



UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

The “Blackness of Blackness”

The city and identity in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Patrick Næss

Master’s thesis in English Literature ENG-3992-1 May 2023.

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore identity and individuality when entering and living in the city for African Americans in the 1920s. More specifically I aim to explore how migrating North from the South caused a crisis of identity for many African Americans and why this happened. Principally through looking at the novels *Invisible Man* and *Jazz*, but also through using essays on the city and identity from the same time period. In locating the “why”, I don’t aim to come up with a solution but to instead use the novels as a way to argue why there is no universal solution on how to “deal” with living in the city for African Americans. However there is a potential substratum, as the principal element in deciding how to live in the city, is first realizing, concretely, who you are and subsequently where you fit into the world. I am therefore using the crisis of living in the city to set up an argument for the importance of self-assertion. This importance is underscored in both respective novels. I am also using the idea of the metronomic beat from jazz music as a potential foundational element in reaching this realization. The realization that “to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another” (DuBois 368).

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Justin Michael Parks. Not just for his patience, but for the work he did in providing useful sources for this thesis, no matter how many times the course changed. And of course for his feedback which eventually set me on the right path and kept me there besides my insistence of veering off. (And for introducing me to some great music in the process.)

I would also like to thank my older brother for really hammering home the need to back up my claims.

Finally I would also like to thank my mother, who, for pretty much my entire academic career up until now has sat up with me and proofread my papers. This is my first opportunity to show my gratitude in a sort of “official” way, and it is about time.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
1 Introduction	1
2 Chapter 1.	11
2.1 A city and The city.	11
2.2 Identity.....	19
2.3 Jazz: The Music of the present	23
3 Chapter 2: Individuality and the city in <i>Jazz</i>	28
4 Chapter 3: Individuality and the city in <i>Invisible Man</i>	47
5 Conclusion.....	70
Works cited	71

1 Introduction

The human river dwindles when 'tis past the hour of eight,
Its waves go flowing faster in the fear of being late;
But slowly drag the moments, whilst beneath the dust and heat
The city grinds the owners of the faces in the street —
Grinding body, grinding soul,
Yielding scarce enough to eat —
Oh! I sorrow for the owners of the faces in the street.

- *“Faces in the street”, Henry Lawson*

“Jazz” is an extenuation of the African chants and songs. It is an extension of the pain and suffering of those long, and too often, destinationless trips across the Atlantic ocean, deep in the holes of those dark, damp, filthy, human slave ships, endured by chained, innocent, black men, women and children.

It is the extension of many, many lynchings, castrations, and other “improvisations” of genocide on these same black men, women and children.

“Jazz” is an extension of the black man, “freed”, who found himself still shackled to the same chain, all shined up, when he unwittingly ventured out into “their” free world of opportunity and wealth, only to be assaulted, whipped, murdered, and raped some more.

“Jazz” Max Roach

The poem by Henry Lawson was written in 1888 and it is already reflecting a perception of the City that would become quite common in America short of a few decades later. The city grinds the people, their body, and their soul, into something scarce, something diluted, simply less than they once were. In the city, despite the discrimination and segregation that was common in the early twentieth century, African American people too, stubbornly, became part of the crowd, the “human river”, within which everyone’s identity merged into one singular mass. However this did not happen immediately upon their arrival in the city itself, not this “human river” anyhow. Firstly they were affected by the aforementioned

discrimination, they were not made part of the human river because they were not allowed to. They were kept from “diluting” the stream where other thousands of “rivulets of blood” melted into a common stream of human unity in the “great American tide” (Wright, *Voices* 102). Secondly they struggled to keep up with the current culture or rather to keep pace with it. They wouldn’t always be behind, sometimes they would be ahead, pioneering certain artforms that would be “discovered” by the dominant culture later on. Thirdly, if I am using the phrase “black people” or “African Americans” to apply universally to All African Americans, I am already in error.

There is no guarantee that all the African Americans who came to the North immediately tried to join the human river in participating in city culture, some might even never have blended in with the human river despite living in the city. In theory discrimination would be less of an immediate obstacle for these individuals, since they were essentially invisible. There is also no guarantee that all African Americans struggled to keep up with or keep pace with the current culture. Certain individuals may have been lucky and gotten a taste of city culture in the South through friendship or family. The main obstacle the city provided was that there was already a culture present there, and the way African American’s approached this obstacle was up to the individual. The African American experience of the city is ambiguous because there is not just one African American experiencing it, there are many African American people doing so, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon (Fanon 115). The only way to see how an African American individual experienced the city, is to first see what the culture which was present and dominant there was.

The city was a place where, in the early twentieth century there existed a culture dominated by an incessant need for “the new”. If there is one thing several theorists agree on, it is that the urban city refused to be attached to and dependent on the past. If anything it feared that the past would haunt it, especially for New York, as New York was in perpetual transformation, its buildings, and its people (Berman 295). The philosopher Michel Certeau agrees with or rather doubles down on this statement, stating that “New York has never learned the art of glowing old by playing on all its pasts “(Certeau, 91). This also made it initially ideal for some African Americans, who wanted to leave the horrors of the South behind. However, unlike the city, they accepted the haunting of the past, they just refused to be trapped by it. They refused to see the past (and in essence themselves) as “an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack (Morrison, Foreword 2). New York on the other hand will never grow old, because it is perpetually reborn as often as it kills itself, it

removes even the parts that were not damaged. This is precisely why it is rather difficult to keep up with the culture created and fostered within such a city, plagued by the new.

What is the new? In the simplest terms being new is, being new, recently created, something people have not seen before. However being new in terms of the city, implies replacing something, its reinvention rather than an addition. Something new being introduced meant something else was being discarded, buildings, people, and things alike. Buildings were torn down to make room for new, “more exciting” ones, people discarded their previous identity for a “citified” (*Jazz* 19) one, and there were always new things to buy to not fall behind the times. There was an oppressive wave of new things being introduced and an equally daunting flow of things being discarded “Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could help stuff” (7). Finally everything is ahead at last (7) but what is ahead changes all the time, and everything you ever wanted swiftly becomes everything you don’t need anymore.

With this rhetoric firmly in place, the city becomes “A factory of manmade experiences” (Berman 287), one which is in perpetual motion (306), constantly producing something new, and pushing something else out in the process. At every level, social, cultural, political, the new was perpetuated. Returning to the introductory poem for a moment “Its waves go flowing faster in the fear of being late;” we can see that the waves of the human river fears being late, in this case, to culture itself. African Americans were late in their arrival to this type of city, to the urban, metropolitan city and to the dominant culture, which was predominantly white. Cities like New York were founded and developed with barely any, if any, influence from black people (Morrison, *City Limits* 37).

Therefore this thesis will look at how the city was viewed and experienced by its newest arrivals/participants/resource, African Americans. Given that they did not shape the culture in the city, nor the initial concrete and steel, their perspective on this nigh mythical place drastically differs, naturally, from white people. One of the main things the city does, not just to African Americans, is that it introduces “a subtle divorce from reality” (Baldwin, *Language* 134). The culture in the city introduces a set order into the lives of people living there, to the point where some may fail to realize that this culture is not universal nor ethereal. The thing the city does to African Americans is a consequence of this effect. The set order leads to a struggle of identity, as African American’s enter into this alien culture. Given that they, nor anyone really could “shake off three hundred years of fear in three hours.” (Wright, *Voices*

100), this could all be quite overwhelming. It was so overwhelming to some that, they would rather “flee hysterically into the sleep of violence or the coma of apathy again” (Ellison, *Blues* 142). This struggle of identity is perpetuated and sometimes strengthened by the systems in place in the city. Given that a majority of the documented experience of the City by African Americans has been negative, that is also the basis of this thesis. The city as a negative experience will be inherent, and I will therefore seek to explore what they could (if they could do anything at all) to improve this situation.

There is no single universal solution to the psychosomatic crisis which was forced upon numerous African Americans (Ellison, *Blues* 138). They each had different reasons for their struggle. Many of the reasons may have in common that they are rooted in the South, but the reasons themselves differed anyhow. Therefore I will not propose a solution, but I will suggest a substratum. Something which they can then use alongside their own experience to reach an understanding of themselves. This substratum comes through the form of music, namely jazz. Jazz as a genre introduces the need to always keep a stable element of the past in the present to ensure the primacy of the present moment. I am not suggesting only listening to the music itself is the solution, but that looking at the basic structure of jazz allows someone to look at the temporal effects of the city, to see that these effects are simply part of the dominant culture in the city, and therefore that they do not have to adhere to this sense of time, nor the culture itself.

