a site to capture and acknowledge how speculative space is best occupied. Erehwon is perhaps the calcified residue of a Black Radical Tradition, both literal in the case of Harlem for Morrison and Ellison, and figurative in the case of Nas's metaphorical "dungeon of rap." In both cases, the subjects in Erehwon rely on the space for expression and escape.

Coates's remarks signify upon characteristics of the black radical tradition as a dichotomous convention, meaning, they embody both resistance and accommodation and rebellion and survival. The tradition's characteristics challenge systemic oppression while simultaneously navigating within its constraints. Such a description reflects Ellison's Invisible, Morrison's Joe and Violet Trace, and Nas's sonic archetype, Nasty Nas. Moreover, Coates's pithy paradox characterizes blackness as an ontological phenomenon, requiring not only an

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[24] Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," *Harper's Magazine,* August 1964, 8, https://harpers.org/archive/2014/08/harlem-is-nowhere-2/.

acknowledgment of its complexity but also of its inherent capacity to resist oppression, celebrate black identity, and subvert social norms through black cultural and social mores beckoning a free and de-racialized existence. In another way, the DuBoisian question— "How does it feel to be a problem?"—still looms, suggesting black being as an ever-contested existence that simultaneously resists erasure through forces like the low-frequency sound Ellison proposes at the end of *Invisible Man.*[25]

In addition to Nas's *Illmatic,* I consider the musicality of Ellison and Morrison's literature. Music is but one of multiple expressions of resistance developed from patterns of *underground* iterations, as Laura Cohen describes in her study of the possibilities of undergrounds as sites for "collective subversion, resistance, refusal, and insurrection."[26] As we will see later, these include Invisible's basement and his actions in the Liberty Paint furnace room in *Invisible Man*, the repressed histories and buried trauma as underground invocations in Morrison's *Jazz,* and Nas's proclaimed "dungeon" of rap in his "NY State of Mind." Those literary and sonic expressions are cultivated through centuries of defiant acts against colonial imperialism and slavery; they are also predicated on antagonistic relationships with ideologies bound within a master/slave dialectic. The underground, therefore, is a crucial site where the black radical tradition was forged. The site also functions as a space of sustainment, nurture, protection, and creation. These underground spaces, both literal and figurative, range from the slave holds of the Middle Passage, where unrecorded exchanges about acts of resistance took place among captives, to the field on, say, John Travis's land where Nat Turner plotted his revolt. This tradition extends to the grounds in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) where Toussaint L'Ouverture planned the Haitian Revolution and extend into recording studios where artists like N.W.A.

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[25] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks,* 6.

[26] Lara Langer Cohen, *Going Underground: Race, Space, and the Subterranean in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Duke University Press, 2023), 2.

proclaimed, “Fuck the Police,” and where Nas recorded “Cops Shot the Kid” after the fatal killings of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and others.

These responses are nested with black radicalism as a response. Robinson explains how this philosophical and political tradition emerged as “specifically an African response to an oppression emerging from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization."[27] Racial ideologies take root in such fragmentation and extend through and within legacies of slavery, disenfranchisement, and other forms of systemic oppression. These systems necessitate sites of resistance as havens and deliberation chambers for symbolic and direct action.

Given the paradox of blackness in Coates’s sentiment about *The Black Book*, and the literal and figurative sanctuaries of the underground, I am fascinated by the possibility of worldmaking as a product of activity from the *underground* as a speculative space to work things out, to resist the product of white supremacy as manifested in social, political, and economic systems and structures. This is what Invisible does in the basement and the Liberty Paint Factory scene in *Invisible Man.* This is what Morrison does when she traces Joe and Violet’s relationship through the trauma experienced *down* South in rural Vesper County, Virginia. This is also what Nas does in his depiction of the Queensbridge projects as a beautifully tragic speculative space.

My goal in describing the underground, and specifically the sonic action within it, is to illuminate its capaciousness. I hope to inform a listening and reading praxis to reveal the historical tentacles of contemporary art, in this case, music and literature. Taking a cue from Lara Cohen’s work, *Going Underground: Race, Space, and the Subterranean in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, I hope this dissertation extends inquiry concerning the underground as a

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[27] Robinson, *The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 73.

vital site of the black radical tradition, forwarding speculative space as a phenomenological realm to focus on how subjugation and resistance are explored in storytelling to transcend unfavorable predicaments. By considering speculative space as a phenomenological realm, my analysis foregrounds how characters encounter and make sense of their circumstance using musical tropes to heighten and fuse experience and memory. The underground, as explored in *Invisible Man, Jazz,* and *Illmatic,* respectively*,* is not only a material location but a felt sense—one shaped by sound, narrative, and communal dynamics. This means that an illmatic reading praxis requires listening to these texts and attending to how these speculative spaces are inhabited, including the introspection gained in part by occupying that space. Nas's Queensbridge, Morrison's depiction of Harlem, and Ellison's basement are all rendered phenomenological because they do not merely describe confinement or struggle but represent sites of affect and are rendered as new spaces in the psyche through prose and poetry.

For example, consider how Nas's *Illmatic* explores truths within his distressed community. The project challenges societal norms in the service of a community of captives in that post-industrial landscape. The underground is not always subsurface; it features in the shadows of circumscribed communities everywhere. For Nas, the underground is a recording studio or an apartment in the Queensbridge Housing Projects. For Ellison's protagonist, the underground is the basement, while for Morrison's Trace family in *Jazz*, it is the City (Harlem) as a site of agency and despair. The underground also exists on street corners and within intimate exchanges of information, bound to materialize into action on, below, or outside the underground site. Physical space, then, is a crucial expanse. Subjects confined within certain boundaries—such as deteriorating housing projects—utilize the underground as a means of resistance, refuge, and subversion.

Contemporary and literal underground sites serve as the setting for entering the cognitive realm of speculative space. They are also enclaves for creative work, nurturing and amplifying

voices demanding to be heard. The *nowhere* space previously mentioned constitutes a unique and otherworldly site where music and literature converge. In theory, Mackey's paracritical hinge is more than a heuristic tool that creaks when it bends, signifying a dynamic threshold—it is a pivot point "to support a door or to open a door permitting flow between disparate orders of articulation," otherwise, the fluid interplay between music and literature.[28] The threshold can also be considered speculative space for its embrace of the collision of language, sound, and its agent. As such, sites often referred to as nowhere offer a specific place of displacement, invisibility, and ambiguity —a kind of limbo or in-between, a *now* and *here* site that must be aptly named. The irony comprising nowhere is in its presence as an undefined space, making its anagram, Erehwon, a fitting term for the designation of this seemingly elusive and productive site.

The following anecdote is serendipitous to say the least, because my early distancing from OutKast, especially given my closeness to the rap group in West Atlanta, does not indicate my displeasure with their methods and the location of their creative production, which also took place in a literal Erehwonian underground site—a basement studio in southwest Atlanta. I am interested in coincidences given the ecology of aspects of their musical creation. Admittedly, the term Erehwon is a signifier of a location that almost shares the same name—Erewhon. I noticed the homophone in 2023 when André 3000, whose formal rap name was simply André, released an ambient jazz album titled *New Blue Sun*. His creative ambition took nearly 30 years after the 1995 Source Music Awards, where he ushered southern rap into the hip-hop world by claiming that "the South's got something to say."[29]

In a 2023 interview with NPR's Rodney Carmichael, André 3000 describes meeting experimental jazz artist Carlos Niño in a chic Los Angeles health food restaurant chain—

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[28] Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essay, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 152.

[29] For a deeper explanation of this moment, see Imani Perry's 2022 study, *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation* (p.141) and Regina Bradley's *Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South* (p.19-25).

Erewhon. The health food store is worlds away from the liquor stores and A&P grocery store populating the intersection of Headland and Delowe Street in southwest Atlanta in the '90s, also the site of the late producer Rico Love's underground studio where the group OutKast first recorded. Benjamin and Niño's impromptu meeting in the grocery store, Erewhon, became fertile ground for their improvisation on *New Blue Sun*. My adaptation of its homophone, Erehwon, is coincidental yet apt given its proximity to nowhere sites as thresholds in speculative space.

In 1994, while Nas took to his tenement apartment in the Queensbridge Housing Projects to write *Illmatic*, André, and Big Boi "descended into the depths" of Wade's basement in Atlanta, Georgia; they called this basement the Dungeon, and the artists who popularized the southern slang were known as the Dungeon Family. It is as if Ellison foreshadowed such a site, especially given his hero's descent underground as a spiritual act of re-presenting the blues. The Dungeon Family relied on the production company Organized Noize to speak for the South in low frequency, transforming their invisibility into a sonic force that Alice Walker would surely point to as music to amplify.

The point here is that Erehwon or nowhere, for André, is the site where southern hip-hop could morph into eclectic and experimental jazz. This claim relies on the idea that while OutKast spent time underground practicing the craft of music, "studying" as Miles Davis puts it, André slowly developed the skills necessary to improvise.[30] As we will see later, Albert Murray describes aspects of study as a prerequisite to improvisation by way of navigating through "all the wisdom and experience of the ages."[31] Additionally, OutKast's production company is aptly named Organized Noize Productions. Forgive the puns, but by attending to several linguistic cues in the monikers associated with this southern rap group, the connection between Erehwon,

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[30] Miles Davis, "Miles Davis Interview on 'City Line' Episode" interview by Jaki Hall and B.T. Bentley, *City Line,* YouTube, December 2, 1984. Video, 18:58. https://youtu.be/DLzMleRSGOM?si=ONh_1GAiPmfV1MFL

[31] Albert Murray, "The Jazz Cadence of American Culture," 112.

nowhere, music, improvisation, and the structuring of the very noise Walker describes as a plea becomes undeniable. Consider the wordplay in what is at stake here: Outcasts organizing noise in a basement studio—a metaphorical dungeon, or rather, Erehwon. This example of illmatic reading highlights the power of artists within that space to transform nowhere sites into Erehwonian enclaves of resistance, much like music studios themselves. When Nas proclaims Queensbridge as a "dungeon of rap," he signifies upon the same process. Thus, Erehwon refers to a creative space where boundaries dissolve and new possibilities emerge. It is a liminal, suspended 'nowhere,' transformed into a site of futurity, blending the tangible with the intangible. Erehwon, depicted through Nas's *Illmatic* and other cultural symbols like the Dungeon or the space created by the drums in Morrison's portrayal of military cadence in *Jazz*, represents a realm where art, narrative, and sound converge to shape new realities—spaces of anticipation, transformation, and social critique. They exist in urban landscapes like Harlem or Atlanta, and fictional sites like Ellison's Liberty Paints Factory and Morrison's Harlem as a personified City. Figuratively, Erehwon is depicted as boundless sites for imagination and agency, the liminal space beneath and between Mackey's hinge—that junction where music and literature meet, birthing OutKast's *ATLiens,* Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Morrison's *Jazz,* Nas's *Illmatic,* and André's *New Blue Sun*.

The discursive work that follows examines how authors propel their protagonists into such a speculative space, using Erehwonian sites as havens for creativity. I rely on the term speculative space to formalize an already rich mental environment, a figurative space where the authorial use of music takes form. This attitude informs a palette for the re-presentation of history, memory, and circumstance. In another way, speculative space is a site of internalized introspection—a result of patterns of literal and figurative iterations of the underground dating back to the 19th-century.

I'm particularly interested in how 20th-century African American literature uses sound and music to reflect that inner life, allowing both characters and readers to navigate trauma and imagine new possibilities. Considering this strategy, speculative space is a mindset. It describes a state of deep focus, where getting fully absorbed in a text or sound opens new possibilities. In this state of focus, one can move beyond the limits of time, space, and identity. The experience becomes transformative as past experiences and future potential intersect in the present. Speculative space also encourages self-reflection, building on themes of the underground dating back to the 19th-century. In speculative space, one gains a deeper understanding of the self and the world, questioning and imagining new realities. This idea also refers to specific moments within a range of fictional works comprising the African American literary tradition, helping to reframe social, political, and cultural systems.

Consider these examples, which I elaborate upon in the coming chapters: In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Invisible enters speculative space several times, each triggered by sound—Louis Armstrong's horn,[32] the sound of the clock on the campus of the southern college,[33] and the dialect of Peetie Wheatstraw, an archetype of the blues singer William Bunch, also known as Peetie Wheatstraw on the streets of Harlem.[34] In Morrison's *Jazz*, the City maintains its sound. Morrison depicts speculative space in a specific area created by musical instruments—the "space the drums were building…"[35] in "the trombone blues,"[36] "in the low-down music,"[37] and in the alley "the sun sneaks into."[38] Lastly, Nas builds speculative space and guides listeners through it as depicted in tracks like "N.Y. State of Mind," "The World is Yours," and "Memory Lane

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[32] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 8.
[33] Ibid., 109.
[34] Ibid., 176.
[35] Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (Random House, 1992; repr. First Vintage International Edition, 2004), 54. Citations refer to the First Vintage International Edition, 2004.
[36] Ibid., 21.
[37] Ibid., 56.
[38] Ibid., 8.

(Sittin' in da Park)." To experience speculative space, readers must engage with the soundscapes created in lyrics and prose as dual-functioning texts and catalysts. By imagining the texture of sound shaping the world of the story, readers can follow characters into speculative space. Speculative space, then, helps formalize a mental experience where a reader notices how an author's use of music influences the character.

While many scholars study how musical themes shape black experiences in literature, few focus on how these elements help create spaces where past, present, and future meet; even fewer explore the possibilities of such absorption. Regina Bradley and Kevin Quashie are two theorists who investigate polytemporal possibilities in literature infused with sound. Quashie examines black identity and experience, focusing on the importance of quietness to create anew, while Bradley looks specifically at how OutKast's music relies on themes of displacement to imagine new futures, especially in the 1996 album *ATLiens*, and the 2000 album *Stankoni*a.[39] My goal here is to show how readers can appropriate those musical tropes authors rely upon in their literature to connect with characters on a deeper and more amorphous level. These tropes blend and bend the past and present, helping characters and readers imagine new futures wherein they can break free from the stereotypes and systems enforcing them.

Entering speculative space follows a cognitive path to a figurative and underground Erehwonian site, where introspection opens a pathway toward resilience. This space can and is often accessed through the music itself, as seen in the work of the writers I analyze in this dissertation. Albeit time spent in speculative space is brief, requiring an attentive in-the-moment experience such as listening to music or reading literature in a way that blends memory with sensory input, creating a deep sense of connection. For the texts I have chosen, I believe an illmatic reading praxis best facilitates entry into speculative space. This approach requires an

[39] See Kevin Quashie's 2012 work *Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*.

acknowledgment of the way protagonists navigate the ill circumstances their authors create—race for Invisible; Dorcas's murder for Joe and Violet Trace; and Nas's youth in the Queensbridge Housing Projects. The reading praxis also acknowledges the way protagonists and authors depict literal and figurative undergrounds, serving as havens for nurturing consciousness—as a result, the ill becomes its opposite signifier—cool. Thus, the auto*matic* cycle of plight can be disrupted.

Speculative space is fleeting in that it is only attainable through a presence of mind in an epiphenomenal listening experience. By this, I mean that listeners must be attuned to the moment when sound triggers speculative space and structures imagined or liminal worlds. For example, the production of certain emotions as byproducts of brain activity when consuming music describes a reconstitution of memory with sensory input, leading to a fleeting yet profound sense of connection—déjà vu as it were. Within the literature, the process informs, say, Zora Neale Hurston's out-of-body experience when listening to music in *How it Feels to be Colored Me*. It describes Ellison's Invisible as he goes literally and figuratively underground, oscillating between past and present, and reality and imagination under the sound of Armstrong's "What Did I Do To Be Black and Blue?"[40] Other epiphenomenal listening experiences exist throughout the 20th-century African American literature tradition, situating the work as a sonic manifestation of black cultural experiences.

Since epiphenomenal listening requires the conditions to hear the break, triggering entry into speculative space, I elaborate on apt spaces to take such a cognitive journey; the underground, as an Erehwonian site, is a key access point into speculative space. For Nas, the underground isn't just a physical space like a basement. To understand how this works, readers should pay attention to how music informs the narrative. For instance, reading *Invisible Man* and *Jazz* as musically infused novels requires listening to how Ellison and Morrison employ musical

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[40] Louis Armstrong, "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue" on *Satchmo the Great*, Sony Music Entertainment Inc., originally released 1957, streaming audio, Apple Music.

elements like call-and-response, improvisation, and dissonance. In doing so, it may be possible for readers to enter speculative space themselves, allowing the literature to act as a catalyst.

Black radical thought concerns itself with how the black body has historically been situated within the underground. When Hortense Spillers and others write about black flesh, they not only critique its fungibility—its susceptibility to inscription and commodification—but also recognize it as a site where black identity is both reified and contested. The black body is simultaneously marked as "beautiful" and unattractive; it "aches," "repulses," "enchants," "enthralls," and "arrests," embodying contradictions shaped by history and perception.[41] Examples of this capacity in the 20th-century literary canon include the black bodies of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, Ellison's Invisible Man, and his unpublished short story character Blues, Morrison's Jazz Women (Violet, Alice Manfred, Malvonne, Dorcas, True Belle, and Rose Dear), and Joe Trace. More contemporary and *real* examples include:

> Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice,
> George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Eric Garner,
> Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile.

Much like the blues, the music of black life is tragic and comedic. It is aching, repulsing, enchanting, enthralling, and arrestingly illmatic. The black body is also auditory as it sounds experiences in speculative space.

1.3 The Music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir "Nas" Jones

Over the past quarter-century, critics have started to focus more closely on the role of sound in the novel. Some examples include Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*; Fred Moten's *In the Break,* Kenneth Warren's *So Black and Blue*, and Emily Lordi's *Black Resonance.* Other works build on this important work to identify how sound affects protagonists and readers alike. Joshua Hall's "Syncopated Communities: Dancing with

[41] Coates, "A Celebration of the Life of Toni Morrison," YouTube.

Ellison," Herman Beavers' work on acousmatic sound, Tsitsi Jaji's emphasis on the relationship between poetry and music, Joseph Winters's examination of melancholy and musical tropes in African American novels, Nicole Furlonge's 2018 *Race Sounds*, and Paul Devlin's 2022 investigation of the acoustic stereoscope, among others, seek to trace and articulate the relationship between music and literature. This dissertation builds upon those scholars, and others, to propose a similar yet expansive inquiry: How do Ellison, Morrison, and Nas use sound as a literary device to shape the trajectory of their protagonists and archetypes? What is the process of entering into speculative space, and what do the protagonists gain by doing so? How does speculative space look, feel, and sound? And is it possible for readers to enter speculative space, thereby developing empathy given the circumstances of the protagonist?

One useful approach to these questions is to identify central figures within 20th-century African American artistic production as a lens for examining the literary approaches defining the century. My effort to consolidate artistic production across multiple mediums, given diverse geographical influences, is not an oversimplification but rather a way into the complicated knowledge field wherein literature and music collide. The work of Ellison, Morrison, and Nas signifies a century-old rhythmic palette and constitutes the *music* or cultural expression uniting diasporic people and their ancestors. Their work offers explanations regarding dispersion, survival, resilience, and the ongoing negotiation of identity across borders and generations.

The tension associated with the relationship between music and language assumes sound as an interpretive phenomenon, meaning, that readers as listeners must hear both the language they read and aspects of meaning, emotion, and the context that sound signifies. Through speculative imagining, or acknowledging speculative space as a site of futurity, readers and listeners can realize the product of their epistemological and intellectual formation. This happens when readers of Ellison's work *feel* and hear Armstrong's voice while reading his lyrics. This happens when readers of *Jazz* can hear the drums make space for the solemn war veterans while

onlookers hear echoes of their despair in the body language of their stoned faces. This happens anytime I listen to Nas's "Memory Lane," absorbing shifting tonalities as memories of my old neighborhood reveal themselves vividly in my mind, *sounded* by Nas's youthful voice. The writers of my inquiry are notable in their ability to *sound* human experience and emotion through prose by invoking subvocal aspects of imagination. Herein lies the affective consideration, for the body's response to sound facilitates its circadian rhythm, mediating essential bodily functions like responding to light and darkness.

The music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nas is, if nothing else, a field of disciplinary engagement. This means that the sound of their prose and poetry as music is integral to how their works evoke, transmit, and challenge emotional and historical resonances. Music's relationship to affect demands inquiry into the ways we come to know music and how we are affected by its resonance. Scholars of affect theory like Dylan Robinson and Patrick Nickleson take up this inquiry, claiming that the disciplinary knowledge of music "is an epistemological claim on an affective domain." They write,

> [We want to] consider the place of the affective *feeling of knowing* music that develops somewhere earlier along a casual chain in thinking and writing about music. Our concern is not music as an object, practice, or vibration but rather the nexus of disciplinary, pedagogical, and epistemological relationships to music (and musicking) that music studies risks taking for granted.[42]

Robinson and Nickleson's inquiry about foundational motives for the study of music insinuates a necessity to take sound seriously by acknowledging how musicology and affect theory intersect, especially in critical discourse that constitutes knowledge work. My investigation of how authors propel characters into speculative space can be interpreted as a study of how sound affects the body of those characters. Furthermore, if sound propels characters into speculative space, then musicians have similar abilities as writers to do the same work. Robinson and Nickleson argue

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[42] Dylan Robinson and Patrick Nickleson "The Feeling of Knowing Music" from *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures* ed. by Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Duke University Press, 2023), 277.

that music is an object concerned with "knowing, intimacy, and love."[43] Taking their cue from a footnote in Alexander Ghedi Weheliye and Katherine McKittrick's 2017 essay entitled, "808s and Heartbreak," Robinson and Nickleson claim that musical lyrics, particularly "Nas's lyrics [can be considered] as a central discursive mechanism."[44] His music, like Ellison's and Morrison's, can be considered an object of study. Again, classifying literature as a type of music, according to the OED extended definition, means considering the ways music affects the body.

Weheliye and McKittrick offer a specific description of such an affective quality. They rely on the scholarship of Oliver Sacks, Daniel Levitin, Aniruddh Patel, and Sylvia Wynter to articulate the affective bearing of music on the body. They write:

> It has been argued that music shapes and moves and repairs our neurosystem. With music, memory and language and words are built and rebuilt. With music, neurons are strengthened and reattached. With music, I have argued elsewhere, working with Wynter's 'Black Metamorphosis,' that the connections and wires and threads, between music and self and environment and others, not only conceptually subvert plantocratic and white supremacist (market) systems but also provide a way to track Black life as livingness (and thus outside narratives of dysselection). More specifically, music, music making, music sharing, music dancing, music jumping, music singing—the act of loving music deeply, the act of feeling and loving music intensely—is one way Black communities physiologically and neurobiologically navigate racist worlds.[45]

The music of Ellison, Morrison, and Nas is the music of invisibility, trauma, mobility, and transcendence. Their work *moves* readers and listeners to action, prompting questions about how the affective domain might also constitute speculative space. In other words, if speculative space is a site of both introspection and action, then the affective domain—through music, storytelling, and lived experience—can catalyze movement, whether intellectual, emotional, or political.

These primal responses to sound can also disrupt features of circadian rhythm, wherein speculative space resists naturalized aspects of time—historical or social—in favor of a more

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Alexander Weheliye and Katherine McKittrick, *Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology* (Duke University Press, 2023), 214.

[45] Ibid.

fluid, affect-driven temporality; this constitutes an *illmatic* quality of time. The music of Ellison, Morrison, and Nas does not simply represent sound but engages deeply with the sensory and emotional landscape of human existence, particularly black, prompting readers and listeners to resonate on a deeper level beyond words, as Nas puts it, "deep by sound alone."[46]

Chapter Two examines Ralph Ellison's use of blues tropes—namely improvisation, call-and-response, and discordant harmony—to propel his unnamed protagonist into speculative space. Specifically, I examine several scenes in *Invisible Man* and one of Ellison's unpublished short stories to argue the blues as a mediating aesthetic, capable of performing as a proxy of sentimentality. Ellison's prose can, therefore, be perceived as Invisible's musical memoir. Through his narrative strategy, Ellison exercises subversion by critiquing racial admixture, the importance of quiet resistance, and the dichotomous relationship between folk and political-charged aesthetic motives. He demonstrates the possibilities existing in speculative space as a site of contemplation. This chapter relies heavily on the juxtaposition of Ellison's narrative form and the blues. I argue that Ellison's conception of the blues is rendered through Invisible's entry into speculative space as a blues gesture and, subsequently, a means of transcendence. Therefore, if the blues represents tragicomedy, then *Invisible Man,* as a blues novel, must project the irony in its character's comedic yet tragic rendering. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a blues gesture performing this work.

Moreover, I hope to highlight several riffs Ellison weaves throughout his narrative, each functioning as a layer of commentary on identity, resilience, and cultural expression. First, I examine Ellison's conception of the blues, offering insight into his narrative method. I examine his personification of Blues, my designation for a character from the undrafted episode "Something About Blues." Blues functions as a blues proxy, offering access to the musical genre

[46] Nas. "The World is Yours" on *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, released 1994, streaming audio, Apple Music.

as a literary trope. Next, I look specifically at scenes that depict Invisible's experience in figurative and literal speculative space, tracing patterns associated with Invisible's entry into what he describes as "into the depths." I also highlight how Louis Armstrong and other sounding agents signify triggers for Invisible's entry into speculative space. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison crafts a mirror for American identity to reflect upon itself, ultimately championing plurality as an ideal aesthetic expression.

Chapter Three centers on Morrison's *Jazz* as a sonic love story. This chapter analyzes Morrison's employment of modal jazz characteristics to enable improvisation as a guiding trope in the novel. Each character performs a solo act that comprises chapters in the novel. Therein, they render diverse insights into the murder plot anchoring the novel. I show how Morrison's use of certain modal jazz tropes mimics the displacement, fragmentation, and strife experienced by African Americans during the Great Migration. Through Morrison's narrator, whom I refer to as Jazz, I navigate several improvisational solo acts throughout the novel. In this case, entry into speculative space is achieved through the freedom that modal jazz allows. Modal jazz depends on the modulation of musical modes as opposed to a standard chord progression. If musicians can use this technique to break free of harmonic restrictions, then Morrison can do the same in prose. She provides listeners and readers an opportunity to interpret perspectives devoid of any linear progressive narrative. Morrison's use of modal jazz techniques propels characters like Joe and Violet Trace into speculative space, wherein the deceased Dorcas looms.

Given the way Ellison employs blues tropes in his fiction, I am intrigued to find similar narrative strategies in Morrison's *Jazz.* Not only does her use of musical tropes contextualize the genre's evolution but also situates the music as a soundtrack for a portion of the Great Migration, sounding diasporic flows within an already fractured time horizon, one that Morrison frustrates by abandoning linear chronology. By this, I mean to point out Morrison's fragmented narrative style as gesturing toward the illmatic—a concept discussed as signifying the harmonious yet

chaotic interplay of voices and experiences mirroring the improvisational nature of jazz itself. This approach not only reflects the complexities of identity and history within the African American experience as sonically bound but also serves to convey the emotional depth and resilience of a community navigating cultural dislocation and the search for belonging. I liken Morrison's narrative to a musical composition, echoing the rhythms and cadences of jazz music while also capturing a profound sense of longing and aspiration inherent in the lives of her characters.

Chapter Four assumes Ellison's critique of invisibility and Morrison's improvisational love story to create space for Nas. In both cases, "the end is the beginning," and Nas reminds us that "time is illmatic." This chapter positions Nas as an inheritor of the AAVT—an exemplar of a legacy of black expression, amalgamated into a hip-hop aesthetic born out of political, cultural, and social upheaval and urban renewal. I argue that Nas's storytelling and social critique function as essential tropes for describing speculative space. Therein, listeners gain a glimpse into Nas's Erehwonian sites and the speculative space they inspire. Nas's musical characters play a crucial role in constructing a multi-temporal realm of imagination. Again, Nas's 1994 album, *Illmatic,* abandons linear chronology while offering a postindustrial critique of Queensbridge and surrounding boroughs.

My close reading of several songs illuminates Nas's ability to use *Illmatic* to embody palimpsestic time toward entry into speculative space. Nas draws on past experiences, generational struggles, and inherited cultural knowledge to depict life in Queensbridge, New York in a way that feels both rooted in the past and reflective of ongoing societal issues. By layering personal memory, urban history, and social critique within his lyrics, Nas creates a sense of temporal depth, transcending the immediate experiences of the 1990s into a sonically rendered Queensbridge as a speculative space. Songs like "NY State of Mind," "Life's a Bitch," and "One Love" demonstrate Nas's episodic rendering, akin to Morrison's *Jazz*, as a piecemeal narrative

readers/listeners must assemble. In sum, I show how an illmatic reading praxis enables readers to harness and make palatable the unpredictability within literature and lyrics that function like avant-garde free jazz music. As a result, Nas's audience takes flight as he constructs Queensbridge as a speculative space.

A short Coda will synthesize the main ideas of each chapter, essentially addressing the kind of theory this work builds toward. I hope to bring attention to speculative space as a polytemporal site for creative imagining, a site supportive of transcendent behavior, in Ellison's words, a hibernation as "a covert preparation for a more overt action."[47] I hope to gloss over the rich oral and vernacular tradition that 20th-century African American literature contributes to and relies upon. Ultimately, this work interrogates long-standing Afrodiasporic practices often neglected as rattling noise to the untrained ear. For example, when Nas claims that he "dominates break loops," he carries the figurative baton Ellison and Morrison have passed to him. He takes charge of producing the "surplus lyricism" necessary to transcend old circumstances, renovating Erehwonian sites into fresh and clean dungeons of rap as oxymoronic and *ill* undergrounds. *Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space* attempts to go deep in this way.

[47] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

2. *Invisible Man* and Speculative Space: Into the Depths with Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

This chapter focuses on how Ralph Ellison employs blues elements in *Invisible Man* to facilitate entry into speculative space for his protagonist, Invisible. As mentioned in the Introduction, the process of going deep enables a rich listening experience, one facilitating introspection and awareness toward cultivating resilience. Deep and attentive listening is required and listening in this way, or any focused moment, demands concentrating on a singular idea. Attentive listening requires paying attention to subvocal aspects of sound as sonic vibrations permeate internally and on the surface of the body.

In *Invisible Man,* Ellison controls the blues by employing its elements to render vibration as a listening act, requiring the entire body to expand its scope of consciousness. Ellison attends to the utility of sensorial interpretation, which often goes unnoticed because most listeners and readers rely on a fraction of their total sense capability to interpret art. For example, music is typically listened to rather than read, while literature is usually read rather than heard. One of the many ways to acknowledge Ellison's control of the blues is to consider how music manifests itself in his literature. My interest in exploring 20th-century African American literature, as a genre suitable for listening, riffs from the work of scholars like Nicole Furlonge and Jennifer Stoever—Sound Studies scholars who examine aspects of identity factors embedded in the *sounds* of literary characters and prose within the African American literary tradition. The intricate details of musical form serve as underlying elements in a period defined by the constant interplay between tradition and innovation, memory and speculation, and realism and abstraction. These details—such as metaphor, emotion, imitation, and repetition—function as catalysts for conveying lived experiences within a rich literary movement.

Literature, much like music, conveys information through narrative form, allowing readers and listeners to empathize with characters of their choosing. Music and literature also

share elements as powerful catalysts for introspection and self-growth. Specifically, the blues maintains a distinctive structure that relies on interactive elements like call-and-response, discordant harmony, improvisation, and lyrical structure. These elements depict a structure of feeling within narrative form and signify African American culture in a nuanced and specific way, which is to say that the blues recapitulates black life. I am concerned with the blues because the genre best exemplifies cathartic responses capable of increasing consciousness in the study of African American literature. In another way, the blues are as lyrical as poetry and as rich as impactful literature. The blues expresses feeling as it also constructs space for empathy. Furthermore, both literature and the blues demonstrate the ability to express deeply personal emotions, and both genres are tethered to human experience through evocative language and musicality.

My interest in Ralph Ellison spans 25 years and reflects his effort to "make the invisible visible, [and] the unheard heard."[48] Ellison's *Invisible Man* best demonstrates how elements of the blues amplify literary narrative, and I believe his use of sound proxies to guide Invisible's descent into the depths of his consciousness enables resilience as a product of the blues. I contend that readers of his novel experience certain latent possibilities given such a specific reading praxis centered on listening to acknowledge Invisible's interaction with speculative space.

Ellison uses blues elements as literary tropes to emphasize aspects of the journey expected of an invisible man in the early 20th-century. This includes the violence of racism, unpredictable implications associated with mobility, and working through trauma to facilitate entry into speculative space—an ephemeral domain where introspection is nurtured and realized. Specifically, by examining how elements of the blues function in *Invisible Man* to guide the protagonist into speculative space, readers can better recognize sonic triggers in African

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[48] John F. Callahan, "Introduction," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (The Modern Library, 2024), xviii.

American literature more broadly to enact a similar transient movement. In other words, this process of going deep is an effort to explore how African American literature like Ellison's might open a portal to affective responses like mourning, joy, grief, melancholy, recognition, dissonance, and other emotional and cognitive reactions.

Many scholars have remarked on Ellison's use of jazz and blues characteristics; however, few consider the possibility of futurity latent in inquiry that interrogates speculative space as an unintended literary realm.[49] I seek to build upon that scholarly work to demonstrate Ellison's narrative power to wield aspects of sound as literary devices, propelling readers and his protagonist "into the depths"—both literal and figurative, and subterranean and sonic. Additionally, my task in this chapter is to examine Ellison's use of blues tropes in *Invisible Man* to demonstrate *how* Invisible enters speculative space, thereby constructing futures and enabling a decoupling of racialized schemas and their architects through listening acts. I rely on the term speculative space to focus heavily on the theme of the underground as a literal and figurative site of introspection. I also read scenes that exemplify Invisible's engagement with the underground as a precursor to entering speculative space; this work also identifies sonic patterns associated with speculative space. It is important to acknowledge the way sound and music function in the novel, playing a significant role in the work's distinctiveness and contributing not only to the depiction of structural and systemic racism but also to expressions of hope and transcendence. These features inform the bluesy mood of the novel while providing insight into the work's power of reflecting a strategy to transcend invisibility.

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[49] Nicole Furlonge's work *Race Sounds* addresses embodied listening as a method of analysis. Her work "aims to understand how listening functions to perceive and interpret bodies, ideas, and aesthetics of race, gender, and class difference." Fred Moten's work engages improvisation as an aesthetic of the black radical tradition. Moten's essays navigate American art to explore its velocity and range. Specifically, Moten's emphasis on the *break* helps me to distinguish the interpretation of music in speculative space from methods of simple literary analysis. Joseph Winters, Herman Beavers, and Paul Devlin all examine Ellison's use of blues tropes to explain blues gestures like melancholy, sorrow, and hope. Their emphasis on the way sound travels and affects listeners is key to my assertation of speculative space as a site for vibrational listening, as Furlonge articulates.

This chapter highlights three significant themes, each constituting distinct sections: first, a survey of Ellison's blues and the influence of the blues on his work. I work to situate Ellison's writing exigence as grounded in music as a communicative proxy. Second, I analyze Invisible's figurative descent into speculative space and his heightened improvisational capability as a result. I read the Prologue of the novel in the way Ellison intends, adhering to Invisible's confession that the end is the beginning; therefore, reading the Prologue retrospectively offers insight into Invisible *during* his moment in a cognitive speculative space and a literal Erehwonian one. Third, I interpret Invisible's literal descent into the speculative space of the Liberty Paint Factory as instructive. The scene serves as both a broader critique of race relations as a blues riff and a demonstration of Invisible's emerging power through his realizations within said space. These focal areas will hopefully show how Ellison's employment of several elements of the blues, as tropes, disrupt conventional notions of space and time within the novel's structure. Thus, speculative space becomes a refuge and a site of artistic production, informing Invisible's life thereafter.

The novel's cyclical construction could, and perhaps should, be read intertextually and thematically; that is, reading the Epilogue of the novel at its beginning helps readers understand how Ellison employs improvisation as an overdetermined blues element of the novel. From a well-lit and damp basement on the periphery of Harlem, Invisible warns readers that "the end is in the beginning…"—accordingly, discordant harmony initiates the story.[50] Discordant harmony is typically associated with instability, and Ellison's cyclical narrative style illustrates this element. I use this concept metaphorically to illustrate Ellison's representation of the tension of African American life. The novel's structure mimics characteristics of jazz, like improvisation, and the thematic complexity of the blues. Dissonance, as a narrative strategy, aids Ellison in

[50] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 6.

mimicking the blues' cyclical form to portray Invisible's experience with social and racial discord.

Beyond the use of discordant harmony, Ellison explores other themes necessitating speculative space as a refuge: power and oppression, invisibility and identity, alienation and isolation, the role of history and memory, racism and segregation, and black intramural peculiarities. These elements frame the novel as a tumultuous coming-of-age journey, where the complexities of self-discovery and societal challenges converge, ultimately driving Invisible underground.

Ellison's work seemingly responds to Du Bois's all too familiar question: "How does it feel to be a problem?"[51] *Invisible Man* can be considered a literary reply, aptly clarifying a complex paradox: the issue of being black in America is not just a problem for black Americans but a challenge affecting all Americans.[52] Thus, Ellison creates his protagonist as a hero who demonstrates the tumultuous task of stewarding pluralism, revealing the challenges many Americans face as stakeholders of democracy. Timothy Parrish, an Ellison biographer, explains this concept in the introduction of his study on the acclaimed author. Parrish writes, "For blacks, the 'Negro problem' meant that they were denied their proper status as equal citizens; for whites, the problem was more complex in that it meant that their identities depended on either their explicit or their tacit consent in the daily subjugation of others."[53] The racial schism can be better understood given the moment of Invisible's conception. Ellison's pre-drafts to *Invisible Man* indicate his effort to render black life in a postwar era as both hypervisible yet simultaneously imperceptible—otherwise (in)visible as a paradoxical condition shaped by the white gaze and erasure.

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[51] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks,* 6.

[52] Timothy Parrish, *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 1.

[53] Ibid.