To keep themselves, grounded in them(self) African Americans in the city need a stable element of the past, to deal with the events of the present. I am not suggesting that this is the solution to all their problems in the city, but that managing to establish an identity, outside of the city, outside of any set stereotypes, enables them to deal with their reality in the city: “It is only when the individual, whether white or black, rejects the pattern that he awakens to the nightmare of his life” (Ellison, *Blues* 142). Reality may be absurd and torturous (Ellison, *Harlem* 323) but it cannot be changed by ignoring its existence (Ellison, *Indivisible* 366). A stable identity, formed continuously from past experience, allows African Americans to “live their blackness” as Frantz Fanon put it. However in Frantz Fanon’s case, he could not live his blackness, because there was no black past (Fanon 117). The more accurate term would be live “with” their blackness, as the “blackness” in question, is not them, it is their body returned spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning by the white man (Fanon 93). Perhaps if one manages to do so, they can work on removing this initial “scientific” blackness all together.

To explore this struggle of identity in the city for African Americans I am going to be working with Novels by two African American Authors, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison. The novels in question are *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. I have chosen these novels because they both deal with the location of New York, around the same time period, the 1920s. They also both use elements of the past to keep their characters grounded in the present, in both cases this element is their past experiences, to create a whole self. In both novels there are also characters serving as an example of the consequence of not having this stable identity. *Jazz* also provides examples of how music could be used against African Americans, which is why the solution is not in just the music itself.

The novels in question each highlight the need of the substratum which I have suggested in their own way as I will explore in Chapter 2 and 3. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* underscores the need and the urgency of the self-assertion of its perpetually unnamed narrator. Once he discovers who he is, he also realizes he is and has always been invisible to perceived society. This in turn makes him realize that he has been quite naïve his whole life. However once he does realize this, i.e. once he awakens to the nightmare of his life, he can at least attempt to change it, perhaps even use his unique position to his advantage. Toni Morrison's *Jazz* underscores the substratum from a different angle. Her novel highlights the importance of the concrete knowledge of individuals through her use of an unreliable narrator. The narrator in *Jazz* did not seemingly have malicious intentions, she simply mistook sight for knowledge. The narrator attempts to improvise certain parts of the story, like a jazz musician would over a metronomic beat, the problem is that the beat is unstable because it was established through assumed knowledge, not the inner lives of the characters. What she is lacking is genuine, indisputable knowledge. This in turn underscores the need for African Americans to assert themselves as individuals precisely because "Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written." (DuBois 41).

Both of these writers have also written a fair share of material on the role of the individual. This is not to be confused with sheer individualism, as the end goal is still to benefit a larger group. Ellison's ideal goal with *Invisible Man* was to "convert experience into fiction" (Ellison, Introduction XIII). The novel started out as a war novel which would be about a captured African American pilot who found himself in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp. Ralph Ellison never served in the army, probably partly due to it being a Jim Crow army, this might even be one of the reasons that he changed his birth date (Lawrence, Cambridge companion n.

pag.). However he did serve in the Merchant Marines, and it was during his service that he started to write this story, which was to become *Invisible Man*. The sudden shift in scenery and character in the story was probably due to the sudden shift in scenery for Ellison, as he was sent home due to a kidney infection (Ellison, Special 349). Divorced from the war, he didn't have the same immediate source for inspiration anymore. Nevertheless the principal concept of the pilots inner struggle remained (Introduction XII). Ellison felt it would be difficult to actually translate such philosophical insight and inner turmoil without writing Science Fiction (Introduction XV). At the time he was writing *Invisible Man* most African American protagonists in African American fiction and the fiction written by white people were presented as without intellectual depth (XIX). These protagonists had to "express a complicated concept with a limited vocabulary; thwarted ideational energy is converted into unsatisfactory pantomime. (Ellison, Blues 70). This isn't to say that there weren't any African Americans in reality with this "intellectual depth" but that their existence could be unknown because "so much in this society is unnoticed and unrecorded." (Introduction XIX). Thus he viewed it as his responsibility to invent such a character, as an "example of human possibility" (Introduction XIX).

Ellison was an individual who it could be said was "raised on the tidal waves of chance" (DuBois, Criteria 41) through "the accidents of education and opportunity." (41). Through this he has been afforded what he has termed a "unique position of observation". As An African American or, in his own terms a "Negro-American" (a product of the blending of both cultures) (McPherson, Indivisible 356) he is in a position where he can see certain things that others may miss:

"I'm saying that I'm in a better position to see certain things about American literature or American culture precisely because I'm a black man, but I'm not restricted by those frames which have been imposed upon us" (Indivisible 382).

From this position he is granted the possibility of writing fiction which is "in touch with a broader literary culture than our own particular culture" (379). This in turn has made him argue that "there are enough unique features in our background to suggest solutions to problems which seem very far removed from our social situation" (367). Furthermore he argues that all African Americans have been afforded a unique position for observation, the principal issue is to view it as an advantage (393). It has been a characteristic of historically great writers that they have been in a position to observe the very top and the very bottom of

society (385). This observation starts with the unique perspective of an individual. Thus Ellison affirms the power and importance of individuals. After all a writer initially has to write based on what they can immediately observe and their own experiences in life:

“A writer writes out of his own family background, out of his own immediate community, during his formative period. And he writes out of his own talent and his own individual vision. Now if he doesn’t, if he tries to get away from that by bending it to some ideological line, then he is depriving the group of his uniqueness” (Ellison, *Indivisible* 393)

Individual writers will have differing perspectives on the world and Ellison states that it is important to keep this unique perspective. However there is no reason that an individual can’t be a member of a group (394), it is just important that they do not let the values of the group overshadow the uniqueness of the individuals within it: “We need as many individuals developing their individual talents as possible, but dedicating some part of their energies to the experience of the group (Ellison, *Indivisible* 394). Ultimately African American’s need to use their unique perspective of the world so that the only one interpreting their experience is themselves, otherwise someone else may end up doing it “And they might be in error.” (Ellison, *Indivisible* 382).

Consequently Ellison did not agree with the curtailing of individualism which the broader African American culture had agreed upon (Baker 16). He felt that this attitude towards individualism was just helping white society with its goal to keep African Americans from being individuals (*Indivisible* 394). His pursuit of proclaiming the importance of the individual was met with accusations that he was an “Uncle Tom” among other things (359). This implied that white people had a “monopoly” on individuality and those African Americans who wanted to assert their own individuality “must necessarily change color” (360). However Ellison feels this is not just unfair but illogical because when “A white thinker who challenges assumptions held by whites about themselves” they are not charged with “trying to be black” (360). Furthermore he felt that someone had to deviate from the set pattern, or they would just be perpetually receiving and repeating an idea handed down to them (375).

The initial fear of individualism was not unfounded, as it was initially essentially a survival mechanism in the South (Ellison, *Blues* 71). In the South an African American could be

lynched for any degree of self-expression (70). It wasn't just the threat of death however that made lynching so bad, it was also that most acts against an African American man was not intended to be an act against him as an individual, it was an attempt to make his whole race suffer (66). However this fear of individualism carried over into the North, despite the risk of being lynched being mostly absent. With the collectivistic ethos in place, and dominant, individualism is not just seen as a risk, it is seen as a hostile, conflicting idea. It is seen as threatening African American culture, since it was a culture founded around a broad discouragement of individualism. Therefore those who still pursue such ideas are accused of challenging the culture's conception of itself and are as a consequence either brought back "in line" or ostracized (McPherson 360). Nevertheless, as previously stated, not providing the community with his or her own individual vision, was not just to deprive the group of their uniqueness, it was also to deprive the group of the possibility of change (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 393).

In terms of writing from personal experience, it seems that aside from his experiences aside from serving in the marines, the concept of invisibility was partially inspired by and reflects experiences Ellison had while writing the novel in both Harlem and New York City. His neighbours struggled to place him in any established group or role (*Invisible Man* Introduction IX). This subsequently made his neighbours view him with unease, and he was put into a group he didn't necessarily fit into in terms of characteristics. In a way this is a way of making him invisible, as they don't "see" him, they see him through their inner eyes. These inner eyes can only attribute preestablished characteristics to him, they don't see him for what defining features he already possesses, except for skin color. This also reflects the epigraph Ellison chose for his novel, a quote from T.S. Eliot:

"Harry: I tell you, it is not me you are looking at, Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks Incriminate, but that other person, if person, You thought I was: let your necrophily Feed upon that carcass" (T.S.Eliot, *Family Reunion*) (qtd. In *Invisible Man*, n. pag.).

Ellison has touched on this type of lack of identity in some of his essays as well, namely "Harlem is nowhere" which talks about the role Harlem has in black culture and identity, but also the struggle of identity for black people living in cities in America in general. Harlem is simultaneously a cultural capital for African Americans, but it is also a symbol of their perpetual alienation in America (*Harlem* 243). Their alienation as an American citizen, but

also self-alienation. Ellison states that when the residents of Harlem are asked who they are, what they are or where they are, their answer is always the same “I’m nowhere” (241).

Similarly to Ellison, Morrison has also covered these types of themes in many of her novels. This has been explored through many aspects of the larger theme of identity in *Beloved*, *A Mercy* and *Song of Solomon* to name a few. In *Jazz* she talks about identity in relation to the urban city, again similar to Ellison. Morrison’s intention with her writing was also much the same in converting experience into fiction. She felt that there were certain aspects of life which only authors could actually “translate into meaning”: “Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination (Morrison, *Blood IX*). The keywords here are “sharpening the moral imagination”. In her novel’s she doesn’t always give the immediate meaning of the novel to the reader, sometimes the reader has to add that meaning through their own experiences and knowledge “Her narratives invite readers to construct meaning from what they read. In fact, Morrison's novels read as if the narrator is speaking directly to the reader, evoking response.” (Raynor, n. pag.). She knew that language could not be her sole tool in this endeavour because language was both “liberating and imprisoning” (131). The language she uses in her writing, the English language was her “masters voice” and she did not wish to reproduce it (Morrison, *Blood 132*). Instead she would manipulate American English, not by painting over it, but by carving away at it until certain perceptions “were not only available but were inevitable (135). Consequently any reader would have no choice but to get the message.

Another thing about Morrison is that she felt that people have established a relationship with art and artists where, they value the struggle of the artist above all (Morrison, *Blood 58*): “We seem somehow to cut off the limbs of the individual artist to fit our short bed, and we ascribe to him or her penury and sacrifice and the notion of posthumous award” (58). It is not just valued, it is insisted upon, and used as a criteria for the overall quality of the work an artist produces. She also feels that it seems like quality “equals/means/suggests” things which are rare and difficult to achieve, but difficult to achieve has to come mean “had to suffer in order to do it” (58). This in turn has made the people romanticize the idea of artists as beggars, which means that immediate success for an artist is not necessarily met with approval. The longer it takes for the artist and the more they suffer in the process increases the quality of the work in a way. In this configuration, when an artist is successful they should “feel guilty—

even apologetic” (59). When writers which are part of a minority, like African American writers have a successful piece of art, they are left with the choice to either abandon their “minorityhood” or they are left having to continuously defend their right “to hear and love a different drummer” (59). This is essentially what happened with Ellison, his first novel was a success, but he has spent years defending himself and his opinions in the aftermath.

Moving back to *Jazz* again, with *Jazz* Morrison aimed to render “a period in African American life through a specific lens—one that would reflect the content and the characteristics of its music (romance, freedom of choice, doom, seduction, anger)” (Foreword 1). In the same process she wanted to examine the “reconfiguration of the `self` ... the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another” (Foreword 4) much like Ellison did with *Invisible Man*. Although Morrison wanted to look at it through examining “couple love” as love seemed to be “one of the fingerprints of the twenties, and jazz its engine” (4). *Jazz* was set up to be a novel where the structure of the novel itself is where the meaning would lie (5). The structure of the novel would be what would be used to sharpen the moral imagination.

Jazz takes place in the city in the 1920s. At the time it was agreed by some that “society” diminished freedom because the urban city limited individualism (Morrison, *City limits* 36). Or rather this is how it was seen by white writers, Herman Melville and Ernest Hemingway being just two of the many Morrison mentions that have written about anti-urbanism (36). In *Jazz*, the city initially doesn’t just limit individualism it also limits the whole individual, but we come to see that the self can exist within a relationship, without diminishing the relationship or individual freedom. It is also true that not everyone viewed themselves as part of this collective identity of African Americans, and therefore did not share in neither their success nor their failures. Some individuals hoped to be apart of the collective identity of people living in the city. Some leave their previous identity and collective identity behind to achieve this, but others directly sacrifice it. The first instance we see of this in *Jazz* is the family that moved to the city from a tiny place called Cottown. This identification goes as far as to pretend that they don’t know other people from Cottown that live in the city, like their neighbour (*Jazz* 19). They have made themselves overtly dignified, hincty and “citified” (19). Citified people are people who treat language like some “Intricate, malleable toy” for them to use and abuse at will because they have an innate feeling of superiority, regardless of race (*Jazz* 33).

2 Chapter 1.

This chapter aims to establish a set of key concepts which will be used throughout the thesis, namely: The dominant culture, being citified and the Metronomic beat. The main purpose is to compress a lot of information into usable phrases. A lot of the concepts being covered are things whose meaning are ambiguous and sometimes ambivalent, thus to hopefully avoid confusion, the phrases will settle on a set meaning.

2.1 A city and The city.

A city is a place where many people live and they are surrounded by buildings, a geometry of glass, steel, and concrete (Hassan 94). However it is not solely the physical place itself that we are concerned with; the glass, steel and concrete are not the main perpetrators of what the city does. It is what the city embodies, and this is something that is not all that strictly set. Many theorists have many different theories. Ihab Hassan states that “To “see” a city whole is also to apprehend its theoretical nature, its hidden functions, and ideal forms.” (Hassan 95), so to see a city one would have to be aware of the elements which makes up its theoretical nature i.e. the theoretical work that has already been done in attempting to comprehend the city. This already presents a daunting task. Hassan also quotes Sartre, stating that the concept of the city is comprehended differently by Europeans than it is Americans: “For us (Europeans), a city is, above all, a past; for them (Americans), it is mainly a future” (Sartre) (qtd. In Hassan 96). Finally Hassan states that:

“the city is less city than a moment in that human project realized by mind, a mind, as Nietzsche knew, which can think only in fictions, a mind, as so many modern Gnostics think, seeking ever-wider—and more problematic—expression of itself in the universe” (Hassan 107).

The city is someone’s ideal world, cities are the physical manifestation of someone’s desires (93). In a similar vein Marshall Berman has a great many things to say about the city, In his book *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity* he quotes Rem Koolhaas, stating: the city is “a factory of manmade experience” (Koolhaas) (qtd. In Berman 287), to

live in the city is to live in a world “totally fabricated by man, to live inside fantasy” (Koolhaas) (qtd. In Berman 287). In Berman’s own words the city “has become not merely a theatre but itself a production, a multimedia presentation whose audience is the whole world (288) and the purpose of this production is “to demonstrate to the whole world what modern men can build and how modern life can be imagined and lived.” (Berman 289). This mirrors what Hassan said about the city. Part of this production according to Berman is the physical city itself i.e. the glass, steel, and concrete. He states that “Many of the city’s most impressive structures were planned specifically as symbolic expressions of modernity: Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, Coney island, Manhattan’s many skyscrapers” (Berman 289). Essentially the physical city itself is just a “Baudelairean forest of symbols” (289) and the symbols within it are all symbols of modernity which the citizens of the city are constantly surrounded by. This continues at the street level, with more symbols of an ideal world through advertisements that urge you buy certain things and wear certain things in order to fit into this ideal world. Consequently the fantasy which citizens are left to live inside is imbued with the idea of modernity (287).

Furthermore the idea of the city as a factory of manmade experience has existed for thousands of years, through manifestations like “the Heavenly City” and “the City of God” (Oates, 11). Because of this it has taken on a near sacred value to some, and is therefore often read as utopian (11), i.e. the Promised land, another Jordan (Jones 95). What this promised land is, is decided by whatever the dominant culture is, which in many cases was a culture focused on modernity. The problem with the idea of modernity established in the city was that it was futurally oriented to a fault. It was obsessed with “the new” (Rosenberg) (qtd. In Berman 295). This culture is doomed to annihilate everything it creates “in order to create more, to go on endlessly creating the world anew” (288). The city is said to be “an archetype of the human imagination” and “an expression of human ingenuity” (Oates 11). This in turn puts the achievement of the city, and things created within the city, on a pedestal. The achievements in question are usually always achievements in modernity, which is why the city itself is often stated to be an achievement of modernity. However, even though the city is often presented as utopian, and the ideal of modern man, it is ironically enough presented and celebrated as being a place that is not beautiful. New York an archetype for “the city” as whole, is said to be overwhelming, at the level of a mountain and the sublime: “New York is exciting and upsetting. So are the Alps; so is a tempest; so is a battle. New York is not beautiful” (Berman 297). Similarly, in *The Practice of Everyday life*, Michel Certeau states that, in the city one

can read a “universe that is constantly exploding” (Certeau 91), one “composed of paroxysmal places” (91), a place where “extremes constantly coincide” (91). Even those who do appreciate the city do so not in spite of these qualities, but because of them; they appreciate the city of New York for its “paroxysmal” conditions (91). As stated by William James:

“The first impression of New York...is one of repulsion at the clangor, disorder, and permanent earthquake conditions. But this time installed...in the center of the cyclone, I caught the pulse of the machine, took up the rhythm, and vibrated with, and found it simply magnificent....” (qtd. in Oates, 19).