Notably, Ellison engaged in many prewriting activities as he began drafting his novel in the mid-1940s. *Invisible Man* was conceived from a draft whose plot involved the capture of a black Army Air Corps pilot, shot down in Nazi Germany and taken captive in World War II. Here, the central problem lies in the complicated relationship between the African American pilot and the ranking officer in the Prisoner of War (POW) camp he was taken to; the Nazi guards, whose defense of white supremacy motivated gratuitous violence, and the white American POWs in captivity alongside Ellison's protagonist. Such an enigma ultimately leads to Ellison's proclamation while on military leave in Vermont: "I am an invisible man."[54] What followed was the creation of episodic iterations of his novel, finally published in 1952 as *Invisible Man*. Many of those pre-writing episodes are unpublished, probed by scholars like Barabara Foley who thoroughly examines Ellison's writing process to better understand his intentions and his hero, Invisible.

In one way, Ellison sought to perfect writing as a craft, emulating his literary heroes: Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Richard Wright, and T.S Eliot. In another way, Ellison's drafts constitute a knowledge field akin to a jazz catalog, especially given that many of the novel's characters have rural to urban back-stories rivaling those jazz artists who took refuge in New York City high-rises during the Loft Jazz period of the 1970s. The Ellison archive recounts those backstories with striking political and cultural implications. Particularly, Foley's work to "re-create the vantage point from which Ellison engaged with his moment" reflects the American Depression Era as Ellison's springboard for depicting the African American experience.[55] Ellison's ability to live with his characters demonstrates his commitment to interrogating the literary life of Invisible as a tragicomedy.

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[54] Ralph Ellison, "On Initiation Rites and Power," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (The Modern Library, 2024), 467.

[55] Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*: *The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Duke University Press, 2010), 18.

The tragicomic aspect of Ellison's narrative creates the tension central to the novel's form and purpose. Invisible navigates those tragic themes and the punctuated moments of absurdity, dark humor, and surrealism. Throughout the novel, Ellison portrays the tragicomic absurdity of the African American experience in a racially divided America. Several scenes illustrate an oscillation between the horrific and absurd circumstances constructing tragicomedy—Invisible's dream of his grandfather giving him advice from his deathbed, the Jim Trueblood scene, the Battle Royal scene, the fight at the Golden Day and Mr. Norton's fainting, and the scathing rebuke from the university President, Dr. Bledsoe. The absurdity of social expectations and the disorientation of identity makes readers laugh uncomfortably, while the more painful realities of oppression and violence, like the death of Todd Clifton and the subsequent riot later in the novel create profound sorrow. In this sense, Ellison employs tragicomedy not just as a tonal choice but as a structural device. Similar to jazz, which integrates dissonance and resolution, humor and sorrow, Ellison crafts a narrative that holds multiple and often contradictory emotional registers. In this case, the blues and jazz serve as a structural and thematic guide for the novel's tragicomic nature.

Historically, the mid-century publication of *Invisible Man* marks a transformative moment. Published only two years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Ellison's modernist masterpiece skillfully encapsulates aspects of American racial and social strife during a long and continuous history of subjugation. Notably absent in his novel are the experiences of women; albeit they populate the novel on the periphery of central moments. Although beyond the scope of my dissertation, the notable absence of women reflects their invisibility in a broader historical and social context. Such a glaring omission compels scholars to ask: What about the invisible woman? As such, a worthy project could satisfy Meina Yates-Richard's claim that

> studying black women's sounding bodies within this [Ellisonian] literary archive enriches our studies of Ellison by attuning our hearing to yet unheard strains of the underground

> maternal sonority that expands and complicates our understandings of the 'the still lower level.'[56]

Notwithstanding, it appears that *Invisible Man* reflects Ellison's preoccupation with his own American experience as opposed to the women around him. He reinforces this through his male protagonist's perspective and journey, which some scholars have described as a black odyssey, mimicking a trek home from battle. *Invisible Man* moves beyond the Du Boisan question to interrogate how the "Negro problem" was a collective and interracial one, and it is this effort which cements the novel as a visionary vanguard of American letters.

Invisible Man also appropriately reflects an era of melancholic hope that many of his contemporaries also grappled with. This includes Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Albert Murray, Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, Ann Petry, Harold Cruse, and others. A contemporaneous soundtrack to this mood aids Ellison's rendering of black American life as a reflection of the music of his day; the blues and jazz, therefore, are multimodal proxies of his sentiment. In a similar way that Du Bois reflects sorrow utilizing the spirituals throughout *The Souls of Black Folk,* Ellison re-presents sorrow as a bluesy-jazz gesture of persistent struggle in his literature and criticism. His protagonist, Invisible, reflects a meditation on trauma and an offering of hope, for through the creation of Invisible, Ellison can rely on blues tropes to depict the ambiguities of black life during the navigation of distress. This narrative strategy allows Invisible to enter speculative space as a polytemporal site for transcending such circumstances.

The plot of the novel is a continuation of Ellison's emphasis on musical influence. In the 1945 essay, "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison writes, "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it

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[56] Meina Yates-Richard, "Sound and Signs of Black Womanhood" in *Ralph Ellison in Context*, ed. Paul Devlin (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 138.

a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."[57] In the 1964 essay, "Blues People," a more mature Ellison writes, "The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes."[58] The former describes a musical strategy, one that overdetermines the plot's employment of a blues aesthetic. The latter, published after the circulation of *Invisible Man,* characterizes Invisible's circumstances precisely. Both claims help readers view *Invisible Man* as a memoir of the protagonist, Invisible, while also offering insight into Ellison's understanding of the blues more broadly, which is remark upon its infusion with his literary creation and critique(s). The human condition can be considered a compilation of tragic and comic elements of the blues idiom, deeming any protagonist subject to such a life as both vulnerable to and shaped by the duality of joy and suffering. This entanglement reflects the essence of the blues, where moments of despair coexist with resilience and humor, creating a narrative as reflective as it is transformative.

Invisible's sense of self and his relationship with the world is entwined with music as a literal and metaphorical force. The novel opens with Invisible Underground listening to Armstrong's "What Did I Do to be Black and Blue?" Readers learn of Invisible's desire to hear the song from five phonographs playing simultaneously, implying a multi-sensorial approach toward representation and recognition. The scene is rhythmic in its literary tone, which acknowledges the way Ellison employs Armstrong's song as a catalyst for Invisible's entry into speculative space—a descent into the music as depicted by Invisible's admission: "I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths."[59] Although the novel opens with Invisible Underground, his account indicates that he was driven there through repetitive

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[57] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act*, (First Vintage International Edition, 1995), 78.

[58] Ellison, "Blue's People" in *Shadow and Act* (First Vintage International Edition, 1995) 256.

[59] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 9.

manipulation. The juxtaposing idea that characterizes the discordant harmony in Invisible's narration is that the Prologue conveys a similar sense of frustration arising from this tension. Ellison's use of this blues element is innovative, it allows readers to metaphorically share space with Invisible, inviting them to hear what he has learned throughout his journey. Through retrospection—an effect of such discord—the novel underscores the lessons that enable Invisible to improvise as a coping mechanism.

The opening chapter riffs on the basement episode in the Prologue. The novel describes Invisible attending a humiliating battle royal. He is forced to fight other black boys for the entertainment of wealthy white men. The boxing match scene is an apt illustration of the way Ellison integrates rhythm into his prose. Invisible recalls,

> I was fighting automatically…Hardly had the bell stopped ringing in my ears than it clanged again and I saw him moving swiftly toward me. He kept coming, bringing the rank sharp violence of stale sweat…Tatlock spun me half around with a blow, and as a joggled camera sweeps in a reeling scene, I saw the howling red faces [of the white men] crouching tense beneath the cloud of blue-gray smoke…the world wavered, unraveled, [and] flowed…[60]

The cadenced motion of the scene is indicated by the rhythmic and sonic elements reflecting chaos and disorientation. The sound of the bell, abrupt shifts in the environment, and repetitive action verbs create a pulsating rhythm mimicking affective responses of emotional intensity: *fighting; stopped; clanged; moving; coming; spun; sweeps; crouching; howling; wavered;* and *flowed.* Ellison cleverly deploys assonance in his description of "fighting automatically" by employing a cadence of repetitive vowel sounds in action verbs. This choice helps to maintain fluidity in the passage while also drawing attention to the oppressive nature of the events as they unfold. Such linguistic play forwards a kind of mechanical and unconscious rhythm—as if the protagonist is trapped in a cycle of violence, its force sounded by the echoes of action verbs as they are interpreted by readers: the ahhs and oohs of the vowels denote utterances of shock,

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[60] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 24.

surprise, discomfort, and relief. Such a scene can be considered illmatic, as defined in the Introduction, by attending to the ill and automatic rhythm of violence in the scene— "fighting automatically."

Consider also the comparison of the protagonist's perception to a "joggled camera," highlighting the fragmented and disjointed nature of the scene as if the world itself is shifting out of sync, much like the dissonance previously mentioned. The cadence here—disjointed and erratic—reflects the Invisible's fractured understanding of the unfolding violence as the world around him *wavers*, *unravels*, and *flows*. The physical sensations of violence, sweat, and smoke are described through this uneven cadence, making the scene feel both immediate and surreal with a sense of disorientation and the loss of control. In this context, cadence operates not just as a musical or rhythmic device but as a narrative technique conveying Invisible's physical and mental chaos and reinforcing the cyclical and oppressive nature of the violence he experiences. Furthermore, the speculative space Invisible occupies is signaled by a cadence of assumed heavy breathing, due primarily to his effort to withstand the world as it "wavered, unraveled, [and] flowed" around him. Invisible achieves a greater sense of resilience from this violence by drawing on the rhythm of survival through the cadence of heavy breathing as a metaphorical pulse—an expression of endurance amidst chaos.

A similar aspect of resilience, because of time spent in speculative space, appears later at Invisible's southern college, arguably signifying, then, Tuskegee Institute. Invisible marks sound as a guiding force while walking on the campus. He recalls, "At the sound of vespers I moved across the campus…Dong! Dong! Dong!" He continues, "the vibrations of the chapel bells stirring the depths of my turmoil, moving toward its nexus with a sense of doom."[61] In this scene, Invisible is insistent on relying on sound to construct the space around him. When the bell tolls,

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[61] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 109.

he enters speculative space, therein able to confront the tension in the depths of his soul. The poetic way Invisible describes sound adheres to the "profound sense of life" Ellison attributes to the blues in the essay "Blues People." Invisible explains,

> And I remember the chapel with its sweeping eaves...And my mind rushing for relief away from the spring dusk and flower scents, away from the time-scene of the crucifixion to the time-mood of the birth; from spring-dusk and vespers to the high, clear, lucid moon of winter and snow glinting upon the dwarfed pines where instead of the bells, the organ and the trombone choir speaks carols to the distances drifted with snow, making of the night air a sea of crystal water lapping the slumbering land to the farthest reaches of sound, for endless miles…"[62]

This passage shows how speculative space fosters resilience by providing Invisible with the ability to reshape his perceptions of reality. The tolling of the chapel bells marks a transition into a mental and emotional space where he can confront the tension and turmoil within him. In this speculative space, he is not simply reacting to the external world; rather, he reimagines it to reflect a deeper, more harmonious part of himself; he renders his physical self in flight, "away" from nature and into speculative space.

Aside from the deliberately poetic language, Invisible attempts to reconcile the discord of his experiences thus far with a more serene and harmonious visualization. This is an indicator that he has drifted into speculative space and therein refashions his surroundings to accommodate his interior sentiment of pleasantry. In that phantasmic space, sensory details blend with Invisible's introspective reflections, evoking a deeply immersive and lyrical experience. The onomatopoetical *dong* of the chapel bell not only marks time but invokes a hypnotic trace through which Invisible experiences temporary bliss in speculative space.

Like the shifting mood in the blues, Invisible's bliss is short-lived. After Invisible is dismissed from the southern college, he arrives in New York where he occupies roles forcing him to play the parts others assign to him. He is ushered to and through situations such as the lead

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[62] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 110.

speaker for the Brotherhood, a quasi-Communist organization; a laborer in the Liberty Paints Factory on Long Island; and, as we know from the Prologue, he becomes a despondent quasi-citizen occupying an underground basement on the periphery of Harlem. The sequential nature of these episodes represents a slow and chaotic descent to a literal underground, which sets the opening plea of the novel as a call-and-response gesture. The evolution also replies to the Du Boisian question by affirming invisibility as a final disposition—Invisible declares, "I am an invisible man."[63]

Throughout Invisible's journey, music becomes a metaphor for the freedom and chaos that comes with embracing identity in a world continuously silencing and controlling black life. Additionally, the improvisational nature of the blues, and its emphasis on individual expression within a collective, mirror Invisible's struggle to assert his individuality amidst the cacophony of societal expectations and characters. Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton, Peetie Wheatstraw, Mary Rambo, members of the Brotherhood, Kimbro, Lucius Brockway, Ras the Destroyer, and Todd Clifton are all characters who, in some way, attempt to impose their vision of identity, purpose, or control onto Invisible. These characters function as discordant chords in a blues progression as they guide Invisible in conflicting directions, confusing his effort to realize agency. Despite these forces, Invisible improvises, absorbing and reinterpreting their impact. Ellison's depiction of Invisible's reaction to these characters echoes the blues, wherein tension and resolution collide. Ultimately, Invisible's journey reveals that identity, like the blues, is a dynamic process—an ever-evolving improvisation shaped by both resistance and resilience.

By the novel's end, music comes to symbolize the protagonist's rejection of the roles imposed upon him by society and his acknowledgment of the complexity as a human being. As Invisible descends into his underground hideaway, he reflects on the fractured and discordant

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[63] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

rhythm of his life. He contemplates the possibility of creating new music, music that is both an expression of his true self and a critique of the world that has tried to silence him. Readers must understand this disposition as not one of failure but of growth, for Invisible ends his journey in a hole in the ground, yet also in the *break*—a deviation that opens possibilities for spontaneity, introspection, and innovation. The remainder of the novel depicts Invisible's search for social agency, coupled with a slow descent into his hole. Ellison uses music not just as an aesthetic backdrop but as a crucial element in exploring themes of identity, freedom, and the struggle for visibility—these themes describe Invisible's blues.

Furthermore, the predominant setting of the novel is notable, given Harlem's role in the Great Migration as a sanctuary city. Initially considered an expanse of expressiveness, social conditions for migrants compounded there, resulting in the transformation of Harlem into a site of abject poverty. Such a conundrum makes the city ripe for both renaissance and ruin—a tragicomedy invoking the blues. In the 1948 essay titled "Harlem is Nowhere," Ellison described the city as a scene of hostility for black folks:

> To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay. Harlem is a ruin…Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.[64]

Despite the location's acclaim, especially given the celebrated Harlem Renaissance period, some of Ellison's contemporaries shared his sentiment. In the same year as Ellison's remarks, both Ann Petry and James Baldwin conveyed similar views. Petry called Harlem an "anachronism—shameful and unjustifiable."[65] Baldwin, a Harlem native, reflected,

> All of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small

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[64] Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere" in *Shadow and Act*, 295.

[65] Ann Petry, "Harlem" in *The Street, The Narrows,* ed. Farah Jasmine Griffin (Library of America, 2019), 775.

> room with all the windows shut. Yet the white man walking through Harlem is not at all likely to find it sinister and no more wretched than any other slum.[66]

Again, discordant harmony characterizes the city as a proxy for the blues—nowhere and somewhere, chaotic and calm, illmatic and Erehwonian. It is in this spirit that I seek to examine Ellison's work alongside and as encompassed within a blues idiom.

Acknowledging Ellison's understanding of the blues helps characterize those musical elements crucial for Invisible's entry into speculative space. Drawing upon Albert Murray's emphasis on leveraging aspects of the tradition of the blues idiom, my goal is to trace the pattern of sonic triggers propelling Invisible into speculative space throughout the novel. Drawing on thinkers like Albert Murray, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and others, I will argue that Ellison's rendering of Invisible demonstrates how prevalent the blues figures are in the novel; furthermore, I will show how improvisation, as both a blues trope and as a method into the *break*, function as a predominate literary device, enabling Ellison's circuitous narrative style as a method of *boomeranging*.

Understanding why elements of the blues are important to Ellison is critical in illustrating his use of the genre as a proxy enabling an understanding of how sound operates as a literary device. To describe Ellisonian blues, I first analyze an unpublished draft from *Invisible Man* entitled "Something about Blues." The short story illustrates Ellison's narrative strategy as musically inclined. Readers can consider the draft short story as an urtext to the novel, especially since none of the characters appear in the 1952 work. In "Something About Blues," Ellison personifies the blues as an antagonist—he even names his antagonist Blues. Given Blues's capability, Ellison demonstrates what the broader genre is capable of and how the blues responds to other characters as proxies for African American folkways like dance, storytelling, and dialect.

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[66] James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (Library of America, 1998), 42.

Perhaps this is Ellison's way of speaking in low frequency, describing his descent into the depths of memory, ancestry, and his subconscious as triggered by sound:

> I can hear you say, 'so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!' But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?[67]

Next, I read subterranean scenes like the figurative underground excursion in the Prologue to show sonic triggers contributing to Invisible's entry into speculative space. Like the nostalgia conjured through the campus vespers, several other examples of *triggers* function to transport Invisible into speculative space as an ephemeral and introspective realm. The figurative example of the underground is vital to understanding the possibilities within the blues as a complex and emotional expression of the African American experience. This analysis will hopefully reveal opportunities to navigate and engage with speculative space more intentionally, enabling readers as listeners to consciously seize their chance to enter it and engage in introspection.

Lastly, I look specifically at the Liberty Paints Factory scene to trace the literal process of going underground into the depths of the factory as a metaphor for an ideological breach. This analysis shows how Invisible navigates a mechanized system whose work contributes to prevailing white supremacist ideology. I argue that the Liberty Paint Factory is a metaphorical site of production for white supremacy, wherein Invisible enters the bowels of production by descending into the depths of the factory to find black laborers as producers. The Optic White paint produced at the Liberty Paint Factory is a symbolic byproduct of the racial schism prompting Ellison's writing, as mentioned in his 1969 lecture at the United States Military

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[67] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.

Academy at West Point. He explained, "American diversity is not simply a matter of race, region or religion. It is a product of the complex of intermixing of all these categories."[68]

I am interested in how Invisible's excursion into the depths of the paint factory demonstrates the possibilities and dangers of mechanized servitude. The lack of freedom Invisible exhibits in the Liberty Paints scene allows him to be easily coerced as he is propelled deeper into a foul speculative space. By juxtaposing both figurative and literal excursions into speculative space, examining the Prologue and the Liberty Paint Factory scenes as varying speculative spaces, I hope to assert Invisible's sonic journey as a comprehensive way to navigate trauma and transcend it through an imagining of new possibilities. Moreover, I hope to make clear the way Ellison's narrative strategy functions as a *blue*print for a broader goal of rendering a technique that transcends those conditions created within communities by the denial of social justice. The conclusion of this inquiry acknowledges Invisible as achieving the necessary skills through a failed journey as he functions and thrives in the break.

2.1 Ralph Ellison's Blues

In the cultural manifesto, *The Omni-Americans*, Albert Murray offers the best explanation of Ellisonian blues. As Ellison's longtime friend and critic, Murray marks *Invisible Man* as a "literary extension of the blues" given its ability to echo the "irrepressibility of America itself."[69] As a former trumpet player and student of music composition, Ellison understood the ways music might amplify expressions of tumultuous experiences. He also understood, through literary mentors, the possibilities of rhythm and cadence to carry his protagonists along a journey of transcendence. This section conveys Ellison's blues as a strategic literary device, one personifying an impulse to confront chaos until it is ordered.

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[68] Ellison, "On Initiation Rites and Power," 467.

[69] Albert Murray, "The Omni-Americans," in *Albert Murray: Collected Essays and Memoirs*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Devlin (Library of America, 2016), 144.

Murray's survey of the illusive nature of the blues is an important point of entry because the blues is a phenomenon defined in various ways by various thinkers, especially concerning those writers whose understanding of social responsibility relies on the appropriation of the blues and other aesthetic forms to amplify social and political goals. What Murray offers is an assessment of such tension to demonstrate the power of Ellison's *Invisible Man,* capturing the totality of the American experience.

More broadly, in the chapter "James Baldwin, Protest Fiction, and the Blues Tradition," Murray examines how Baldwin and Wright "missed [taking advantage of] the literary possibilities" suggested by the blues tradition.[70] A blues tradition adhering to both Ellison's and LeRoy Jones's (Amiri Baraka) understanding of ritual—that is, the blues tradition constitutes the emotional and living conditions of African Americans in the southern portion of the United States. Specifically, Murray points to Ellison's essay "Richard Wright's Blues" as not only a commentary on Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy* but also an acknowledgment of the fact that "Wright had written a book that was in essence a literary equivalent to the blues."[71] Regarding Baldwin, Murray decries, that he "has never written in terms of any of the sustaining actualities of that tradition in any of his own stories."[72] This critique is important because any explanation of Ellison's conception of the blues is incomplete without understanding the way African American mores affected political aims, especially as depicted in literature functioning to resist oppression.

Ellison writes during a racially contested post-war period. Baldwin, Baraka, and other proponents of the Black Arts tradition were concerned with cultural, political, and aesthetic liberation; their distinguishing contribution was radical art that inspired action. Ellison, on the other hand, is largely criticized for what some considered a rather passive approach. His emphasis

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[70] Murray, "The Omni-Americans," 143.
[71] Ibid., 139.
[72] Ibid., 127.

on interrogating American diversity and pluralism was criticized as accommodating. Murray's examination of Baldwin, Wright, and Ellison's work demonstrates the importance of the blues as a signifier of African American sentiment, and Murray's concern with the proper implementation of the blues tradition in literature implies that the craft of writing is one of many tools to assert music as a sonic rendition of the soul of black folks.

Ellison's blues riffs on Wright's manifestation of the same genre. Ellison writes,

> *Black Boy* is filled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains, the names of Southern towns and cities, estrangements, fights and flights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers and pain. And like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, its lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound.[73]

Ellison describes Wright's chaos as a foundation of the plight that birthed Invisible. He adds, near the end of the essay, that the blues "…express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self."[74] Murray echoes this sentiment when he writes, "The blues with no aid from existentialism have always known that there were no clear-cut solutions for the human situation."[75] Like Bessie Smith's 1929 song "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out," Ellison and Murray describe a paradox of resilience existing in the blues. Smith writes,

> Once I lived the life of a millionaire
> Spending my money, I didn't care
> I carried my friends out for a good time
> Buying bootleg liquor, champagne and wine
> When I began to fall so low
> I didn't have a friend and no place to go
> So if I ever get my hand on a dollar again
> I'm gonna hold on to it 'til them eagle's green
> Nobody knows you
> When you're down and out

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[73] Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 79.
[74] Ibid., 94.
[75] Murray, "The Omni-Americans," 144.

In my pocket, not one penny
And my friends, I haven't any.[76]

These blues lyrics reflect the pain and agony of abandonment, closely associated with the playful realization that people only care about you when there is something in it for them. Much like Invisible, where sound guides his navigation through speculative space, this song's blues cadence reflects a larger existential rhythm—one where failure and success, and joy and suffering constantly intertwine.

To Murray's point about the blues affirming Negro life in all its complexity, the music is also able to uplift listeners and transport them to realms of memory, exemplifying the impulse Ellison describes as surreal. Take, for example, Baldwin's encounter with Bessie Smith. Baldwin recalls listening to Smith's blues while in Paris, the music propelling him into the depths of shame. In the essay "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American" Baldwin writes,

> It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and cadence, who helped me *dig* back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that, for years, I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a 'nigger' (my italics).[77]

The ability of sound to settle and create tension is a strategy Ellison exploits in his fiction. Given Murray's critique of Baldwin's rebuke of the protest novel, the blues functions as a kind of qualifying gesture. The blues idiom, according to Murray, fosters cultural assimilation through its use as a writing tool to excavate, so when Baldwin listens and "dig[s]," he is likely to find speculative space.

After the publication of Ellison's essay, "Richard Wright's Blues," Murray describes an exchange wherein Ellison and Wright verbally joust about form: "…when Wright encountered

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[76] Bessie Smith, "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out," on *The Best of Bessie Smith*, recorded 1929, Columbia Records, released 1929, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[77] James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (Penguin Random House, 1964), 4.

him [Ellison] shortly afterward all Wright could do was shake his head in pleased bewilderment…" He said, "'Man, you went much further than the book [*Black Boy*]. Much further.'" Ellison replied, "Well, what you wrote made it possible for me to say what I said about it. All I was trying to do was use what you put there. All I was trying to do was play a few riffs on your tune. It was your tune. I just hope I didn't embarrass you. I just hope I did it justice."[78] In terms of form, we can understand this exchange as an explanation of Ellison and Wright's improvisational and call-and-response exchange. Ellison can improvise on Wright's *tune* because Wright offers interpretive space to do so. Wright's *Black Boy* functions like a jazz vamp wherein Wright sets a melody and yields to Ellison or others to improvise. The call-and-response gesture indicated in the line, "playing a few riffs," denotes the dialogic and iterative literary form at play. Ellison's comments also describe his emulation of Wright as a literary mentor. The fact that Ellison was Wright's protégé is widely known; however, what Murray illuminates are the varied interpretations of the blues as a useful narrative tool. Murray's emphasis on the sharp criticism of Wright's work from Baldwin reveals blue-infused fiction as pregnant, otherwise full of life, and rendering conceptions of Wright's protagonist as problematic. In another way, Murray believed that the implications of the blues tradition as a "*product of the most complicated culture"* cannot be neglected. In Murray's opinion, "Baldwin misses the mark, Wright misses the mark, but Ellison does not."[79]

Furthermore, Murray's claim that the literary possibilities Ellison critiqued in "Richard Wright's Blues" are also articulated in *Invisible Man*. He writes,

> It was a first rate novel, a blues odyssey, a tall tale about the fantastic misadventures of one American Negro…And like the blues, and echoing the irrepressibility of America itself, it ended on a note of promise…In terms of cultural assimilation, the blues idiom at its best is Omni-American precisely because it sounds as if it knows the truth about all the other music in the world and is looking for something better.[80]

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[78] Murray, "The Omni-Americans," 138.
[79] Murray, "The Omni-Americans," 143.
[80] Ibid., 144.

The narrative realism and surrealism of *Invisible Man* exemplify Ellison's understanding of the blues as an essential catalyst for his fictional creation. Murray's characterization of Ellison's work ironically describes Invisible Man as a blues proxy: "it was as if Ellison had taken an everyday twelve bar blues tune (by a man from down South sitting in a manhole up North in New York singing and signifying about how he got there) and scored it for full orchestra."[81] Murray helps to recognize Ellison's blues as a fictional performance.

In 1969, Ralph Ellison traveled to the United States Military Academy at West Point to discuss his rendering of invisibility as not merely a circumstance of racial and social strife, but as an arduous attempt to fully realize humanity while navigating universal struggle. Ellison explained to cadets, "My task would be to give him [Invisible] the surface and then try to take him into the internalities, take him below the level of racial structuring and down into those areas where we are simply men and women, human beings living on this blue orb, and not always living so well."[82] Using the blues, Ellison moves beyond the externalities of race, exploring the deeper and shared experiences of humanity while emphasizing the commonalities uniting us all, regardless of social or racial construct. Ellison's *Invisible Man* reflects a conscious and deliberate effort to direct his fictional creation, Invisible, into speculative space, and Ellison would rely on the blues for its ethereal and transformative quality.

In the 1955 essay "Living with Music," Ellison describes living in a small apartment and slowly appreciating the way music clarifies his writing process. We might think of Ellison's intent of *taking* Invisible "into the internalities," otherwise into the depths of sound, as a magical immersion into the unfamiliar—a speculative space wherein Ellison's pluralistic aims unfold. We must take Ellison's claim about reproduction seriously. He writes, "I was obsessed with the idea

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[81] Ibid., 143.
[82] Ellison, "On Initiation, Rites, and Power," 475.

of reproducing sound with such fidelity that even when using music as a defense behind which I could write, it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion."[83] Although Ellison is describing a high fidelity (HiFi) audio system used to combat the noise of his neighbor's singing, the metaphor might imply the control Ellison anticipates and desires. This understanding of wielding sound enables readers to listen to Invisible with a mind's ear; to understand that Louis Armstrong's voice does work in parallel with Bessie Smith's and that both Baldwin and Ellison's invisible people, real and phantasmic, can enter speculative space.

As a fictional apparatus, Ellison's Blues embraces the raw and unvarnished truths of human existence. The blues allow vulnerability to meet resilience and turn hardship into a profound expression of authenticity and clarity. Ellison's writing serves as a fulcrum in that triangulation, balancing, and controlling the blues idiom while enabling access to internalities that reveal moments of transcendence. The creative genius in Ellison's writing is his ability to live with music and report his experience.

Ellison's writing is archived at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Therein, researchers can survey Ellison's blues alongside documents indicating his drafting and revision process. Ellison produced an archive of multiple episode drafts and commentary regarding *Invisible Man*. Much of that writing reflects Ellison's attempt to reproduce sound metaphorically; that is, Ellison was intent on emulating his literary ancestors who, in their way, fashioned aural experiences to replicate the human condition.

Within that archive lie several unpublished short stories that demonstrate Ellison's claim about sonic reproduction. Chief among them is "Something About Blues," an undated episode capturing the essence of the blues idiom and dance. Ellison attempts to harness its "near-tragic, [and] near-comic lyricism" by personifying the blues as an antagonistic figure. I consider

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[83] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 195.

Ellison's draft as a heuristic tool to consolidate aspects of American character through the personification of musical and dance tropes, specifically using the character Blues as a catalyst to guide readers into speculative space. By personifying the blues as a character, Ellison demonstrates what the blues is and what the music is capable of. In this way, Ellison can explore the introspective qualities of the blues and demonstrate its dynamism. In "Something About Blues," Ellison also explores how music interacts with and influences characters, shaping their decisions, identities, and cultural movements. Reading "Something About Blues" as a primer to *Invisible Man* offers insight into the role music plays in navigating turmoil and gives Invisible's journey a soundtrack comprised of a range of musical artists and poets such as Louis Armstrong, Peter Wheatstraw, Robert Browning, Ella Fitzgerald, and others.

"Something About Blues" reflects musical tradition, coupled with the tragic and comic elements of joy and laughter and melancholy and sorrow; the streets of Harlem are center stage. Moreover, the story unites characters who signify a rich African American musical and cultural tradition.[84] There are three aspects of Ellison's Blues character I want to focus on: first, the blues, as a personified entity [Blues] can embody the collective experiences, struggles, and resilience of the people who create and live it. By describing Blues as a personified figure, the trope becomes a vessel for storytelling, conveying the emotional depth of the human condition. Second, by acknowledging Blues's friends as characters turned musical proxies, it is possible for readers to better understand how elements from other genres like jazz and swing inform elements of the blues as employed in Ellison's fiction. By doing so, Ellison's creation, Blues, becomes a personified bridge between elements of the blues as a genre and humanity *writ* large. Blues's companionship with characters like Sammy Russel and Breakaway Johnson shows the varied

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[84] Ellison "Something about Blues," Box 142, REP. From Library of Congress, *The Ralph Ellison Papers, 1890-2007.* In this episodic and unpublished draft, Ellison tells the story of Sammy Russell, Velma, and Blues. Ellison's tropological personification of the blues is remarkable in its ability to demonstrate the capability of the genre more broadly. *Wrestling with the Left* (Duke University Press, 2010), 427.

ways that Blues interacts with different feelings, both tragic and comedic. Third, Ellison seemingly writes his way to improvisation as a coping mechanism. Metaphorically, he employs the amputated dancer, Breakaway Johnson, to demonstrate the formulation of the break in a literal way. Here, I rely on Albert Murray's definition of improvisation as a blues element to show how the break functions as a space of creation and transcendence, thereby establishing Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a blues novel that charts a path to the break as an emancipated destination.

"Something About Blues" takes readers into a two-day episode with Sammy and Blues, revealing vital blues characteristics that can be attributed to Ellison's conception of the genre—the blues as a despondent sentiment and metaphor, signifying community and universal human connection. This description suggests that Ellison's creation, Invisible, is possessed of a blues aesthetic or a way of seeing and hearing the world around him.

Ellison opens the story with a frustrated Sammy Russel strolling along New York's Eighth Avenue one morning. Sammy's "gal," Velma, fled their apartment after a tense argument the night before, and his morning walk is intended to be a calming experience. During the walk, Sammy meets Blues, Ellison's personification of the melancholic musical genre. Sammy describes, "He [Blues] was coming up the dark side of the street, sticking close to the buildings like he didn't want no part of the sun...Blues was big as hell and every one of his joints looks crooked."[85] Sammy explains that Blues's eyes were "little and black and shiney like a big birds, and I couldn't look into them long."[86] Sammy warns,

> 'Go way from *me*, Blues,' I said 'I'm already so low this morning that I can give *you* the blues. In fact, I'm low as whale hockey and that's at the bottom of the ocean and even you can't get no lower'n that...
>
> Blues let out a laugh that sent all the folks in the block looking out their windows, then he jumped back and gave me some skin *slapped the palm of my hand…*[italics denote marginalia on draft].[87]

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[85] Ellison, "Something About Blues" REP., 1.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., REP. 3.

Notice the blues-inspired oral tradition indicated here. Colloquial slang establishes a call-and-response pattern between the two characters. Both blues elements denote vernacular storytelling as a key element of the blues. Moreover, Sammy's remarks about whale hockey demonstrate toasting—playful wordplay signifying spontaneity, both tragic and comic. One reason Ellison sought to characterize the blues is to illustrate the musical genre as a tragi-comic, shadowy, enigmatic, and formidable entity, a figure of darkness and a product of a marginalized experience.

Several elements of the blues can be taken from such a vivid description of Ellison's character. First, "coming up the dark side of the street" suggests a figure enveloped by shadows. Such a mysterious image implies those unacknowledged truths about life, suffering, and resilience.[88] This image of Blues is also ironically like Ellison's Invisible in the Prologue as he "accidentally bumped into a man…because of the near darkness…"[89] This tells us something about the blues: that Blues, both character and genre, thrives in spaces of obscurity. Next, Blues's "crooked joints" symbolize the imperfection of the blues as a genre expressing the tragi-comic of life experience. The nature of the blues resists conventional notions of perfection, and Ellison's Blues personifies this resistance too. Third, the descriptor "big as hell" signifies the cultural weight of the blues as a genre; the blues looms large as an essential aspect of African American history and creativity. The music also suggests certain elements to nourish its existence—alcohol, romance and seduction, dance, and gossip. Lastly, Blues's "little and black and shiney" eyes suggest insight toward penetrating awareness, the blue's ability to "finger the jagged grain," compelling listeners and participants to face their vulnerabilities. Mirror-like in their appearance, Blue's eyes signify introspection, the product of time spent in speculative space, a space Ellison possibly inhabits while writing his unpublished drafts. Perhaps Ellison is suggesting introspection

[88] Ibid., REP. 1.
[89] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

as an element of the blues worth emphasizing when he notes Sammy's reaction to looking in Blues's mirror-like eyes. Through those eyes, readers can perceive Sammy's discomfort as he follows Blues down the Harlem streets, meeting many of Blues's friends and experiencing the City at the moment many Harlemites populated the street.

As Blues and Sammy walk the streets, they encounter several people, all of whom Blues claims he knows. The most interesting among them is Breakaway Johnson. Upon seeing Breakaway, Blues tells Sammy, "'I know that guy,' 'Blues said, Fact, I been knowing him since the war. That's how he lost his legs. Name's Breakaway Johnson. Used to be a dancer. Good one too.'"[90] The three men spend some time chatting before Blues invites Breakaway for a morning drink. Breakaway replies,

> Naw, Blues. Thanks, I'm taking my boys to school. They on a program over there today, going to dance… 'You boys good dancers?' [Blues] asked 'em. 'Tell him yes! Sho they good,' Breakaway Johnson said. 'These is Breakaway's boys and they're as fine as a pair of little dancers as you going to find anywhere. They going to stop the show today too. That is if they don't forget to do that last break I been teaching 'em…'[91]

Ellison is careful in the naming of his characters. Breakaway Johnson signifies the swing era during the Harlem Renaissance and a tragic and comic blues gesture. Breakaway is comedic, given the way Ellison chooses to depict him—a veteran who takes advantage of his debilitating state to provide entertainment. The name itself, Breakaway, must somehow refer to the absence of his two legs. Still, his spirit is joyful despite the sorrow his appearance may produce. This, again, exemplifies the blues paradox. The scene suggests a key feature of the blues as "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe, expressed lyrically," through Ellison's prose; thus, Breakaway's resilience is demonstrated in the training of his children to perform the

[90] Ellison, "Something about Blues," REP. 5.
[91] Ibid.

break.[92] What follows is a street performance of the break by Breakaway and his two sons: "You give us the time, papa…O.K. [says Breakaway] And don't forget to smile."[93]

Readers cannot help but visualize the scene as Breakaway "starts to move very light on his leather-covered nubs, then he was clapping his hands and setting the time by pounding the concrete with his right stump," singing a rendition of a 1940s tune from Louis Armstrong's album *Swing that Swing*.[94] The track "Cut off my Legs and Call me Shorty" is a clarion call for dancers to perform. After the first verse, Armstrong's band features a *break*, a short pause in the jazzy rhythm allowing ensemble members to perform solos. These solos set the rhythm for dancers like Breakaway to perform. What is notable here is the triangulated relationship between Blues as a signifier of the blues genre, Breakaway as a signifier of swing and its dance accompaniment, and the blues-infused lyrics, which are notably different from Armstrong's original arrangement. In the marginalia of the draft, Ellison works through three drafts of the lyrics to render what can be argued as Breakaway's fictional circumstance. A close reading of a portion of Ellison's rendition of the lyrics demonstrates Ellison's attempt to illustrate the blues as a product and the foundation of several other forms of expression. At the same time, when Sammy, Blues, and Breakaway congregate on the streets of Harlem, they demonstrate dance as an improvisational tactic to thrive in the break:

> The sun shot down into the street just then and I could see the boy's shoes sparkling and they were whirling besides Breakaway and singing in high treble voices,
>
> They cut off our legs
> And they call us shorties
> They cut out tongues
> And call us dummies
> So all we got to do is dance and die!
>
> 'Dam, Breakaway,' Blues said when they made that complicated break he'd been teaching them. You got something there. These boys is chips off the old block.'

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[92] Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 79.
[93] Ellison, "Something About Blues," REP. 5.
[94] Ibid.