New York’s oppressive, and therefore impressive, nature is taken as a strength. The cyclone, the earthquake, the tempest, are all in a sense positive quality of the city. The fact that it is a tough place to live is taken as a testament to its greatness (27).

Joyce Carol Oates states that the contemporary city is “a material expression of civilization itself” (Oates 11), she also states that quite rightly that “The city has so fascinated contemporary writers of prose and poetry alike that no paper can do justice to the variety of “images” that has been explored” (Oates, 29). It is a space of ambivalent purpose, and how one comprehends it is a case of interpretation. Therefore I am led to the conclusion that the easiest theory to accept is the one stating that the city as a whole cannot be comprehended (Oates, 30). With this in mind, Leo Marx’s idea of the city fits my purposes. Leo Marx viewed the city as an “abstract receptacle” which receives the feelings people have about other things (Marx, 64). Thus we can say that the city is an abstract receptacle for the dominant culture’s idea of an ideal world. For ease of use the connotations with the word *the city* will be synonymous with the *dominant culture*, unless stated otherwise.

The dominant culture in the city was oriented around Modernity and Commodities. Commodities are in the simplest terms “objects of economic value” (Appadurai 3). Elaborating a bit further, the value in an object is created by “Economic exchange” (3). The value of an object is determined by how much the object resists one’s desire to possess it (Simmel p. 67) (qtd. In Appadurai 3). Economic value posits that there is distance which must be overcome in order for someone to possess it, this distance can be overcome through economic exchange, i.e. the sacrifice of another object which the other person desires (Appadurai 3). This other object is never stated directly by Arjun Appadurai to be money in

this particular section of his book, but I am going to assume it is. Thus economic life is essentially just a constant “exchange of sacrifices” (Appadurai 3). In its constant need of the new, the culture in the city valued commodities as a way of temporarily accessing the future (Barnhart 35). However, due to this culture’s need of something new, the new quickly became the not new, and thus the purchase of commodities to access the future had to be continually re-performed (35), i.e. a constant sacrifice of an object. Once within this system for long enough, the consuming subject is kept within it due to their built-up Debt, since the current dominant ethos was “Buy now, pay later” (36). This ethos also subsequently embraced the idea of “sacrificing the present to the future” (37), which also serves to prevent the enjoyment of a present not subservient to a fixed version of the future (37). Since people still need to eat, and live somewhere, they were also left shackled to their jobs in this culture, as they needed the money. A society based around the consumption of commodities is essentially the “society of the spectacle” described by Madhu Dubey in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, a society oriented the idea that “all social relations and cultural products are subject to the laws of commodity fetishism” (103). In the society of the spectacle, everything is decided by commodity exchange and exchange value. The society of the spectacle is very similar in execution to the concept of “possessive individualism,” which postulates the idea that society is essentially just a series of market relations (Macpherson 43) (qtd. In Barnhart 18). Both ideas view society at large as a market.

The level of control these ideas had over society is reflected in how they even required a new construction of time, or essentially changing time itself. This is required because in these systems, nothing exceeds market relations, therefore even time must be quantifiable (Barnhart 19). This construction of time is also incorporated into society in a way where its presented as a transcendental truth, it is presented as the indisputable natural conception of time (27). However time is not ethereal. Like with culture, it is something subjective, reflecting the ideas of the culture that applies it: “Time is an instrument by and through which social life is ordered” (27). What this culture is trying to do is to perpetuate the system it was incorporated through, through making this idea of time fixed and immutable, through “phantom objectivity”. If people do believe it is a fixed concept, it becomes difficult to imagine a future that does not include this sense of time, and therefore the culture that created it is perpetuated (27). Thus this system keeps the subjects caught within it trapped not just through debt, but with the control of their entire perception of time, and subsequently their reality. To stay apart of perceived society, people had to adhere to this idea of time, which also again forced them

to be futurally oriented individuals. To not just be a part of the future, but also the present, the people had to participate in the commodity-oriented culture or else they would essentially not be part of history.

Thus the city, as an abstract receptacle for this dominant culture, becomes an arena where everything is decided by commodity exchange and exchange value. This in turn turns city culture into a predominantly commodity-oriented culture. This commodity-oriented culture still keeps the initial image of an ideal world embedded in it, perhaps even somewhat concealed. The image excluded certain people in its initial idea of the world, mostly because these people were not present when the city was founded. The people in question is African Americans (Morrison, *City limits* 37). This was sometimes reflected in commodities, thus those who purchased them either knowingly or unknowingly supported this image of society. Since we are clearly spending a lot of time around this world culture, it is also necessary to provide a more strict definition of it, in the context of African Americans. Culture, is not something objective, it is merely a reflection of “a whole way of life” (Baker 1). Things created within and for this culture are just reflections of this specific way of life. Those who seek to hold up culture as something objective and transcendental are those who seek to preserve it, with all its set boundaries (1). The city, with its symbols of modernity, perpetuates the culture that created it and the culture that was created within it. Things created within this culture are therefore not any better objectively than any other culture, the only claim that it is, is subjective (2). Furthermore Baker states that “All of us had been lobotomized into an acceptance of ‘culture’ on the white world’s terms” (9), and that this use of the word culture serves to perpetuate the “denial of the black man” (9), as well as keeping “culture” upheld as a transcendental value. Baker grew up in the South, surrounded by “artefacts of the white world” (8), in a society which served to perpetuate this meaning of the word culture, that meaning being “the best that has been thought and known in the world,” but the world in this context only means the white world (9). This is symbolized by, among other things, that the coloured library and white library had the same pioneer books, that being works by white writers. (8).

When African Americans entered the city they were entering into a world of symbols, one which symbols perpetuated an image of an ideal world that was established without the presence of black people. Therefore, before black people had started to actively buy commodities themselves, they were being commodified. They were being made into symbols used to appeal to those who wished to “fit in”, or rather, symbols of what those who want to

fit in ought to avoid. This is evidenced by the type of advertisements one could find in the city (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 262). This wasn't because they were black, but because they were not white. This world of symbols wasn't much unlike the South that the black migrants had just left behind, where they had been constantly bombarded by images and artefacts of the white world (Baker 8). They were also entering into a culture already in motion, the city, the people, and the life within it were all there before they arrived, and they had been there for a long time.

The African Americans who came to the city were migrating from the South for work. They ended up in the North because the city needed them. However, it would be wrong to say that the city genuinely needed them specifically, the city had just simply run out of other options when it came to labor forces. As Alain Locke states in "The New Negro", they didn't have to look for work in the North, "work looked for them" (306). They didn't even have to come North, the work would find them in the South and bring them North. This was mostly due to a sudden halt in the stream of European immigration during World War 1, which also meant a halt in the steady stream of unskilled laborers who could work in factories (Jones, 98). Many of the people migrating North were either former slaves, or the sons and daughters of former slaves. For reference to how little time had passed, Ralph Ellison states in his essay "Harlem is nowhere" that it was possible for black people to step "from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism simply by moving across the Mason-Dixon line" (321), or in simple terms, to move ahead 85 years. It was their first opportunity to actually be perceived at all, as being outside of the economy and culture they essentially didn't exist before, in terms of recorded history. Therefore, moving North wasn't just a shift in location and scenery it was moving onto a whole new "plane of consciousness." (Wright, *Voices* 99).

One of the main reasons for African Americans to go North was simply to escape from the South. Even after the supposed fraternity created during World War One, African American soldiers came home only to be lynched in uniform in the South (Baldwin, *Language* 135). These soldiers had, had gained a new international sense through their experiences abroad (Jones 118). Their experiences in Europe pointed out the fact that the social inequities African Americans experienced in America, was exclusive to America (Jones 113). This also allowed them to look at these inequities as an evil (113), as something that could be changed and fought against. Even before the migration North, this idea was being spread in the South, which urged their decision to move into this new plane of consciousness. The South was and forever will be the "scene of the crime", or, as LeRoi Jones aptly puts it, "The incredible

fabric of guilt and servitude” (Jones 105). At this time a lot of African Americans in the South were still working on plantations, not as slaves per se, but as sharecroppers. Previously they had been shackled to these jobs through debt, but because what was produced (cotton) had become less and less profitable, the owners of the plantations had grown too poor to keep them with anything but goodwill (Wright, *Voices* 56). The allure of the North was further strengthened by endorsement from numerous “coloured” newspapers, all painting the North as a mythical land of promise (87). In *12 Million Black Voices* Richard Wright paraphrases the voice of many of those moving North “We’d rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the president of Dixie!” (88), which perfectly demonstrates how aggressive and uncompromising this need to go North was.