'You mean they shoots off the old stump,' Breakaway said and laughed real wild.[95]

This scene illuminates Ellison's reminder in *Shadow and Act* that "there is a mystery in…the innocence of evil and the evil of innocence, though being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the blues..."[96] The breakaway swing dance was a syncopated two-step. In the break, Breakaway and the boys dance to a narrative of plight. The song is tragic, signifying physical mutilation and dehumanization, disempowerment through silencing, and strikingly rich irony suggesting resilience throughout a description of systemic harm. In this sense and situation, improvisation functions as a coping mechanism.

My third point about improvisation as a specific element of Ellison's blues has to do with Albert Murray's definition of improvisation as "how you do what you have to do"—dancing for Breakaway, drinking for Blues and Sammy, writing for Ellison.[97] Murray explains,

> Improvisation, as it functions in the blues idiom, is something that not only conditions people to cope with disjuncture and change but it also provides them with a basic survival technique that is commensurate with and suitable to the rootlessness and the discontinuity so characteristic of human existence in the contemporary world…[98]

Murray also advises that to improvise "you have to know everything that has to do with what in jazz is called 'the break'…"[99] He continues, "The 'break' is a device which is used quite often [in the blues idiom] and always has to do with the framework in which improvisation takes place…it is precisely this disjuncture which is the moment of truth. It is on the break that you 'do your thing…'"[100] And it is in the break that perhaps Ellison conceives of "Something About Blues." This story is emblematic of what some scholars call a "five-finger exercise"—an exercise used to develop a skill like writing, piano, or the guitar. This might also explain the hundreds of drafts

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[95] Ellison, "Something about Blues," REP.
[96] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" in *Shadow and Act*, 53.
[97] Murray, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 111.
[98] Ibid., 113.
[99] Ibid., 111.
[100] Ibid., 113.

comprising Ellison's papers at the Library of Congress. I contend that "Something About Blues" tells us something about Ellison, which is that blues figures in his writing as more than a character but an idiom and a coping mechanism. In *Invisible Man*, he employs the genre as a proxy to aid Invisible in a search to find the break—that subterranean enclave in the depths.

A similar enclave is the setting for the close of Ellison's short story. Blues and Sammy arrive at the Skitdat bar for their morning rye and gin— "In the Skitdat Bar the juke box was throbbing [Benny Goodman's "How High on the Moon"] and the round-the-clock drinkers were evaporating the gin."[101] The 1940 song lyrics to "How High on the Moon" depict the way speculative space is navigated. The lyrics suggest that speculative space emerges through the interplay between realms of absence and presence:

> Somewhere there's music, how faint the tune.
> Somewhere there's heaven, how high the moon.
> There is no moon above when love is far away too.
> Till it comes true that you love me as I love you.
>
> Somewhere there's music, it's where you are.
> Somewhere there's heaven, how near, how far.
> The darkest night would shine if you would come to me soon.
> Until you will, how still my heart, how high the moon.[102]

Similar to Invisible's basement, the speculative space this sound triggers allows for waiting and shaping an alternative reality through sound and imagination. Goodman's *somewhere* might be speculative space. The song captures Sammy's predicament accurately, in that his experience with Blues reflects his blues—the longing for his wife, Velma, who left abruptly at the beginning of the story. Throughout the episode, Sammy describes his mood as "low." This spatial way of describing his demeanor characterizes the blues as a space for grief.

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[101] Ellison, "Something about Blues," REP, 10.

[102] Benny Goodman, and His Orchestra and Helen Forrest, "How High on the Moon," Track 7, *Best of Big Bands,* Columbia Records, Released 1972, Streaming audio, Apple Music.

In Ellison's bar, the sound from the jukebox functions as background music for Blues' conversation with Sammy concerning Velma. Blues assures Sammy before he leaves the bar, "I done told you too many times not to worry bout no woman. Because the way a woman's built you just can't win."[103] In typical fashion, Blues's advice reflects common themes associated with blues music—loss and heartbreak, hardship and struggle, and juke joint culture (alcohol, dancing, and loud conversation). It is as though Blues responds to both Sammy and the Goodman track when he dismisses Sammy's longing for Velma as an unwinnable game. While Blues remains at the bar with a friend, Rockmore, Sammy returns to a home absent of his wife Velma, and the cycle starts again—he wakes the next day and returns to the bar, only to be lured into a room with a prostitute named Agnes—Blues is still there. She whispers to Sammy, "I'm better than these young ones, you can see that caint you, baby? [Ellison writes in the marginalia: Didn't Blues tell you?] Put your arms around me."[104] The rest of the scene describes Sammy being held captive by Agnes while Blues is heard "laughing down below, the sound seeming to come from the Jukebox mixed in with the music."[105] The story closes with Sammy in a frantic state, a tragic and comedic spell that seemingly mocks his situation in speculative space, triggered by the music and Blue's laughter:

> I'm a man who likes his time…And *for a second I thought I fall and the insides seemed to fly out of me while I saw her* [Agnes] standing there defying me. I shook my head hard but she wouldn't go away and I called on my liquor for help [my italics].
>
> And I called on my eyes to deny what I saw, but they said no. She was real…And I began to tremble and then I was crying and hiccupping.
>
> 'Blues,' I told her 'he said he'd take me…'
>
> 'Get out!' she said.
>
> '…he said he'd take me.' I said. Then I was laughing and crying both as the same time. I laughed so hard it ached and she was yelling 'Get out, get out!' and finally I said, 'Sure, sure,' and stumbled out into the hall and cried-laughed, 'Blues, Blues, Come up here, Blues!'[106]

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[103] Ellison, "Something about Blues," REP, 12.
[104] Ibid., REP, 15.
[105] Ibid., REP,10.
[106] Ibid., 10.

The draft ends with Sammy calling for Blues after an ambiguous and unknown realization—Blues orchestrated the chaos.

Ellison's Blues demonstrates his manipulative and tragicomic potential as he lures Sammy back to the Skitdat Bar, a bar whose name signifies mockery and a blues aesthetic as a thing—"[Skit] a literary production intended as a piece of light satire, parody, or caricature;"[107] [Dat] a variant of 'that'; a demonstrative pronoun "with reference to a thing (concrete or abstract)" in the case of Blues the character, blues the genre, and the blues mood.[108] Taken together, *Skitdat* becomes a layered signifier, embodying the ironic and self-aware nature of the blues tradition.

It is unknown how or why Ellison omitted this story from *Invisible Man*. It appears that Sammy and Velma's relationship aids Ellison in thinking about how sound [embodied through Blues] affects ordinary people. As mentioned, Barabara Foley is likely the only other scholar who remarks on Velma's whereabouts. In *Wrestling with the Left*, she cites a similar unpublished draft depicting Invisible's relationship to Sammy Russel, Velma, and Blues. Specifically, Foley links Russel's story, "Something About Blues," to the novel's later Harlem uprising. The following account is told to Invisible *after* he starts living in the basement, which may indicate a prelude to the novel itself. Foley writes,

> …the nameless narrator recounts meeting a friend named Russell, evidently a CP [Communist Party] member, who 'had been sent down to Mississippi' to organize in the army…This tragic-tale-within-a-tale ([Sammy] Russell narrates most of it in the first person) describes the events leading to his murdering wife Velma, while he is back in Harlem AWOL from his military base in the South; the invisible man wonders to himself at the irony that Russell, presumably an 'integrated personality,' would be 'coming to me, an invisible man, for understanding.'[109]

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[107] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "skit (n.2), sense 2.b," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2963348815.

[108] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "that (pron.1), sense I.1.a.i," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1031307583.

[109] Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 335.

This information is absent in the version of the story I discovered in Ralph Ellison's papers. Foley continues,

> Russell explains why he loved Velma: 'She symbolized a large section of our people.' But he became alienated from her…He then had an affair with a white woman. After Velma left him Russell came under the influence of a mysterious 'big black man' who called himself 'Blues' (here the story veers into the realm of the Gothic.) [This begins the narrative 'Something About Blues' as rendered in the unpublished archive draft titled 'Something About Blues']. At the prompting of Blues, Russell killed Velma when he learned she had turned to prostitution.[110]

In summary, Blues lures Sammy into the Skidat bar, takes advantage of Sammy's vulnerability given his recent fight with Velma, and arranges a prostitute to seduce Sammy. Later, Blues convinces Sammy to kill Velma. According to Foley, the story "Something About Blues" is retold by Invisible, after he has been "living in a 'hole in the ground' in Harlem for a year ('three years' is crossed out [of the manuscript]) …"[111] The exclusion of this account from the novel shows Ellison's prewriting as a dynamic process of discovery. It implies that Invisible has omitted details of his past affairs. And it implies that music, like the blues, is essential in Invisible's relationship with the political and social circumstances of his time. Ellison's narrative strategy centers the blues as a portal to frame Invisible's conundrum. By demonstrating what Blues is capable of, Ellison claims that the blues genre can also reveal the depth of Invisible's internal struggle.

2.2 Improvising in the Depths

Ellison's goal of taking Invisible inward involves going beyond the surface of the music and its signifiers. Ellison's use of blues and jazz tropes allows for a focused exploration of the break and offers a destination to those whose experiences yield certain expertise. Invisible's journey can be perceived as an improvisational and epistemological trek, wherein blues tropes

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[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.

like call-and-response, syncopation, and discordant harmony characterize his self-knowledge and facilitate his metaphorical entry into speculative space. These tropes not only thrust Invisible into speculative space but also show how Ellison communicates in low frequency as a strategy to tell us something about the blues. Invisible's improvisational journey is framed as a continuous process of preparation. Returning to Murray's understanding of improvisation—such that a journey "not only conditions them [artists] to cope with disjuncture and change but also provides them with a basic survival technique"—and recognizing that the novel's Prologue serves as the actual endpoint of Invisible's excursion, readers can better understand him as resilient and prepared to engage in free play. This free-play ability functions as a metaphorical posture resisting rigid definitions of identity. The ability to improvise is an ideal starting point because spontaneity riffs on pre-existing conditions to create space for innovation and new possibilities. For example, in Invisible's case, his repeated attempts and failure to gain agency and self-consciousness, being manipulated and neglected in nearly every scene, results in his weariness and strategic retreat underground; a hibernation-like "Jack-the-Bear," a reference to the 1906 Joel Chandler Harris character in *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit* folktales—Invisible improvises in the search for himself. Consider the scene after Invisible suffers an injury at Liberty Paints, discussed in detail later. In a scene of disorientation, Ellison relies on Harris's Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit as archetypal trickster figures to frame Invisible's survival strategy. Ellison writes,

> Who was Buckeye the rabbit? I was filled with turmoil. Why should he think of *that?*...I laughed, deep, deep inside me, giddy with delight of self-discovery and the desire to hide it. Somehow *I* was Buckeye the Rabbit…or had been, when as children we danced and sang barefoot in the dusty streets:
> Buckeye the Rabbit
> Shake it, shake it
> Buckeye the Rabbit
> Break it, break it…
> Left alone, I lay fretting over my identity. [112]

[112] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 242.

In this case, exploring Invisible's metaphorical journey into speculative space reveals how music promotes an engagement with latent yet powerful ancestral forces like African American folktales. Improvisation, in this sense, can be employed as a tool of self-discovery. In *The Art of Fiction,* an interview from *The Paris Review* in 1955, Ellison explains,

> Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his master to define these crucial matters for him.[113]

In other words, to improvise is to be intentional.

Ellison's use of improvisation can be better understood if we receive his novel as not only a powerful examination of existentialism but also an explication of how aspects of the blues and jazz inform black life in a pre-Civil Rights era. As Michael Germana argues, in Ellison's view, pre-bop jazz and the blues make palpable the intensities of an unheard history.[114] The common theme uniting those musical genres, and the novel itself, is self-consciousness amid conflicting cultural forces. Ellison explains how jazz functions as an improvisational extension of the blues, representing modes of resistance in the music's ability to offer spontaneous creativity as a coping mechanism to transcend circumstances. Ellison remarked on this condition in a lesser-known essay, "The Charlie Christian Story." He writes,

> True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity as an individual, as a member of the collectivity as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.[115]

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[113] Ellison, "The Art of Fiction" from *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 183.

[114] Michael Germana, "Ellison's Durational View of Bebop" in *Ralph Ellison in Context*, ed. Paul Devlin (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[115] Ellison, *Shadow and Act,* 234.

Although the Prologue depicts Invisible as the only presence in the hole, readers quickly realize that he is not truly alone. Invisible's group consists of phantasmic jazzy-blues people awaiting their "solo flight" in speculative space—"Under the spell of the reefer I [Invisible] discovered a new analytical way of listening to music."[116] In the "underworld of sound" he hears "an old woman singing a spiritual;" and "a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading…" on an auction block; he listens to a sermon from a pastor calling out to a congregation as they respond in validation. Invisible hear trumpets, tom-toms, footsteps, and trombone timbre, all sounding what he terms "the invisible music of my isolation." Each solo flight accompanies Armstrong's powerful question in the song: "What did I do to be so black and blue?" Armstrong *sounds* Invisible's trip by bending that "military instrument into a *beam* of lyrical sound [my italics]."[117] Interestingly, Ellison's original novel draft describes Armstrong's instrument as a mere object, not a beam: "…Louis bends that military instrument, the trumpet, into an object of lyrical sound."[118] Ellison's revision denotes something powerful in Armstrong's music, enabling sound to physically carry a load like a construction *beam* or a *beam* as a focused stream of illumination, traveling along a straight path. In both instances, Ellison allows us to see the power of music to carry energy and strength. Accordingly, this section is informed by the possibility of readers listening to Ellison's prose, to somehow "hear the silence of sound" and improvise within it.[119]

Specifically, I contend that Invisible models reconfiguration as an aspect of improvisation given his journey of identity loss, or more precisely, identity evasion. Here, I emphasize the jazz break as a reflection of the blues ethos of rupture and resilience—a brief and unaccompanied moment for creative assertion, much like speculative space as a brief moment of introspection. The blues tradition, with its reliance on various techniques to evoke emotion and spontaneity,

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[116] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 8.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid., 13.

directly influences the jazz break and the improvisational moments within it. These elements not only reflect black life in Invisible's world but also suggest the potential for speculative space as a site where trauma is reconfigured into resilience. Several factors contribute to my assertion regarding this transformative possibility: the implications of a tumultuous and chaotic migration era; creative imagining through improvised acts throughout Invisible's journey toward the underground and speculative space as a break; and an evolving depiction of black life as a byproduct of antagonistic relationships, addressed later in my analysis of the Liberty Paints scene of the novel. We must remember that Invisible's story is told in retrospect and within the break, that is, after he has experienced life's turmoil and realizes that he has something to riff upon.

Ellison uses an underground site in Harlem as Invisible's literal site for improvisation. The polytemporal possibilities in Invisible's hole are mediated through Armstrong's horn as a signal for Invisible's psychic excursion. Possibilities like Invisible's past, his understanding of the black struggle, and the potential of a future where he can exert leadership are encapsulated in Armstrong's sound. The Prologue of the novel is, therefore, a paradigm for the examination of improvisation, given Invisible's solo act of delving into the depths, or speculative space, under Armstrong's sound. At the outset, Invisible describes and personifies the "traditional materials" in the "peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I[nvisible] come[s] in contact."[120] Invisible explains his invisibility as a result of misrecognition, and though this establishes the appropriation of jazz and blues tropes to reify himself, he takes advantage of his invisibility to locate a space of protection. Moreover, according to literary critic Michael Germana, Ellison smartly projects his "belief that music can reveal intensities immanent to the present conditioned by the past but determinative of no particular future…"[121] In other words, the past influences and is interconnected with the present, and the future is not simply a continuation but emerges

[120] Ibid., 3.
[121] Germana, "Ellison's Durational View of Bebop," 211.

through creative reinterpretation of past possibilities. Improvisation, then, is also bound up with time as a new phenomenology of temporality—the study of how dimensions like space, memory, and music intertwine to shape subjective reality. Germana continues, "In Ellison's view, [this] propel[s] a new ontology of time that reopens the future to the dynamism immanent to the present."[122] Invisible relies on Armstrong's music to "make poetry out of being invisible."[123] His thrust into speculative space is a catalyst for and prompts the reader to follow him into the phantasmic realm.

Take, for example, how the syncopated language of improvisation describes Invisible's condition. The irregular meter in the following passage demonstrates Ellison's emphasis on the disjointed and fragmented nature of time, reflecting the disorienting experience of invisibility:

> 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's music [my italics].[124]

The OED defines syncopation as "the action of beginning a note on a normally unaccented part of the bar and sustaining it into the normally accented part, to produce the effect of shifting back or anticipating the accent; the shifting of accent so produced."[125] Ellison does this by describing an irregular flow of time, which mirrors how syncopation shifts the expected rhythm, with time stretching or compressing in unpredictable ways, much like how a syncopated note starts on an unaccented beat and lingers into the accentuated portion of the measure. The italicized phrases represent blues tropes that relate more broadly to Ellison's circular narrative. One example is the way Armstrong's music mimics Invisible's journey toward identity consciousness as it presents disjuncture as a defining feature. Put differently, improvisation figures through the fissures

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[122] Ibid., 211.
[123] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 8.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Oxford English Dictionary, *s.v. "syncopation (n.), sense 3.a,"* June 2024*, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8879405455.*

created in the disruption of the traditional twelve-bar blues tune—an arrangement that Blue's theorists like Giles Oakley claim is a standard blues form: "Ask almost any jazz or pop musician to play a blues and that's what you'll get— 'a twelve-bar blues.'"[126]

Additionally, Author Steven Tracy's take on what constitutes a blues novel is helpful. In his 2004 chapter titled, "The Blues Novel," he writes,

> The musical form of the blues roughly follows most frequently a 12-bar pattern with a chord progression of I-IV-V. Because the blues is an oral genre practiced in its earliest days for the most part by illiterate or semi-literate, informally trained musicians, performers frequently did not adhere to strict time boundaries but followed their own technique, intellect, or emotions in creating their blues patterns. Therefore, songs frequently tended toward the 12-bar length rather than rigidly following it.[127]

The blues offers a structure simple enough to allow for both skill and creativity. Ellison's narrative use of syncopation in relation to time conveys a blues mood by aligning with a blues philosophy as defined by Tracy, particularly in how the blues relate to the novel as a genre. He continues,

> Finally, the blues philosophy of endurance and hope is reflected in the many references to the horizon in the novel, particularly in looking for transcendence by transforming hardships into personal and artistic triumph.[128]

This is also the work of speculative space. Moreover, the call-and-response gesture given Armstrong's unanswered question about being black and blue, unites race with sentiment and offers the possibility of varied responses. According to Murray, the break in Louis's music is an opportunity to "'do your thing,'" offering an answer to Armstrong's question— "what did I do to be so black and blue."[129]

Considering Invisible's underground space as an expression of the black interior, it is possible to render Invisible's black body as (in)visible, that is, both present and absent, seen and

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[126] Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1976), 42.

[127] Steven Tracy. "The Blues Novel." from *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 132.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Murray, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 112.

unseen, simultaneously existing within the tensions of visibility and erasure. The underground space serves as a metaphor for this duality, wherein Invisible's black body can be both hidden from the oppressive gaze of society and profoundly expressive in its terms. This is another benefit of speculative space—the autonomy of anonymity. Invisible's invisibility allows for a subversive form of self-expression, a space from which he can reclaim autonomy and reshape his identity free from external classification. From this liminal space, Invisible's black body navigates the paradox of being hyper-visible in the outside world while internally experiencing a kind of freedom through an act of retreat and self-reflection: Invisible occupies speculative space underground to achieve liberation—he is otherwise *in the break* as he recounts his story.

The break becomes a site of transcendence for Invisible. It is within this literal underground turned figurative speculative space that Invisible can make sense of his journey and the world around him. I am suggesting we consider the idea that Invisible's final disposition in the underground basement is a space of introspection that nurtures the cultivation of resilience occurring in such a site. This requires the consideration of Invisible's journey throughout the novel as a manifestation of Murray's claim about improvisation, that one needs to tap into "the wisdom and mistakes of the ages."[130] If readers are to heed Invisible's advice to "look around," they might identify a realm of existence beyond category, a future where the past and present collide, depicting a path away from distress—this is the basement as the break.

Armstrong's song "What Did I do to be so Black and Blue?" is critical to this scene because it serves as a reflection of Invisible's blues as rendered by the tragicomic Louis Armstrong. Consider Armstrong's rendering: "Cold empty bed, springs hard as lead / Feel like Old Ned, wish I was dead / What Did I Do, To be so Black and Blue?"[131] In this verse, Armstrong

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[130] Ibid.

[131] Louis Armstrong, "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?" from *The Complete Louis Armstrong Decca Sessions (1935-1946)* recorded 1929, released 2009, Universal Music Group.

emphasizes the debilitating effect of racism as hopelessness. Notably, "Old Uncle Ned" is a minstrel song from 1848. It tells the story of enslaved people and their toil in the fields of their bondage. Armstrong uses the blues to resurrect Uncle Ned, while Ellison reimagines him in the Harlem hole. The song is representative of the very conundrum Invisible finds himself in as he describes his underground space as both a site of freedom and constraint:

> I was in a deep basement, full of shapeless objects that extended farther than I could see…Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning…There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I do to be so Black and Blue'—all at the same time.[132]

Invisible's melancholic yearning describes the impact of Armstrong's sound on the body.

In the pivotal study, *Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature,* Nicole Furlonge describes vibrational listening as a whole-body approach. This form of listening highlights the multimodal possibilities enabling Invisible to "slip into the breaks." This section builds on Furlonge's goal of understanding "how listening functions to perceive and interpret bodies, ideas, and aesthetics of race, gender, and class differences" by examining the benefits of speculative space on Invisible as a protagonist who best exemplifies improvisation.[133] I believe that it is this type of engagement that readers of African American literature must be attuned to, listening for pathways enabling entry into speculative space.

Another way of conceiving the importance of the improvisational moment for Invisible is to understand Fred Moten's conception of improvisation as a spacetime modality. He writes,

> Improvisation must be understood, then, as a matter of sight and as a matter of time, the time of a look ahead whether that looking is the shape of a progressivist line or rounded, turned. The shape and space of improvisation is constructed by and figured as a set of determinations *in and as light*, by and through the illuminative event. And there is no event, just as there is no action, without music.[134]

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[132] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8.
[133] Furlonge, *Race Sounds*, 2.
[134] Moten, Fred, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 64.

Moten's claim demonstrates the dynamic nature of improvisation; it implies intentionality as a factor of improvisation. Ellison's narrative strategy demonstrates this as Invisible transitions from scene to scene with a catalyst, most often through a character who responds to Invisible's potential. Moten's claim also suggests improvisation as a metaphor for light, itself a metaphor for knowledge. Moten toys with language to promote the idea that "improvisation is already an improvisation of improvisation…," otherwise implying that improvisation is a deliberate and transformative creation, an iterative process constantly remaking itself in response to what came before it while anticipating what comes next.[135] This recursive quality, coupled with Ellison's syncopated narrative technique, enables Invisible to notice opportunities to slip into the break, initiating a form of creative knowledge production—Invisible illustrates this when he accepts his invisibility, claiming, "Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see, I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa. And so, I play the invisible music of my isolation."[136]

Thus, reading the basement scene as an improvisational moment in the break, readers are reminded how *light* functions alongside music to foster introspection and revelation—1,369 lights in the case of Invisible. This is reminiscent of the cave scene in Plato's *Republic*, light can be blinding to subterranean occupants—they must adapt slowly, adopting Murray's take on improvisation to "do what you have to do."[137] Another key scene demonstrating how improvisation functions occurs when Invisible occupies his hole toward the end of the novel; he describes burning the contents of his briefcase to illuminate his path—"I moved slowly off, toward the darkness, lighting my way by these feeble torches."[138] Underground, darkness is an

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[135] Ibid.
[136] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 13.
[137] Murray, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* 111.
[138] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 568.

inaugural experience, a genesis of sorts, marked by Invisible's proclamation that the end is the beginning. Metaphorically, Invisible's obsession with light reveals his obsession with a knowledge of self. He proclaims, "Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form…The truth is the light and the light is the truth."[139] Spiritual in its authority, the declaration about light suggests Invisible's emphasis on seeing beyond his own Platonic shadow to ascertain *his* true purpose.

The tranquility of the basement and the shapelessness of objects therein imply a calmness that negates disorder as an overdetermined characteristic of Invisible's circumstance. In that basement, Invisible experiences speculative space as a transcendent moment. Moreover, Invisible's urge to physically feel the vibrations of music by playing multiple Armstrong recordings simultaneously, combined with his use of light as a metaphor for knowledge and reification, creates a state of sensory overload. Such a sonic environment fosters a polyphonic experience. Simply imagine Invisible attempting to set five recordings of Armstrong, initiating their play simultaneously. A newly muddled sound would emerge, yet over time, these looped recordings would eventually mesh, producing a new sound that cannot be anticipated.[140]

Time and space are frustrated within this new sound, and music aligns with improvisation as an embodied experience, an apt description of what happens when protagonists enter speculative space. By going underground, literally and figuratively, Invisible embodies the tension between stillness and motion, silence and noise, and order and chaos; he reflects the complexity of human experience in that confined space. This is the benefit of time spent in speculative space. Both figurative and literal sites enable resilience; additionally, speculative space enables pensive listening acts, allowing protagonists therein to attend to their mind's ear.

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[139] Ibid., 7.

They are attuned to their subvocal modalities, including bodily vibrations of sound, which Furlonge refers to as tactile listening.

Ellison's use of improvisation allows Invisible a space to work through the many tensions that ultimately facilitate his journey into the hole. A useful way of interpreting Ellison's narrative goal is to consider Furlonge's view that "listening in *Invisible Man* is a fully embodied strategy of sonic engagement imbricated in efforts to potentially sense a newly materialized and more fully realized racial identity."[141] I hope to build on her argument to show how this method is performed in speculative space.

Invisible describes this "new analytical way of listening" as he goes "into the depths" [speculative space] to explore improvisation's new thing: "So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music"—an underworld of sound and ancestry through vibrational listening as a catalyst for slipping into another world.[142] Invisible continues,

> 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 as Weltzchmerz 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: Brother and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness…"*[143]

What is interesting here is Ellison's use of sonic figurations, the italicized prose, to signal the tempo within the figurative journey through Invisible's speculative space. The *leaning* prose is an auditory expression invoking speed, cadence, and musical texture, given its description of descension.

Consider Invisible's disposition at the time of this slippage into speculative space. Just before lighting his hole with the 1,369 lights, he admits, "I began to scream, getting up in the

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[141] Furlonge, *Race Sounds*, 41.
[142] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 8.
[143] Ibid., 9.

darkness and plunging wildly about, bumping against the walls, scattering coals, and in my anger, extinguishing my feeble light."[144] It is as if Armstrong's music might render aid to calm Invisible, allowing him to acclimate to his surroundings. If Invisible had his way, the distorted sound rendered from five near-simultaneous recordings of Armstrong, the effects of his reefer, and the buzzing and heat from those lights function collectively to thrust him into a space of sonic imagination. I am reminded of Alice Walker's accusation that those who amplify music feel invisible.

Invisible's slippage initiates call-and-response as an element of vernacular musical tradition. As Invisible enters the lower level of his slippage into speculative space, he describes a church scene led by a presumable hooping preacher. The cognitive shift from the well-lit basement to a church sanctuary demonstrates the mesmerizing power of sound as a portal to spaces of refuge for black expression. Consider Invisible's lucid dream:

> *"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…"*

[144] Ibid., 568.

"It do…"
"It do, Lawd…"
"…an' it don't."
…
"Black will make you…"
"Black…"
"…or black will un-make you."[145]

Invisible recounts this sermon as a feature of his hallucination. He recalls that only the sound of Armstrong could shake him from "this underworld of sound," which alludes to the capturing power of rhythm and cadence in the call-and-response sermon. I cite this passage fully for two reasons: first, to demonstrate how call-and-response signals the validation of black being; the sermon itself is another form of the music of invisibility. Second, I show how Ellison employs improvisation to freshly render traditional vernacular form. As he writes in the 1986 essay "Going to the Territory," "I see the vernacular as a dynamic process in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations from which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves."[146] There is value in emphasizing Ellison's gesture toward newness because the possibilities are boundless for Invisible, especially given his time in speculative space.

The irony of Invisible's invisibility is its corollary—a simultaneously hyper-visible entity. The more one fades from view, the more their presence becomes undeniable, etched into the minds of those who choose not to see. As Moten puts it, "To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognized as the unrecognizable."[147] Ellison employs blues tropes as modes of expression for Invisible to be noticed and heard, by extension, he is a proxy for a broader society of invisible people. Thus, the congregation, including Invisible's phantasmic proxy "in the depths," constitutes an unrecognizable broader and black public. Both the reader

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[145] Ibid., 9.
[146] Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (Vintage International, 1987), 141.
[147] Moten, *In The Break, 68.*

and Invisible participate in the re-presentation of a black being, a Genesis story about that underworld congregation, which signifies black folks from the Antebellum and Jim Crow eras, respectively. The sermon brings forth the central problem of 20th-century black thought, blackness as the site of negation and possibility. The same is true in the depths, thus, Invisible's landing zone in the hole can be perceived as both an abyss and ground zero for revitalization—"In the beginning there was blackness. Under a red, bloody sun, Black—

> is
> ain't
> will get you
> won't
> will make you
> unmake you."[148]

In this new space, in the depths, in speculative space, Ellison's preacher offers a bluesy sermon, prompting a serious question about the transformative potential of blackness: Can it serve as both a site of collective survival and individual renewal? The preacher's words, steeped in the rhythms and contradictions of the blues, frame blackness as simultaneously generative and destructive—a force capable of making and unmaking, and affirming and denying. Invisible considers these possibilities in speculative space, triggered by Armstrong's horn and illuminated by light.

2.3 Optic White: The Darkness of Lightness

> *If, I thought, one could slow down his heartbeats and memory to the tempo of the black drops falling so slowly into the bucket yet reacting so swiftly, it would seem like a sequence in a feverish dream…I was so deep in reverie that I failed to hear Kimbro approach.*
> *'How's it coming?' he said, standing with hands on hips.*
> *'All right, sir.'*
> *'Let's see,' he said, selecting a sample and running his thumb across the board. 'That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and sound as the all mighty dollar! 'That's paint!' he said proudly. 'That's paint that'll cover just about anything!'*[149]

[148] Ellison, *Invisible Man, 9.*
[149] Ibid., 203.

This passage is taken from an important episode in Ellison's novel. It occurs during the second time Invisible goes underground to experience growth. Readers first glean Invisible's time underground in the "Prologue," when he slips into a figurative speculative space by smoking reefer while listening to Louis Armstrong. The second slippage takes place in Ellison's Liberty Paints episode when Invisible is ushered deep within the paint factory as a literal speculative space. My literal conception of this speculative space accounts for the many ways in which the cultural reproduction of the values of whiteness shapes societal structures, individual identities, and collective imaginations. These values, embedded in narratives of progress, dominance, and exclusion, permeate physical, social, and intellectual spaces, often constraining the possibilities for alternative modes of being and knowing. Speculative space, then, becomes a site for challenging these reproductions—where the cultural logic of whiteness can be disrupted, and new frameworks for understanding black existence and futurity can emerge.

Ellison pens this scene to critique the ideological forces acting on Invisible, while simultaneously illustrating his power therein. I read this episode as a solo act in a similar way that Murray discusses improvisation as indicated above, that is, by considering Invisible's experience in the factory as a song of transcendence. Regarding a blues aesthetic, Ellison's Liberty Paint's episode is both tragic and comedic. Tragic in its exemplification of the production of whiteness through characters whose work sustains hegemony—Ellison depicts them exaggerated in their roles as instruments of conformity. The comedic irony emerges as Invisible is physically forced into the role of subjugator, becoming a necessary but invisible part of the process and armed with the power to temporarily dismantle it.

Ironically, each chapter in *Invisible Man* functions as a type of solo act. It is as if Invisible band-hops to find his place in time and space, yet the wagon never stops, only slows for moments of egress. The sonic transport moves Invisible from his home in Oklahoma, through the southern college, to New York. Invisible's journey demonstrates a blues gesture in the form of

cyclical time and dissonance, both indicating that Invisible need not trust so quickly. His blues bandwagon is propelled by the search for identity, adhering to Harryette Mullen's observation of a "genetically illogical racial system requiring that racial identity be reduced essentially to a white/not-white binary, allowing the maintenance of a white center with not-white margins."[150] Mullens's observation suggests that by framing the racial system as inherently restrictive, those at the margins must find creative ways, like improvisation, to assert their identity. If the oppressive framework Invisible improvises within relies on whiteness as a normative center, then the blues is a product of its socializing alchemy.

Returning to Tracy,

> There are numerous ways the blues might be utilized in a novel…the reader must measure the elements the novel portrays against the use of elements in the blues tradition itself to determine how the novelist accepts, modifies, or alters the occurrence of those elements from the blues tradition in the novel, and why they are employed as they are.[151]

Ellison's Liberty Paints scene is a dramatization of the paradox of racial identity in America. Through Invisible's navigation of the factory, readers can confront the metaphorical interior of white supremacist production. Corresponding elements of the blues define his trek: the call-and-response structure of his interaction with foremen and union workers, the improvisational adaptation required for survival in a hostile environment, and the irony associated with black labor producing white paint, contributing to blues gestures like sorrow and transcendence. Invisible is both strengthened and debilitated by his experiences in the factory. Adam Gussow further describes this condition as he argues that a blues ethos is a strategy for coping with the worst life has to throw at you. He explains, the blues ethos "prefers to acknowledge the pain to

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[150] Harryette Mullen "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," *Diacritics*, Vol. 24 (1994): 73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/465165.

[151] Steven Tracy "The Blues Novel," 125.

evade suffering, whenever possible."[152] Ellison's ability to leverage his protagonist to critique broader societal problems places Invisible in harm's way for the sake of a broader public.

Ellison shows, through the Liberty Paints episode, how the illusion of purity and the erasure of black identity are central to the cultural machinery of whiteness. Ellison's episode is most significant in its critique of assimilation as a mechanical operation. The scene not only underscores the literal process of Invisible's trek underground but also demonstrates Ellison's attention regarding systemic racism and societal complacency.

Early in the novel, Invisible offers this explanation:

> It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was…I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself the questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man![153]

The journey of that discovery describes the many acts of deception inflicted upon Invisible. Ellison smartly employs the verb *boomeranging* to represent pain through a recursive, violent, and physical act of realization. Invisible's journey leads him through many moments of return given the knowledge of being manipulated time and time again. One of these boomeranging moments occurs when Invisible takes a job at the Liberty Paints Factory on Long Island. Upon discovering Dr. Bledsoe's intentions—that Invisible would never return to the college, and that those meant to support his success were conspiring against him—Invisible secures a job at the Liberty Paint Factory to safeguard his well-being.

Liberty Paints is Ellison's rendition of a site of production for whiteness, especially given its creation and distribution of Optic White paint, a kind of mask Ellison considers an

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[152] Adam Gussow, "Blues Expressiveness and the Blues Ethos," effective 11 February 2025, https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/blues-expressiveness-and-the-blues-ethos/

[153] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 15.

"inseparable part of the national iconography."[154] There is even a sign on the fictive factory that reads, "Keep America pure with liberty paints."[155] Initially, Invisible works for Kimbro, an anxious and task-oriented foreman. Kimbro teaches Invisible the process of blending the Optic White paint and allows him entry onto an assembly line to prepare the paint for distribution. The paint factory serves as a complex metaphor for race relations in America, and Ellison uses this to indirectly address the mechanical and systemic influence on American assimilation.

My interest in reading this scene is to explore the guiding forces instrumental in Invisible's literal entry into speculative space, to describe that site, and to identify how Invisible not only engages with it to identify the collision of trauma, joy, and struggle, but also to emphasize how cultural memory, introspection, and subversion intersect to create a new reality for Invisible, a future liberating him from his frustrated journey of identifying his humanness. While improvisation is crucial in highlighting Invisible's negotiation with racial and ideologically charged environments, the Liberty Paints scene best exemplifies how moments of temporal palimpsest require Invisible to grapple with a conflated past and present circumstance. Additionally, and in blues music more broadly, there is often a sense of circuitous time—a feeling that past trauma, joy, and struggle are not fully resolved but continue to resonate in the present. This sentiment aligns with the concept of a temporal palimpsest, where history is not erased but layered over, allowing the musician to engage with the weight of the past while simultaneously creating something new.

Ellison carefully depicts the fictional Long Island paint factory as a mechanical, racialized, and compartmentalized site of racial admixture. The Liberty Paint Factory's production of Optic White paint is arguably a parable depicting the production of whiteness. Such a claim implicates the paint producers in the formulation of white supremacy, even the black

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[154] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 48.
[155] Ibid., 196.

workers. The paradox of this scene lies in the idea that unblemished white paint requires a black elixir as the crucial ingredient to achieve purity and perfection. This ironic claim underscores the complex and often contradictory dynamics of race and identity, where elements considered opposite, or incompatible, are inextricably intertwined and dependent on one another. In addition to the irony of the attraction of opposites, the Liberty Paint scene combines two underdeveloped themes concerning speculative space.

First, Ellison demonstrates boomeranging, especially given Invisible's descent into the bowels of the factory as a metaphor for self-discovery and enlightenment, alienation and isolation, and loss and rebirth. In the paint factory, as a literal speculative space, Invisible participates in the production of Optic White paint and gains an understanding of the inner workings of both the production of the paint and the personalities essential in the alchemic creation. Ellison's narrative sleight of hand is a metaphor for the social construction and sustainment of race more broadly.

The Optic White paint is a symbol of dubious ideology and the production and distribution of it implies a deliberate and covert scheme of white supremacy. Notably, after realizing and disrupting the paint-ploy, Invisible is relegated further down into the depths of the factory, he admits to *falling* similarly as in the Prologue, only this time, stasis characterizes his descent: "It was a fall into [speculative] space that seemed not a fall but a suspension."[156] The suspension captures the essence of the blues when cyclical time prevails, collapsing past, present, and future into a single, indistinguishable flow. The following scene reads like a reflection from a blues musician, nervous to play for a white audience. Invisible recalls,

> All my movements seemed too slow, ran together…my eyes darting here and there through the room of tanks and machines and up the stairs so far away and hearing the clear new note arising while I seemed to run swiftly up an incline and shot forward with

[156] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 230.