Going North was the first opportunity the African American population had to actually participate in “American” culture, which is to say, whatever culture was dominant in the Cities in the North. They would get the opportunity to be “American” citizens: to live in brick buildings, to vote, to have their children go to school, to not be lynched (Wright, *Voices* 87). They could also purchase commodities and therefore become part of recorded history in the form of a market on sales prognostication charts (Jones 101). With all this in mind it was not a difficult decision to leave the South behind for the North. The North, and the city, meant three things: “Jobs, Homes, Dignity” (Jones 96). The North and the city were the promised land for African Americans, at least up until they actually had to live in it. However, participation was easier said than done, as the only requirement for participating is to buy things, but things cost money. As a people that had just recently started getting paid for their labor, they did not have a surplus of money to spend on commodities; they first and foremost needed to actually pay to live in the City, and survive in the City. They also immediately learned that this culture demanded that they would not just participate in the culture through the purchase of commodities, they also had to behave as “citified” people. To be citified is essentially to be as white as possible, because the culture in the city, is predominantly white oriented. This complete shift in reality is daunting enough, but to then enter into an arena ruled by a culture they had no part in founding and were pre-emptively excluded from made this experience even more intense.

The city’s role in all this is that it is complicit with creating and perpetuating these ideas produced by the dominant culture. The symbols are not just symbols of modernity in general, but specifically of modernity in the eyes of the dominant culture. The ideal world that is emphasized by the “Baudelairean forest of symbols” (Berman 289) the city is, is also one that

has no meaning to its African American migrant population. In *Long Black Song* Houston A Baker Jr. states that:

“The perspectives of black America and white America are as far apart as the captain’s cabin and the holds full of ‘black ivory’ during the middle passage (the eight-week voyage from Africa to the New World)” (Baker 4).

Their goals are different, their motivation is different, their heroes are sometimes near polar opposites: “The armed frontiersman, the American God, and the ferocious hero were the ones who stood over the slave’s back and insured his continued mortification” (13) while “The legends of men conquering wild and virgin lands are not the legends of black America” (2). To not dwell on it too much, Frantz Fanon puts it best in *Black Skin, white masks*: There will always be a world—a white world—between you and us: that impossibility on either side to obliterate the past once and for all” (Fanon 101).

That isn’t to say that it’s impossible for black people to see the city as white people do, but that for them to do so is to dilute themselves. Thus to be citified is not just to be as white as possible, but also to be “as little negro as possible” (Baraka 145). However they still had the experiences of the South fresh in their memory, and the incredible fabric of guilt and servitude was the fabric they were shaped from, their lives and their identity, i.e. their “self” was shaped by this struggle (Baraka 139). Leaving all of this entirely behind would be leaving their” self” behind. This struggle of identity started with their initial move onto a new plane of consciousness and is then strengthened by the City itself. In the country, unlike the city, the land doesn’t try to impose some other ideal image onto you or the world, it is simply there, and one deals with the reality of it:

“You wake up whenever it is that you wake up, and you look at the sky. It is there, and it gives you some idea what kind of a day you are going to have, and you walk on the ground. It’s there. It gives you some sense of yourself, and you go about your duties: You have your lunch, you take a walk, you know that at a certain moment the sun is going to go down, and you prepare yourself to deal with that” (Baldwin, *Language* 134).

In the South African Americans knew who they were as they lived in a relatively static social order. They had lived in it long enough to develop certain strategies which helped them accept their reality, despite its absurdity. They were “at home” in this world; the South was home.

(Ellison, Harlem 323-24). In the North they are divorced from this stable reality. James Baldwin states that “Every day in the city—involves a subtle divorce from reality” (Baldwin, Language 134), in this case not just for African Americans, but for everyone who lives in the city. This then goes doubly for African Americans, who already had their reality violently shifted in moving North. Thus “The” City, for African Americans is another Jordan, but it is also a place which at once highlights and then perpetuates their place in society. It is also what gives them a place in society in general, definable society anyhow. It is the arena where they have to face an alien culture and incorporate it into their lives and their culture, or let it subsume them completely. This then causes an immediate struggle of identity, and consequently the aforementioned struggle of reality.

2.2 Identity

As previously mentioned, the main reason it was so hard for African Americans to become “citified” is that the process introduced a struggle of identity. They had to first accept that there was a way to “be” black, established in the city and then accept that they could not be this way. This way of “being” black and “living” with blackness was something created by the white world, but it didn’t reflect the individuals it was supposed to apply to. Instead it was an image, woven together by anecdotes and stories, not with actual evidence, or even the presence of a black man (Fanon 91). Nevertheless, this “blackness” was waiting for them in the city just like it had in the South (Fanon 113). The blackness in question was a construction of the white world:

“The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me... the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality...I see in this white gaze that it’s the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact!” (Fanon 95)

Before African Americans had come to the North, their initial struggle of identity in the South was fighting to have one in the first place. Their initial fight was to be seen as people, not animals or some other species. It took a long while until scientists finally admitted, although reluctantly, that black people were human beings (Fanon, 99). Once they finally did, others still decided for them what types of human beings they were, and demanded that they would apply this visage “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to

the white man” (Fanon, 89). There were set characteristics, which were made to apply to all African Americans under the banner of this new type of man, a “Negro” (Fanon, 95). The “Negro” was the carefully dissected remains of the essence of a black man. African Americans were supposed to accept this scarce being, and perpetuate its characteristics through themselves and their own behaviour (Fanon 94). As famously said by W.E.B DuBois:

“the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring ones soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (DuBois, Souls 364-65)

James Baldwin echoes this sentiment in his writing, especially in “Stranger in the village”, where he states that in the United States he finds himself in a culture which controls him, and has essentially created “him” (120). He further argues that it is beneficial to the white man to keep African Americans at this “human remove” (122), to avoid having to confront the past transgressions of his ancestors. However at the same time, the culture African Americans finds themselves in demands that they behave as though they were living under the same limitations as their ancestors, because that is the image of a blackness that the current culture has. This image and this culture also perpetuate the role white people have in this construction, and thus “by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is” (Baldwin, Stranger 123). In another of his texts, “The Language of the City Streets,” Baldwin doubles down on this statement, essentially stating that the idea of a “white” man was created through the idea of the “black” man. Before the people now seen as “the white man” came to America, they were men of many different nationalities, but they became white in their need of keeping the “other” black (135). Thus this configuration doesn’t just enable African Americans to know who the white man is, but it enables the white man to know who Black people “are” as well.

When Baldwin was in Europe, he experienced what it was like to be seen as something outside of this configuration. In the village he visits he is a stranger and (quite rightly, as he

emphasizes himself) regarded as a suspect latecomer (Baldwin, *Stranger* 3). But the basis of this suspicion is different in Europe; it is not based on the connotations of the word Negro, which they also use, although spelled differently (4). Instead they simply don't know anything about him, and some (mostly children) regard him with genuine wonder. (2). When they use the word Negro it is not with the same connotations as in the United States. Baldwin describes this difference, stating that "There is a dreadful abyss between the streets of this village and the streets of the city in which I was born, between the children who shout Neger! today and those who shouted Nigger! Yesterday" (4). He calls it "the Abyss of the American experience" (4). The marked difference between the North and the South is that in the North this abyss is not somewhere he dwells, but it is where he is tossed with one word "when gorged with empty, lofty words/Like the box on top of your shoulders/You step again on the bitter red earth of Africa" (David Diop) (qtd. In Fanon 116). This once again underlines the fact that the configuration of African Americans in relation to white people, is somewhat exclusive to America.