> sudden acceleration into a wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness.[157]

Invisible's fall, as a state of suspension, mirrors the ability of the blues to fold time onto itself, where every descent into hardship is both a return to past struggles and a precursor to future growth. Just as a blues singer laments recurring suffering while simultaneously channeling the possibility of transcendence, Invisible's suspended fall is a moment of reckoning, wherein the weight of history and personal experience converge. *Black emptiness as a bath of whiteness* suggests a paradoxical transformation, where Invisible's descent into darkness—a metaphor for struggle, alienation, or negation—becomes a site of revelation and renewal. This is the moment of introspection that speculative space fosters. When Invisible is suspended, he mentions "sprawl[ing] in an interval of clarity…"[158] Seemingly helpless, Invisible suffers sharp pains before experiencing a flash of light sparking the realization that he "had lost irrevocably an important victory."[159] This imagery aligns with the blues aesthetic, where moments of profound sorrow often carry the seeds of resilience and creative expression. This cyclical pattern underscores Ellison's portrayal of identity, where moments of alienation and enlightenment repeat, layering over each other, much like a temporal palimpsest, never truly erased but always influencing the present reality.

The second theme concerning speculative space is the Liberty Paints factory itself. The plant extends underground and is both a site of resistance and a subterranean site of erasure. Two main characters appear in the factory: Kimbro, a white foreman intent on sustaining, without question, the paint production, and Lucius Brockway, a black furnace room engineer who claims that he is "the machine inside the machine."[160] Akin to an overseer, Kimbro has neither the power

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[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., 230.
[160] Ibid., 217.

nor the expertise to modify the process of paint mixture. Brockway, on the other hand, is Ellison's trickster; his treatment of Invisible demonstrates the inner strife of black folks concerning a separate and unequal social philosophy. Although Brockway occupies his layer in speculative space, his freedom is circumscribed and reduced to a single aspect of the paint production. Like the black elixir, he is instrumental in the process, yet he is also invisible. Specifically, and as sociologist George Yancy points out, Ellison's Liberty Paints scene "explores the dialectics of how whiteness is constructed through the reconstruction/negation of Blackness."[161] Thus, as Invisible is charged with producing Optic White paint—a chemical nonetheless, but the very exemplar of patriotism—he is complicit in sustaining white supremacy so long as he blindly adheres to his foreman's rules. Only through ignorance does Invisible realize his ability to sabotage production.

The paint factory is also a location of mechanization. Consequently, foremen like Kimbro urges workers like Invisible not to think about what they are doing, and to simply follow procedure. Efficiency is a key component of mechanization, therefore, the labor of Invisible, Kimbro, and Brockway are subordinated to the mass production of Optic White paint. This is important because the piecemeal production of the paint, by factory workers who operate in isolation, absolves any one person from the implications of its production. In another way, when the Optic White paint is applied to the monuments of Washington, DC., the black *dope,* and the black workers who helped produce its white sheen are invisible. The Liberty Paint Factory is bureaucratic in the way its operation sustains chaos, disorder, and the American myth— "'If It's Optic White, It's the Right White.'" Remarkably, Ellison echoes this phrase from black oral tradition to amplify the tradition of differences American institutions rely upon. The blues tune can also be attributed to blues musician Big Bill Broonzy:

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[161] George Yancy, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* Vol. 19, No. 4 (2005); 229.

If you're white, you'll be alright / If you're brown, stick around /
But if you're black, m-m-m brother, git back, git back, git back.[162]

Invisible understands this advice, having to "repress a laugh as a childhood jingle rang through…[his] mind: 'If you're white, you're right,…'"[163] Here again, Ellison entwines the blues with aspects of black life, a reminder of one's place in the black/white binary. The blues, in this case, figure as a warning for entry into speculative space in that the cultural aspects associated with the color of one's skin accompany them into speculative space. We've seen this in the church scene in the Prologue, where blackness looms like a shadow throughout the sermon. Readers now see this same effect in the Liberty Paints scene, especially given the strife in the factory, mediating the relationship between the black Union workers and engineers like Brockway.

Returning to the essay, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," Mullen argues that the production of Optic White paint is an "astute parable of the production of whiteness."[164] Invisible's role in this production suggests unconscious subversion as an improvisation act. As we will see, Invisible accidentally taints the Optic White paint by adding too much black elixir. This not only disrupts the mechanized process of paint production but also demonstrates the role black labor plays in sustaining or thwarting aspects of systemic racism. Again, drawing upon Murray's definition of improvisation, and considering Invisible's role in the paint production, he haphazardly does what he must do. Moreover, aspects of Ellison's boomeranging and sabotage characterize the Liberty Paint factory as a chaotic setting, one mirroring the basement scene in the Prologue. When Invisible arrives at the factory, he is accompanied, successively, by multiple foremen and an organization of hostile black workers

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[162] Big Bill Broonzy, "Get Back," recorded 1951, on *Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, released 1989.

[163] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 218.

[164] Mullen, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," 74.

before falling victim to physical violence in the form of a chaotic, disorienting, and mechanical injury. He is ushered deeper underground as he makes mistakes during the paint production.

At the outset, Invisible is charged with adding ten "glistening black drops" into the white paint, causing a chemical reaction, transforming the otherwise flat white paint into Optic White. Toying with light, in an early draft of the novel, Ellison called the paint lumière, French for light. This early revision indicates that Ellison may have been concerned with the same light blazing his path in the hole.[165] This light *beam* may also connect to sound given Invisible's earlier mention of Armstrong's horn as producing a sonic beam.

Ellison emphasizes the metaphor by employing the foreman Kimbro as a translator of the theme of racial admixture. After Invisible measures and mixes the paint, Kimbro inspects it, proclaiming, "That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the all mighty dollar! That's paint!...That's paint that'll cover just about anything!"[166] By connecting the Optic White paint to symbols of American patriotism, Ellison introduces binary opposition as a conundrum that Invisible must grapple with. The juxtaposition of the colors white and black, coupled with the ability to cloak eyesore, functions to equate whiteness as representative of the liberty espoused by the symbolic locale of the nation's capital and the destination of the Optic White paint—Washington, DC. The scene implies Ellison's belief in the hybrid nature of American prosperity and plight, in that the producers of whiteness include the poor white foreman Kimbro, the black and impressionable Invisible, the toothless black foreman Brockway, and a crew of Black Union workers.

This scene also clarifies Ellison's critique in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." In it, he discusses the trickster as an agent of disorder at the center of "order and chaos,

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[165] Ellison "Prologue," Box 146, Folder 4, REP. From Library of Congress, *The Ralph Ellison Papers, 1890-2007.*

[166] Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 202.

illusion and reality, nonentity and identity." This trickster personifies characters whose performance is the result of lived experiences navigating racialized structures. In their way, Kimbro, Lucius, Invisible, and the black Union crew constitute a theatrical ensemble, reflecting the implications of American identity regarding intramural aspects of race. Ellison is concerned, however, with how invisibility enables a trickster and the way whiteness is somehow a pantomime of the chaos presumed to be experienced by black folks. He writes,

> When the white man steps behind the mask of the trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell (for there is a mystery in the whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil and the evil of innocence, though being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the blues) and thus lose that freedom which, in the fluid, 'traditionless,' 'classless' and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone.[167]

The mystery concerning racial admixture presumes the vulnerability of both white and black people as possibly becoming representatives of the dogma that subjugates them; in other words, the cyclical nature of white supremacy relies on Kimbro, Brockway, and Invisible *writ* large.

Both Kimbro and Invisible are complicit, despite representing opposing subject positions concerning a clash of the racial epidermal schema— for Kimbro, compliance and efficiency are vital. Despite his instrumental role in the creation of the paint as a façade of power, he is concerned more with quantity. Kimbro represents mechanical efficiency at the expense of an ethical praxis. For Invisible, "racial meanings function in relation to specific social positionalities, that is, being black becomes indicative of ones inferior social, economic, political, and even geographical status."[168]

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[167] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 53.

[168] Seunghyun Song, "Bridging Epidermalization of Black Inferiority and the Racial Epidermal Schema: Internalizing Oppression to the Level of Possibilities," *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2017) 54.

Returning to Invisible's act of temporary palimpsest marks a relevant example of racial essentialism. As Invisible stirs the black droplets into the white paint, he slips into speculative space, unconsciously infusing the soon-to-be "Optic White" paint alongside deliberations of what edifices are truly worthy of a coat of that kind of liberty. He admits,

> I wondered if the same Liberty paint was used on the campus, or if this Optic White was something made exclusively for the government. Perhaps it was of a better quality, a special mix. And in my mind I could see the brightly trimmed and freshly decorated campus buildings as they appeared on spring mornings[…] The buildings had always had seemed more impressive because they were the only buildings to receive regular paintings; usually, the nearby houses and cabins were left untouched to become the dull grained gray of weathered wood[…] Like Trueblood's cabin, or the Golden Day…The Golden Day had once been painted white; now its paint was flaking away with the years, the scratch of a finger being enough to send it showering down[…] If, I thought, one could slow down his heartbeats and memory to the tempo of the black drops falling so slowly into the bucket yet reacting so swiftly, it would seem like a sequence in a feverish dream…I was so deep in reverie that I failed to hear Kimbro approach.[169]

Time in speculative space tends to temporarily enclose the occupant into a space of their imagination. Listening from this perspective is an act of introspection and Invisible's daze causes him to haphazardly produce the Optic White paint, simultaneously thwarting mechanistic efficiency. In other words, relying on Kimbro's compliment for symbolic fuel to produce whiteness: "Keep it up…And don't waste any time!"[170] Readers who notice Invisible's engagement with speculative space can aptly unite mechanistic efficiency with the façade, the presence of reality somehow looming within an introspective space only inhabited when Invisible slips into his daydream. This is important because the result of Invisible's daydream is the very reason he is ushered deeper into the paint factory. His initial success in efficiently mixing the paint gains Kimbro's trust and Kimbro's directive to "just do what you're told and don't try to think about it" causes Invisible to work faster.[171] As a result, he taints the pain by using the wrong

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[169] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 201.
[170] Ibid., 202.
[171] Ibid., 200.

elixir—Sabotage! Invisible has demonstrated the power to thwart what Ellison might have perceived as a dubious racialized construct—admixture.

Ellison offers a way out through descension, in that only through Invisible's process of introspection can possibilities of subversion and resistance take root. Consider what the Liberty Paint Factory and its Optic White paint signify. Both suggest a reliance upon standardization and uniformity, and both imply ideas of purity, independence, and romanticized ideas of freedom. Given that Optic White paint is used exclusively for the government, the manner of its production is aimed at serving a powerful institution. Ellison relied on a news headline from a 1952 edition of a Norfolk-Virginian-Pilot newspaper to reference how the "whitest paint available [is] used on [the] White House.[172] The emphasis on a superior and exclusive formula underscores the precision and care associated with industrial efficiency, suggesting an optimized product tailored for specific and influential users. Optic White becomes synonymous with purity. In Kimbro's terms, "That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig [another cloaking mechanism] and as sound as the all-mighty dollar! That's paint!"..." That's paint that'll cover just about anything!"[173] Other phrases: "Only buildings to receive regular paintings," "flaking away with the years," and "scratch of a finger being enough to send it showering down," imply the frailty and ease with which a superficial cover can be stripped away, revealing reality underneath, in the depths.[174]

What follows is Invisible's unconscious sabotage by dropping another form of "dope" into the white paint. The use of "dope" is important here because this is the term Kimbro gives to the black droplets, a signifier of toxicity—the production of whiteness, with a taint of dope suggests an inherent evil at play—the production of whiteness relies on *dope* to sustain the cover-

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[172] Ellison "Paint Factory," Box 145, Folder 15, REP. From Library of Congress, *The Ralph Ellison Papers, 1890-2007.*

[173] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 202.

[174] Ibid., 201.

up. Ellison's parable at Liberty Paints highlights a long-standing American myth, presuming white superiority and purity as connotating liberty, prosperity, and freedom. The white foreman Kimbro, the toothless uneducated engineer Brockway, and the collective black Union workers of the factory coalesce to unravel the American myth.

As Brockway justifies his over two decades of working underground in the plant, he proclaims, "I been studying this machinery for over twenty-five years…They got all this machinery, but that ain't everything; *we the machines inside the machine.*"[175] Brockway is completely aware of his role in the production of whiteness, however, the paradox here lies in the manner of the juxtaposition of his indispensable role in the production of the factory's famous white paint with his marginalized position within the company and society. Like the droplets of black dope, Brockway's contribution is invisible and simultaneously essential. Mullen explains,

> The American myth may rely for its potency on the interdependent myths of white purity and white superiority, but the invisible ones whose cultural and genetic contributions to the formation of American identity are covered up by Liberty White, those who function as machines inside the machine, know that no pure product of America, including the linguistic, cultural, and genetic heritage of its people, has emerged without being influenced by over three hundred years of multiracial collaboration and conflict.[176]

Indeed, Brockway is a troubled Ellisonian trickster whose self-preservation hinges on the belief that his deep knowledge of the machine grants him agency within it. Brockway is ostracized by the black Union workers and consigned to the basement as a traitor. Even the utterance of his name by Invisible to the Union initiates an interrogation of subversion: "'Get him the hell out of here'" one of the Union brothers demands. "Throw him out!...He looks like a dirty fink to me. A first-class enameled fink!"[177]

Confused by accusations of practicing *Fickism*, Invisible seems disordered and simultaneously trapped in the chaos. Experiencing this type of interrogation during a lunch break

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[175] Ibid., 217.
[176] Mullen, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," 74.
[177] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 220.

causes Invisible to question his presence: "Why hadn't I simply left…why hadn't I *said* something, defended myself?"[178] The triangulated relationship between Kimbro, Brockway, and the Union centers Invisible within an intra-racial quarrel of respectability politics and radicalism. Brockway explains,

> 'Cause them young colored fellers up in the lab is trying to join that outfit [Union]. Here the white man done give 'em jobs,'…He done give 'em *good* jobs too, and they so ungrateful they goes and joins up with that back biting union! I never seen such a no-good ungrateful bunch. All they doing is making things bad for the rest of us![179]

Readers may take for granted the continual and disjointed mentorship Invisible has received up to this point of the novel. Ellison depicts several older men as advisors for Invisible, each with their philosophy of upward mobility and survival.

What follows is a physical quarrel with Brockway and an act of sabotage—Brockway tricks Invisible by convincing him to pull a lever, activating "a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension… [Invisible] seemed to sprawl in an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery…And in that clear instant of consciousness, I opened my eyes to a blinding flash."[180] Indeed, light confirms Invisible's reality, and this particular boomeranging marks a turning point in the novel. Under the flash, Invisible "seemed to exist in some other dimension, utterly alone," he recalls, "A terrible sense of loneliness came over me…I realized that I no longer knew my own name.."[181] He proclaims,

> I am an Invisible Man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand because people refuse to see me.[182]

> …I am an *invisible* man. Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which I originally started.[183]

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[178] Ibid., 224.
[179] Ibid., 228.
[180] Ibid., 230.
[181] Ibid., 239.
[182] Ibid., 3.
[183] Ibid., 573.

The result of time spent in speculative space is clarity. For Invisible, the descent described in the Liberty Paint scene is similar to the descent into the depths in the Prologue. In both instances, Invisible emerges with more clarity. In the Prologue, after coming out of the speculative space while listening to Louis Armstrong, Invisible explains, "…this familiar music had demanded action…I know now that few really listen to this music."[184] After the fall in the Liberty Paints Factory, Invisible observes, "I stopped, looking at the buildings down the bright street slanting with sun and shade. I *was* no longer afraid."[185]

I have tried to render Invisible's journey into the depths as a response to sound and blues elements. The episodic descent into speculative space is one way to ascertain the low frequency Ellison leaves readers equipped to hear at the end of the novel. And since his novel hinges on a cyclical narrative, demonstrating how the end is the beginning, I implore readers to become listeners, taking Ellison's novel seriously as sonic propulsion and a medium through which to enter speculative space to empathize with Invisible.

In closing, exploring both the literal and figurative notions of speculative space in the Prologue and the Liberty Paints Factory reveals the potential for resistance and transcendence through resilience, which emerges as a product of introspection within speculative space. Invisible must go through those episodic disappointments to truly understand that he spends far too long searching for the very agency he already possesses. The deeper Invisible goes, the broader his perspective, lighting the way toward self-consciousness. I am deliberate in my omission of critiquing aspects of the Brotherhood, or Ellison's relationship with Mary Rambo toward the goal of explaining speculative space. Those episodes highlight political and gendered

[184] Ibid., 12.
[185] Ibid., 249.

perspectives beyond the scope of this chapter, however, questions about the glaring absence of women in Ellison's novel, save Mary Rambo, exist: who is the invisible woman?

Perhaps Toni Morrison explains as she describes jazz women as Harlemites who surely and fictionally might have performed their solos in proximity to Invisible's hole in the ground. Morrison's *Jazz* performs similar work as Ellison's yet takes readers into a speculative space propelled through a Great Migration via jazz tropes and solo acts. Playing with the bandwagon, like Ellison, Morrison pushes the locomotive backward to demonstrate what is lost given a departure from the agrarian south to the City as a means of upward mobility. Like the blues for Ellison, Morrison's jazz plays in the dark too.

3. Toni Morrison's Modal Jazz and Speculative Space

Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz* is a quintessential example of the way literature can replicate musical structure. The title of Morrison's novel signals a reliance on jazz music as a genre known for its relationship with African American culture and sentiment, especially given how its sound signifies the fluidity and spontaneity of human emotion and experience. Through its improvisational nature, call-and-response dynamics, and intricate interplay between the individual and the collective, jazz music mirrors the complexities of life by facilitating a confrontation with unresolved tension, discordant harmonies, and a sense of freedom. These sonic benefits allow for the constant reinterpretation of experiences and innovation given the new realities jazz music invokes. In short, jazz is a sonic manifestation of the complexity of being, and in Morrison's novel, the influence of the musical genre helps reveal vulnerability as a product of life's many uncertain factors.

Jazz explores the tension associated with factors such as fragmentation, mobility, ancestral trauma, and aspects of rootlessness common in black migrant experiences. The 20th-century Great Migration serves as the novel's historical backdrop, depicting Morrison's characters in situations where their freedom of movement and opportunity clash under the weight of systemic oppression and personal trauma. In *Jazz,* Morrison offers a language that functions as music to preserve stories. The novel serves as a soundtrack of suffering and transcendence while conveying various structures of feeling comprising its distinct modal jazz framework. *Jazz* is a novel that thrives given such a narrative strategy because through modal jazz Morrison can relinquish control of her literary ensemble to an unnamed narrator, whom I refer to as Jazz throughout this chapter. Morrison successfully fuses literature and music to examine a tragic love story through Jazz as a metaphorical ensemble lead. The unnamed and ungendered narrator *sounds* jazz as more than an expansive musical genre; the form serves as an amplification of a cohort of characters in the novel. In other words, the novel's use of modal jazz as a distinctive

jazz form creates a speculative space for its characters to navigate tension in their pursuit of a state of renewal. Such authorial ambition deviates from the conventional resolution typically expected in the novel as a genre. Thus, Morrison's divergence facilitates entry into speculative space for the novel's characters.

Specifically, I am interested in how Jazz articulates the jazzy-blues story through a modal jazz compositional framework, especially given how numerous character perspectives collide to depict the past as a contributing factor in their present circumstances. According to jazz pianist and music theorist Keith Walters, "modal compositions called into question many of the fundamental assumptions about harmonic progression by suppressing or abandoning functional harmony…and by replacing standard harmonic progressions with different harmonic possibilities."[186] Many of Morrison's novels function this way, but *Jazz* best demonstrates the range of harmonic possibilities by denying any movement toward traditional resolution in the novel genre. Harmony is the "combination of parts or details in accord with each other, so as to produce an aesthetically pleasing effect…"[187] In jazz music, when a chord moves from dissonance to consonance, or from an unstable sound to a more stable one, resolution is achieved; the progression from tension to stability describes resolution as a destination. This understanding is essential in my reading of Morrison's *Jazz* because her narrative strategy depends on fragmented versions of a tragic murder plot in jazz-like solo acts that comprise the chapters. There is no clear and progressive movement toward stability in the novel, but rather reconciliation—a means of creating melody by finding a way to make each character's solo act compatible or harmonious. Thus, the novel assumes a modal jazz compositional form that contributes to consonant harmony, wherein the novel relies on character solos to demonstrate

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[186] Keith Waters, "What is Modal Jazz?" *Jazz Educators Journal* 33, no. 1 (07, 2000): 53-55.

[187] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "harmony (n.), sense 3," September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1075083040.

pitch, each solo working in harmony toward reconciliation and renewal as opposed to resolution. In other words, Morrison's *Jazz* refuses a progressive linear narrative, utilizing modal jazz tropes like improvisation, call-and-response, and consonant harmony to demonstrate how a confrontation with varied forms of tension yields reconciliation. By this, I mean that the narrative tension resolves like a jazz composition, where each solo act emerges, intertwines, and harmonizes to reveal deep linkages in soloist experiences.

I rely on the modal jazz compositional framework to read *Jazz* because Morrison's denial of a standard harmonic progression best imitates the modal jazz form. According to Walters, the term modal refers to "the association of a seven-note scalar collection (the mode) for each harmony, providing a source of pitches for improvisation."[188] Pitch influences the appeal of both modal jazz and Morrison's narrative form in *Jazz*. The technique relies on tonal variations to build meaning, tension, and emotional depth. A simple example of this is seen by distinguishing characters by the tone of their narrative voice, their tonal shifts and how pacing shapes meaning.

Throughout the novel, the plot is described in multiple voices and likened to different instruments like a jazz ensemble. Morrison's chapters function as solo acts, mirroring improvisation; in this way, motifs shift and contribute to collective harmony. The freedom the modal jazz form allows enables soloists to improvise as they choose. The approach also allows for greater harmonic freedom as soloists can explore musical mode—Morrison's plot—over extended sections of a composition—chapters as solo acts. In this case, Morrison's novel mimics a modal jazz composition wherein each chapter functions as a solo act engaging in free play. Therein, each chapter contains distinguishing pitches and contributes to overall harmony.

The plot of the novel can easily mimic a modal jazz vamp; the plot is fluid, improvisational, and centered around a single mood. A modal jazz vamp is a short and repetitive

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[188] Waters, "What is Modal Jazz?," 1.

melodic phrase based on a single mode. In Morrison's *Jazz*, the narrative structure functions like a vamp in that it revolves around recurring themes set forth on the first page of the novel. A modal vamp stays centered on one tonal area, providing a stable backdrop, allowing for freedom in melody—this is the tragic-murder plot and its varied interpretations throughout the novel. In this case, the opening mood is somber given the death of Dorcas as summarized on the first page of the novel. Just as a modal jazz vamp may foreshadow its arrangement, a plot summary of similar features offers insight into the novel.

Morrison's *Jazz* is the second work in a trilogy alongside *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1997). The novel opens with the story of Joe Trace and the result of his affair with 18-year-old Dorcas. Dorcas's murder by the hand of Joe propels the narrative into a spectacle of discovery. Joe's wife, Violet Trace, is understandably distraught and relies on neighborhood women to vent her frustration. Throughout the novel, the unnamed narrator, Jazz, guides readers back in time, depicting the story of Joe and Violet before they met in the rural south and after they moved to the City in the north. This recapitulation of the Great Migration invokes the ancestral history of Joe and Violet, revealing an entangled web of factors leading to efforts to right past suffering and ultimately the death of Dorcas. In the end, Dorcas's memory functions as a gulf between Joe and Violet; it also creates space for intermediaries like Felice and Malvonne, friends of Dorcas and Violet, respectively, to help mediate and mend their marriage.

Much like *Invisible Man*, *Jazz*'s structure assumes a circular narrative, Morrison is deliberate in her depiction of how the past shapes the future. Throughout the novel, each character is given time to offer their perspective on other characters and the cause of Dorcas's murder. Jazz facilitates this exchange in the manner of a band leader so that in the end, readers understand the totality of the circumstances leading to Joe and Violet's reconciliation. The novel functions as a musical gesture in that it reflects a rhythmic structure that conveys spontaneity and individuality. The recurring jazz aesthetic in the novel acts as a constant and repeating theme,

providing emotional resonance throughout the novel. Much like how the murder-plot functions as a vamp to create a harmonic foundation in jazz, Morrison's novel offers space for characters to explore complex emotions. I contend such space is speculative because, through deep introspection, each character's perspective works toward reconciliation and harmony.

Morrison's *Jazz* can easily be deemed "something likened to music by virtue of its beauty or charm, or the pleasure which it produces."[189] She easily demonstrates aesthetic aspects of the narrative through her use of language, voice transitions, vivid descriptions, and clarity in the shifting of narrative flow. Many scholars juxtapose Morrison's work with Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, "Flamenco Sketches" to be exact, as an exemplar of modal jazz.[190] In a figurative context, *Jazz* is much like a sonic composition and may appeal to readers interested in the interplay of literature and music through its introspective and imaginative narrative, intricate character development, and a collision of identity factors like memory, trauma, love, and community. I hope that readers of this chapter, and Morrison's *Jazz*, understand the power of replicating jazz characteristics through compositional form in literature; particularly the way Morrison relies on jazz form as a catalyst to depict ancestral history, trauma, and memory as constituent factors in aspects of mobility like the Great Migration.

It is also my hope that readers understand how the novel moves toward a better understanding of speculative space as a site of introspection and renewal for Morrison's characters. The musicality of her prose ushers them into speculative space and functions in the novel to enable their understanding of *how* their respective past, present, and imagined future(s) intertwine, offering a framework for healing and reimagining identity construction. This space, shaped by rhythm and resonance, allows characters to confront trauma, reconcile memory with

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[189] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "music (n.), sense II.8.a," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8158126704.

[190] Waters, "What is Modal Jazz?," 1.

desire, and envision possibilities beyond the constraints of their immediate reality. Through this interplay, the novel demonstrates how speculative space becomes a sanctuary for transformation, where introspection fuels renewal and the act of imagining becomes a radical form of resistance and hope.

This chapter builds on existing scholarship concerning the relationship between music and literature. Notably, Chad Jewett's 2015 essay, "The Modality of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," introduces a clarifying critique about the way readers might better understand Morrison's work by reading it through a modal consideration. Jewett argues for the acknowledgment of aspects of modal jazz in Morrison's work to better understand her narrative strategy as a replication of the genre of jazz itself. My interest in his claim moves beyond technical observations to explore how a modal jazz structure enables entry into speculative space for Morrison's characters. Specifically, this chapter examines how Morrison replicates the structure and characteristics of modal jazz through solo acts that take advantage of free improvisation. Facilitated by musical language, this repetitive technique guides characters into unique speculative spaces: for Joe, recollections of abandonment and his cognitive search for love; for Violet, a fear of abandonment and dispossession, especially given the suicidal death of her mother and her absent father; for Dorcas, a rebellious sentiment, specifically resulting from the death of her parents in the East St. Louis riots. This triangulated relationship constitutes Morrison's ensemble, suitable for orchestration by the omniscient unnamed narrator, Jazz.

As a jazz gesture, the novel employs modal jazz elements such as freedom in improvisation and extended *literary* solos to navigate the unresolved tension resulting from Dorcas's murder. Through a combination of perspectives, readers glean a perspective of Joe's actions through several retrospective accounts of his, Violet's, and Dorcas' life. This technique fosters introspection and collective harmony within the characters as a triad of the novel by explaining aspects of trauma as stimuli for subsequent action. In some way, the characters must

experience trauma-bonding to cope. In their solos or speculative spaces, we learn about other women, like the noisy neighbor Malvonne, Dorcas's friend Felice, and her aunt Alice Manfred. Readers learn about Violet's mother Rose Dear and her grandmother True Belle. Readers also learn of Joe's abandonment by his mother, Wild, as she leaves with Golden Gray—the mixed-race child of Vera Louis, raised by Violet's grandmother True Belle. If this all seems disorienting, it is intentionally so. In modal jazz, tonality functions as an open, flexible framework that prioritizes harmonic exploration. In other words, Morrison structures *Jazz* with a similar openness, allowing narrative shifts, character perspectives, and temporal disjunctions to create a fluid, improvisatory storytelling experience. A common example of this is Miles Davis's "So What." The song is based on just two chords. Instead of frequent chord changes, improvisation can occur within the same tonal space. Tonal space refers to the range of pitches within which the improvisation takes place.

For Morrison's *Jazz*, every chapter initiates a new improvisation wherein each character reacts to the plot as a single mode. Their voices signify distinct tonalities. By reacting differently to a single mode, tension can build through clashing tones and pitch; however, tension is resolved through shifting tonality and rhythm. Specifically, Morrison relies on modal jazz structure to set two distinct tonalities, past and present, rendering each character's story as a binary and fragmented segment—a rural past and present city tonality, respectively. A rural tonality evokes the sounds and storytelling of America's countryside—particularly the blues, gospel, and folk traditions instrumental in the development of jazz. A city tonality induces the sound of jazz and bebop—energetic, complex, and constantly moving. Throughout Morrison's novel, readers experience both resonances.

As mentioned, the novel's tragic yet exploratory love story resists a linear progressive narrative and traditional narrative resolution— such resistance is a hallmark of modal jazz. The narrator, Jazz, embodies the essence of jazz itself, they orchestrate each solo act within a larger

ensemble of characters, producing a layered and immersive narrative. At its core, I argue, speculative space enables characters to confront the trauma of their experiences introspectively. Those adolescent experiences are manifested and mediated through solo acts as micro-novels. Again, in *Jazz*, harmony emerges not from resolution, but from navigating the tension between the past and present in speculative space, thereby opening pathways to reimagined selfhood and collective identity. Additionally, this revelation is a benefit of listening while reading, facilitating a similar effect for the novel's reader as an audience member.

And so, while Jewett focuses on resisting composition and favoring improvisation as the primary link between *Jazz* and aspects of modal jazz, I emphasize how speculative space emerges as a product of such resistance through improvisation.[191] Morrison crafts her narrator, Jazz, as an organizing force by blending their omniscience with spontaneity, mirroring a bandleader of a jazz ensemble. Rather than narrate the story based on traditional standards of the novel, especially given the typical progressive character development toward a conclusion or resolution, Jazz offers no chronological story. There is no conflict-resolution scheme, and no consistent narrative perspective guiding the story and chapter structure. Jazz quickly sets the melody of the novel by succinctly depicting the murder plot in the first paragraph of the novel's jazz vamp. The remainder of the story is told from multiple perspectives, from characters who constitute the literary ensemble. As mentioned, the chapters function as micro-novels given their complete isolation from the matter that precedes and follows them. Additionally, many of the solo acts are separated by a blank page, signifying a jazz-like break—a disjuncture upon which to improvise. The solo acts in the break represent the speculative space Jazz sets for its characters to enter—those spaces serve as multidimensional sites where memory and trauma collide, explaining the novel's triad—Joe, Violet, and Dorcas. So how exactly does this work? How might we better

[191] Chad Jewett, "The Modality of Toni Morrison's *Jazz,*" African American Review, Vol. 48, No. 4 (African American Review, 2015) 445.

understand Jazz's orchestration as leading toward speculative space? Revisiting Albert Murray's explanation of improvisation is helpful, the creative and spontaneous process can offer a handrail toward speculative space. Improvisation, like speculative space, "is something that not only conditions people to cope with disjuncture and change but also provides them with a basic survival technique that is commensurate with and suitable to the rootlessness and the discontinuity so characteristic of human existence in the contemporary world."[192] Jazz understands this, and they orchestrate the ensemble accordingly.

3.1 A Jazz Ensemble

Jewett's modal analysis of *Jazz* gestures toward Morrison's narrative form as a deliberate and successful attempt to employ jazz as a catalyst that functions as "a constituent of racial identity at the level of emotional reaction."[193] Any modal consideration of *Jazz* must also account for how the novel structures its guiding tonalities or the way the novel establishes its emotional and thematic atmosphere, especially given the rural south and Harlem as Ellisonian *nowhere* sites. My use of tonality refers to the shifting ambiance of the city and rural settings in the novel. Thus, the city and the southern rural landscape, respectfully, establish parameters for character solo acts. For example, landscapes such as the woods enable Joe to *trace* or hunt for aspects of his past; he suffers the implications of mobility and trauma by way of the novel's musical language as he transitions from a rural to an urban setting.

The predominant element of modal jazz I am most concerned with is improvisation as an enabling mechanism. Modal improvisation is rooted in jazz theory and offers a flexible and expansive framework for creating music. The musicality of *Jazz* adheres to such a framework as the plot departs from a rigid structural framework and depends on modulations conveying

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[192] Murray, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 113.
[193] Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz,* 15.

character perspective. Just as chord progressions in jazz establish the harmonic context for a jazz performance, Morrison's modal jazz structure creates a narrative context for Jazz as an omniscient and unnamed narrator. Freedom within solo acts allows Jazz to yield their time and perspective to other characters, fashioning unexpected voice transitions and a deeper understanding of the collective harmony by combining solo acts as each character tells their story.

This polytemporal and multi-perspective narrative approach is immediately evident in the opening lines of the novel. Unconventionally, the plot is revealed early and serves as a melody for the remainder of the story. Readers arguably assume a musical audience perspective as a call-and-response gesture initiates the story's vamp:

> Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl [Dorcas] with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church…But like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl. There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it…the man who killed her [Joe] cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.[194]

Jewett refers to the novel's opening melodic riff as "bars," acknowledging the musicality and possibilities of the prose. By opening the novel as a jazz riff, Joe and Violet are situated to offer their perspective of Dorcas's killing. They describe the events leading up to the murder and explain how and, perhaps, why the murder occurred in the first place.

The call-and-response gesture is the key note for other characters to riff upon. I am fascinated by the "Sth" gesture opening the novel; it is as if Jazz shares a secret with readers by soliciting trust. The language Morrison employs require keen listening on the part of the reader. Nicole Furlonge describes this practice as a desire of African American writers whose language is liberated from traditional structures of composition. Given a sensory-rich novel like *Jazz*, I want

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[194] Morrison, *Jazz*, 3.

to draw upon Furlonge's experience teaching it. She describes her students' encounter with the novel, specifically concerning the word "Sth," as a debilitating signifier:

> They inevitably attempt to say the sound on the page or ask me how to read it and what it means. They also see this word and assume that it is a sound, something meant to be heard aloud, but one that they are not sure how to say…'Sth' pauses them in their reading tracks.[195]

Decoding print language in this way means responding to the narrator's call to listen. "Sth" invokes gossip, and gossip relies on embellishment, requiring listeners to trust and contribute to the hearsay. When Morrison opens with such a gesture, readers are curious to learn more about *how* and *why* Dorcas was killed. Readers might also be inclined to interpret the term on its merit. Morrison's strategic use of language yokes the reader to the narrator and the reader, as the ensemble's audience, is therefore implicated.

Since the plot of the novel appears in totality on the first page, the remaining chapters operate like jazz suites—interconnected movements toward the central theme of Dorcas's murder. Instead of a linear progressive narrative, Morrison takes readers into the depths of ancestral history to explain the backstory of Joe Trace, Violet Trace, and Dorcas. Additional characters constitute figures whose actions occur in the speculative space Jazz facilitates for the threesome.

The triangulated relationship between Joe, Violet, and Dorcas is akin to a rhythm section in a jazz band, that is, their interactions sustain the cadence of the novel. I liken their perspectives to solo acts because each chapter reflects specific characters as ensemble members who understand their roles in the collective and discordant experience of coping—they respond to the initial riff—the murder ballad set by Jazz—and quickly yield to other characters as bandmates. Listening to each character's solo act is the aim of my project. Through pensive listening to solo acts in the novel, it is possible to identify moments where characters engage with speculative space. Consequently, readers can gain a deeper and more immersive understanding of Morrison's

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[195] Furlonge, *Race Sounds*, 4.

characters as versions of themselves. In this way, the novel performs similarly to a jazz number—that is, it keeps you guessing while facilitating a sensory experience.

3.2 Solo Acts in Speculative Space

3.2.1. Violet as a Jazz Woman

Violet's speculative space emerges, in part, through the narrator's voice and the gossip of jazz women who reflect the improvisational, fluid, and deeply expressive nature of jazz music. The jazz women in the novel function as a kind of choral ensemble, seamlessly weaving their perspectives into the narrative. Violet is a jazz woman, described as a child of suicide: "…hard to please and quick to believe no one loves [her] because [she is] not really here."[196] Jazz depicts her as a silent and despondent spouse, and throughout the novel, she wanders around in a daze as the public pities her because they know that her husband cheats with Dorcas. Jazz recalls, "Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks…She didn't use to be that way. She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician."[197]

The gossip from other jazz women, much like improvisational riffs in jazz music, creates a layered texture that amplifies Violet's inner world and emotional landscape. These jazz women— "women who wake in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea and don't care what she has done" contribute to the sounds that facilitate Violet's entry into speculative space as a site of envy and disgust regarding Joe's affair with Dorcas.[198] Jazz claims,

> They are all like that, these women. Waiting for the ease, the space that need not be filled with anything other than the drift of their own thoughts. But they wouldn't like it. They are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down…They fill their minds and hands with soap and repair and dicey confrontations because what is waiting for them, in a suddenly idle moment, is the seep

[196] Morrison, *Jazz*, 4.
[197] Ibid., 23.
[198] Ibid., 14.

> of rage…Or else, into a beat of time, and sideways under their breasts, slips a sorrow they don't know where from.[199]

Note the musicality of the language as it denotes how the melody is infused into literature as a catalyst for speculative space. In the passage above, the women "waiting for ease" could refer to improvisational opportunities representing freedom of expression, to "drift" or riff as desired. In other words, speculative space is ubiquitous. When Jazz observes, "into the beat of time…slips a sorrow they don't know where from," they imply the relationship between melancholia and music. Throughout the novel, Morrison navigates jazz in a narrative strategy that depicts Violet's sorrow through a literary tonality sounding the blues as sentiment. In this way, speculative space helps contain the rage she harbors from her husband's infidelity.

In fact, after the murder-plot vamp, Jazz explains Violet's first slip into speculative space as she curls another woman's hair:

> These women always need their hair done, and sometimes pity darkens their shiny eyes and they tip her [Violet] a whole dollar.
> 'You need to eat you something,' one says to her. 'Don't you want to be bigger than your curling iron?'
> 'Shut your mouth,' says Violet
> 'I mean it,' says the woman…'Men wear you down to a sharp piece of gristle if you let them.'
> 'Women,' answers Violet. 'Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It's these little hungry girls acting like women. Not content with boys their own age, no, they want somebody old enough to be their father. Switching round with lipstick, see-through stockings, dresses up to their you-know-what…'
> 'That's my ear, girl! You going to press it too?'
> 'Sorry. I'm sorry, Really, really sorry.' And Violet stops to blow her nose and blot tears with the back of her hand.[200]

This exchange is an example of a sacred conversation between women within a community hub. Hairdressers are sometimes privy to gossip and information regarding the locals in the community, only in this case, Violet is the subject of the community's interest. The conversation

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[199] Ibid., 16.
[200] Ibid., 14.

takes place *after* Dorcas is shot, and *after* Violet attempts to disfigure Dorcas's face in the funeral scene of the opening chapter.