In the North African Americans were allowed to mostly walk around the edge of this abyss unless they were "out of line". However, being out of line wasn't just behaving "badly", it was any behaviour that disturbed the configuration of the "White man" and "the Black man". If something were to disturb this configuration, it would shake the foundation of both "identities", but mostly it would remind the white man that he was less superior than he originally envisioned. Therefore almost any success for African Americans, representing African Americans, was seen as stepping out of line and "constituted an insult" (Wright, *Voices* 31). In the South African Americans would have been lynched for such an insult, so when asked certain questions by white people in the South, they would not answer in objective truth, but in terms of whatever the white man wanted to hear (41). In the North they were "free" to do and say most things as long as they acted like civilized people and didn't stray from their set place in society. They were allowed success if they represented a larger group, or if their success was a success for the culture. If African Americans did stay in line, the people around them pretty much acted indifferently, as they could just ignore them. This neutrality was even reflected in the way people spoke, which Richard Wright describes as "clipped Yankee phrases" (Wright, *Voices* 98), phrases spoken so fast and with such neutrality that it was difficult to discern the actual meaning and intention. Initially it is a welcome neutrality: "O sweet and welcome indifference" (99). Thus the "dignity" associated with the appeal of the North slowly faded (Jones 96). African Americans were indeed given

jobs and “dwellings” one could call homes, but dignity was left sorely lacking. However, as they were now living in the city, they had to rely on the participation in city culture to survive. Essentially, they had to be citified or die, as outside of this already monolithic problem of dignity and self-affirmation, they were still human, with human needs food and food required money, since they no longer relied on the land to feed them. If they didn’t have money they also soon didn’t have homes (Wright, *Voices* 116). On top of this, they could also be tossed out of their jobs or their homes for reasons entirely out of their control, like a depression, or just that the building they live in is to be torn down to make room for factory building (102). Without money, African Americans in the North lose the possibility of participating in American citified culture and ended up with yet another identity issue.

However since they are “beyond public concern” they are not just back to not being people, in this case they are not even animals, they simply don’t exist to the world. This inevitably leads to the individual being faced with such a situation to question their own identity as well. The identity which lurks in the abyss of American experience, their “Negro” self is the first self that they applied to themselves. This self has defined them, and “IS” them. The other self, the citified one, is no longer available to them, so they may come to realize that they have no true conception of themselves outside of the dominant culture. If they are to deny their Negro self, According to Ellison, there is nothing, “One `is` literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a `displaced person` of American democracy.” (*Harlem*, 325). A lot of African Americans were therefore left with the choice to take the plunge into the abyss themselves, and once again take the form put upon them, or to not exist at all.

This fate is imposed onto some, but it is also the ominous shadow lurking at the edge of the existence of “citified” African Americans, increasing their eager commitment to the culture of the city. Some African Americans living in the city fight desperately to remain citified, and this is a fight on many fronts, where every victory comes with the knowledge that it may be temporary. They had to participate in the purchase of commodities, they had to keep pace with a culture that they were late in the arrival to, they had to participate in this culture by taking set roles where they made themselves scarce, and even if they did all of this, they might be tossed out of the system regardless because of something entirely out of their control. They might lose their job because it was to be given to a white man instead, (Wright *Voices* 122), they might lose their home because their home was to be given to a company instead. There was no true, lasting victory. Somewhat inevitably the threat of being erased from history led to a clear split between citified, Northern African Americans and the fresh

migrants from the South, who still held onto their collective identity. The first arrivals had wished to discard the culture and heritage from the South, but this was easier said than done, as reminders of that culture came with each new wave of arrivals (Jones 108). Subsequently citified African Americans started to look at the new arrivals in a negative light if they refused to adapt to the culture of the city. They started to think of and call them “country boy” as a kind of derogatory term (106). This split was even more prevalent with the people who had grown up in the city and only in the city. To them, the culture of the arriving migrants was just as alien as the culture in the city was to the migrants (109). With this new generation, “Southern Negro culture” became a buzzword all on its own (109).

However, in this desperate fight to be and to remain citified, African Americans sacrifice their other possible salvation, namely the collectivistic nature of African American culture. Baker states that this idea of collective experience is one of the bedrocks of African American culture (Baker 16). However this collective does not exclude the self and the idea of the self; rather, the self, through self-assertion, should be used to bolster and expand the collective experience and community values (Morrison, *City Limits* 38). Through individual victories towards a common cause, members of this collective work towards advancing a people. In this way an individual victory should not be a step towards individualism, but a collective victory. Those who deliberately chose to not view themselves as part of this collective identity of black people subsequently did not share in either their success nor their failures.

“A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world” (DuBois, 368).

This collectivistic nature was captured in the music of African Americans as well, especially in jazz, which in of itself was a fusion of the culture of Southern and Northern African Americans.

2.3 Jazz: The Music of the present

Jazz represents the clash and subsequent merging of a part of Northern and Southern black culture, reflecting what Ralph Ellison states in “Living with Music”: “in the United States when traditions are juxtaposed they tend, regardless of what we do to prevent it, irresistibly to

merge” (236). The culture which African Americans had in the South was a predominantly oral one, mostly because it was founded without the possibility, knowledge (or permission) to write. Baker states that “the innovations of Gutenberg and Caxton, whose effects Marshall McLuhan has attacked in recent years, had little influence on the early expressions of black American culture” (Baker 16). The first types of songs that could be said to be of “African American” origin were the songs sung at plantations: spirituals, and work songs, the sacred and the secular. Spirituals (the sacred) contained a “strain of other-worldly yearning” and essentially covered “the entire gamut of human experience” (Baker 32): joy, sorrow, resilience, and, most of all, endurance (32). Work songs (the secular) were solely focused on the primary activity of the black folk experience, work, and were either accompaniments to the work or descriptions of it. From these types of songs we get the blues, which, like the spirituals, is a very broad genre essentially covering the entire black experience, and is a distillate of several folk song types (34). Blues is therefore a difficult genre to narrow down, but Ralph Ellison put it best in “Richard Wright’s blues”:

“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 a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”

(Ellison) (qtd. In Baker, 35)

As with folklore, the music reflected situations which had repeated themselves often enough to warrant preservation, again reflecting what the typical experience of an African American would be (Baker 40). This type of music had a type of raw, confronting honesty, fit for a brutal life. We see then that one of the main ways the slaves and subsequently African Americans could initially perceive and understand the world was through song.

Jazz was an urban development of the blues, essentially “spirituals” of the city pavements (Wright, *Voices* 128), and still expressed joy, sorrow, resilience, and endurance. It was a development and extension of sentiments held in the South, merged with sentiments held in the North, sentiments that also reflected experiences as far back as the middle passage. But the strength of jazz especially was that it also reflected the experience of the city for African Americans. Being an urban development it also included the experiences of citified African

Americans (Jones 108). The tools to make the music were there before them, but it was the black experience, or rather “the black man’s hell on earth” (Roach 114) through centuries which made “jazz” what it is. Jazz, like other forms of art, is a reflection of a people’s current experience of a culture, but it is founded on the idea of learning the best of the past, and adding it to the current vision (Ellison, *Living* 229). This is manifested through the use of a continuous metronomic beat. The metronomic beat is a “continuous, implied, and sometimes-sounded pulse” (Barnhart 16) which all the music in jazz is formed over. This beat insists on “the primacy of the present” moment, and also leaves no set direction or goal for the music except the repetition of the beat, making Jazz entirely the music of the present (Barnhart 16). Over this beat, the rest of the music of Jazz is formed through improvisation. However, it is of paramount importance to remember that improvisation is not just random self-expression; it may seem spontaneous, but it is and must be built upon past experiences. Improvisation in jazz is controlled self-expression (Munton 238). This also keeps a constant element of the past embedded in Jazz, the continued existence of the music relies on the metronomic beat. The way jazz works reflects the collectivistic ethos of African American culture. It is a collective music, which necessitates a socially maintained collective time, where individuals and collectives alike can express themselves (Barnhart, 17). If they stray from this principle, there will not be a rhythm for the individual to return to (17). So again through individual victories towards a common cause, jazz performers work towards advancing a people (or in this case a piece of music), and the end result is a collective victory. The presence of other musicians also provides the individual members with more past material to build their next improvisation on. Thus it is a constant collective experience.

With this need of a constant element of the past to live in the present, as well as the need of the group, jazz reflects the black folk experience of the city. The African Americans in the who did not become citified, needed to keep elements of the South with them in order to have a stable reality. Some of these elements came with the culture itself, which was continuously brought to the North by arriving waves of migrant workers. One of the biggest parts of this culture was the church. The church was the first stable cultural institution in black communities (Baker 27), and the first way they entered western civilization (Wright, *Voices* 131). It was the first place representing and bolstering the collective identity which is the key to African American culture. It wasn’t the building itself, but the collective identity formed within it that made the church important to African American culture. The other element (obviously) was the music, which this section has already elaborated on. The music

contained, and was itself, a stable element of the past. This stable element of the past was European in origin, as the musical structure Jazz builds itself upon is from European forms (Munton 236).