In the passage above, there is a remarkable interplay between the blues as a sentimental conveyor of sorrow and jazz as a seductive signifier of resilience and improvisation. On one hand, the rhythm contained in Violet's description of Dorcas signifies the blues as Violet's plea; the blues after all is deeply expressive. On the other hand, a jazz aesthetic predominates Violet's envy as she characterizes "little hungry girls" as akin to lewd aspects of jazz music—sexual undertones, transgression, and bodily expression mirror how jazz is historically associated with sensuality. The "switching round," "see-through stockings," and "their you-know-what" signify the sensuality and fieriness of jazz music. The sound of Violet's blues causes her to burn her client's ear with the curling iron. As Violet speaks about Dorcas, she slips into speculative space and begins to cry. Violet's voice is the sound that troubles her, and as a result, she burns her client's ear, the very receptor of the sound itself. Violet is cautioned about this circumstance as her client warns, "You're in trouble…Deep, deep trouble."[201] This is the kind of depth where speculative space exists—deep. Violet doesn't literally descend into the depths like Invisible does in the Liberty Paint factory, rather, she engages in communicative acts of "low frequency" as internalized introspection.

In addition to Violet's own words causing her to slip into speculative space, other stimuli trigger entry too. Jazz explains, "When she [Violet] isn't trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl's [Dorcas's] hair; when she isn't cursing Joe with brand-new cuss words, she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head… she wonders what color were Dorcas's eyes."[202] Jazz's voice shifts abruptly, transitioning from Violet speaking in the apartment doing hair to Jazz explaining Violet's behavior. This spontaneous and back-and-forth

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[201] Ibid., 15.
[202] Ibid.

dynamic builds emotional intensity and comments on the vamp as a call-and-response gesture. One way to examine Violet's solo is to consider it as a blues gesture, especially given Violet's characterization as despondent and coupled with an obsession with Dorcas: "For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality, the girl's memory is a sickness in the house—everywhere and nowhere."[203] Dorcas's picture likely is enough to propel Joe and Violet into speculative space.

Early in the novel, readers learn that Dorcas's picture sits atop a mantle in the Trace home. There is no explanation as to why her photograph is centerstage on the mantle, but Morrison's use of this symbolism implies a *Beloved*-like haunting. Jazz describes the Trace apartment as akin to a funeral parlor where wakes are held. The rooms in the Lenox Avenue apartment are likened to empty birdcages, and the furniture is arranged as a kind of gallery, or perhaps a concert hall:

> the way a person walks from one room to another without bumping into anything…the dining room doesn't have a dining table with funeral parlor chairs…the front room, or parlor, is not wasted either, waiting for a wedding reception to be worthy of…The mantel over the fireplace used to have shells and pretty-colored stones, but all of that is gone now and only the picture of Dorcas Manfred sits there in a silver frame waking them up all night long.[204]

Morrison's use of Dorcas's photo to render likeness, history, and memory suggests another kind of listening, a listening praxis inspiring those low frequencies in the depths of one's soul. Jovanna Jones is a scholar who examines black aesthetics in Morrison's *Jazz* to articulate the way Dorcas's photo functions as a catalyst toward speculative space. She argues, "To look at an image is to fall into an intimate decomposition of that which held a gaze in the first place…"[205] For Violet, Dorcas's dead face looks

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[203] Ibid., 28.
[204] Ibid., 13.
[205] Jovonna Jones, "'Look, Look, Look': The Work of Black Aesthetics in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*" *Callaloo* 41, no. 2 (2018), 96.

> greedy, haughty, and very lazy. The cream-at-the-top-of-the-milkpail face of someone who will never work for anything; someone who picks up things lying on other people's dressers and is not embarrassed when found out…in inward face.[206]

In this passage, Violet's perspective of Dorcas's photo reflects her internal trauma. The photo transcends its static nature, becoming a site of introspection and a portal into speculative space. Such an imaginative confrontation with self-identity is a key function of speculative space, and the photo is a catalyst for this form of therapy. Jazz, as an omniscient narrator, takes advantage of Violet's vulnerability and facilitates a deeper exploration of Violet's trauma. This cueing is a modal jazz element because Jazz allows Violet's solo to continue until she has exhausted her feelings.

Later in the novel, Jazz informs readers about how twelve-year-old Violet witnessed the repossession of her mother's belongings in the southern town of Rome:

> the men had come for the stock, the pots and the chair her [True Belle's] daughter Rose Dear was sitting in…Dispossessed of house and land, the sad little family True Belle found were living secretly in an abandoned shack…[207]

When Violet looks at the photo of Dorcas, she enters a polytemporal speculative space to reimagine the foundational deprivation she experienced in the town of Rome. To Violet, Dorcas represents a manifestation of loss, longing, and displacement, embodying the unresolved grief and deprivation that shaped her identity. Violet is therefore syncopated, existing offbeat within the story's melody. Rather than mourning Joe's affair traditionally, Violet reacts erratically and becomes obsessed with Dorcas, even befriending Dorcas's aunt Alice Manfred to cope. Additionally, by engaging in speculative space, Violet jumps between time periods to confront unresolved grief. Violet is syncopated because she is off-kilter; her inability to cope with anger mirrors a frustrated improvisational solo—one diverging from a predetermined chord progression evoking the spirit of modal jazz. Jazz's narration captures this dynamic appropriately, "There is

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[206] Morrison, *Jazz*, 12.
[207] Ibid., 138.

nothing for Violet to beat or hit, and when she has to, just has to strike it somehow, there is nothing left but straw or sepia print."[208]

Violet's improvisational solo highlights the tension created by her ancestral past. Syncopation in improvisation often signifies a breaking away from strict conventions and this is what Morrison does when she modulates between Violet and Joe's solos throughout the novel. Although the rhythm of the novel is structured like the music it is named after, Violet's solo represents a deviation from linear progression. By emphasizing the unexpected notes and tones of Violet's story as a historical and traumatic context, Morrison's use of syncopation facilitates tension and sets the stage for reconciliation, underscoring the narrative's emotional and rhythmic complexity. The paradox here lies in the modal jazz form—the ancestral trauma of Violet's family's dispossession, the suicide of her mother Rose Dear, and Joe's extramarital affair are all acts that cannot be resolved, but rather reconciled. In other words, these events persist as unresolved tension within the family, much like dissonant harmonies in jazz that refuse to fully resolve. Instead of finding closure, the characters must navigate their emotional and psychological landscapes, finding ways to live with and make sense of these traumas.

There are two predominant tones in *Jazz*'s orchestration of not only Violet's solo but other characters more broadly. Those tonalities correspond to the rural South and the City as characters themselves. The timbre or tone quality characterizing the rural South can be likened to a Phrygian tonality—evoking a sense of nostalgia, rootlessness, and a plaintive quality that mirrors the struggles and traditions of the Southern past. The timbre characterizing the City can also be likened to a Dorian tonality—imbued with complexity, dynamism, and a blues-infused modernity-mood reflecting the vibrancy and layered experience of urban life. Together, these

[208] Ibid., 28.

tonalities create a rich and harmonic interplay, capturing the movement and implications of the 20th-century Great Migration.

The migration story unites Joe and Violet with ancestral trauma as both their solos demonstrate aspects of lack. Consider another moment when Violet slips into speculative space and burns another customer, this time, Violet longs for a child she cannot bear. The following passage demonstrates Jazz's attempt to *sound* Violet's entry into speculative space by abruptly shifting voice while describing the possibilities of urban and rural life in a final tonal shift back to the tonic vamp—the murder-plot constituting the home chord for the novel. By listening to Jazz's narration, it is possible to hear and acknowledge Violet's speculative space, consisting of modulating tonalities that descend into the depths of speculative space yet ascend to the level of the tonic— suggesting both the weight of her past and the possibility of transformation in the present and future.

Distinct timbres associated with urban and rural life can be observed through the interplay of Violet's memories and desires, as well as Jazz's oscillation between structured and improvisational narrative modes. Again, the rural timbre evokes a sense of longing and loss—Phrygian—characterized by plaintive notes reminiscent of the blues and the hardships of Southern life. This contrasts sharply with the more discordant urban timbre—Dorian—reflecting the cacophony, opportunity, and alienation of city life. Jazz explains,

> He [Joe] took his bride on a train ride electric enough to pop their eyes and danced on into the City…
>
> Joe didn't want babies either so all those miscarriages—two in the field, only one in her bed—were more inconvenience than loss. And citylife would be so much better without them. Arriving at the train station back in 1906, the smiles they both smiled at the women with little children, strung like beads over suitcases, were touched with pity. They liked children. Loved them even. Especially Joe, who had a way with them. But neither wanted the trouble. Years later, however, when Violet was forty, she was already staring at infants, hesitating in front of toys displayed at Christmas. Quick to anger when a sharp word was flung at a child. The worst burn she ever made was on the temple of a customer holding a child across her knees. Violet, lost in the woman's hand-patting and her knee-rocking the little boy, forgot her own hand holding the curling iron. The customer

> flinched and the skin discolored right away. Violet moaned her apologies and the woman was satisfied until she discovered that the whole curl was singed clean off…
>
> By and by longing became heavier than sex: a panting, unmanageable craving. She was limp in its thrall or rigid in an effort to dismiss it. That was when she bought herself a present; hid it under the bed to take out in secret when it couldn't be helped. She began to imagine how old that last miscarried child would be now. A girl, probably. Certainly a girl. Who would she favor? What would her speaking voice sound like? After weaning time, Violet would blow her breath on the babygirl's food, cooling it down for the tender mouth. Later on they would sing together, Violet taking the alto line, the girl a honeyed soprano. 'Don't you remember, a long time ago, two little babes their names I don't know, carried away one bright summer's day, lost in the woods I hear people say that the sun went down and the stars shone their light. Poor babies in the woods they laid down and died. When they were dead a robin so red put strawberry leaves over their heads.'…
>
> Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming…When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter whose hair she had dressed to kill. Who lay there asleep in that coffin? Who posed there awake in the photograph?[209]

I cite this passage in full to illustrate Violet's speculative space as mediated by Jazz as an ensemble leader, and how it is demonstrative of the freedom improvisation affords to enable the imagination of alternative realities—Violet's longing for a child and her fantasy of being a mother. Additionally, the tonal shift away from and simultaneously toward the tonic vamp of the murder suggests Violet's experience is grounded in Dorcas's demise, uniting the past and present. Notably, individual solos are part of larger collective performances, such that when Jazz sings to the imagined baby, their voice predominates to signal the melancholy Violet exhibits.

The jazz language, as depicted above, reveals essential elements that define its style and sound. Morrison relishes in Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic claim, suggesting that what the novel reveals is the process of understanding one's language through the lens of another's language and recognizing one's perspective within the perspective of someone else.[210] Perhaps Morrison's attempt to enact Bakhtin's theory has to do with the way storytelling implicates the reader. In an essay on storytelling, Justine Tally reads *Jazz* as a collection of speech acts, adhering to Bakhtin's

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[209] Morrison, *Jazz*, 109.
[210] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press, 1981), 275.

model and leveraging storytelling to center black culture as a reflection of collaboration and community. Tally argues, that Morrison's objective "is to involve the reader in the unfolding of her story (stories); certainly, one of her foremost strategies is to ensure…intertextual spaces for readerly participation."[211] By this logic, it may be possible for readers to enter speculative space with Violet by imagining the implications of her trauma and loss, and using that realization to inform an opinion regarding other characters in the novel, thereby influencing future interpretation.

3.2.2. Tracing Changes with Joe Trace

Joe's speculative space is cultivated by the music of the City and Jazz as an interlocutor. Joe's role in the vamp is murderous, yet ephemeral. That is, the three mentions of his actions in the short murder-plot summary are limited to his yearning for eighteen-year-old Dorcas[212] and the fact that he shot her.[213] Everything else about Joe takes place, first, under the influence of the City and, second, through his several identity shifts in rural Vesper County, Virginia in 1873. Both city and rural examples constitute individual solo acts for Joe, the City described by Jazz, and his multiple confrontations with identity in rural Virginia.

Joe is a kindhearted cosmetics salesman who suffers from abandonment and the absence of love. This lack motivates his adulterous relationship with Dorcas and situates him to respond to the call of the City— "the City was speaking to them [Violet and Joe]. They were dancing…"[214] Jazz explains,

> They came for a visit and forgot to go back to tall cotton or short…And in the beginning when they first arrive[d], and twenty years later when they and the City have grown up, they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like—if they ever knew, that is.[215]

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[211] Justine Tally, *The Story of Jazz: Morrison's Dialogic Imagination* (Hamberg: London, 2001), 83.
[212] Morrison, *Jazz*, 3.
[213] Ibid., 4
[214] Ibid., 32.
[215] Ibid., 33.

To consider the City as a literal form of speculative space is to acknowledge the way Jazz presents the City as a character itself, capable of occupying space and responding to other characters like bandmates.

The personification of the City illustrates Morrison's effort to reify the abstract nature of jazz music and locate its meaning in the folk tradition, particularly through the juxtaposition of the urban north and rural south as binary folk paradigms. Like a jazz tune, the fluidity of the description of the City in the novel evolves as the novel's prose eliminates certain structural rules through improvisation. The narrator describes such a community by asserting the City as a character in the text. Furthermore, the language the narrator uses to describe the City reflects the music, violence, mystery, and allure of the Harlem Renaissance. Although the narrator projects a sentiment of an optimistic condition in the city, they warn us to "Look out."[216] The image of "a colored man float[ing] down out of the sky blowing a saxophone, and below him in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat," suggests a multi-faceted existence in a new and musical place.[217] The narrator talks of the City in a pleasurable and exciting way, but also clearly explains a three-dimensional site where things are quite different above and below the shadows. The narrator explains:

> Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half, I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which are the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this makes me dream tall and feel in on things.[218]

The act of transitioning in and out of the shadows of the City indicates the many ways one can be affected by surrounding conditions. Another example can be seen in the description of a jazz band on the roof of the City, above the shadows where the light shines. The narrator recounts

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[216] Ibid., 7.
[217] Ibid., 8.
[218] Ibid., 7.

> You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played…I could hear the men playing out their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk… [they were] sure of themselves, sure they were holy, standing up there on the rooftops.[219]

Through musical innuendo, the narrator invites readers to join the collective consciousness they have created.

The City is speculative in the way it integrates music and the lived experiences of inhabitants like Joe, blending the real and the imagined to construct a space where history, culture, and emotion converge. By personifying the City, Morrison not only animates the urban environment but also bridges the gap between physical space and the intangible qualities of jazz. The City becomes an instrument, its streets and shadows resonate with the improvisations of its people, much like modal jazz, a genre that draws its vitality from the interplay of individual voices within a collective sound.

Midway through the novel, Jazz renders the City in springtime— "it's that time of year when the City urges contradiction most…"[220] Ironically, like Ellison's unpublished story "Something About Blues," Jazz, much like the character Blues, describes the Harlem Street as populated with bluesmen. Jazz explains,

> Blind men thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk. They don't want to stand near and compete with the old uncles positioning themselves in the middle of the block to play a six-string guitar.
>
> Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man.
> Everyone knows your name.
> Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So lonesome-I-could-die man.
> Everyone knows your name.[221]

Like Ellison's character, Breakaway Johnson, Morrison's singer has an amputated leg as well, and Joe, like Ellison's Sammy Russell, is curious about his bluesy song—indeed, Joe "probably

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[219] Ibid., 197.
[220] Ibid., 117.
[221] Ibid., 119.

thinks the song [Blues man] is about him."[222] Morrison's employment of this moody blues tune invokes the abandonment Joe suffers from the absence of his mother. Furthermore, Joe feels a similar feeling about Violet—the question looms, "where-did-she-go-and-why man." Joe turns to Dorcas because of his loneliness— "So lonesome-I-could-die man." The song triggers in Joe a sense of the blues, sending him into speculative space. His descent there allows him to be introspective about how he arrived in such a melancholic state in the first place. Jazz even explains the music, the City, and Joe's relationship as a triangulated and cyclical arrangement:

> Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round the town. That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where you feel like it…You can't get off the track a City lays for you…you always end up back where you started: hungry for the one thing everybody loses—young loving.[223]

Jazz's depiction of Joe, in the break [groove], is a subtle introduction to Joe's forthcoming solo act. Morrison denotes this foreshadowing through the inclusion of a page break before Joe explains his perspective in a solo act.

Joe performs a solo wherein he depicts the seven changes he experiences to become "…a new Negro."[224] The repetitive retelling of his changes in this section of the novel is akin to Louis Armstrong's 1931 song "Shine," wherein Armstrong plays a high C note in approximately four different keys; each repetition builds upon the last until it peaks, and the song ends. In each account, Jazz signals the story as a modulation of several changes or emotional states: "The first time;"[225] "The second change;"[226] "…the third time…;"[227] "I changed up again the fourth time…;"[228] "the fifth one;"[229] "'Then long come a summer in 1917…;"[230] "I survived though, and

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[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid., 120.
[224] Ibid., 129.
[225] Ibid., 123.
[226] Ibid., 125.
[227] Ibid., 126.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid., 127.
[230] Ibid., 128.

maybe that's what made me change again for the seventh time…"[231] In each account, tension is created and released. I am reminded of a similar chord progression and repetition in Coltrane's "A Love Supreme"— the central motif revolves around a four-note pattern known as the love supreme motif. Such a form is repeated throughout the narrative, serving as a unifying element and a foundation for improvisation and exploration. The repetition of this motif also creates a sense of continuity and unity much like the initial plotline for the micro-novels that follow in *Jazz.* Joe's maturation is like the crescendo of Armstrong's trumpet and Coltrane's skillful composition.

Additionally, and notably, Joe's metamorphosis during his *changes* is arguably tonal given their distinct shifts in mood and resonance; interestingly, they mimic the modal jazz structure in Miles Davis's "So What." Joe recalls,

> Before I met [Dorcas] I'd changed into new seven times: I named my own self…I was picked out and trained to be a man…Vienna burned to the ground [a complete upheaval]…I took my wife to Rome…We moved uptown…they almost killed me…I marched with the three six nine.[232]

Joe's life initially follows a routine path, but as the story progresses, he experiences a series of events that disrupt his stability, partially due to meeting Dorcas. These changes parallel the variations and improvisations found within the structure of "So What." Both "So What" and Joe's process of renewal highlight the interplay between stability and experimentation. In the modal jazz composition, Davis departs from the established melody to explore new musical ideas (improvisation), thereby creating moments of surprise. Similarly, Joe's journey disrupts the equilibrium of his life, propelling him to confront new experiences, emotions, and challenges that transcend the confines of his established existence. This unpredictable journey ultimately culminates in an adulterous relationship with Dorcas, a woman nearly three decades younger.

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[231] Ibid., 129.
[232] Ibid., 129

While the specific elements of "changes" may not align directly, the broader concepts of transformation, variation, and the interplay between stability and experimentation connect the transformative nature of Joe's solo in *Jazz* with the musical exploration found in Davis's songs from the 1959 recordings of "So What" and "Flamenco Sketches."

Regarding Miles Davis, in a 1984 interview on a public television show titled "City Line," Davis explains improvisation as a product of experience. His words seemingly describe Joe's "changes" as a solo act and as a musical gesture. Davis explains, "in order to play like I do, you have to go through all stages of music…and you have to know what you want to do…If you have the technique…"[233] He continues to emphasize *studying* as a method toward expertise, thus improvisation, to borrow from Albert Murray, is *not* so much a spontaneous creation, but the "knowledge of the experience data of mankind; it is all the wisdom and mistakes of the ages. That is what you 'riff' on or improvise on…"[234] I believe that speculative space, especially in the case of Joe's solo act of depicting "changes," enables introspection as a form of study. By meditating on each change, Joe gains insight into an aspect of lack he satisfies with Dorcas. Introspection in speculative space brings him clarity.

Returning to Jewett, he notes,

> Like the improvising musician, Joe chooses his words as he moves along, sometimes misspeaking, playing wrong notes, having to correct himself or allowing himself to angle down rabbit holes of expression that are genuinely unexpected. The surprises present, or at least potentially present, in Joe's explanation of his seven selves utterly resist composition in the very same fashion as modal jazz. Joe seems quite aware of the possibility of misinterpretation, of his improvisation being turned into a melody not of his choosing; his words are filled with doubt and attempts at redirection.[235]

I aim to amplify Jewett's analysis by focusing on how the modal value system underlies Joe's improvisation, also facilitating the speculative space Joe occupies to work things out. In his solo

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[233] Miles Davis, "Miles Davis Interview," moderated by Jaki Hall and B.T. Bentley, December 2, 1984, by WJZ-TV, YouTube,46:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLzMleRSGOM

[234] Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," 112

[235] Jewett, "The Modality of Toni Morrison's *Jazz,*" 454.

act of seven changes, Joe ascends toward a crescendo as he modulates through the tonalities that time and conditions influence, beginning in Vesper County, Virginia in 1873 and ending in Harlem in 1925. Fusing history through memory and music, Joe performs his solo act using only a few modal changes through free melodic conception. Arguably, Joe's solo act replicates free play like the bebop language Cannonball Adderley displays in his alto saxophone solo on "Flamenco Sketches."

Adderley's solo is the fourth measure following John Coltrane in the modal jazz ballad "Flamenco Sketches." Adderley uses syncopation, offbeat accents, and unexpected rhythmic groupings, creating a sense of spontaneity in his sound as he moves through the five tonalities of the track. Toward the end of the first tonality, Cannonball presents bebop as a sentiment in the search for rhythmic identity and meaning within his improvisation. Cannonball's notes are rapid and spontaneous yet grounded in the rhythm of Paul Chambers' bassline and Jimmy Cobbs' drums. Adderley's free play is a "merger of the relentless exploration characteristic of modern jazz improvisation with an adherence to the irrepressible elements of swing and the blues."[236] Listening to Cannonball's solo, it is possible to hear his attempt to incorporate his musical knowledge of bebop to forward the flamenco sound—a Spanish sound distinguished by its intricate rhythms, typically in the Phrygian mode of play.

Joe's solo demonstrates this figurative chromatic expression as he spontaneously shifts in and out of clarity and confusion while depicting moments of love and loss. These shifts build the tension and release it unpredictably. Take for example the way Joe explains how eavesdropping had revealed his mother's reasoning for abandoning him, leaving "without a *trace*" and triggering the modulation to his second change—becoming a man through hunting lessons from the father

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[236] A. Timothy Spaudling "Embracing Choas in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *Callaloo* 27, no. 2, 483.

of his adopted mother, Frank.[237] The result of these memories in the speculative space of Joe's solo act facilitates understanding for Joe. He expresses this reconciliation just before each modulating change, saying, "You can imagine how bad I feel knowing that, can't you?"[238] "[Frank] Taught me two lessons I lived by all my life."[239] "I was twenty-eight years old and used to changing…bold enough to do it again."[240] "They moved us five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law."[241] Joe learned adaptation as a survival mechanism: "When the rent got raised…I got me a little sideline selling Cleopatra products…we did fine. 'Then…after those white men took that pipe from around my head, I was brand new…" again.[242] " I survived it, though, and maybe that's what made me change again for the seventh time…"[243] The bebop riff in Joe's improvisation is a result of introspection in speculative space. Like Cannonball in "Flamenco Sketches," Joe explores the interplay between structure and freedom, using his improvisational moment to navigate tension, resolution, and transformation. Just as Cannonball's bebop notes bring depth and spontaneity to the modal framework of "Flamenco Sketches," Joe's narrative riffs reflect a fluid negotiation of his identity within the shifting tonalities of his life.

Joe's speculative space relies on a figurative chromatic scale, where each shifting note of his story bends the established key of his experiences, introducing emotional dissonance that challenges his sense of self. Joe's changes do not result in resolution but are rather instrumental in his adulterous affair with Dorcas— "How did I know what an eighteen-year-old girl might instigate in a grown man whose wife is sleeping with a doll?"[244] And with that question, Joe yields his time and solo back to Jazz.

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[237] Morrison, *Jazz*, 125.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid., 126.
[241] Ibid., 127.
[242] Ibid., 128.
[243] Ibid., 129.
[244] Ibid.

Joe's solo predominates *Jazz*. Readers-as-listeners learn about Joe's mother, Wild, in his solo act regarding his several changes; however, readers can easily miss the importance of Joe's search for her as a metaphor for his fractured sense of self. The woods, as a wild setting, figure predominately yet subtly in Joe's search for love. As mentioned, Joe hunts love throughout the novel; his mother, Wild, is appropriately named and symbolic of prey. During Joe's solo act about his changes, he remembers his surrogate father, Mr. Frank, as a "hunter's hunter." Joe recalls,

> He was so good they say he just carried the rifle for the hell of it because he knew way before what the prey would do…It was because of him, what I learned from him, made me more comfortable in the woods than in a town.[245]

The woods are a metaphor for mystery. Wild's elusiveness flourishes in the woods to signify dislocation and loss. Although Joe is at home in the woods, he cannot find his mother without invoking listening acts—a key aspect of hunting involves listening. Speculative space requires the same attentiveness. Consider how Jazz recalls Joe's oneness with the woods:

> The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds…hypnotizes mammals. Bucks raise their heads and gophers freeze. Attentive woodsmen smile and close their eyes. Joe thought that was it, and simply listened with pleasure until a word or two seemed to glide into the sounds.[246]

Listening is a key aspect of entering speculative space. Given Joe's search for his mother, speculative space is that site where listeners like Joe can search for meaning, connection, and self-discovery within the interplay of sound, silence, and memory. In this liminal space, the boundaries between the external world and internal consciousness blur, allowing characters to confront absence, reimagine the past, and construct identities in the present. For Joe, the music of the world becomes more than just a natural phenomenon—it is a form of communication, a language of longing and resonance that mirrors his quest for belonging and understanding. In this

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[245] Morrison, *Jazz*, 125.
[246] Ibid., 176.

case, speculative space and the woods and the sounds therein invite introspection. The woods offer a setting where what is lost can be reimagined, and where fragments of identity can begin to coalesce into a fuller, more textured entity.

As the novel shifts between solo acts, readers can hear and imagine how characters like Joe evolve through new experiences and knowledge. *Jazz* acknowledges the challenge of this process, noting that it is "risky… trying to figure out anybody's state of mind. But worth the trouble if you're like me—curious, inventive and well-informed."[247] These traits might also describe Morrison's ideal reader—those attuned to the "invisible ink." Similarly, the speculative elements of the narrative require the reader's imagination to piece together the story as part of a larger ensemble. This interplay reflects the seductive power of Morrison's prose, as she explains: "Writing the reading involves seduction—luring the reader into environments outside of the pages."[248] *Jazz* performs such work as readers are immediately lured into the literary life of Joe and Violet Trace. As Jazz facilitates entry for characters into speculative space, readers who are attentive to Morrison's invisible ink are postured to enter as well. Perhaps the closing lines of the novel are indicative of the proximity of the reader to the narrative: the talking book instructs, "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now."[249]

A significant effect of the novel's engagement with speculative space is the ability of characters to interrogate identity, history, and the fluidity of selfhood. As mentioned, the blank pages denoting modulations in the literary solo acts also function as breaks, inviting characters and readers into the improvisational mood. Let's turn to a brief examination of Golden Grey's role in Jazz's ensemble as a soloist who occupies liminal space.

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[247] Ibid., 137.

[248] Toni Morrison, "Invisible Ink: Reading the Writing and Writing the Reading" in *The Source of Self Regard* (Random House, 2019), 350.

[249] Morrison, *Jazz*, 229.

Golden Grey's solo enables Jazz to speculate upon those legacies that haunt Joe and Violet—the legacy of slavery, racial hierarchies, and the erasure of black lineage. Grey's presence as a historical figure underscores how the past is never entirely resolved, but continues to reverberate in the present, much like the way modal jazz builds on the blues by layering complex harmonies and extending improvisational possibilities.

Gray is the mix-raced son of Vera Louise Gray, a white woman, and Henry LesTroy, a black man. Seemingly disjointed from the Harlem soundscape of *Jazz,* Grey's role in the novel represents the complex legacy of forbidden relationships between white women and black men throughout American history. The name Golden denotes his fair skin and golden curls; he is raised under the assumption that he is white. Grey's mother also refuses to acknowledge him, claiming that he was adopted. After his nurse, True Belle—Violet's grandmother—reveals Grey's true parentage, confirming that he is indeed black, his self-perception is shattered. He begins to harbor resentment and seeks vengeance against his father, whom he believes violated his mother. Grey's journey toward revenge takes an unexpected turn when he witnesses the birth of Joe Trace by Wild. Instead of rejecting his black heritage, Grey finds solace in Wild's community and finds liberation in the freedom of the woods. Despite his rejection of his white upbringing offered by his mother, and the realization that he will never fully belong in the black community, Grey finds a sense of belonging with Wild, transcending the racial boundaries imposed by society.

Grey's story links many characters in Morrison's novel; however, Jazz's uncertainty of the details may strike the reader as unreliable. The account comes at a time during the novel when the reader may already question the validity of the narrative account. Given the many solo acts leading up to this point, Jazz's narration takes the form of simply another perspective. As Morrison intends, readerly imagination is free to roam. Scholars like Alan Rice suggest that Morrison's reliance on improvisatory modes enables a sense of flow. He suggests that Morrison must have had a sense of what has come before: "The jazz performer 'always looks behind at

what he has already created,' so that 'each new musical phrase can be shaped concerning what has gone before.'"[250] In this vein, historical riffs may aid the author in structuring the literary improvisations.

Readers attuned to Morrison's invisible ink may be aware of Jazz's attempts to keep Golden Grey in the dark: "True Belle knew what all the slaves knew, and she knew more since she was the one whose sole job it was to tend to whatever Miss Vera Louise wanted or needed…There was never any need to speak of it. The only people who didn't know were the fathers."[251] Such an unspoken theme looms throughout the novel, as Golden Grey serves as an echo and counterpoint to Joe and Violet's solos. The unresolved identity crisis that Grey undergoes deepens the tension of the novel through its ability to allow readers to imagine what reconciliation sounds like. Like the Liberty Paint scene in *Invisible Man*, Morrison confronts the implications of racial admixture as she examines Grey as he is—both white and black. Golden Grey, much like Ellison's play on the term "Optic White," symbolizes racial hybridity.

In her essay, "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz,*" Carolyn Jones explains Golden Grey's influence on multiple characters in the novel as central to the narrative. Jones writes, "These memories and this figure [Golden Grey] fascinate our narrator. The episode of Golden Grey, the Wild, and Henry…is the pivotal, even mythical, center and the most consciously narrated part of *Jazz.*"[252] This is especially helpful in the examination of modal jazz characteristics like sustained tension without a conventional resolution and improvisation, respectively. Golden Grey's influence also serves as an exemplar of how Jazz facilitates characters into speculative space as a narrator. The novel *Jazz* relies on its narrator to facilitate

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[250] Alan Rice, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing: Jazz's Many Uses for Toni Morrison," *in Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison,* ed. *Simawe, Saadi A*., (Garland Publishing, 2000), 170.

[251] Morrison, *Jazz*, 140.

[252] Carolyn Jones, "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," *African American Review* 31, no. 3 (1997): 487.

the repetition and improvisation Morrison pens throughout the novel. Riffs and call-and-response gestures serve as unifying elements, binding the novel's many solo acts and underscoring their centrality to the narrative structure.

3.2.2. The Undead: Dorcas

Dorcas is undead and looms throughout *Jazz*. Her presence is like a phantom, haunting Joe and Violet Trace much like Beloved does Paul D in Morrison's classic *Beloved*. As literary critic Joseph Winters points out, Dorcas serves as a "quasiredemptive object" for Joe, enabling him to "compensate for the losses and erasures that constitute and haunt his identity."[253] Dorcas is also prey for Joe; as scholar Carolyn Jones observes,

> Dorcas represents the sought-for-completion that they [Joe and Violet] think are their real best selves. She is what Joe has lost: the trace of something he must hunt. *Dorcas* means deer…[and] Dorcas comes from the Greek verb *derkomai*, 'to see clearly' or 'to have sight.'"[254]

For Violet, the memory of Dorcas reflects her broken self— "the symbol of the crack in Violet's being."[255] For Joe, she is prey. The triangulated relationship between Joe and Violet is fused by Dorcas as a symbolic and emotional fulcrum, connecting and destabilizing the Trace nuptial. Accordingly, the speculative space Dorcas occupies is both liminal and transformative, functioning as a site where unresolved tension and desire converge.

Dorcas's solo act encompasses two dimensions: one visual, and the other auditory; both performed against the murky "lights-out' and "low down music" as catalysts projecting Dorcas into the speculative space. The visual solo act unfolds in the compounding and undead realms given the memory of Dorcas as a trigger—Dorcas's solo act relies on relics of her spirit as stimuli, propelling observers and those who remember with malice into speculative space. This

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[253] Joseph Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and Agony of Progress* (Duke University Press, 2019), 124.

[254] Jones, "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," 482.

[255] Ibid.

includes the looming image of her photograph on the Trace apartment mantle, and Jazz's later portrayal of Dorcas slipping into speculative space while dancing at a house party. The auditory solo act is performed by Dorcas just before her death—Jazz gives way to Dorcas's voice as she recalls her time in speculative space as defiant, that is, she evades Joe to explore the freedom she enjoys with other men at the party. This solo act is haunting because it transforms Dorcas's voice into the hunted, her chorus-like warning prepares readers for her inevitable demise— "He is coming for me," she repeats.[256]

Interpreting Dorcas's solo act through Morrison's use of the drum is also insightful. Just as Dorcas looms throughout the novel, functioning as connective tissue binding and tearing Joe and Violet, the drums in the novel establish a cadence for other soloists to improvise upon the motive underpinning Joe's crime. A specific feature of Dorcas's solo act is her consistent presence as a rhythmic anchor for Joe and Violet's relationship. Her undead presence facilitates Morrison's ability to allow Jazz to quickly transition solo acts and distorts time through a circular narrative: *Jazz* modulates from the 20th-century city of Harlem to 19th-century rural Virginia and back again. Like a modal jazz composition, the drums are not the predominant force; rather, they sustain the melody, allowing soloists to flourish within a rhythmic framework that offers harmonic freedom while maintaining structure. The drums in *Jazz* operate similarly, providing a backdrop that supports the emotional and narrative arc of characters while leaving space for individual expression. Through rhythmic shifts and pulsating patterns, the drums mirror Dorcas's oscillation between the real and the phantasmic, amplifying her role as both a figure of desire and loss. In other words, the drums curate speculative space for each character, specifically Dorcas. It is as if Morrison takes her cue from Miles Davis, especially since his experimentation with modal jazz relies on drums to maintain rhythm as a timekeeper.

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[256] Morrison, *Jazz,*190.

Both songs, “So What” and “Flamenco Sketches,” rely on the drums to sustain a modal jazz technique of curating space for improvisers. The drums enable improvisational freedom through their denial of a strict chord progression. In both tracks, Davis relies on the simplicity of drummer Jimmy Cobb’s quarter note for timekeeping. This is important because, in the space the drums make, soloists are afforded the freedom to explore and improvise within a steady, unyielding rhythmic foundation. For example, Cobb’s consistent quarter-note in “Flamenco Sketches” *pulses* like a heartbeat, driving the accompanying musicians to deviate from traditional harmonic structures to focus on modal exploration, all while maintaining a sense of stability and continuity. In the *Power of Black Music,* Samuel Floyd describes this effect by observing Davis’s method in modal improvisation as enabling the embellishment of sound. There are striking similarities in the way Jazz describes the function of music in the city in the novel *Jazz* and the way Davis plays alongside Cobb’s drums as an enabling force in free jazz play. Dorcas inherits the product of this modernism as the kind of surplus lyricism Fred Moten elaborates on in his work, *In the Break*. Floyd writes,

> The leading jazz figures of the 1960s were Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Davis had begun by reshaping jazz standards in new and different ways, redefining the role of the rhythm section, and introducing abrupt changes of tempo, and even silences, in his performances. In his album Miles Smiles (1966), especially on "Circle" and "Footprints," he began floating over the rhythm section. Later, rather than floating on top of the section or playing on the beats, he and his sidemen began to cut into the rhythmic flow, becoming part of its texture and leaving spaces for the excursions of the drummer.[257]

Jazz seemingly mimics this orchestrative strategy, enabling Dorcas’ voice by utilizing musical cues like drums. Jazz’s description of the City at the outset of the novel is musically inclined and relies on jazz language to insinuate the City as a metaphor for jazz itself.

Dorcas’s solo act begins before her affair with Joe. Morrison cleverly conveys Dorcas’ ancestral trauma through the death of her parents in the East St. Louis Riots of 1917. The event is

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[257] Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), 186.

described by Jazz through a re-memory, "almost nine years back," of a protest march down Fifth Avenue. Jazz remembers,

> Alice Manfred [and Dorcas] stood there for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to the drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not. What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums…the beautiful faces were cold and quiet; moving into the space the drums were building for them…down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T...over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her [Alice's] sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots…the Colored Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to white men in straw hats who needed to know what the freezing faces already knew…Then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connecting them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above…the Fifth Avenue Drums…[258]

The drums serve as a proxy, sounding the cadence of marching men and women, whose trauma and anger render them silent. The drums also create the speculative space for Jazz to improvise atop its literary cadence. Jazz relies on the drums to elaborate on Dorcas's plight through Alice Manfred's memory, thus illustrating Dorcas's unresolved grief and her migration north to cope with violence and loss. Alice is introduced as a redeemer figure for Dorcas, a character attempting to shield her niece from the perils of modern life and low-down music by teaching her restraint and dignity, which is on full display at the protest march. The drums also highlight the generational tension between Alice's mourning of her sister and brother-in-law, Dorcas's parents, and Dorcas's desire to seek identity and freedom within the City. Dorcas's solo act is mirrored by the drumbeat as she watches the parade from the curb with her aunt. The beat mirrors her shifting states of being—both the rhythm of inherited trauma and the syncopated improvisation of her rebellion, leading to a slippage into the speculative space wherein she realizes her freedom through promiscuous acts: "suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance,

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[258] Morrison, *Jazz*, 53-59.

gathering them all up and connected them…"[259] By triggering Dorcas's journey into speculative space with the sound of the drums, Morrison gives voice to the silences that haunt Dorcas.

Another memory that forms its tonality, serving as a thematic element within Dorcas's solo act is the rhythm of swing music. Much like the space the drums make, Dorcas's entry into speculative space is triggered by vibrant swing music at a house party. In a pivotal scene, sixteen-year-old Dorcas, accompanied by her friend Felice, steps into a vibrant and bright apartment. When the lights are turned out, Dorcas slips into speculative space under the sound of the music. In this space, Jazz describes a lack of control for the partygoers:

> They believe they know before the music does what their hands, their feet are to do, but that illusion is the music's secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates.[260]

Dorcas transcends the confines of her physical self by descending into the depths of the music much like Ellison's invisible man in his hole. Consider the way Morrison offers musical language to demonstrate a trance-like hum, initiating Dorcas's entry into speculative space: "She [Dorcas] can hear its preparatory hiss as the needle slides toward its first groove."[261] The *hiss* is anticipatory, triggering readers to listen as Dorcas is enveloped by the "slow and smoky" music, it is as if she enters the groove too.[262] In this scenario, the narrator, Jazz, describes Dorcas's speculative space as liminal, seductive, and enigmatic. Jazz explains,

> …the time for lights-out music is approaching…the right record is on the turntable now…Dorcas has been acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove…the body she inhabits is unworthy…Alice Manfred had worked hard to privatize her niece, but she was no match for a City seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day. 'Come,' it said. 'Come and do wrong.'[263]

Reading this passage closely crystalizes how alluring the capacity of jazz music to usher one into speculative space is. In this scene, Alice arguably represents those critics of jazz who scrutinized

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[259] Ibid., 58.
[260] Morrison, *Jazz*, 65.
[261] Ibid., 67.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.

its promiscuous implications. Once considered crude noise, jazz music suffered scrutiny in its reception in terms of cultural and artistic discourse. Like Alice and Dorcas, the music is understood to have migrated north alongside other black migrants between 1916 and 1920. Simultaneously, jazz propaganda morphed into publication with emerging textual production in the 1920s, shaping the bourgeois moralists' view in the popular press. According to Nicholas Evans, many moralists "objected to jazz on aesthetic grounds. Their distaste stemmed in part from the music's aesthetic hybridity which represented to them a cultural promiscuity that flaunted Western artistic conventions."[264] Morrison amplifies this sentiment, explaining, "Obviously, jazz was considered…to be devil music; too sensual and provocative, and so on."[265] Despite the music's reputation, jazz provided black women like Dorcas with the means to reclaim their bodies and confront chaos directly. This may explain Dorcas's actions at the party as a form of ritual, which Floyd contends is an Africanism; for example, he draws comparisons of jazz performances to the African ring shout.[266] In this scene, Morrison signifies the AAVT, using literature to give voice to silent migrants whose only recourse for coping is the drums and its corollary jazz.

Morrison is clear about her fiction relying on jazz as an aesthetic model for writing. In several interviews, Morrison expresses that the novel is more than a jazz gesture. Although music isn't explicit in the novel, the melody of the text is felt in Morrison's desire to give the audience what they anticipate— the "invisible ink" that only attuned readers can decipher. Morrison is clear about the role of the reader as an audience in the performance of solo acts. She writes,

> invisible ink is what lies under, between, outside the lines, hidden until the right reader discovers it…The reader who is 'made for' the book is the one attuned to the 'invisible ink.'

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[264] Nicholas Evans, *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s,* ed. Nadelhaft, Jerome, (Garland Publishing, 2000), 95.

[265] Elissa Chappell, *Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction. In Toni Morrison: Conversations,* ed. Denard, Carolyn (University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 83.

[266] Floyd, *The Power of Black Music,* 188.

> …in *Jazz* is it a man or woman who declares 'I love this city?' For the right reader such strategies are annoying, like a withholding of butter from toast. For others it is a gate partially open and begging for entrance.[267]

Regarding speculative space, Morrison's explanation of who has access to the literature builds upon Murray's explanation of improvisation as the product of experience. In other words, to be "attuned to the invisible ink" one must understand *how* to notice its subtle cues, implied meanings, and the space between the explicit lines of a narrative. Much like the marchers stepping into the space the drums made, readers can participate in the speculative space the novel offers. Such an opportunity exists when Dorcas warns readers that Joe "is coming for me!"[268] This auditory solo act demands listening in the way Furlonge recommends. She writes, "Texts such as Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, for instance, invite readers to develop and employ a more sensory-rich reading practice."[269]

As readers, being sonically attentive to Dorcas's solo reveals the novel's arc toward reconciliation. This is important because the trauma causing the tension in the novel cannot be undone. Like Violet's relationship with Alice, the characters in this novel must reconcile their trauma. In Dorcas's solo act, it is possible to notice how she confides in the reader to keep the affair with Joe that takes place in Malvonne's apartment secret. Morrison's invisible ink becomes legible to readers who *hear* Dorcas's plea. Attuned readers might join Jazz's ensemble, contributing to the call-and-response gesture in a similar way as Dorcas's friend Felice does within her solo toward the end of the novel. Morrison's suggestion that readers must be attuned implies the acknowledgment of subtle points of entry. Consider these opportunities for readerly intervention in *Jazz*: the speculative space the drums make, Dorcas's auditory plea about Joe, the blank pages serving as chapter breaks, and Dorcas's solo act as a gesture of independence, all

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[267] Morrison, *The Source of Self Regard*, 349.
[268] Morrison, *Jazz*, 190
[269] Furlonge, *Race Sounds,* 4.

constituting thresholds for entry into speculative space— *these are the breaks* in which readers can perform too.

Dorcas's auditory solo act begins with the warning: "He is coming for me."[270] At this point in the novel, attuned readers can occupy speculative space with Dorcas by acknowledging the fear latent in her plea. In this case, the voice of her solo act is intimate. She confides,

> What I wanted to let him [Joe] know was that I had this chance to have Acton and I wanted it and I wanted girlfriends to talk about it. About where we went and what he did. About things. About stuff. What good are secrets if you can't talk to anybody about them?"[271]

Dorcas's solo act takes the form of a blues tune, specifically considering its call-and-response gesture and the emotional themes they imply. It is also possible to read Dorcas's solo act through a modal jazz form as she performs through three distinct tonalities. Each transition is subtle and Dorcas shifts seamlessly between apostrophe, direct address, and a dramatic aside, both replicating the Dorian and Phrygian tonalities to skillfully explain why Joe shoots her.

An apostrophic tone targets readers, conveying Dorcas's awareness of an audience; an audience who cannot verbally respond because we are situated as readers and listeners. The idea that Dorcas addresses an audience who cannot respond is an example of Morrison's use of invisible ink, wherein "Leading sentences can be written to contain buried information that completes, invades, or manipulates the reader."[272] When Dorcas begins with the warning, "He is coming for me," she confides in a reader who cannot save her. The meditative Dorian tonality is replicated in this gesture as well. The leading sentence of Dorcas's solo functions like a refrain; it is the catalyst to the "buried information" about why Joe is coming. Much like the subtle transitions in Davis's "Flamenco Sketches," Dorcas's tonality shifts to the Phrygian mode, a tonality invoking anxiousness, uncertainty, and confrontation.

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[270] Morrison, *Jazz*, 189.
[271] Morrison, *Jazz*, 189.
[272] Morrison, *The Source of Self Regard*, 348.

In a non-traditional call-and-response gesture, Dorcas addresses Joe:

> ‘He said, You can’t die from cologne.
> ‘I said, You know what I mean.
> ‘He said, You want me to leave my wife?
> ‘I said, No! I want you to leave *me.* I don’t want you inside me. I don’t want you beside me. I hate this room. I don’t want to be here and don’t come looking for me.
> ‘He said, Why?
> ‘I said, Because. Because. Because.
> ‘He said, Because what
> ‘I said, Because you make me sick.
> ‘Sick? I make you sick?
> ‘Sick of myself and sick of you.

The invisible ink in this exchange is the deliberate absence of closed quotation marks, perhaps this is Morrison’s slight gesture of openness. By omitting closing quotation marks, Morrison challenges the traditional separation of call-and-response, mirroring the improvisational nature of jazz where solos and responses bleed into each other. This entanglement symbolizes the overlapping nature of Joe and Dorcas’s relationship. The uninterrupted flow exploits the freedom in Dorcas’s solo for Joe to respond to her accusations against him. Improvisation, as a modal jazz quality, is boundary breaking. Also, notice the repetitive “Because. Because. Because.’ The elongation of this moment mimics a jazz soloist’s emphasis on emotional resonance. The gesture also implies uncertainty while buying time for Dorcas to think. The repetitive nature of the term ‘because’ warns readers of a revelation; it simultaneously resists explanation as a characteristic of modal jazz. In one phrase, Dorcas moves back into the Dorian tonality, confiding to an audience of readers who cannot respond: “I didn’t mean that part…about being sick.”[273] She continues, “What good are secrets if you can’t talk to anybody about them?”[274]

The dramatic aside is sudden and constitutes the third tonality and the entrance of Jazz as an accompanist of the solo. The piece is a brief and sharp interval that functions to provide additional tension, much like the moody modulations in Davis’s solo at the beginning of

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[273] Morrison, *Jazz*, 189.
[274] Ibid.

"Flamenco Sketches," just before the tonal transition to Coltrane. In this dramatic literary aside, Jazz rejoins Dorcas to tell us something about the speculative space she occupies:

> Anything that happens after this party breaks up is nothing. Everything is now. It's like war. Everyone is handsome, shining just thinking about other people's blood. As though the red wash flying from veins not theirs is facial makeup patented for its glow. Inspiriting. Glamorous. Afterward there will be some chatter and recapitulation of what went on; nothing though like the action itself and the beat that pumps the heart. In war or at a party everyone is wily, intriguing; goals are set and altered; alliances rearranged. Partners and rivals devastated; new pairings triumphant. The knockout possibilities knock Dorcas out because here—with grown-ups and as in war—people play for keeps.[275]

"Everything is now" signals an epiphenomenal moment, and the slippage into speculative space. The passage describes a scene of intense, momentary clarity, where time collapses into the present and all that matters is the immediacy of experience. The party, much like war, becomes a heightened space of possibility and transformation, where identities are fluid and fleeting, and actions are charged with both excitement and consequence. In this speculative space, Dorcas is caught between the thrill of the moment and the underlying awareness of its transience—everything is happening now, but soon it will be over, leaving only fragmented memories and reflections.

The chaos described near the end of Dorcas's solo act nearly completes the story of Joe's murderous act. Like modal jazz, this scene cycles moods associated with trauma with no resolution. The collective improvisation by Jazz and Dorcas generates rhythm intertwined with the chaotic and warlike atmosphere of the party after the shooting, the "action itself," and the resulting shift in alliances and objectives. Together, these elements pave the way for a new vamp, ultimately leading to the creation of a reimagined ensemble. The possibilities rendered from such a collective improvisation suggest jazz music's unresolved quality, a quality mirroring Jazz's envy of Joe Trace's literary life and Dorcas's search for freedom.

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[275] Morrison, *Jazz*, 191.

3.3 A Talking Book Sounding Jazz

Throughout *Jazz,* Morrison's unnamed narrator orchestrates a chaotic and cathartic ensemble, sounding an intense murder plot as a vamp depicting the fractured marriage of Joe and Violet Trace. At the beginning of the novel, readers are oriented by gossip and recollection to demonstrate a variety of perspectives in considering the killing of Dorcas. The subsequent chapters, serving as solo acts, reflect a distinct ancestral history bound in familial neglect and loss, which unites characters like Joe and Violet in their haunting. An important aspect of the way speculative space functions in the novel can be understood through an analysis of Jazz as more than a literary and musical escort, but a talking book whose voice requires attentive listening.

Morrison riffs on Henry Louis Gates's theorization of the trope of the talking book in his study *Signifying Monkey*. The talking book theory is rooted in the 18th-century efforts of enslaved people to depict their experiences in writing. The theory suggests that "black people could become speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word."[276] Morrison's *Jazz* assumes the task of inscribing voice by empowering the book itself to speak. In a 1995 interview with Angels Caribi, Morrison explains,

> So, when I was thinking of who was going to tell this story, the idea of 'who owns jazz,' or who knows about it, came up. I was looking for a voice and having trouble figuring it out, but then I decided that the voice would be one of assumed knowledge, the voice that says 'I know everything.'…I was trying to align myself with more interesting and intricate aspects of my notion of jazz as a demanding, improvisatory art form, so I had to get rid of the conventions, which I distrust…The voice is the voice of a talking book. So when the voice says, 'I know what it's like to be left standing when someone promises,' it talks to the reader…It's a book talking, but few people read it like that.[277]

Reading *Jazz* through a modal jazz framework means acknowledging the fluidity and improvisational nature of the narrative. It means being comfortable with the idea that no one is in

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[276] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press,1989), 147.

[277] Angels Carabi, "Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison Speaks about Her Novel *Jazz*" *in Toni Morrison: Conversations* (University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 95.

control. As Morrison admits, "It's very strange, but I like it because it's risky. But jazz unsettles you. You always feel a little on edge…You're not in control."[278] The novel, like modal jazz, becomes a medium that speaks directly to the reader, breaking away from the expectations of linear, conventional plots and instead offering a rhythm and tone that fluctuates, improvises, and allows the reader to engage with the story in a dynamic, evolving way.

Jazz represents the "I" in the novel's epigraph: "I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name. I am the sign of the letter and the designation of the division."[279] This passage from "Thunder, Perfect Mind," taken from The Nag Hammadi Library, signifies a nuanced gap between music and literature, and Morrison's use of the "I" narrator demonstrates her objective to oralize fiction and render its sound as free as an Avant Garde jazz composition itself. The "I" narrator, or Jazz, also parallels the qualities of improvisation, self-discovery, and transformation inherent in modal jazz compositions. As shown, the freedom Jazz exhibits in the novel is demonstrated through the many voice transitions and moments of intimate confession, arguably targeting its reader. In a letter to her friend Erroll McDonald, Morrison explains,

> 'I' is a 'certain kind of gaze—romantic about Harlem and blackfolk, but contemptuous and controlling too. Like whitefolks and some blackfolks are when they resurrect the period. I wanted this gaze to function like a talking-book (the 'I' never moves, eats, sleeps, etc.; it can only think, remember, imagine and so…like a mind). It is a voice that in the act of re-imagining the story, recreating the lives of the characters, is deceived and learns of its mis-reading as it goes deeper into the process of thinking up other people's lives…I hoped the gaze would be forced to alter itself, change its tune, become vulnerable and take risks—clearly needs something…I want [*Jazz*] to mean not the music as background, which is how the 'I' sees or hears it, but as the act of making it up (improvising); breaking laws (of formal narration); of discovery and surprise (some interior truth); of playing with tradition and history; of pure sensuality [as in jizzum]. And to make that process liberate the 'I' so it discovers the nature of its limited point of view, learns something, performs something difficult, and moves on to another place.[280]

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[278] Ibid.

[279] Morrison, *Jazz*, *Epigraph.*

[280] *Jazz* Correspondence; Toni Morrison Papers, C1491, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library Box 124, Folder 32, Princeton University Archive.

Modal jazz form strives for a similar destination through its improvisational freedom. Jazz, as a metaphorical band lead, is free to respond to the solos of other characters in the novel; furthermore, as a talking book, Jazz speaks to readers who perceive Joe and Violet from a similar vantage point, which is to note readers' proximity to the characters as mediated by the sound produced by the characters themselves.

In another way, Jazz's envy of Joe and Violet's reconciliation is a result of observing the way they negotiate their turmoil. The contemptuous and controlling way Jazz looms explains Morrison's description of a "certain kind of gaze" as dubious. Another way of understanding Jazz's gaze is to understand their role as ensemble lead, watching and controlling characters' solo acts through tonal shifts between improvisational solos. The result of this kind of control dictates the audience/reader's perception of truth. Jazz is not only a narrative force capable of its solo act, but as a talking book, it also seeks to balance the tension between readers, characters, and self. Morrison cleverly empowers Jazz with a book voice that amplifies the novel's modal jazz form. Jazz's voice enables characters to enter speculative space through its musical language. Much like the conclusive declaration regarding speaking in low frequency in the "Epilogue" of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison's narrator envies a fragmented low-frequency solo act throughout the novel. Jazz offers their solo act as a love letter to readers attuned to Morrison's invisible ink—jazz.

In her interview with Caribi, Morrison discusses the love letter as a sentiment of intimacy:

> It sounds like a very erotic, sensual love song of a person who loves you. This is a love song of a book talking to the reader…It was interesting to me how the whole act of reading, holding, surrendering to the book, is part of that beautiful intimacy of reading. When it's tactile, your emotions are deeply involved…I deliberately restricted myself using an 'I' that was only connected to the artifact of the book as an active participant in the invention of the story of the book, as though the book was talking, writing itself in a sense.[281]

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[281] Carabi, *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, 95.

Morrison's narrative strategy implicates the reader as an audience member of Jazz's ensemble. Furthermore, the threshold separating the talking book's prose from its voice collapses into a fluid and improvisational space where the text itself becomes an active participant in the reader's experience. The talking book, as Jazz, says,

> I envy them [Joe and Violet] their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it—to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love you the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick.*
>
> But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.[282]

Here, the self-conscious narrator takes the form of a metaphorical talking book to invoke a jazz-like seductive appeal. In this moment, readers as audience members are symbiotically yoked with the book as a proxy of Jazz, in that, the physical novel is a metaphorical talking book and becomes an object for readers to caress. The subtle sense of urgency in the proclamation of the "Now" moment functions as a time for realization; a moment to appreciate Jazz as a talking book rendering a story so rich with drama and sound, that it allows readers to hear while they read, thus entering speculative space.

In the novel *Jazz,* Morrison engages in a kind of revision, employing characteristics of jazz music to depict ontological pain and identity seeking. Such phenomena result primarily from migration and efforts to reestablish normative mores associated with aspects of black life. The novel's solo acts convey the totality of intramural black sentiment vis-à-vis the implications of mobility given a rich history of fragmentation and mobility. Morrison's novel, as a talking book,

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[282] Morrison, *Jazz*, 229.

"renders a period of African American life through a specific lens—one that would reflect the content and characteristics of its music."[283] The rhetorical impact of merging music and language in the novel situates jazz music as a soundtrack to the Great Migration, and considering this framework, it is important to understand how Morrison oralize her fiction to cultivate *Jazz* as a "talking book." This rhetorical move functions to disrupt linear progressive narratives, as do the modal jazz aspect of the novel, and render the AAVT as a discursive impetus to navigate struggle and trauma, transcend it, and reconcile its effects in speculative space. Thus, Morrison's *Jazz* can be read as a literary reproduction of modal jazz; its solo acts enable the navigation of speculative space wherein Dorcas, Joe, Violet, Wild, Jazz, and Golden Grey dwell as kin.

[283] Morrison, *Jazz,* xv.

4. "It Was Written": Speculative Space in Nas's Illmatic

In an essay titled, "It Ain't Hard to Tell," writer Imani Perry describes the rapper Nasir "Nas" Jones as a poet who strikes a balance between extremes. She writes,

> Nas always wants to give you something to think about that is bigger than you. He appreciates symbolism and his connections to a larger community: spiritual, racial, and political. At the same time, he's also committed to a kind of political realism. He never disses or departs from the life of the street; instead, he makes it plain and puts it into economic, historical, and social context.
>
> To understand this, we must consider Nas as a poet.[284]

Given Nas' status as a musical artist, his poetry is typically heard; however, another way to interpret his art is to see it as written verse. Nas relies on literary devices to make this possible. Perhaps the most impactful is his use of vernacular to transform his narratives into a graphic soundscape.

Perry's advice of considering Nas as a poet is wise. By examining the lyrics of his 1994 album *Illmatic* as poetry, I can trace the emotional and linguistic power of Nas's lyrical alchemy. The cultural and historical context of his music is important because it demonstrates the role storytelling plays in the formation of speculative space. Considering Nas as a poet means recognizing his work as a vehicle for emotional release. This aspect of his work contributes to the formulation of speculative space as a site for introspection and memory. In this chapter, I consider speculative space as an immersive auditory realm wherein sound operates as a medium for time travel, memory renewal, and alternative world-making. This of course presupposes a receptive listener, one attuned to the circumstances motivating Nas's art and a willingness to engage with its sonic cues as a portal into deeper meaning. Through this sonic portal and into speculative space opportunities for transcendence, understanding, introspection, and resilience are possible. I argue that Nas renders the Queensbridge Housing Projects, the setting of *Illmatic*, as

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[284] Perry, *Born to Use Mics,* 196.

speculative space. Through immersive and visceral poetry, Nas offers fertile ground for exploring speculative space as a sonic hinterland.

At just 16 years old, Nas released his debut album *Illmatic* on April 19, 1994. The year was an important one for hip-hop rap artists as their emergence across the United States signaled a tide shift in black expression from the post-Soul era of the 1970s and onward. The Notorious B.I.G. released *Ready to Die* a short distance away in Brooklyn, New York, while OutKast's *Southernplayalisticcadillacmuzik* sounded the south in Atlanta, Georgia. On the West Coast, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg were sonically archiving the effects from the 1992 Los Angeles Riots—a series of violent uprisings in response to the Rodney King verdict— through the 1992 album *The Chronic*. In each case, young artists like Nas engaged in their political realism by loudly addressing the systemic injustices plaguing their neighborhoods. Artists like Nas could vividly describe the impacts of systemic racism precisely, even telling listeners the very street corners where atrocity occurred—Crenshaw and Slauson in Dr. Dre's California; the Allen Temple projects, "the Temp," for OutKast and rappers like Killer Mike; Marcy Projects for Jay-Z; Hollygrove for Lil Wayne and the Hot Boys in Louisiana; and Queensbridge Projects for Nas.

My focus on Nas's *Illmatic* is two-fold. First, *Illmatic* was the first album I studied as literature. I took a formalist approach to Nas's lyrics-as-poetry long before Imani Perry advised. Second, Nas's music connects to Alice Walker's 2005 comment to me about frequency. When she proclaimed, "Young black men listen to their music loud because they do not feel heard or seen," it was as if she pinpointed my feelings of erasure because I identified with those characters in the rhymes of 1990s artists. I remember the moment Walker's voice echoed in my head, in 2015, when I turned up the volume to a Nas track in my car. At that moment, I was mentally transported to the Queensbridge Housing Projects—I slipped into speculative space just as I had when I read his lyrics long ago in grade school. I experienced Queensbridge again, only in

speculative space. I believe I understood why I was able to notice my slippage, and my goal is to explain the process.

This chapter will show how Nas's *Illmatic* constructs the Queensbridge Housing Projects, and its sites along its periphery, as speculative space. In other words, I argue that Nas's speculative space is a sonic re-presentation of the Queensbridge Housing Projects, a site where social conditions, linguistic gestures, and sonic materiality through storytelling collapse temporal boundaries and reconstruct its physical site into an auditory environment. More broadly, Nas's *Illmatic* is a sonic representation of the realities of his economic, social, and historical environment. First, I will show how historical social conditions in New York City gave birth to *Illmatic* as a response to the city's urban renewal policies in the latter half of the 20th-century. As a result, *Illmatic* functions as a fragment of a rich lyrical archive that responds to similar government practices. The album constructs Queensbridge as a sonic haven, where the complexities of black life are expressed, preserved, and reimagined. Next, I demonstrate how the AAVT figures in *Illmatic* as a call-and-response gesture. I will show how *Illmatic* constructs Queensbridge as a speculative space by lyrically rearticulating the site as a realm of possibility. *Illmatic* demonstrates the implications of urban renewal policies and the necessity to reimagine the city in a new way with new inhabitants. As such, speculative space becomes a dynamic realm to interrogate aspects of life on the margin. Lastly, by showing how *Illmatic* assumes material reality through Nas's storytelling, I hope it becomes clear how Nas's poetry helps structure speculative space as a navigable site. Taken together, these factors contribute to *Illmatic*'s ability to serve as a musical portal to speculative space; thus, Queensbridge becomes a sonic and metaphorical *underground* for transcendence and a site for confrontation given the circumstances motivating Nas's introspection in the first place.

This chapter is also grounded in lyrical analysis to examine the ways Nas constructs speculative space. My close reading of Nas's lyrics requires a specific reading praxis, one I term

illmatic, especially given an emphasis on *ill* aspects of social and street culture that are unpleasant yet seductive. An illmatic reading praxis pays particular attention to the interplay between chaos and order in Nas's lyrics. As mentioned above, the extremes Nas navigates in his music are rather elusive. By examining the subjunctive and indicative aspects of his lyrics I hope to articulate Nas's rendition of speculative space as a complete sonic narrative that guides his imaginative archetypes and listeners through the Queensbridge Housing Projects. Moreover, Nas's ability to depict Queensbridge as a sonically induced cinematic form results from his inheritance of a blues legacy from his father Olu Dara. Nas is also influenced by a network of jazz and hip-hop artists who value eclecticism. The 1994 album is replete with musical samples from an archive of oral tradition. Despite Nas's solo venture as a lyricist, the album features five producers and more than ten sample tracks. Such a legacy reflects an oral tradition extending from the blues, through Avant Garde or free jazz, to a rap genre turned cultural phenomenon vis-à-vis hip-hop.

Additionally, I hope my scrutiny reveals an aural relationship with Nas and his audience. In like manner, I extend Nicole Furlonge's examination of race sounds in her study of African American literature; I too want "to think of them [Nas and his fictional archetypes] as subjects immersed in history and particular contexts and moments."[285] For Nas, speculative space emerges as a sonic and narrative realm wherein Queensbridge exists both as a reconfigured imagined space shaped by memory, sound, and lyrical innovation. For his audience, speculative space is made intelligible through soundscape—the texture of the sounds producing images propelling listeners and readers of his lyrics into Queensbridge. Through a pensive and illmatic listening and reading act of *Illmatic*, Nas's audience can witness the process of transforming Queensbridge into a sonic realm of possibility—otherwise, an acoustic speculative space.

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[285] Furlonge, *Race Sounds,* 6.

4.1 Sonic Revisions of the Cityscape: Urban Renewal and Urban Removal

Consider Nas's music as a portal into speculative space. He employs tropes like storytelling and social critique in response to societal, historical, and economic factors. Much of understanding how Nas depicts Queensbridge as a speculative space has to do with *how* the space became a cloistered enclave itself. Within *Illmatic,* Nas positions himself as a street ethnographer, exploring and capturing the implications of Great Migration migrants and their subsequent strife to possess space in the north to live and thrive. In an unconventional sense, Nas functions within the spirit of the blues as a narrator of trauma and frustration. Following the lead of Mark Anthony Neal, I examine a meta-story that may have compelled Nas to "carry on tradition" by using speculative space as a panorama to acknowledge his father's blues, the result being the production of sound reflecting postindustrial urban renewal as a form of urban removal. *Illmatic* emerges as explanatory discourse regarding the cyclical struggle embedded in the landscape of postindustrial black life. To riff on Neal's observation in his essay "Memory Lane," the housing projects [Queensbridge and the Bronx River houses, respectively,] became metaphors for deferred dreams of upward mobility.[286] In Nas's conception of speculative space, he employs music to demonstrate his dream through sonic rendering.

Many scholars date hip-hop's origins back to August 11, 1973. The small apartment at 1520 Sedgewick Avenue can rightly be considered an Ellisonian nowhere space and a scene of profound creativity. It is here that DJ Kool Herc projected sound from turn tables, looping a beat so MCs (rappers) could freestyle, B-boys and girls could breakdance, and a community could commune without worry. While this date symbolizes an amalgamation of cultural and oral traditions spanning centuries, it is also misleading, forwarding the notion that the date constitutes a moment of conception for hip-hop. Although the back-to-school party like the one in the Bronx

[286] Neal, *Born to Use Mics*, 119.

facilitated the union of DJ Kool Herc's breaks, graffiti artists, breakdancers, MCs, and a crowd of kids feigning the first day of school, these activities have been occurring in every New York borough since adolescent migrants took to the city streets in the 1960s. Specifically, hip-hop in the Bronx rose like a phoenix from the ashes of supposed urban renewal projects as a response to a legacy of disenfranchisement and subjugation.[287] As the Bronx nurtured the *breaking* phenomenon, spinning its urban tales of discontinuity, the city became hip-hop's birthplace, constituting the activity within it as a *break* or *hinge*, otherwise, an interval through which to interrogate what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls a "perverse circuitry" as the complicated collision and product of social, economic, political, and historical factors.[288]

Nas's poetry thrives on the tension derived from an embrace of expressions of socio-economic plight and the acknowledgment of hopeful moments of transcendence. Take for example Nas's description of Queensbridge amid the complexity of urban renewal. Nas expresses the "perverse circuity," as Denise Ferreira da Silva explains it as a hopeless existence. Nas writes,

> Each block is like a maze. Full of black rats trapped, plus the Island is packed.
> From what I hear in all the stories when my peoples come back, Black.
> I'm living where the nights is jet-black.
> The fiends fight to get crack.
> I just max, I dream I can sit back.[289]

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[287] Although urban renewal in New York can be traced back to the 1941 New York Urban Redevelopment Corporation Act, the Housing Act of 1949 set broader goals to address the physical renewal of substandard domiciles and slum areas. Specifically, it was concerned with "…the elimination of substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas…" Although redevelopment was an end goal of this effort, the neglect of broader socioeconomic and cultural factors exacerbated the effort. The problem with urban renewal exists in the negation of external factors affecting the broader community.

[288] Denise da Silva explains the perverse circuitry as the way in which power relations are organized through a network of social, economic, and political relations that operate across different scales and domains. According to da Silva, this perverse circuitry is "perverse" because it operates in a way that is detrimental to those who are marginalized within it, perpetuating forms of oppression and exploitation. The circuitry creates a feedback loop in which those who are excluded or marginalized are pushed further to the margins, while those who benefit from the system continue to accumulate power and resources. The result is seen in the emergence of Queensbridge projects, for example, as a way to house the Great Migration migrants, but also to sustain a dialectical class relationship. Da Silva has argued that racialized bodies are positioned as the outside of the circuitry, excluded from the benefits and protections that are enjoyed by those who are part of the inside. This exclusion is not accidental, but rather is built into the very structure of the circuitry itself.

[289] Nas, "N.Y. State of Mind," track 2 on *Illmatic.*

These lyrics are from "N.Y. State of Mind," the first full track on the album. Nas begins to construct speculative space within defined boundaries shaped by a concrete enclosure. He depicts Queensbridge as a dizzying malaise where its inhabitants scutter like rats to gain freedom. The very connotation of a black rat suggests surveillance, entrapment, and the struggle for survival. In New York, especially, black rats are considered symbols of urban decay. Such a characteristic of Queensbridge as a speculative space implies congestion, a site populated by a steady flow of people from the south, and nearby Riker's Island prison. Lyrically, Nas constructs a dark and dangerous speculative space wherein he observes the chaos and reports on the violence. Sonically, the track relies on an ominous bass line, taken from Joe Chamber's 1978 song "Mind Rain." The hypnotic tune is sampled to signify and conflate a jazz aesthetic with a kind of melancholia. In the essay "A Rebel to America," Sohail Daulatzai describes Nas's work as a "dystopic vision continu[ing] to hint at this claustrophobia in his descriptions of the labyrinth that is the Queensbridge projects…In the bleak sci-fi world Nas creates of his beloved Queensbridge, the sufferation continues, but it's also emblematic of so much more."[290] Returning briefly to the political realism Perry refers to above, Nas's ability to explain the lived realities of a marginalized community from a position of relative safety is remarkable. The speculative space he begins to construct necessitates an appraisal.

The social critique in Nas's poetry highlights and transmits a state of confusion and frustration. The residents of his Queensbridge neighborhood scurry frantically to survive, unaware that there is no escape. Nas underscores the dehumanizing conditions his people endure as they are forced into a cycle of survival where systemic oppression limits options. This aptly describes the term illmatic as a phenomenon and a disposition—both *ill* and auto*matic*. Nas's poetry reflects the harshness of these environments and the psychological toll they take on those

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[290] Dalulatzai, *Born to Use Mics,* 34.

trapped within them. The speculative space he builds allows his audience and the characters in the space to experience a frantic state to transcend it. Much like Ellison's description of the blues as an impulse to "finger the jagged grain," Nas's lyrics not only capture physical struggle but also convey a deeper existential plight wherein the deferred dreams of escape often collide with the brutal reality of urban life. The deferred dream explodes, just as Hughes foreshadows in his 1951 poem "Harlem."

Amid danger, Nas's New York state of mind is protective; he understands to escape the *trap* is to possibly enter another one—perhaps the prison system on Rikers and Staten Island, respectively. Notably, the stories of the packed prisons come from those who have escaped them only to return home to a similar congested maze; the track "One Love" takes up this inquiry. Nas's claustrophobic description enables his storytelling trope to convey a way out: His indicative statement, "I dream I can sit back," foreshadows Neal's claim of the deferred dream. This is the introspective quality of Nas's speculative space; the music allows him to gain an objective view of his environment. Sonically, Nas situates Queensbridge as a microcosm for urban cities suffering similar strife. Through his construction of Queensbridge as speculative space, those metaphorical rats can be better examined to understand the conditions prompting their behavior—a response to the pressure of systemic injustice.

The Bronx is situated northwest of the Rikers Island jail complex. Both boroughs, Queens and the Bronx, represent enclaves for Great Migration migrants. The name borough comes from the Old English term "burg," which means fortified settlement.[291] Nas's description of being trapped signifies this etymology. When the South Bronx burned throughout the 1970s, the ashes of the burnt apartment buildings fertilized and nurtured immigrant ingenuity. A paradox exists within those ashes as remnants of the 1924 National Origin Quota favoring European

[291] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "borough (n.), Etymology," September 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4337155412.

immigration to New York. The vestiges remained and contributed to the subsequent 1965 Immigration Act, challenging and overturning the 1924 quota. This enabled African and Caribbean immigrants to pursue prosperity in the Big Apple.[292] Such a spontaneous influx of people threatened the ill-perceived land swaths, creating situations of what was termed urban blight. Shortly after World War II, the term "blight" was operationalized by the federal government to describe and act upon the deterioration of urban areas populated largely by people of color; their neighborhoods were deemed as "slums." The federal government took action to institutionalize efforts to treat what they considered "urban disease," thus instituting urban renewal as a remedy. Writing their plans in the Federal Housing Acts of 1949, 1954, 1956, and 1957, the federal government solicited aid from local authorities to target local inhabitants. Urban planning expert Reuel Hemdahl explains,

> All of this has lifted the problem of urban blight onto a different plane, has provided new perspectives in policy, new dimensions for analysis and refined techniques for treatment. With this change has come a recognition that complete blame and responsibility cannot properly be charged against any one group of persons, neither the 'wicked landlords,' nor the 'wicked slum dwellers,' that here society has a responsibility for past mistakes and accumulated deferred maintenance. A recognition has also been partially evidenced that negative action not enough, that positive action is necessary—the replanning of neighborhoods, communities and cities.[293]

Subsequently, policies like redlining and economic disinvestment initiatives were implemented due to an immigrant influx. Moreover, the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway between 1948 and 1972 devastated an otherwise stable community in the Bronx. These acts create

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[292] The National Origin Quota facilitated the mass migration of white Europeans from Germany, the United Kingdom, and Ireland—subsequently, these three countries received over 70% of appropriated visas, sustaining the disenfranchisement of people of color in the Caribbean, Asiatic regions, and Africa, preventing them access to the United States. In places like New York, given such a homogenous landscape, the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated National Origins Formulas, effectively opening opportunities for people of color to reunify with their families and seek upward mobility. However, given Civil Rights setbacks like the assassination of figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, black cynicism pushed the country into civil unrest. Nixon's New Federalism and policies of Reaganomics were responsible for a counter public of people of color who began to cultivate their own reality. This renovation of superstructures facilitated a complex socio-economic scene of subjection, manifested through white flight, a housing crisis given overcrowding, redlining and other discriminatory practices, social tensions, and strained community relations and urban decay in the form of landlords literally burning the city.

[293] Hemdahl Reuel, *Urban Renewal* (Scarecrow Press, 1959), 15.

opportunities like those in a jazz break—a space for creativity by actors who inhabit those mazes. Those policies constitute the traps, blocks, hoods, and the *jungle* as a ghetto as it were—the socio-cultural dungeon of rap according to Nas, and the nowhere spaces according to Ellison. In another way, those "slums" establish *undergrounds* of creativity where artists like Nas can exploit the objectivity offered in speculative space.

Other paradoxes emphasize hip-hop as a hybrid tradition and as a response to post-industrial urban renewal. In the first edition of *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*, David Toop examines tradition as a reformulation of aesthetic practices reacting to survival instincts. He writes, "The two extremes of hip hop are the sophisticated cross-cultural fusions which meld the oldest traditions with the freshest of musical technologies or, at the other pole and clinging for life, the bottom line of street survival."[294] This clinging for life is further explained as a cultural form by Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*. She writes,

> [hip hop] negotiates the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity, and community…it is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame [or flame, in the case of the Bronx] for the development of hip hop.[295]

Such an observation helps reframe urban renewal as urban removal—the systemic displacement of black folks under the guise of progress. I posit hip-hop, in its singular moment of conception [August 11, 1973] as a response to factors of discrimination, fragmentation, and urban decay on the part of post-industrial motives of revitalization. Hip-hop and rap, as socio-cultural tentacles, reflect the removal of prosperity and peace, resulting in the establishment of undergrounds like those "dungeons of rap" Nas refers to in "N.Y. State of Mind."

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[294] David Toop, *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (South End Press, 1984), 12.
[295] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (University of New England Press, 1994), 21.