Jazz, in this thesis, is mostly used for its reflection of the black experience of the city and to introduce the idea of the metronomic beat, the constant element of the past. The lyrics of jazz mostly focused on experiences I have already described, as it generally reflected the black folk experience, which is why I won't be covering more aspects of the lyrics. However, they are an absolute key element in Jazz, and without it, the music itself could be appropriated and used by others. Given that Jazz is being used here for its reflection of the black folk experience, and these cases of appropriation reflect a culture that distinctly did not want to focus on its role as reflection of the black folk experience it warrants at least some brief examination. A key example of this attempt at appropriation is jazz itself being labelled as "America's gift to the world" (Baker, 15), which would mean it is a product of the broad "American" culture. As we already discussed, African American culture and American (white) culture are distinctly different, and Jazz did not initially reflect or base itself on the experiences of white American culture (Baker 15). They are both American, but one culture got their "stars and stripes" through engravings of cat-o'-nine tails on their flesh (Baker 2). Jazz was and is an extension of "many lynchings, castrations, and other "improvisations" of genocide" on black people (Roach 115): "Until the white musician has been called upon to give and experience as much, and the same, he cannot, in all honesty, claim the kind of affinity to the music he insists he has" (Roach 115).

However, America didn't actually want jazz as an expression of Black experience. The music as an expression of Black experience would just remind white people of their transgressions, as just as "The reality of Irish life challenges English oppression—the reality of black life challenges the white racist monopoly capitalist system" (Baraka 152); the music was certainly not "the gentle outpouring of a contented slave" (Baker 12). Therefore, as with many artforms, jazz was deplored before it was revered, often deemed to be "sinful" and "savage" (Barnhart 29). The dominant cultural body just wanted the music, or parts of it, as it was a new and exciting style at the time. Jazz would have "the same revivifying effect as the injection of the new, and in the larger sense, vulgar blood into dying aristocracy" (Locke 221) (qtd. In Barnhart 30).

This resistance to the artform essentially just worked to bolster its appeal and its spread. The strategy to combat this aspect of it and jazz in general therefore soon shifted when the dominant culture began to move toward inclusion and assimilation rather than exclusion. In a way this was actually worse, as they deemed jazz to be crude artform which was simply in need of refinement; someone just needed to “make an honest lady out of jazz” (Barnhart 30). This refinement would come from it being used by white artists, again perpetuating the idea that white American culture is inherently superior to African American culture. This was worse yet because the white American culture already had a larger audience to perform their music for, thus they could convince those that had never heard jazz before that the “refined” version was the peak of the genre. They could even go as far as to say it was the beginning of the genre and before they knew it “jazz had rushed into the mainstream without so much as one black face” (Jones 100). This also allowed the dominant cultural body to initially divorce jazz from its dark past at its inception.

This was also at a time where one of the main ways to sell music had become through records, and here too the white American culture beat African Americans in the race of putting out the first jazz record (Jones 100). The people that actually made “jazz” what it is didn’t put out a jazz record until a full 3 years later in 1920 (100). The jazz that was performed by white artists was performed using big “swing” bands, which emphasized big band dance arrangements (Spaulding 485), which limited the possibility of individual expression and improvisation. These artists also often only hired white musicians for the bands (485). Thus the most publicly known and dispersed version of Jazz was white, and was not oriented around individual self-expression. This was also around the same time that “race records” were becoming popular. Race records were records specifically aimed at a new African American market (Jones, 99). The popularity of race records also led to the spread and subsequent dispersal and dilution of Blues in the City. Race records led to certain styles of singing, which had previously been somewhat exclusive and local, to be copied by other aspiring artists nationwide (101). This then robbed the new music of its somewhat exclusive appeal, as the singing was put into a set genre of “blues-singing”(102). The fact that it was recorded music also initially robbed it of some of the space that the performers had to improvise in, since there was just a limited time that they had to perform in. The aspect of improvisation did not disappear entirely, but it was put under more set rules which the performers imposed on themselves (Jones 103). This development, in combination with the presence of the “swing” bands, led to the subsequent emergence of a style of jazz called

“Bebop” as a sort of counter movement to this development. Bebop once again emphasized the importance of individual expression and used smaller bands to give each member more room for improvisation (Spaulding 485).

3 Chapter 2: Individuality and the city in *Jazz*

In this chapter I aim to explore how Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* underscores the importance of the knowledge of individuals through an unreliable narrator. The novel underscores this point by having a narrative which is faulty, given that it’s narrator does not possess all the necessary knowledge about the characters whose lives she is attempting to describe, and predict. The main mistake the narrator makes is attempting to improvise the story being told over an unstable beat with how she assumes the characters will act. The beat is unstable because it was established through assumed knowledge, not the inner lives of the characters, a tell-tale sign of voyeurism as established by Madhu Dubey: “voyeurism is explicitly presented as a uniquely urban mode of cognition, which mistakes sight for knowledge” (Signs 139). It all adds up to a question of representation. Who can claim to accurately capture the life and character of an African American individual? “Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written.” (DuBois 41). DuBois posits that it probably wouldn’t be white people. Thus the easy answer would be, African Americans, but as will be proven, one African American individual cannot represent all African Americans. Thus the question is made more complicated. The answer to the question has to start with another question, “what is an African American really?” and the answer to this question is so manifold that one would have to be an expert in the field to answer it with confidence and a semblance of truth.

I am not an expert in this field, thus all I can do is highlight what I view as an important facet into reaching an answer. This facet is genuine, indisputable knowledge. I aim to highlight the importance of knowledge by exploring what happens when one doesn’t possess it. The first step in this process is identifying that there is a lack of knowledge to begin with, such as asking the question “what is African American really?” and realizing you don’t have an answer. The status of African Americans in American society has been a problem, precisely because of the absence of an answer to the question above. It has not just been a problem for

African Americans, it has also been a problem for the white world, perhaps even more so, which in turn did make it an even bigger problem for African Americans because the white world dictated the boundaries of the dominant culture. As we already know, initially most African Americans had to fight for their right to simply be seen as people, not animals. Once they were seen as people, they had to accept a constructed identity with set characteristics. This was the initial solution for the white world to the “problem”.

However, with the migration North and the move onto a whole new plane of consciousness, these same African Americans gained a new sense of self. This new self still had certain limitations put upon it, but the people to whom these limitations applied actually had the opportunity to be aware that these limitations weren't universal. They also soon discovered that, despite curtailing individualism as a defence mechanism, there had inevitably been a culture formed regardless which was unlike the dominant white culture in the city. This is because, as Houston A. Baker jr. states, culture is a whole way of life, and the way of life for most African Americans in the city was drastically different from the broader culture. It was also because the culture African Americans entered the North with had been different from the broader culture in the South as well. African Americans might have merged far more seamlessly with the culture dominant in the North if they had not faced discrimination in their attempt to do so (Baraka, 140). Instead, they would indeed work in the North, but when they went home from work, they were still culturally remaining in the South (Wright 127).

However, their way of life in the North was different from their way of life in the South, even if they did try to keep parts of that culture with them, because the city was different from the country in many ways, one of the key ones being that they didn't have land which they could rely on for food. Subsequently, since these workers and their families were confronted by the presence of the culture of the North every day, a new culture emerged which was a distillation of both because, as Ralph Ellison states in his essay “Living with music”: “in the United States when traditions are juxtaposed they tend, regardless of what we do to prevent it, irresistibly to merge” (236). This inevitably became reflected in the art produced by these African Americans as well, because “art is the ultimate extension, elaboration, and refinement of the rituals that reenact the primary survival technology” (Murray, “Improvisation” 111) (qtd. in Barnhart, *Jazz* 2). Like the folklore of African Americans, this art was supposed to reflect the reality which was typical for African Americans in the North. Certain art reflects the individual who made it, therefore it may vary in content based on the individual who produced it because of their unique emotional climate (Roach 115), and certain individuals

may even have experienced the city positively, thus their specific art would or should reflect this. No matter their interpretation, one of the key forms of art which was developed, distributed, and consequently diluted in the city was Jazz, the “spirituals” of the city pavements.