The construction of the Cross-Bronx expressway paved the way for the mass displacement of communities in and around Queens and the Bronx. The project also fueled devastating economic decline and massive social disruption. According to a U.S. Census report, the Bronx experienced a population decline between 1950 and 1960 of approximately 7%. This would later rise between 1960-1970 to a staggering 22%. Over 600,000 jobs vanished, approximately 80% of domiciles were destroyed, over 250,000 people were displaced, and a group of selfish landlords reaped $10 million of insurance payouts (over $50 million today) in exchange for the burning of their real estate.[296] The 1970s became known as the Decade of Fire and represents the urban removal of people of color seeking refuge in one of the largest urban centers in the United States. The destruction of infrastructure left behind scarred and dispossessed communities struggling to rebuild themselves amidst ashes and rubble—therein, East Coast hip-hop rose from that smoldering and MCs became the new architects of the city's resurgence. The movement became a sonic form of resistance across the country and a contemporary global and cultural phenomenon as we know it today.

Despite the debate about the genealogy of hip-hop, the commonly held understanding of the music's power is undeniable. Such a sentiment reverberates throughout the discourse of black studies, animating much of its content. Toop writes, "Rap's forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acappella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs [Jodies], toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia…"[297] This epistemological reach is considered an Afrodiasporic remnant, reconstituting itself through genres of expression while

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[296] Samuel Ehrenhalt, "Economic and Demographic Change: the Case of New York City," Monthly Labor Review, February,1993: 41, https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1993/02/art4full.pdf.

[297] Toop, *Rap Attack,* 19.

reflecting the impact of migration and mobility; this is the germ of Nas's music. The melding of tradition and sound creates a soundscape turned melting pot, one wherein the Caribbean and African influence of artists like DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, KRS One, Afrika Bambaataa, Busta Rhymes, the Notorious B.I.G., and others, coalesce to recycle the creativity of black Americans in the reproduction of social realism. Thus, Nas's sonically rendering of Queensbridge as a speculative space is infused with diasporic and African retentions.

The unintelligible cultural markers are made clear by re-vocabularizing signifiers through elaborate wordplay, double-entendre, dialect and vernacular, signifying, allusion, and cultural references turned archetypes. It is important to acknowledge the hybridity of cultural expression in the aforementioned MCs, especially given the Caribbean and African lineage they represent. Scholars like Toop meticulously document the rap community as an education system that nurtures the skill, talent, and knowledge of hood archetypes by cultivating the MC's lyrical talent, the DJ's acrobatics and sleight-of-hand trickery, the break-dancer's agility, and the graffiti artist's flare. Herein, improvisation flourishes, renovating nowhere spaces like Harlem, Queens, and the Bronx into sites of creative production—the Harlem Renaissance and later, hip-hop.

Toop also suggests that the melding of tradition and musical technology demonstrates the fluidity and complexity of sonic landscapes as an ontoepistemological liminal space containing what Moten calls "sonorous black bodies." The improvisation Moten emphasizes in *In the Break* emanates from those bodies, and the beat of black life resonates in the same drums Morrison features in her novel *Jazz*; similar drums once organized the movement of enslaved people in places like New Orleans's Congo Square or old rituals like the African ring shout. The drums, as a legacy of timekeeping and communication, have since morphed into a technological sonic conductor of cadence, organizing the MC and the bodies of B-boys and girls to drum sequences like that of OutKast's song "B.O.B." The vibrational sound catalyzes visceral catharsis, and the

emotional and psychological toll of urban removal serves as a foundation for Nas's construction of speculative space.

Interestingly, Tricia Rose takes a different position than Toop when she critiques the effects of urban de-industrialization in the 1970s and the post-industrial urban landscape in the 1980s as a "clinging for life" subject position for the marginalized. Rose contends that hip-hop functions as a phenomenon, offering a critical lens on socio-political landscapes. Thus, hip-hop embodies the essence of urban renewal, and its rap serves as global discourse on the effects of government intervention as it pertains to the psychosomatic effects of blight. Rose writes,

> Rap's primary context for development is hip hop culture, the Afrodiasporic traditions it extends and revises, and the New York urban terrain in the 1970s… [s]ubstantial postindustrial shifts in economic conditions, access to housing, demographics, and communication networks were crucial to the formation of the conditions that nurtured the cultural hybrids and sociopolitical tenor of hip hop's lyrics and music.[298]

Rose describes the need for the reconfiguration of elements to revise dominant culture. She continues,

> Rappers are constantly taking dominant discursive fragments and throwing them into relief, destabilizing hegemonic discourses and attempting to legitimate counterhegemonic interpretations. Rap's contestations are part of a polyvocal black cultural discourse engaged in discursive 'wars of position' within and against dominant discourses. As foot soldiers in this 'war of position,' rappers employ a multifaceted strategy. These wars of position are not staged debate team dialogues; they are crucial battles in the retention, establishment, or legitimation of real social power.[299]

In keeping with the claim that *Illmatic* is its knowledge system, Nas's project also functions as a strategic reconfiguration of urban reality into speculative space, where Nas can challenge, critique, and reimagine narratives constraining black life.

By delving into speculative space as a realm where objective observation facilitates liberatory futures, a form of soul-renewal for black communities is possible. Music's role in community restoration and the emergence of cultural heritage from the ashes of the Bronx can

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[298] Rose, *Black Noise*, 187.
[299] Ibid., 101.

yield an insightful illustration of Nas's speculative space as a prototype of Robin Kelley's "imaginary upside-down world"—a space encapsulating a vibrant hip-hop soundscape.[300] Kelley amplifies Rose's observation by attributing this strategy to a blues aesthetic, he cites how signifying facilitates the reappropriation of hard times into the bedrock of prosperity. This describes the utility of Nas's music. Kelley writes,

> …we need to go back to the blues, to the baadman tales of the late nineteenth century, and to the age-old tradition of 'signifying' if we want to discover the roots of the 'gangsta' aesthetic of hip hop. Irreverence has been a central component of black expressive vernacular culture…many of these narratives are about power.[301]

Nas's speculative space *is* "the imaginary upside-down world," also referred to as illmatic, where ill constitutes the process Kelley claims as recursive—the oppressed are made powerful.

The architects of this social reality range from Nas and his creation, *Illmatic,* to Robert Moses and his Cross-Bronx expressway. The architects also include other creators like the Wu-Tang Clan and their reconstruction of the *36 Chambers of Shaolin*, or OutKast, and their speculative space known as *Stankonia*. This kind of world-building illustrates Kelley's claims of "ghettocentrism"—the process through which marginalized and oppressed communities reclaim, redefine, and reshape derogatory terms, symbols, and narratives; thereby asserting focus on how individuals and communities within urban ghettos reclaim language as a means of challenging dominant power structures, expressing solidarity, and creating a sense of belonging. As such, new identities emerge alongside a grammar that signifies them. Ideologically, Nas's construction of speculative space mirrors the way urban renewal leveraged a grammar to facilitate displacement—blight, slum, urban decay, eminent domain, redlining, gentrification, and urban clearance are terms enabling the operationalization of displacement, otherwise an illmatic process of mechanization.

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[300] Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (The Free Press, 1994), 187.
[301] Ibid., 187.

As urban removal fractured the Bronx in the post-civil-rights era, the manipulation of traditional values, widespread moral panic of proliferating immigrant cultural traditions, and the commodification of hard times constitute the tinder sparking social upheaval as a response to hegemonic neoliberalism. Following a tumultuous deindustrialized era, the weight of institutional and political pressure gave rise to phenomena like Reaganism and its accompanying counterhegemonic discourse, hip hop. It is necessary, then, to unravel the knotwork of socio-economic and political narratives creating and sustaining binary realities for mainstream society's identity crisis. The result of such an ideological fissure is a utopian and speculative space wherein black futures thrive in soundscapes; they are aural and simultaneously effective. Herein, speculative space emerges in response to the tension created by systemic pressure such as deindustrialization and neoliberal agendas. This foundation enables Nas to create an effective site where black futures are *not* confined to a maze but are unconstrained in a location to launch counternarratives.

In his work, *Representing,* S. Craig Watkins describes the post-industrial regime as marked by the dynamic flow and widespread distribution of capital and industry across diverse sectors and regions. This spread of productive activity morphs into ideological bunkers of malicious and spiteful behavior, hindering societal progress and fostering negative divisions:

> Deindustrialization ushered in the steady erosion of the industrial base economy in favor of a flourishing service, administrative, and information-driven economy. These economic transformations devastated the infrastructure of the cities that were once robust centers of production and economic growth. As a result of systematic neglect and institutional racism, these changes have led to the erasure of well-paying jobs, income, and tax base, which has generated acute fiscal and social problems in many inner-city communities.[302]

Inherent within this era of economic plight were also social and political structures influenced by racial, class, and gender disadvantages. The result of such splintering is the forming of a late

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[302] S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (The Chicago University Press, 1998), 21.

20th-century brand of American citizenry reliant on the adherence to ideological subject positions like social conservatism or social progressivism to maintain order. Hip-hop architects responded to critiques to counter the hegemonic impact. In 1988, N.W.A. addressed economic disparities and police brutality in their music, specifically hits like "Express Yourself" and "Straight Outta Compton" promoted agency and bravado. In 1989, Public Enemy challenged similar racial disparities embedded in societal structures through songs like "Fight the Power." Later, in 1989, Queen Latifah celebrated gender equality and challenged patriarchal structures in her song "Ladies First." Notably, these contributions enhanced hip-hop discourse and projected voices from the margins through sonic and visceral waves into the mainstream.

The social currents of the postindustrial landscape also included the political antagonism that constructed social identities. Watkins observes, "The dominant themes in hip hop develop their creative shape in relation to a social world in which new forms and sites of political antagonism proliferate."[303] Returning to the Bronx as ground zero for hip-hop, the cultural landscape makes possible the rearticulation of symbolic materials to contribute to the creation of the imagined community Kelley claims exist. This imagined community fosters several key myths, despite their inherent incongruities. Scholars like Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Eric Lott, Houston Baker, Tricia Rose, David Toop, Brian Cross, and others, emphasize the dangers of misperception in the inconsistent theories of black youth nihilism as a prime cause for deviance. Claims of black youth destroying their communities as they demonstrate criminality, the commodification of a hard times contradiction wherein capital accumulation coincides with pronouncements of poverty, and a capital paradox promoting prosperity at the expense of misogyny and gratuitous violence through storytelling. These myths justify governmental policies arguing blight as an exigence for urban renewal. On the contrary, the soundscape turned

[303] Ibid., 67.

speculative space is ripe for ontological and epistemological critique, suggesting the transformation of the moral panic fueling those myths into raw reality; this is an affordance of speculative space.

A consideration of hegemony, as inflicted on the subjugated, is the ideological work preceding the use of coercion. As Watkins argues, "The general public must be made to feel vulnerable, to feel that the stability of the moral and social order is threatened, this necessitating dramatic acts to preserve social order."[304] Just before the release of *Illmatic*, hip-hop's most prominent critiques centered on the effects of Reaganism and the War on Drugs. According to Watkins, at that time, "The call for law and order is about the maintenance of a social system that produces political and economic hierarchies."[305] Emergent crisis necessitated the deployment of repressive state apparatuses, like the police, to discipline subjects who were ultimately portrayed in media and other institutional venues as militant and deviant. On the contrary, on the opposite pole of that sonic bridge are subjects who understand their positionality as somehow trapped within an ideological debate of political correctness and the physical landscapes characterizing contemporary housing projects like Queensbridge. More precisely, Stuart Hall explains:

> The themes of crime and social delinquency, articulated through the discourses of popular morality; touch on the direct experience, the anxieties, and uncertainties of ordinary people. This has led to a dovetailing of the 'cry for discipline' from below into the call for an enforced restoration of social order and authority 'from above.' This articulation forms the bridge, between the real material sources of popular discontent, and their representation, through specific ideological forces and campaigns, as the general need for a 'disciplined society.' It has as its principal effect, the awakening of popular support for a restoration of order through imposition: the basis of a populist 'law-and-order' campaign. This, in turn, has given a wide legitimacy to the tilt of the balance within the operations of the state toward the 'coercive' pole, whilst preserving its popular legitimacy.[306]

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[304] Ibid., 61.
[305] Ibid., 35.
[306] Stuart Hall, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 137.

The direct response against the hyperbolic dramatization of Reaganism, political correctness, and claims of what is or isn't legitimate is the "expressive culture of black youth [who] loosely organize a worldview that cultivates varying ways of interpreting, representing, and understanding the changing social, economic, and political contours of ghetto dislocation."[307] If Nas's *Illmatic* constructs Queensbridge as a sonic speculative space, then the music sounding Nas's lyrics serve as a portal to the healing site. The resulting acoustic and lyrical archive becomes a world where street deviants are converted into street disciples—enter Nasty Nas, the self-proclaimed "street's disciple," or as Imani Perry claims, a "prophet of the hood."

4.2 The African American Vernacular Tradition and Illmatic

If urban renewal was instrumental in the creation of *Illmatic*, then the album serves as a response to and a document of its consequences. This response is deeply rooted in cultural expression and the AAVT figures prominently in Nas's ability to construct Queensbridge as a speculative space. I conceptualize *Illmatic* as a response to the call sent forth by notable blues and jazz figures dating back to the advent of the Mississippi blues and through the Ava-t Garde jazz period of the 1970s. Nas's father, Olu Dara, helped establish the *blue*print for Nas's speculative space by teaching him what columnist Phil Gallo called the "pork-fried jazz wrapped around Delta blues and easygoing funk."[308] Gallo writes,

> What he [Dara] proffers has a timelessness with context…whether it be the Mississippi Delta in 1934 or Times Square circa 1971. It's jazz and then it isn't; there's always a sense of Africa, and from the blues perspective, he indicates that he enjoyed free-form rock radio in the 1970s. It's some of the most enjoyable undefinable music going.[309]

The eclecticism characterizing Dara's music also informed his mannerisms. Writer Kyra Gaunt recalls meeting Dara later in his career. She describes him as flamboyant:

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[307] Watkins, 198.

[308] Phil Gallo, "Olu Dara." *Variety,* Apr, 2001, 36, https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/olu-dara/docview/236292319/se-2.

[309] Ibid.

> [a] mack daddy…and a southern gentlemen….Olu Dara is a travelin' bluesman, a ladies man, and a sage trickster steeped in the sounds of the diaspora. He embodies the aesthetic of black verbal and musical improvisation and the politics of being a black man moving the crowds through the blues, bebop, or verbal social play.[310]

Dara's range and eclecticism extend to Nas in the bluesy aesthetic of his lyrics. Nas deems his music "retardedly bop" in the way of Dara's diasporic and diverse sonic renderings. As Imani Perry observes, "Moreover, Olu Dara's diverse artistic influences, the Caribbean, Africa, Mississippi, and Louisiana, have been filtered to his son, whose first album has both classic soul and reggae riffs abounding."[311] Accordingly, Dara's contribution to speculative space is by way of a sonic inheritance, wherein his diasporic influences helped shape Nas's auditory imagination.

In 1983, Dara took his young son, Nasir, to the cinema to watch the hip-hop film *Wild Style*. The film signifies the evolution and velocity of hip-hop as a product of raw expression. A few years after the screening, 13-year-old Nas picked up a pen and went to work narrating street life in Queens, New York in a similar fashion. With his razor-sharp lyrics, Nas transformed the gritty Queensbridge Projects into a sonic dais for his poetic storytelling, weaving together vivid street narratives harkening back to the oral work of griots. Through *Illmatic*, Nas constructed speculative space by penning the sounds of street life. He cemented his place as not only a skilled rapper but also a chronicler of his generation's struggles and triumphs. Mark Anthony Neal chronicles Dara's musical education as a catalyst for Nas's creative capability. Neal explains the germ of Nas's inheritance:

> …Olu Dara was a migrant son. Born and raised in Natchez, Mississippi, twenty-three-year-old Charles Jones III was discharged from the Navy in 1964 and landed in New York City. Charles Jones III was part of a generation of southern black men who could smell freedom just around the corner. Serving in the armed forces enabled those men to put a down payment on their freedom. In the armed services men like Jones and some of his contemporaries such as alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson or former James Brown sideman Fred Wesley Jr. traveled the world and passed time honing their skills as musicians. With the breezes of change blowing through black America, by the end of the 1960s Jones had dubbed himself Olu Dara and with his little cornet in hand, began to

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[310] Gaunt, *Born to Use Mics,* 174
[311] Perry, *Born to Use Mics,* 199.

> play the dramas of the built environment of New York City…As Dara admitted in an interview, 'I knew in the back of my mind that I always wanted to combine my experiences and not settle for one sound.' Art Blakely, Taj Mahal, Leon Thomas, Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake, and Arthur Blythe—part of a New York—based avant-garde with roots in the black arts movement of the 1960s—were among the artists Dara performed with during his first decade in New York.[312]

Dara met and married Fannie Ann Jones, Nas's mother, and settled in Queensbridge where they gave birth to Nasir Jones in 1973. Dara's connection to migration and musical craftmanship are key elements of Nas's upbringing. By the time Nas was a teenager, he and his father had developed a kind of intergenerational dialogue, one steeped in the history of music as an expression of black thought, mobility, and experience. I am fascinated by the way Nas's music channels his father's aesthetic into sounds of street life, again enabling the transformation of the Queensbridge projects into speculative space.

The Queensbridge soundscape is visceral, allowing listeners to enter the music through sounds of street ambiance like subway trains, gunshots, and sirens, and interludes of voices describing scenes as illmatic. *Illmatic* is street ethnography, by this, I mean to imply that *Illmatic* offers an auditory window into the lived experiences in the Queensbridge Housing projects. The soundscape reflects Nas's artistic inheritance and diverse aesthetic education from his father, among other sound architects who helped produce the album. The DJs and MCs from South Bronx and Queens, and a variety of other burden bearers who expressed the liminal experiences of immigrant and migrant communities through the blues, jazz, and spoken word, contribute to Nas's talent as well. The speculative space Nas describes for listeners and readers emerges from this blend of historical and cultural legacies, both personal and communal. Through the blending of his father's jazz influences, South Bronx's booming hip-hop scene, and the realities of life in Queensbridge projects, Nas can construct a speculative space wherein his lyrical voice projects imagined and alternate possibilities for his community. This space becomes a platform for

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[312] Neal, *Born to Use Mics*, 119.

exploring the many "what-if" realms where Nas can envision realities from a perspective informed by historical burdens and futuristic possibilities. Nas offers a snippet of such an Afro-futuristic rendition in 1996 when he wrote “If I Ruled the World”:

> Imagine smokin’ weed in the street, without cops harassin’
> Imagine goin’ to court with no trial.
> Imagine everybody flasin’ fashion, designer clothes
> Imagine law with no undercovers.
> Gimme one shot, I turn trife life to lavish
> Political prisoners set free, stress-free
> No work release…
> Feel the wind breeze in West Indies
> I make Coretta Scott-King mayor…
> I’d open every cell in Attica,
> Send ‘em to Africa
> If I ruled the world,
> Imagine that.
> I’d free all my sons.[313]

So, how does this music stir the imagination in such a cosmic and syncopated way, yoking the past and present into one unified chord? What does speculative space as a polytemporal site truly look like? My three-decade-old inquiry regarding *Illmatic* has always been about the seductive nature of Nas’s stories and the rhythm of his rhymes, the seamless way he “dominates break loops” as a way to imply a mastery of improvisation.[314] Despite the complexity of its arrangement, the 1994 album is seldom discussed as a product of two genres archiving black experience for well over a century—the blues and jazz. Considering this, many of Nas’s tracks can be considered ballads—a form of narrative poetry telling stories of tragedy, love, loss, or historical events—undefinable in some ways, like his father’s music. Another way of perceiving *Illmatic* could be as a love letter to Nas’s sonic self—simply listen to the songs “Memory Lane,” “One Love,” and “The World is Yours” and you would find an epistolary

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[313] Nas feat. Lauryn Hill, “If I Ruled the World (Imagine That),” track 14 on *It Was Written*, Columbia Records, released 1996, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[314] Nas, “It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” track 10 on *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, released 1994, streaming audio, Apple Music.

quality implicating an unnamed recipient. More specifically, the Nasian ballad signifies the blues of Dara, free jazz player Henry Threadgill, and many others, by reimagining the introspection of the blues within the speculative space of Queensbridge. In this manner, Nas's music foreshadows Kelley's ghettocentric method, leveraging sounds of the city's soundscape and a specific grammar to reimagine Queensbridge as far more than a dungeon of rap.

Nas forges a raw poetic style as a revision of multiple genres—fiction, the ballad, lyric, and poetry—demonstrating an elusive and boundless phenomenon that he may describe as illmatic. One glaring acknowledgment of genre is observed when Nas refers to his music as "retardedly-bop." He signifies upon a tradition of expression having to do with jazz. Political incorrectness aside, he invokes bop to acknowledge and pronounce the duality and improvisational nature of his sound. Perhaps this is why Nas's music is so suggestive of lived reality as shaped by systemic forces. He speaks life into his translucent younger self, as depicted on the album's cover art below, as a representative of those who cannot speak for themselves. On that cover art, Nas is one with the city he sonically reconstructs. Ironically, we can perceive Nas as acting upon Ellison's inquiry at the end of *Invisible Man*: "Who knows by that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" In this way, *Illmatic* informs young people everywhere and *nowhere* about the circumstances of plight and possibility, speaking to and for them, saying, you are not alone.

Figure 1: *Illmatic Cover Art* by Aimee Macauley (1994).

My goal is to show that it is possible to engage in Nas's storytelling by interpreting his lyrics as subjunctively asserting access to a soundscape that seduces and guides listeners into that "imaginary upside-down world," otherwise speculative space. Nas employs several tropes in *Illmatic* to convey speculative space. Perhaps, chief among them is his role as wanderer and griot. Others include a form of temporal collapse through musical sampling, evoking the AAVT through musical production. Nas also relies on speculative geography to guide listeners through auditory terrain, and a call-and-response trope enabling an interactive listening experience through a blues-like communal dialogue. Each track employs these tropes, slowly constructing speculative space as an interactive realm to navigate.

The introductory tune on *Illmatic* is biblically titled "The Genesis," invoking a new beginning. The title signals time as a critical factor of Nas's project. The track opens with the sounds of passing trains depicting the very mobility enabling migration. Dialogue from the movie *Wild Style* opens the introductory track, signifying hip-hop's beginning and serving as a backdrop for the communion of young friends. Given the symbolism in the production, Nas is indeed

signaling something new. This gesture is a component of speculative space because the future the space conceives is informed, but not constrained, by the past. Under this sound montage, listeners can hear vocals from Nas's first guest appearance with the rap group Main Source— "Live at the Barbeque." Again, in "The Genesis" a biblical reference is heard before the track's sound shifts to dialogue: Nas raps "When I was 12, I went to hell for snuffing…" Immediately, the track shifts to a dialogue depicting Nas and his brother, Jungle, hanging out and deliberating about time. Nas employs the tropes of call-and-response and aspects of auditory geography like the train and city noise to establish the foundation of speculative space as ambiguous and layered as the city itself. Notice the call-and-response exchange in "The Genesis" as Nas and his brother Jungle engage in an exchange charged with meaning:

> Jungle: Ayo, dunn
> C'mon, c'mon, man stop wavin' that, man
> Don't point it at me, bruh, take the clip out
>
> Nas: Nigga, alright, but take this Hennessey, man
>
> Jungle: I'm sayin' take the clip man, c'mon, take it out
>
> Nas: Light them Phillies up, man, niggas stop fuckin' burnin' Phillies, man
> Light some Phillies up then (pass that Henrock)
>
> Jungle: Pass that Henrock, nigga, act like you know
> Yo, we drinkin' this straight up with no chaser
> I ain't fuckin' with you, nigga
>
> Nas: I'm saying, though, man
>
> Jungle: What is it? What is it, baby?
> What is it, son? What is it?
> You know what time it is
>
> Nas: I'm saying, man, you know what I'm saying?
> Niggas don't listen, man, representin', it's Illmatic.[315]

[315] Nas, "The Genesis," track 1 on *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, released 1994, streaming audio, Apple Music.

The dialogue in "The Genesis" is comprised of street slang and rhymical exchange. It captures a moment of ritual communion—the two brothers smoking reefer, handling a gun, and drinking alcohol. The combination of these elements reflects a ritualized call-and-response. Nas and Jungle go back and forth over who has the reefer and alcohol, who has the gun, and what even is this form of give-and-take. As *Wild Style* is heard in the background, enabling a panorama of a television set in a small apartment room, the conversation angles toward attempts to name something unintelligible— "What is it?" they ask. Illmatic is not only the title of the album but something else. When Nas concludes with "It's Illmatic," it is not clear what he is referring to. This ambiguity leads listeners to understand the "it" as their circumstance—illmatic, in the very sense of the word, is sick yet cool and automatic as in mechanical, much like the scene of the Introductory track.

Notably, this too exhibits Kelley's claims of ghettocentric aspects of reappropriating language to challenge existing power structures. Terms like *nigga* are an example of such a strategic deployment. Traditionally, urban slang has roots in diasporic oral traditions as they mimic signifying as another strategy of revision. According to Adilifu Nama, the exchange is "the continuation of the African American oral tradition of preserving and transmitting suppressed, censored, and ignored narratives of racial resistance and struggle not shown in corporate media or discussed in the halls of political power."[316] This aptly describes the scene in "The Genesis."

Nas's speculative space continually builds over the next three tracks. "N.Y. State of Mind," "Life's A Bitch," and "The World is Yours," collectively archive black intramural experiences in Queensbridge. These tracks function to sonically depict the projects as speculative space by constructing a sonic geography. In other words, a mapping of factors given the post-industrial project of urban renewal as previously described. The aspect of speculative space I am

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[316] Nama, *Born to Use Mics,* 25.

concerned with here is how Nas can vividly render Queensbridge, and life in New York *writ* large, through a nihilistic turned subjunctive grammar. Within his lyrics, possibilities emerge that transcend the confines of the physical boundaries of Queensbridge. As Nas constructs speculative space, he simultaneously ruptures the margins containing him and his fictional archetypes, thus offering a way out of the maze. Consider these lines taken from the three respective tracks. Collectively they depict Queensbridge as a speculative space—a ruin in progress:

> Ayo Black, it's time, word (word, it's time, man)
> It's time, man (a'ight, man, begin)
> Yeah, straight out the fuckin' dungeons of rap
> Where fake niggas don't make it back
> I don't know how to start this shit, yo, now.[317]

> I woke up early on my born day, I'm 20, it's a blessin'
> The essence of adolescence leaves my body, now I'm fresh and
> My physical frame is celebrated 'cause I made it
> One quarter through life, some godly-like thing created…
> …Life's a bitch and then you die, that's why we get high cause you never know when you're gonna go.[318]

> I'm the young city bandit, hold myself down single-handed
> For murder raps, I kick my thoughts alone, get remanded
> Born alone, die alone, no crew to keep my crown or throne
> I'm deep by sound alone, caved inside, a thousand miles from home
> I need a new nigga for this black cloud to follow
> 'Cause while it's over me it's too dark to see tomorrow.[319]

Nas expresses the ontoepistemological properties here by merging lived experiences with poetic introspection, a feature of speculative space. He signifies upon Alain Locke's New Negro theory to construct the *new nigga* in speculative space. The declaration, "I don't know how to start this…" refers to "The Genesis" as a new beginning. Immediately, Nas expresses self-awareness concerning his artistic creation of speculative space— "born alone, die alone…I'm deep by sound alone." And within this depth, like Ellison's Invisible, Nas can enjoy introspection as an aspect of

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[317] Nas, "N.Y. State of Mind," track 2 on *Illmatic*.
[318] Nas, "Life's A Bitch," track 3 on *Illmatic*.
[319] Nas, "The World is Yours," track 4 on *Illmatic*.

speculative space. He “need[s] a new nigga for this black cloud to follow,” so he constructs ‘Nasty Nas’ as an alter ego.

Readers should also note the plethora of characters emerging in this speculative space, as they play the role of the laborer throughout the album. The work they accomplish personifies the continuation of the AAVT. They are referred to throughout the album as "Black,” “Five Percenters,” “fake ni*gas,” “baseheads,” “real nig*as,” “crews,” “snitches”, and “crackheads.” And they construct “the projects,” “the dungeons of rap,” “the corners,” “the block,” “building lobbies,” “Queens,” and New York as a “rotten apple.” The trio of tracks is the bedrock for Queensbridge as a speculative space. They define the who, what, where, and why of Nas’s narrative positioning.

The fifth track is aptly titled “Halftime,” signaling to listeners that it’s time to flip the vinyl record or cassette tape. Perhaps the title offers a way to include listeners in the construction of speculative space, a break, as it were, to collect thoughts and rest. Nas seemingly positions “Halftime” as a break to contemplate the speculative space he has described up to this point in the album—an interval wherein listeners can visualize Queensbridge as not just a physical housing project complex, but a layered sonic geography where time collapses into a cipher as a reinterpretation of life in Queensbridge. Produced by Large Professor, a mentor for Nas, “Halftime” introduces listeners to Nasty Nas, an archetype who takes audiophiles through the Queensbridge Streets by battling an undefined opponent. Nasty Nas describes swagger through the sonic texture of attire and action, all while navigating the projects. In some ways, Nasty Nas plays a similar role to Morrison’s narrator Jazz, and Ellison’s Blues in his undrafted short story. All three narrators personify their parent musical genre as fictional extensions of its rhythm.

The track is a meditation on self-proclamation, cataloging Nas’s journey from street dweller to rapper. The difference here is important, because as Marc Lamont Hill explains, “Nas brings together two allegedly irreconcilable camps within the hip-hop community: ‘conscious’

and 'commercial.'"[320] Hill explains how the street dweller/rapper dichotomy contributes to high and low distinctions within the culture. Such division threatens to situate the street dweller as an entity contributing to the rapper's craft by providing content. In another way, Nasty Nas only exists because the *real nigga* in the "dungeon of rap" does. This interdependent relationship positions Nas's persona, Nasty Nas, not just as a street dweller but also as someone deeply connected to the "dungeon of rap" as a primitive lived experience from which the music originates. Thus, the *real nigga* gives rise to the rapper, and both elements are essential for the creation of an artistic persona in speculative space. Nas writes,

> I'm an intellectual
> Of rap, I'm a professional and that's no question, yo.
> These are the lyrics of the man, you can't near it, understand?
> 'Cause in the streets, I'm well known like the number man
> Am I in place with the bass and format?
> Explore rap, and tell me Nas ain't all that.[321]

These lyrics depict Nas's braggadocios demeanor as not simply an expression of self-assurance. They indicate a heightened sense of self-awareness, also an affordance of speculative space. It is also worth noting how Nas employs his lyrical prowess to battle an imaginary opponent. Hill also observes this subtle act as a form of African-centered pedagogy. He writes, "Through 'Halftime,' Nas demonstrates his commitment to the hip-hop vernacular tradition by engaging in one of hip-hop's primary lyrical exercises: the battle."[322] The idea of exercise in speculative space had not initially occurred to me; however, in this case, such an activity is essential for freestyling as a form of improvisation. While *Illmatic* does not include any freestyles, it is a notable aspect of the rap cipher—a circle gathering of rappers harnessing creative energy to display lyricality—a contemporary ring shout of sorts. Within the construction of speculative space, "Halftime"

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[320] Hill, *Born to Use Mics,* 98.
[321] Nas "Halftime," track 5 on *Illmatic.*
[322] Hill, *Born to Use Mics,* 113.

represents an opportunity to survey the sonic worksite, Queensbridge, specifically, the "40 side" of Vernon Avenue.

Tracks six through eight narrow focus and shift temporally through multiple nowhere sites—a park bench in the projects, a letter exchange in a prison, and Nasty Nas's sonic psyche. The songs navigate aspects of memory, incarceration, and the day of the life of Nasty Nas. "Memory Lane (Sittin' in da Park)," "One Love," and "One Time 4 Your Mind" illustrate those aspects of quiet that Kevin Quashie describes as "an expressiveness of the interior."[323]

These tracks affect memory by engaging with stories that seemingly refashion the archetypes animating the first five tracks. For example, in "Memory Lane," Nas revisits past experiences to reconfigure archetypes of struggle and camaraderie introduced earlier in the album. Those silent friends "sitting in San Quentin" on the track "Life's A Bitch" gain a voice in the epistolary song "One Love." Here, Nas engages memory as a tool not only for recounting past trauma but for reimagining possibilities of peace and self-determination. In "One Love," Nas expands the notion of introspection into a broader collective memory tied to the constraints of systemic injustice.

One attribute of speculative space is the use of it as a site to mount resistance. "One Love," is arguably the most intimate song on the album and serves as an epistolary and intimate description of resistance. Q-Tip, from the rap group "A Tribe Called Quest," used his friend's basement as a recording studio for the track. In the underground site, they used mbira, bass, and piano to produce a mystic soundscape complementary to Nas's epistolary treatise addressing a fictional and incarcerated companion. The letter articulates the implications of confinement given

[323] Kevin Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2012), 21. Quashie explores how a notion of quiet might express diverse forms of expressiveness. This concept does not refer to silence from a public perspective, but rather those internal and meditative aspects of expressiveness. The interior for Quashie is "the inner reservoir of thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, ambitions that shape a human self…" Nas's ability to construct speculative space is indicative of this quality.

a community of people connected to the penal system. In just a short verse on the track "One Love," Nas captures the complexity of the prison-industrial complex:

> So stay civilized, time flies.
> Though incarcerated, your mind dies.
> I hate it when your moms cries.
> It kinda wants to make me murder, for real.[324]

The phrase "One Love" is an expression of unity taken from Bob Marley's 1965 ballad of the same name. Nas relies on this mantra to remain connected with friends held captive by the penal system; he also acknowledges the possible degradation of civility given captivity. Regarding speculative space, Nas uses this track as an epistolary device to show how the speculative realm exists beyond the confines of his sonic housing project. The track adds to an already rich construction of speculative space by demonstrating how time and distance can collapse to allow for the transcendence of oppressive structures like the prison system.

By closely reading the song as correspondence, I can show how the subjunctive mood is present throughout and how this conveyance of hope restores optimism. It also invokes alternate realities and possibilities, where the past is reimagined and reinterpreted. This polytemporal feature of the letter creates a reflective and speculative narrative, and in doing so, these tracks deepen listener's understanding of characters' internal struggles, their desires, and their dreams, ultimately revealing the complexity of their inner world as they navigate memory, incarceration, and existential contemplation.

Through letter writing, Nas demonstrates another form of ritualized exchange. Below, I have reformatted the song lyrics into a letter in the way Nas performs it on the album. Nas writes:

> What up kid?
> I know shit is rough doin' your bid. When the cops came, you shoulda slid to my crib. But fuck it black, no time for looking back it's done; plus, congratulations, you know you got a son. I heard he looks like you, why don't your lady write you? Told her she should visit, that's when she got hyper. Flippin', talk about he acts too rough. He didn't listen, he be riffin' while I'm tellin' him stuff. I was like yeah, shorty don't care, she a snake too.

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[324] Nas "One Love," track 7 on *Illmatic.*

> Fuckin' with the niggaz from that fake crew that hate you. But yo, guess who got shot in the dome-piece, Jerome's niece, on her way home from Jones beach. It's bugged. Plus little Rob is selling drugs all the time. Hangin' out with young thugs that all carry 9's. And nighttime is more trife than ever. What up with Cormega, did you see 'em, are y'all together? If so then hold the fort down, represent to the fullest. Say whats up to Herb, Ice and Bullet. I left a half a hundred in your commissary. You was my nigga when push came to shove.
> -One what? One love.[325]

This exchange underscores the deep bond and the emotional weight of staying informed about a world that feels simultaneously close and distant. This reading assumes the many captives populating the criminal justice system as a chaotic and automatic circumstance (illmatic). The unnamed prisoner in Nas's letter represents incarcerated men and women more broadly. Accordingly, listeners can envision "Black" as a companion whose arrest and captivity leave a community without his presence. The "production of disposable lives" Saidiya Hartman mentions in her influential essay, "Venus in Two Acts," can be conceptualized in the criminal justice system, wherein, the 13th Amendment frames confinement due to a crime as a legally sanctioned form of subjugation —as previously mentioned, this is what Michelle Alexander refers to in her work *The New Jim Crow*. Through "One Love," Nas demonstrates the continuity of racial control and exploitation, reinforcing the notion of disposable lives in a society prioritizing punishment over rehabilitation and equity. This aspect of speculative space enables the penetration of physical barriers like the concrete, bars, and water separating Queensbridge from the island prison Nas refers to "N.Y. State of Mind."

Nas also references the violence threatening young innocent bystanders like Jerome's niece. Little Rob is also subjected to violence as he has begun to sell drugs because of associating with the crews in his neighborhood. Nas laments this cycle, informing the unknown letter recipient to "hold the fort down, [and] represent to the fullest," suggesting that although the body

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[325] Nas, "One Love" track 7 on *Illmatic*.

is in bondage, there is still the possibility for agency through the proclamation of a reputation as social capital.

In the essay, "'One Love,' Two Brothers, Three Verses," Michael Eric Dyson explains,

> The point of framing 'One Love' as a letter is to root his [Nas's] reflections on prison in existential soil by accounting for the shifting allegiances, shattered affections, and sustaining alliances that sprout in the aftermath of incarceration…Beyond the chaos of urban violence and poverty, Nas expresses care for vulnerable children, hurting parents, wayward youth, and suffering friends, just as members of the broader society do. This may be the other America, but in the grammar of human aspiration and social desire, the noun is just as important as the adjective.[326]

Dyson's observation helps explain Nas's sonic epistle as an intimate gesture. The collision of chaos, vulnerability, and intimacy, within the confines of the letter, demonstrates the possibility of resisting the "production of disposable bodies" and making a sonic audience aware of the implications of incarceration.

Following Hartman's lead in exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive mood, an illmatic reading layers the chaos and dysfunction of the prison system for both inmate and freeman, bound by captivity, yet mediated through written discourse. In this case, Nas's fusion of prose and music exemplifies the very paracritical hinge Nathaniel Mackey describes as mediating sound and literature. In "One Love," there are several aspects of the subjunctive mood Nas uses to offer a future for listeners to explore: "You should slid to my crib;" Why don't your lady write you?;" Told her she should visit;" and "What up with Cormega, did you see 'em, are y'all together? If so then hold the fort down, represent to the fullest."[327] Like the other phrases, the expression "*if so*" suggests a hypothetical situation reflecting uncertainty. In an illmatic way, the possibility of union for Nas's friend Black is disrupted given his capture, yet *if* he slid to Nas's crib*; if* his lady writes; *if* she visits, perhaps the inmate's confinement could be curtailed.

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[326] Dyson, *Born to Use Mics*, 135.
[327] Nas, "One Love," track 7 on *Illmatic.*

By paying attention to the subjunctive mood, readers can explore a range of possibilities for ameliorating confinement. Confinement is a subtle and repetitive theme in Nas's lyrics, especially given the many stories whose premise depends on breaking the law. "One Love" functions similarly as does Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which emphasizes how epistolary genres facilitate entry into the interiority of black life. In keeping with the spirit of Nas's love letter: "'One Love' is both reportage and pep talk, a morality tale of lost innocence and lost life in degrees and proportions, a missive smoothly melding empathy and caution."[328] Speculative space is the imaginative rendering of what could be—an envisioning of lives unburdened by the constraints of systemic injustice and social alienation. Nas's letters create a sanctuary for contemplation, offering not only a critique of the present state of incarceration but also possibilities for connection, healing, and resilience.

Like speculative fiction, in speculative space listeners are invited to engage with alternate realities—where the incarcerated can reclaim agency, where community ties remain unbroken despite physical separation, and where the violence of the streets gives way to a nurturing environment for the vulnerable. The subjunctive mood in Nas's lyrics serves as a vehicle for this exploration, allowing the narrative to navigate the terrain of "what ifs" and "could bes," ultimately fostering hope in the face of despair.

In articulating the nuanced relationships developing in the aftermath of incarceration, Nas opens a dialogue about the complexities of love and loyalty amidst chaos. The idea of "holding the fort down" resonates as an acknowledgment of both struggle and solidarity, signaling that even when the body is imprisoned, the spirit of the community can endure. This tension reflects the duality of confinement—both a physical and psychological state—while simultaneously offering a vision for liberation, penetrating the literal bars of the prison system. By presenting this

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[328] Dyson, *Born to Use Mics*, 133.

area in speculative space, Nas disrupts the narrative of disposable lives, positioning his letter as an act of reclamation and resistance. The dialogue he establishes with listeners becomes a critical reflection on systemic inequities, inviting them to consider the broader implications of their realities while fostering empathy for those caught in the web of the criminal justice system. In speculative space, "Memory Lane (Sittin' in da Park)," "One Love," and "One Time 4 Your Mind" represent the power of epistemological reach as the concrete of speculative space reconstruction.

I consider the last two tracks as the project's Coda. "Represent," and "It Ain't Hard to Tell" are clarion calls celebrating life in the projects as subjugated space. Together, they tell stories of the interiority of the *block* as a site for identification and pride. The speculative space is nearly complete as these two tracks reflect the need for psychological escape through capital accumulation. The paradox in these tracks characterizes the ideological and seductive lure of the very streets Nas articulates in his lyrics. Notably, "It Ain't Hard to Tell" samples Michael Jackson's "Human Nature." Throughout the song about entrapment, Jackson pleas: "Looking out," "Get me out," "Why, why?" "Reaching out…" "If they say why...Tell them that it's human nature?"[329] Freedom is Jackson's plea in that he suggests that the natural state of man ought to be autonomous. Nas's sampling of this track implies parallel confinement, for in Nas's Queensbridge projects, speculative and real, the tenement buildings function as structures of imprisonment. Despite this, Nas's lyrical transcendence invokes what Imani Perry claims is a "long-standing theological tradition… [She explains,] Nas's [poetry as a] statement goes beyond 'I am more than just a young black man.' Instead, he says 'As a young black man I have a vast

[329] Michael Jackson, "Human Nature," track 7 on *Thriller*, MJJ Productions Inc., released 1982, streaming audio, Apple Music.

universe inside me.'"[330] That universe is depicted as those tenement buildings shown through young Nas on the *Illmatic* cover art; it represents Queensbridge as speculative space.

4.3 Beyond Trope: A Grammar of Speculative Sonicity

My investigation into how Nas's *Illmatic* renders Queensbridge as a speculative space relies on the work's ability to project a grammar of speculative sonicity; in other words, like *Jazz,* and *Invisible Man*, *Illmatic* disrupts linear chronology using rich metaphors, personification, and parallelism. As a result, Queensbridge is transformed into a speculative site composed of fragments of a broader imaginative soundscape. The grammar I am referring to is not so much specific words or phrases, but rather a parabolic structure enabling Nas as a flaneur to guide listeners.

Nas's music represents a dynamic and multifaceted cultural fusion. The genre intertwines diverse artistic influences, social reality, and individual expression into a frequency that speaks for the inhabitants of urban centers like Queensbridge. Unfortunately, Nas's music can be overlooked given a broader and damaging hip-hop stigma associated with criminality and vagrancy. At its worst, rap music is vulgar, misogynistic, self-serving, and malignant; at its best, the music is a raw rendition of a socio-political movement in flux—the intersection of Afro-diasporic tradition, urban landscapes, and technological advancement. Indeed, rap music describes a genre encapsulating the spirit of creative resilience, storytelling, and cultural empowerment. Rap also relies on rich historical narratives to sustain the continuation of the African American oral and vernacular tradition. Through its unique grammar, Nas's lyrics are seductive explicitly and hypnotically, enabling listeners to lose themselves in the vivid textures and narratives as Ramsey observed above. Therein, Nas's archetypes function as fictional characters. Nas's music enables this kind of immersion, and he leverages the archetypes of his

[330] Perry, *Born to Use Mics*, 201.

poetry to facilitate a collision of vernacular and artistic inheritance. Consequently, those archetypes become sonic representations of citizens on the margins who cannot often speak for themselves.

The central paradox in my investigation of the grammar *Illmatic* forwards as a knowledge system lies in its romanticization of street life through nebulous terms and sentiments. More broadly, Nas's parables collectively depict the broadside of the American Dream as oppressive and violent, while also portraying it as a crucible for personal resilience and artistic achievement. The archetypes Nas presents, as mentioned above (Nasty Nas, Black, etc.), contribute character to the Queensbridge soundscape as a tumultuous yet promising site. Furthermore, Nas's storytelling exposes deep-seated tension between the harsh realities of urban struggle and the aspirational narratives commonly associated with the American Dream. The album is not only a blueprint charting a new method of lyrical delivery, but the work engages in a complex worldview, combining aspects of ontology, nihilism, and phantasmic futures as possibilities—a bluesy-jazz aesthetic *sounding* a socio-cultural critique emerges.

The album can also be considered a sonic social referent as it reflects the wholesale of reality constructed by several ontoepistemological narratives of trauma. One way to show this construction is to examine how Nas employs tropes in his music to reveal this kind of speculative space. He reconstructs memory while addressing human agency;— his work is a buttress alongside what Denise da Silva calls the post-Enlightenment ontoepistemological political architecture.[331] This idea refers to the "juridical and the economic (the captive body) and the ethical (flesh) through the workings of the symbolic (skin color)."[332] Da Silva relies on this mapping to demonstrate how the black body, which she terms as the *wounded captive body* has

[331] See Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Unpayable Debt*. I am using this language to examine how Nas's characters in *Illmatic* are critiqued by the same structures—the prison system, systems of urban renewal, the political remnants of dubious policy, and subjects interested in capital accumulation.

[332] Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 28.

been subjected to various systems of inequality. Put another way, *Illmatic* critiques the dominant structures that have historically confined black existence with fixed structures of existence and knowledge; so, when Nas writes about the black cloud that follows him in "The World is Yours," he invokes melancholy as a New York state of mind that materializes da Silva's model.

The shadow from that cloud dims the Queensbridge projects *writ* large by layering a bleak cloak of subjugation onto a cloistered people. Through music, they demand disconnection from the "perverse circuitry"—the entanglement of institutional and government structures powered by divisive intent as defined by da Silva. The metaphorical shadow also extends across similar bleak enclaves in America: physically, South Central Los Angeles for NWA and others; OutKast's Southwest Atlanta (SWATs); and places like Memphis, Louisiana, and Detroit. Similar areas exist throughout the 20th-century African American literary tradition as well, notably Harlem and its stoops and alleys; the Deep South and its rural enclaves; and Nas's Queensbridge Housing projects. In those places lie Ralph Ellison's invisible men, Richard Wright's black boys, Morrison's Jazz women, and Baraka's blues people. They are blurred ghosts of modernity—illmatic everywhere and nowhere, and in time *now* and *here*.

Consider the following as an example of how Nas illustrates an epistemological narrative of plight. Revisiting the third track on *Illmatic,* "Life's A Bitch," the New York-based rapper AZ and Nas engage in ritualized dialogue and ontological contemplation. They rap:

> AZ: Visualizin' the realism of life in actuality,
> Fuck who's the baddest, a person's status depends on salary…
> …Others such as myself are tryin' to carry on tradition.
> Keepin' the effervescent street ghetto essence inside us.
> Cause it provides us with the proper insight to guide us…
>
> Nas: My physical frame is celebrated 'cause I made it.
> One quarter through life, some godly-like thing created.
>
> Nas: Life's a bitch and then you die, that's why we get high,
> Cuz you never know when you gonna go.[333]

[333] Nas, "Life's a Bitch," track 3 on *Illmatic*.

These lyrics signify the cathartic expression of hood archetypes whose existence is rooted in subjugation, survival, and the accumulation of wealth. Nas and AZ offer a glimpse into the interiority of a lifeworld circumscribed by hood politics—they fuse what Ramsey calls "cultural dialogues" into a rich intragenre exchange as Dara's trumpet moans at the end of the rhyme.[334] Notably, Dara completes the triad with AZ and Nas, constituting an intragenre dialogue as a continuation of the blues tradition. The song is also rich with funk riffs as it samples the 1980s Gap Band soul and funk ballad "Yearning for your Love."[335] Additionally, Dara infuses the song with a blues aesthetic as Nas and AZ rap through lyrics depicting the realism circumscribing their existence as a "life in actuality."[336]

Although AZ and Nas's lyrics don't mention Queensbridge, their depiction of life within that space conveys a vivid image of survival. The ontoepistemological aspect of Nas and AZs lyrics lies in the way they craft intricate and thought-provoking proclamations of da Silva's ontoepistemological political architecture, situating Queensbridge as a *scene of subjection* replete with *wounded captive bodies.* Nas's emphasis on his body and its negotiation with the world implies his melancholic attitude. Descriptions such as "my physical frame," "the essence of adolescence," "some Godly thing created," and "Life's a bitch," all imply a meditation on the human condition.

The "effervescence street ghetto essence" is a marker of misrecognition because it presumes a kind of innate spirit of authenticity, which constitutes the Real for Nas and AZ. For AZ, aspiring to that mirror's ego is indeed a *paper chase*. AZ writes,

> Even though, we know somehow we all gotta go
> but as long as we leaving thieving,
> we'll be leaving with some kind of dough, so,

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[334] Ramsey, *Born to Use Mics,* 71.

[335] "Yearning for Your Love," track 2 on *The Gap Band III,* UMG Recording, released 1980, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[336] Nas, "Life's A Bitch," track 3 on *Illmatic.*

> until that day we expire and turn to vapors
> me and my capers, will be somewhere stackin' plenty papers
> keeping it real, packing steel, getting high
> 'cause life's a bitch and then you die.[337]

Acquisition, in these terms, means thriving in an env(iron)ment where capital is king. This pursuit of wealth is rooted in the belief that nothing belongs to AZ or Nas. Rhetorically, the statement grants listeners a glimpse into the interiority of the *hood* as it boldly asserts a dichotomous relationship between life and death, authenticity and falsehood, and the use of guns and cannabis as coping mechanisms to survive. Consequently, the mirror stage manifests itself in the lyrics through the complex interplay of self-perception, societal expectations, and materialistic pursuit.

Analyzing Nas's lyrics aside from its aural aspects of sound yield a masculine and ritualized-poetic dialogue. The song is centered on the two rappers—Nas and AZ—as they negotiate the all-American capitalistic dream while acknowledging street code as a circumscribing discipline. Nas and AZ's dialogue fuses with a chorus insinuating hopelessness and ontological uncertainty. The claim, "and then you die," captures the paradoxical nature of human existence and the desperate search for solace amid a transience of life for black folks in Queensbridge.

At the end of the track, Dara gifts his son the most cathartic rendering of concord in a blues coda. Dara's solo captures a second ritualized dialogue that (re)convenes the genres of jazz and blues and embodies sound into a cathartic expression. The sonic link of Dara's muted trumpet carries both the "intergenerational dialogue between father and son," while also functioning as a pivot point connecting orality and lyrical literacy.[338] Dara's horn moans just after AZ proclaims, "Life's a bitch and then you die..."

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[337] Nas, "Life's A Bitch," track 3 on *Illmatic.*
[338] Ramsey, *Born to Use Mics*, 71.

Notably, the cornet solo was improvised. Nas glanced at his father in the studio and asked him to play a tune replicating the phrase: "Life's a Bitch." The improvised sound is emblematic of *bridging the gap* from blues to hip-hop for the father and son. Nas's "Life's A Bitch" is but one example of the fungible nature of its sound. A description of speculative space, in this case, is the polytemporal moment—the fluid interplay between memory and improvisation—characterizing the song as a commemorative plea. The studio also becomes an *underground* site for creative expression, allowing for the synthesis of personal history and artistic evolution. As Dara's trumpet moan follows Nas's poetry, the track's Coda invites listeners into an ethereal realm where time collapses and the boundaries between generations blur.

In this speculative space, the act of listening transcends mere auditory reception and becomes an act of communion. The weight of legacy, heritage, and the shared struggles embedded within the notes are felt in Dara's music. Nas would later admit, "My music is the child of his [Dara's] music."[339] Each sound reverberates with the stories of those who came before, creating a patchwork of interwoven histories. The improvisational quality of Dara's performance mirrors the unpredictability of life itself—a recognition that while "life's a bitch," it is also a space of potential and resilience.

Moreover, this sonic dialogue serves as a metaphorical bridge, linking not just the father and son but also the disparate realms of jazz and hip-hop. It bridges conventional boundaries of genre, illustrating how music can foster connections to defy categorization. The bluesy lamentation of the trumpet also echoes the heartfelt struggles expressed in Nas's lyrics, establishing a shared emotional landscape resonating with listeners on multiple levels. Ultimately, this moment in the studio is a microcosm of a broader narrative within hip-hop—one embracing vulnerability while celebrating heritage and acknowledging the cyclical nature of struggle and

[339] Baz Dresinger, "Nas and His Dad's Jazz," *Los Angelos Times,* December 5, 2004, E51.

triumph. The speculative space created through this father-and-son collaboration opens possibilities for understanding the transformative power of music as a means of dialogue across time and experience.

Listening to Nas's lyrics while reading them on paper, or through earcups, enables Queensbridge as a speculative space to emerge cognitively. Time, distance, and space are conflated in such a listening experience; however, when live performances occur, the consistency that wax enables is missing. Somehow, the artist can re-curate a sonic and polytemporal site in real time. This procedure describes Nas's 2018 performance of *Illmatic* with the National Symphony Orchestra. The scene and sounds at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC involve an older and polished Nas—he stands centerstage as a maestro, reimagining Queensbridge through anecdotes between tracks. On the stage, Nas is flanked by his DJ, Green Lantern, and Steven Reineke, the conductor of the orchestra. This performance is also facilitated by a tuxedo-wearing audience as a display of the paradox in an otherwise perceived high and low-hybrid as a cultural space. The space separates the audience, and Nas is also an actor in this scene. In other words, the space, the fourth wall, serves as a threshold between the audience and the soundwaves of the orchestra moving through Nas's poetry and sound. Herein, call-and-response is evident as Nas dialogues with the audience between the tracks—the imaginary barrier between audience and performer establishes the paracritical hinge Mackey theorizes.

Specifically, the live performance of "Memory Lane" includes a requiem as a sonic eulogy of time spent in the Queensbridge maze. Nas explains:

> Yea. Yea. Brings me back. I used to come outside on the block. The basketball court was cracked, we still playin' ball. Shooting on a rusty rim. I lived on the fifth floor. Wow. Remember those days like yesterday. Memories man…they feed the soul. Yea.[340]

[340] Nas, "Memory Lane" National Symphony Orchestra Live, February 2, 2018, posted March 31, 2018, YouTube, https://youtu.be/gvJjNTcXIs0?si=Kd8hKnzGC3bLSq16

Within this memory, the orchestra's quality matches the illmatic scene, which is to remark on the cool aspect of ill and the automatic connection of the audience with Nas given a shared familiarity with the music. This quality also induces a flow state, as the music controls time to match Nas's cadence. And just before Nas begins his rhyme, a dramatic crescendo drops into a percussion-filled and repetitive rendition of DJ Premier's sampling of the jazz organist Rueben Wilson from "We're in Love."[341] DJ Green Lantern is the sonic architect in this remix.

Nas's ballad pays homage to that translucent boy, fixed forever on the cover art of his debut album. A picture depicting a ghostly Nas as one with the city he projects as speculative space. Particularly, Nas's performance of the first verse is demonstrative of a griot in action. He makes the polytemporal space intelligible through his delivery. As the DJ scratches a sample from the original track into the live performance, the orchestra's music, infused with DJ Premier's nostalgic track, is transmitted through a musical threshold or the fourth wall. Nas raps,

> I rap for listeners, blunt heads, fly ladies and prisoners,
> Hennessy-holders and old-school niggas.
>
> I dropped out of Cooley High,
> Jungle survivor.
>
> Sentence begins indented with formality.
> My duration's infinite, money-wise or physiology
>
> Poetry, that's a part of me, retardedly bop
> I drop the ancient manifested hip-hop straight off the block
>
> It's real, grew up a trife life, the times of white lines, the high pipes
> Murderous night times and knife fights and blight crimes
>
> I'm takin' niggas on a trip straight through memory lane.[342]

Nas isn't just recounting his past—he invites listeners to join him in bearing witness to the socio-political realities that shaped his life. Notice the work each stanza performs as Nas describes an *ill*

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[341] Rueben Wilson, "We're in Love," track 2 on *Set Us Free*, Blue Note Records, released 1971, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[342] Nas, "Memory Lane," track 6 on *Illmatic.*

audience who might identify with his survivalist attitude—having to drop out of school and exist at home in a figurative jungle. His escape relies on his pen as it controls and produces the language liberating him. Dropping "ancient manifested hip-hop" symbolizes a rich acousmatic inheritance, as the audience can hear his father's music but can never see him as its source. The lyric "Straight off the block" demonstrates Nas's escape from the maze, a place of "murderous" nights, "knife fights" and crime. Nas also indicates a way out by going through the chaos. Much like the blues, transcending circumstance means confrontation and the way Nas depicts speculative space through his musical poetry is demonstrative of its power to render Queensbridge anew.

5. Conclusion: A Coda

I think I understand Alice Walker's retort: "Young black men listen to their music loud because they do not feel heard or seen."[343] This dissertation focuses on the music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nas because I believe their work best exemplifies the relationship between music and literature, and sound and identity. In their way, these artists reveal the threshold existing beyond their literary and musical tropes, inviting audiences to listen beyond the surface and in the depths of speculative space. I conclude this study by offering the utility of speculative space as a destination for authors to send their protagonists, therein to operationalize the schism between a sonically induced and literary world, and a world existing in the reader's hand, extending to a real world that motivates art in the first place. Perhaps this is what lies in that space Richard Wright and Ta-Nehisi Coates attempted to articulate— *between the world and me* as it were. Hopefully, my focus on analyzing the crevices these writers illuminate allows room for a broader critique of other speculative spaces and the production of time spent in introspection there. Speculative space, then, is a necessary destination for rehabilitation—a realm shaped by sound and a site for growth. Furthermore, a goal to seek in the advent of noise threatens to silence inner moral and sacred imaginings.

The low frequency Ellison, Morrison, and Nas transmits reflects the improvisation of black life. Respectively, as I have shown, Ellison and Morrison's literary rhythm and polyphonic structure echo the collective memory of African American experiences, while Nas's lyrical precision and mastery of flow situate hip-hop as a repository of urban history rendered in poetic form. Taken together, *Invisible Man, Jazz,* and *Illmatic* illustrate how speculative space functions as a site where sound and storytelling converge, creating possibilities for interpreting identity, history, and cultural memory.

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[343] See footnote 1 for reference.

Additionally, my call for an illmatic reading praxis might present opportunities to examine how other voices, styles, and genres further expand on the agency of musical tropes as sound proxies who function in a mechanized realm of chaos and disorder; perhaps the speculative space of the inhabit is a refuge from that noise to enjoy the quiet as a catalyst of clarity. Reading illmatically reveals the depth in the liminal space between music and literature. I hope my approach encourages future scholars to continue investigating the symbiotic and sensorial relationship between sound and literature, exploring how artists use auditory tropes to transcend the written word and evoke what cannot be directly articulated: the pulse of life, memory, and resistance. This Coda demonstrates such an effort, fusing music, literature, and its interstice to reveal a kind of symbolic reincarnation as the product of time well spent in speculative space. I close with a contemporary example of a metaphorical sonic rebirth— Shawn E. Okpebholo's 2025 project *Songs in Flight*, which excavates musical archives to sonically memorialize the ancestral past.

5.1 Songs in Flight: Embodied Surplus Lyricism

In 2023, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, composer Shawn E. Okpebholo, librettist and Sound Studies scholar Tsitsi Jaji, and other esteemed poets and singers premiered the song cycle *Songs in Flight*. This work is an artistic response to *Freedom on the Move*, a Cornell University database cataloging over 30,000 historical newspaper advertisements about formerly enslaved people.[344] Many of these ads were written by historical enslavers to retrieve their *property.* The song cycle is set as a collection of poems, curated and written by Tyehimba Jess, Crystal Smith, and Tsitsi Jaji. Notably, the work of transforming advertisements into poems, and subsequently into songs, demonstrates an illmatic reading praxis by ordering the

[344] "Freedom on the Move Project," Cornell University, Accessed March 6, 2025, at https://database.freedomonthemove.org.

mechanized chaos of American slavery as an abysmal institution. The chaos and disorder characterizing each instance, detailed by the advertisements themselves, is ordered by the poets through a variety of methods. For example, ordering chaos through a poetic haibun method reveals how each poet arranges trauma into a pithy and precise act of remembrance. The poets gain inspiration from historical "runaway ads" as a method of recovering enslaved people characterized as runaways yet humanized through the rendering of their physical characteristics as property. I argue that an illmatic reading of the song cycle shows how such a method might sonically recapitulate and revise historical memory. The speculative space to perform such work demands an ability to listen sensorially to the poets' characters, both real and sonic. In other words, to attune oneself to the rhythms of the opera singers' voices, and the poet's lyrics—to acknowledge the possibilities in the liminal space between the music and literature where invisible ink exists. Such attentiveness in speculative space allows the past and present to converge in new imaginative possibilities. "Four Martins" is one of several songs that aptly *sound* history by transporting its characters into contemporary life.

Jaji reflects on the project, offering context to explain the exigence of her writing: "The resonance between history and the present was undeniable. In the wake of the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in 2020, a sorrowful energy linked the liberation work of our time to this archive."[345] Notably, the terrible death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012 represents a contemporary tragedy. The song "Four Martins" is in many ways a requiem for Trayvon and the many Martins who share his vulnerable state as a person of color in antebellum and postbellum times. Through her poetry, Jaji breathes life into Trayvon, and others, as she metaphorically reincarnates those victims whose race marked their bondage and premature deaths.

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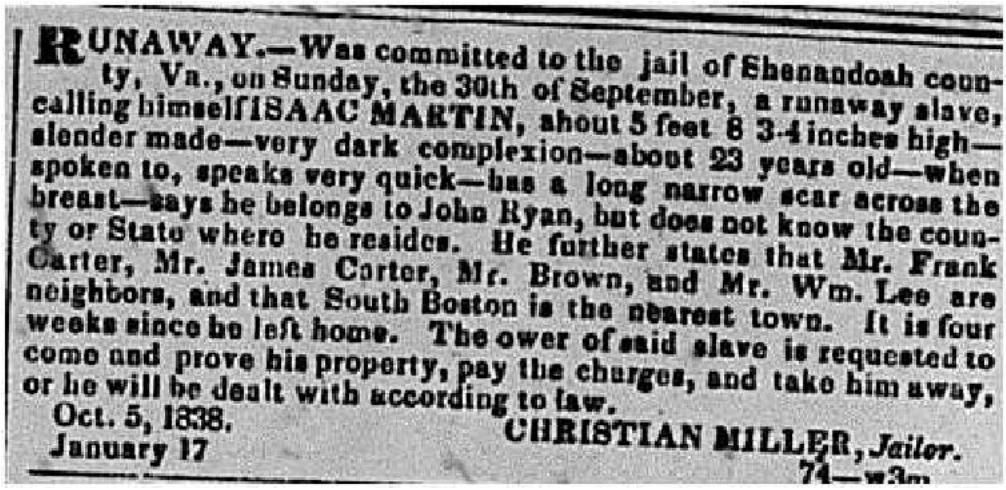
[345] Tsitsi Jaji, "Songs in Flight," Program Pamphlet.


RUNAWAY.—Was committed to the jail of Shenandoah county, Va., on Sunday, the 30th of September, a runaway slave, calling himself ISAAC MARTIN, about 5 feet 8 3-4 inches high—slender made—very dark complexion—about 23 years old—when spoken to, speaks very quick—has a long narrow scar across the breast—says he belongs to John Ryan, but does not know the county or State where he resides. He further states that Mr. Frank Carter, Mr. James Carter, Mr. Brown, and Mr. Wm. Lee are neighbors, and that South Boston is the nearest town. It is four weeks since he left home. The ower of said slave is requested to come and prove his property, pay the charges, and take him away, or he will be dealt with according to law.

Oct. 5, 1838. CHRISTIAN MILLER, *Jailer.*

January 17 74—w3m

Figure 2: Newspaper Scan of Runaway Ad: Isaac. Charleston, South Carolina. August 26, 1835

[Transcribed text: Runaway,—Was committed to the jail of Shenandoah county, Va., on Sunday, the 30th of September, a runaway slave, calling himself ISAAC MARTIN, about 5 feet 8 3-4 inches high—slender made—very dark complexion—about 23 years old—when spoken to, speaks very quick—has a long narrow scar across the breast—says he belongs to John Ryan, but does not know the country or State where he resides. He further states that Mr. Frank Carter, Mr. James Carter, Mr. Brown and Mr. Wm. Lee are neighbors, and that South Boston is the nearest town. It is four weeks since he left home. The owner of said slave is requested to come and prove his property, pay the charges, and take him away, or he will be dealt with according to law.]

In the case of "Four Martins," the song began as a poem whose dedication invokes the father of Trayvon:

for Tracy Martin, whose son, Trayvon, was shot dead before his 18th birthday. And for all the other Martins. And that one Zimmerman."[346]

The remainder of the poem draws on four advertisements [one pictorially depicted above]; three invoke the Martin name, and the last ad signifies the name Zimmerman:

RUNAWAY—Was committed to the jail…calling himself ISAAC MARTIN…[347]
RANAWAY, from the undersigned…a negro man by the name Martin…[348]

[346] Shawn Okpebholo and Tsitsi Jaji, "Songs in Flight: No.11, Four Martins," track 11 on *Songs in Flight,* Cedille Records, released February 2025, streaming audio, Apple Music.

[347] "Freedom on the Move." Cornell University, archived February 7, 2019 at, https://fotm.link/a/fcc4d170-60b1-480c-852f-91f7cdad921a

[348] "Freedom on the Move." Cornell University, archived February 7, 2019 at https://fotm.link/a/6251238e-6c6e-404e-b81c-c6dce3aa9162.

> RUNAWAY…A little yellow fellow, called HARRY…he called himself Martin Fog.[349]
> $500 REWARD. RANAWAY…a negro man named PETER…[signed] S.B. Zimmerman.[350]

Considering the function of Mackey's paracritical hinge through Jaji's "Four Martins." The language mediates time and space in the way it disrupts a linear progressive narrative of history through the *breaks*, merging events in the 19th-century and 20th-century, respectively:

> For Isaac Martin, dark and slender, scar across the chest:
> owner to pay all charges and retrieve property
> before the law disposes of it.
>
> For a negro, name of Martin, dark yellow, suspected of
> Stealing home. A mama's boy of 19:
> 20 dollars, and 5 more if delivered.
>
> For Harry, alias Martin, wearing grey with yellow thread:
> 20 dollars if trapped in-state, 50
> for delivery, 7 miles hence.
>
> For Peter, **or** Trayvon Martin,
> 5 foot 8, 5 foot 10,
> Lurking, seen lurking in the neighborhood, seen lurking in a grey hoodie:
> A handsome reward. A handful of skittles. Such handsome men.
> Signed S.B. Zimmerman. May 1864.
> **Or** George Zimmerman, February 2012.
> **But** George, free to go.
> **And** George, free to go.
> **And** George, scot-free.[351]

The poem distills the advertisements into terse elegies, serving as a clarion call for the many Martins lost to history and racism. Readers and listeners should pay attention to the subtle coordinating conjunctions signifying the hinge. For example, the conjunctions "or," "but," and "and" [bold above] denote intervals mediating time and space. These gestures mark the continuity of that dialectical power relationship, notably master/slave, as it also signifies the liminal space where the past and present merge.

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[349] "Freedom on the Move." Cornell University, archived February 14, 2020 at https://fotm.link/a/5abf83c3-dcf9-48c2-85fd-c0d3a5d1b879.

[350] "Freedom on the Move." Cornell University, archived February 14, 2020 at https://fotm.link/a/abc8d704-9736-4ff5-a6d4-793b97b4a3f5.

[351] Okpebholo, "Songs in Flight."

The poem also takes advantage of spatiality to offer each Martin their area, a speculative space allowing readers-turned-listeners an opportunity to reflect upon unique circumstances while simultaneously refiguring words into imaginative figures. Reading the poem illmatically requires attention to the machinery of disorder and chaos circumscribing each Martin. For example, Issac Martin's scar reveals the violent reality of his bondage. Once considered property, Issac becomes *troped* as the subject of the ad, thereby valuable to an enslaver as a commodity. Given the description, his body is transformed into a phantasmic rendering of market value. Issac's dark and slender frame denotes African ancestry, not likely a product of rape, therein notable. And Jaji takes care to utilize the pronoun "it" to convey Issac's status as property. Each Martin can be analyzed discursively, and the juxtaposition of "Peter *or* Trayvon…S.B. Zimmerman *or* George Zimmerman" is strikingly dialectical. The tension characterizing these antagonistic relationships relies on violence to maintain their cohesion. Such a collision overdetermines the sound of the poem when sung as part of the song cycle.

In the song version of "Four Martins," the countertenor increases their range to invoke the beauty and strength of Isaac. Sung with considerable timbre: "Scar across his chest…," all singers quickly decrease their pitch, singing disposal as if the very act can be heard. This arguably reminds listeners that Isaac is a thing to be discarded. Almost immediately, the countertenor gives way to a powerful baritone as singers collectively describe four Martins: The price, "20 dollars, and 5 more if delivered." The countertenor emphasizes "5 more" as if to remind listeners that price marks the black body as a commodity. Next, the baritone gives way to the soprano, describing Harry in a grey garment as if his alias "Martin" and Trayvon are one. Conclusively, the trio unites in an effortless glissando as Martin's name *slides* across the accompaniment and eclipses the piano chord. Perhaps the most powerful melisma in the cycle is the singing of Trayvon's name by the baritone, succeeded by a call-and-response portrayal of the 17-year-old.

Either through poetry or song, reading "Four Martins" illmatically allows listeners to take advantage of speculative space to reimagine the Martins as adolescent contemporaries. Listeners can perceive the beautiful voices of the soprano, countertenor, and baritone trios, as well as the *creaking* of the paracritical hinge to notice the linkage of the narrative form (poetry) and music (sound). Here, the distinction between text and sound fades away, facilitating a profound examination of oneself and the reimagined world where Trayvon, Issac, Martin, Harry, and Peter coexist. This union produces *static* or interference between the relationship of listener and performer, the music converting them into kin through its shared resonance much like the drums in Morrison's *Jazz*, or Armstrong's famed plea "What Did I Do to be Black and Blue?"—a clever double entendre signifying being bruised by beating.

This union is also a product of improvisation whereby Jaji's work *boomerangs* in the way Ellison describes in a 1972 interview with John O'Brien:

> I described it [history] as a boomerang because a boomerang moves in a parabola. It goes and it comes. It is never the same thing. There is implicit in the image the old idea that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes. History comes back and hits you."[352]

If Fred Moten's assertion holds: "Improvisation is already and improvisation of improvisation…," then music can represent a kind of cultural relativism whereby its sound can become a continuous loop, constantly reinterpreted and reshaped through acts of performance like *Songs in Flight* and in specific cultural contexts.[353] The resonances emanating from these sonic productions beckon us to traverse the threshold between the known and the unknown, inviting listeners to navigate corridors of perception and cognition; otherwise, a journey into our imagination in speculative space.

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[352] Ellison "Interview with Ralph Ellison" John O. Brien circa 1972, Box I:177, REP. From Library of Congress, *The Ralph Ellison Papers, 1890-2007.*

[353] Moten, *In the Break,* 64.

Considering an imaginary soundscape through lyrical analysis also provides a way to rupture hermeneutic loops rooted in moral panic and dominant and dubious ideologies like racism. Perhaps such ambition on the part of artists like Tsitsi Jaji, Shawn Okpebholo, Henry Threadgill, Olu Dara, Nas, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and others can negate the social pathology of black youth culture-bound in a recursive cycle of plight. Further, by reading song lyrics as text, and interpreting poetry through an illmatic lens, counter-hegemonic strategies may emerge in the way Invisible conceives his invisibility as a Du Boisian gift of double consciousness. Like the invisible man, readers can hear "not only in time, but in space as well."[354] They can live in sound like Threadgill, or trust Nas's voice as an acousmatic subject when he raps, "Time is illmatic." In this way, Alice Walker's retort makes complete sense—music is the low frequency that speaks for me, Martin, and others.

Ultimately, *Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space* clarifies the sonic power of African American writers—in the words of writer Kiese Laymon, "the generators and architects of American music, narrative, language, capital, and morality." Laymon writes,

> Take away all those stolen West African girls and boys forced to find an oral culture to express, resist, and signify in the South, [in the Global South], and we have no rich American idiom…Eliminate the Great Migration of Southern Black girls and boys and you have no Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, or New York City.[355]

There would be no Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, or Nasir Jones because a soundless expression "[e]xpunge[s] the sorrow songs, gospel, and blues of the Deep South and we have no rock and roll, rhythm and blues, funk, or hip-hop."[356] Consequently, there is no Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Peetie Wheatstraw, or Henry Threadgill. So heeding Alice Walker's advice, I'll continue to turn the music up loud, because what it means to be seen is also what it means to be heard.

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[354] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 9
[355] Kiese Laymon, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*: *Essays* (Scribner Books, 2020), 54.
[356] Ibid.

5.1.1 An Ill Ring Shout

Dear Reader,

This dissertation is the product of an extensive examination of sound's ability to assume material form. I better understand the many ways sound permeates from sonic bodies, propelling narratives in the same way musical genres characterize generations of people. To this end, those sounds from antiquated phonograph speakers, whose needles find the grooves in wax, echo and bounce around bounded areas like caves full of invisible people. For me, speculative space is the site of a new ring shout, a collective and cadence-driven rotation of African American griots sustaining oral tradition. A space of transcendence and introspection where 20th-century African American writers and musicians congregate. Their characters are products of ancestral history. In speculative space, imagine Chinua Achebe locking arms with Ralph Ellison, flanked by Zora Neale Hurston, Jesse Facet, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, Joan Morgan, Kiese Laymon, and Jesmyn Ward. Imagine James Baldwin shuffling next to Ta-Nehisi Coates, while Henry Threadgill and Olu Dara dance broadside of Shawn Okpebholo, Tsitsi Jaji, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Percival Everett, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I imagine young Nasir Jones sitting and eating a yam with Roxane Shanté and Willy "Ill Will" Graham. Tupac Shakar, Queen Latifah, Kendrick Lamar, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. chill on a Harlem stoop near Langston Hughes' house at 20 East 127 Street. They enjoy the shade and dancing as they chat about roots— "the yam is the power that be." The yam of The Gambia. The same sweet and hot buttery meat Ellison's Invisible enjoys on the Harlem street. In the distance, the anticipation of Kiese Laymon, Deesha Philyaw, and Tayari Jones reminds me of children waiting to jump into a game of double-dutch. This new ring shout breathes life into Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Breana Taylor too. But also, Todd Clifton, Dorcas's parents, Nas's friend Ill Will, and others—Petry's Bub, Wright's Bigger Thomas, and Hurston's Janie. Tsitsi Jaji's four Martins and their owners are implicated too; somehow, their dance in the nowhere sites of rural landscapes signifies what Alice Walker mentioned to me decades ago: "Young black men listen to their music loud because they do not feel heard or seen." Nearly 20 years later, Walker's statement echoes from the Du Boisian question, resonates in Ellison's words regarding frequency, and extends into a speculative space—where an ill ring shout marks time as *Illmatic*. Imani Perry aptly clarifies,

> If Ellison's words serve as a meditation on the existential challenges of a Black life, then Toni Morrison's famous quip of a response—"Invisible to whom?"—is a reminder that Black folks have had to see each other regardless of what the larger world will recognize. That too is the majesty of the blues, a beauty shared and witnessed by its people, no matter who is listening. It is not the sound of appeal; it is the act of living. Together.[357]

Together.
And.
In speculative space.

Yours truly,

Trivius Caldwell

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[357] Imani Perry, *Black in Blues: How a Color Tells the Story of My People* (HarperCollins, 2025), 146.

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Biography

At the time of this publication, Trivius G. Caldwell serves as an Infantry in the United States Army at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. His dissertation, *Beyond Trope and Into Speculative Space: The Music of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Nasir Jones*, explores the intersection of 20th-century African American literature, Sound Studies, and Hip-Hop literature. Caldwell's academic journey is marked by a deep interest in the ways music and literature shape cultural narratives, particularly within African American communities.

Trivius is a graduate of Tuskegee University with a B.A. in English. He also holds an M.A. in Literary Studies from Auburn University and an M.A. in Military Arts and Science from the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His teaching experience spans institutions such as the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he served as an Assistant Professor and Course Director in the Department of English and Philosophy. Caldwell has also lectured on topics ranging from African American literature, Sound Studies, and Hip-Hop, to military leadership and civil rights, with guest lectures at universities, military institutions, and correctional facilities. His work also extends beyond academia through his mentorship in programs such as the Warrior-Scholar Project, Service to School, and Stop Soldier Suicide, supporting veterans in their transitions to civilian and academic life.