If one is deprived of the art of others, then one necessarily creates art of one’s own. Thus Jazz came to be this way at least partly because most African Americans in the city were excluded from the broader culture, because as Richard Wright states, “We are able to play in this fashion because we have been excluded, left behind; we play in this manner because all excluded folk play” (Wright, *Voices* 128). This art consequently often reflects the fact that its creators were deprived of something else, and also the reality of the lives of these creators (Baraka 152). Wright further states that the music which is made by those who are excluded was essentially a desperate “banner of hope” (Wright, *Voices* 130). This banner was essentially torn to shreds when the Great Depression hit, as it stopped the distribution of music made by African Americans for almost three years (Jones 117), which eventually led to the death of the cultural development of Harlem. The Great Depression was the first economic crisis that was experienced by many African Americans, since they were living in the culture which was suffering from the crisis (Jones 118). Not only that, but the Great Depression also tore Harlem down from its pedestal and reduced it to a slum, as many African Americans even went back to the South instead of staying in the North (Jones 117). Thus, as stated by Alain Locke, the hope in the culture that was reaching its Zenith in the 1920s consisted in “cruelly deceptive mirages” (Osofsky 187) (qtd. In Paquet 224).

From here, we fairly swiftly move into a period where the idea of viewing the city as a utopian promised land slowly but surely all but disappeared (Dubey, Introduction 4) while the initial fight of self-determination still persisted for many African Americans who remained in the city (Baraka 142). Toni Morrison states in “A Race in Mind” that one of the main things many African Americans had to establish was that their point of view was different from mainstream America (Blood 35). Therefore, we move from a period where many African Americans were trying to blend in with the dominant culture, to one where they are asserting that they were indeed different.

Initially the dominant cultural body allowed African Americans to maintain this assertion because the culture and the people within it could be profitable through their exoticness. However, this only bestowed visibility on the “exotic” writers, those “whom the accidents of

education and opportunity have raised on the tidal waves of chance” (DuBois, *Criteria* 41). As Richard Wright states, it is not that the success of these writers should not be seen as progress, but it is important to see that they were “fleeting exceptions,” “like single fishes that leap and flash for a split second above the surface of the sea” (Wright, *Voices* 5). A majority of the African American population was still stuck “in the depths” (*Voices* 5) and invisible. Toni Morrison felt, retrospectively, that it was the responsibility of these writers to maintain their minorityhood (*Blood* 59).

However the strategy of the dominant cultural body soon shifted again, this time into saying that “Blacks were like everybody else” (Baraka 152). This was just an attempt to divorce African Americans from their past and in turn erase the guilt white people constantly felt from looking at this past (Baldwin, *Stranger*, 122). What further complicates this (and makes it harder to fight against) was that to allow race to be ignored was essentially seen as generosity from the side of the dominant cultural body (Morrison, *Blood* 142). It was a move to “allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (142). The dominant cultural body was trying to establish the non-presence of race as a fact, because it benefitted them (164). Thus, once again, race was being used as a heuristic term, only invoked in support of an existing order (Baker 5). To Morrison, this only called attention to what she has termed the “Africanistic presence” in the United States. The term Africanism, as defined by Morrison, is the “blackness” that African Americans have come to signify, as well as the subsequent assumptions and misreadings of African Americans that have followed because of this (Morrison, *Blood* 141). She finds the presence of this Africanism precisely through its non-presence in American writing, stating that “through significant and underscored omissions” (Morrison, *Blood* 141), African Americans are made very visible through their clear absence (Morrison, *Blood* 152). Later, when that African American presence in writing was visible through precisely their presence, the ideal move for the dominant cultural body was to simply erase the African part and just make them Americans.

Toni Morrison felt it was her responsibility, and the responsibility of other writers as well, to represent those African Americans who still remained invisible decades later, the ones who were simply “ordinary people” (Raynor, n. pag.). Subsequently, when she chose to tackle a story set during the Harlem Renaissance, she didn’t focus on individuals who necessarily had major artistic or cultural value (Stave, n. pag.). By highlighting ordinary people, she also calls attention to the fact that despite many artists flourishing in the North, there was still little space left for those who weren’t said to possess exotic value. The story in question is

presented to us in her novel from 1992, *Jazz*. Aside from its historical setting, the key events of the plot were inspired by a photograph of a young Black girl in her coffin, who, like Dorcas, the girl in the novel, had been shot by her boyfriend at a party (Stave, n. pag.). Morrison states in the foreword of the novel that her goal with the novel was to capture the “essence” of the jazz age (Morrison, Foreword 4), the moment in time where “an African American art form defined, influenced, reflected a nation’s culture in so many ways—Primary among these features, however, was invention. Improvisation, originality, change” (4).

The novel opens with establishing an implied closeness and level of knowledge between the narrator and the characters of the novel: “I know that woman—know her husband too” (*Jazz* 3), which is then immediately followed up by the narrator telling the reader almost everything that will happen in the novel, and also what she assumes will happen. The implied closeness is important to point out because the narrator bases her knowledge on what she has observed and what has been recorded, not because they know the characters personally. They also admit as much in the novel’s conclusion: “I overreached and missed the obvious. I was watching the streets, thrilled by the buildings pressing and pressed by stone; so glad to be looking out and in on things I dismissed what went on in heart-pockets closed to me” (*Jazz* 220-21). The narrator observes, and therefore tells us, that Dorcas was shot by Joe Trace, Violet’s husband, and that Violet went to Dorcas’s funeral and cut her face (*Jazz* 3). She also says that Violet’s mother committed suicide (*Jazz* 4), and that Violet formed a friendship with Dorcas’s aunt (*Jazz* 6). Finally, she says that a new girl has entered the lives of Violet and Joe (*Jazz* 6). These are all things the narrator can claim to know, because she observed them. If she didn’t see the event directly, she heard it from one of the characters and can somewhat safely assume it to be true. Shirley Ann Stave states that laying out the entire plot on the first few pages like this is Toni Morrison’s way of establishing the “melody of the work”, like the metronomic beat in a piece of jazz music (Stave, n. pag). Subsequently it is also the narrator’s way of establishing the melody of the work, thus the reader may assume what the narrator assumes, because the established beat leads them to think so.

In terms of what the narrator assumes will happen, there are a few instances where she gets it wrong, or she simply don’t have the whole story; her assumed knowledge of the characters just leads her to strongly assume it will. The main instance is their stating that the girl who enters the lives of Joe and Violet leads to a threesome, which subsequently would end with another person being shot (*Jazz* 6), but neither the threesome nor the shooting happens. Consequently, the narrator once again admits her faults at the novel’s end, stating that she

essentially forgot she was dealing with people, people who are “original, complicated and changeable” (Jazz 220). The narrator thought that the melody of the work was decisive, but instead the characters in the novel reach a different ending than the narrator expects through precisely being original, complicated and changeable and through improvisation.

Another thing the narrator does, or rather doesn't do, is provide concrete answers to some of the biggest questions that the novel asks the reader. Quite a few of the key events in the novel are events where the narrator actually doesn't provide the reader with a concrete answer as to why they happened, because she doesn't know either. We are not told concretely exactly why Violet's mother Rose Dear threw herself down a well, we are not told concretely why Joe ends up shooting Dorcas, and we are not told concretely why Violet gains her renegade tongue because the narrator doesn't know for certain. We are told many possible reasons for each of these events, but the narrator doesn't settle on any of them, so it is essentially left to the reader to find explanations. The absence of an explanation for these events in turn highlights their importance to the reader because the absence of an explanation becomes glaringly obvious. What the reader is told by the narrator is important to the whole picture because it establishes which pieces are missing. It also highlights how a narrator who doesn't know the full story of their characters cannot accurately tell their story, which in turn highlights the importance of having African American authors tell the story of African Americans, or “somebody else is going to be interpreting your experience for you—And they might be in error” (Ellison, *Indivisible* 382).

This speaks to Morrison's goal of writing a novel where the structure of the piece would not just enhance meaning, it would equal meaning (Morrison, Foreword 5). A reader of a novel is used to trusting that a narrator already knows, fully, what is going to happen in the story they narrate, but in *Jazz* the reader is made to realize that the story and its meaning are essentially being pieced together by the narrator on the spot. The structure of the novel makes it so the reader is left to fill in what is left out and in turn they are meant to realize that they actually can't do so, because they don't know the whole story either, and they never will. Morrison also wanted to write a novel that followed some of the same rules and achieved some of the same goals as the musical genre jazz. She would take this as far as using jazz's use of improvisation over an established metronomic beat as well as its deceptive straightforwardness (Munton 242).

However, I don't think the novel *Jazz* was supposed to be seen as a successful result of this experiment. The beat the reader is provided with, the metronomic beat of the novel, is revealed to be unstable at the novel's end given the unreliable narrator. One of the key things to remember about improvisation when it comes to jazz is that improvisation is not just random self-expression; it must be built upon past experiences, it is controlled self-expression (Munton 238). The narrator doesn't know accurately how the characters in the novel will improvise because she doesn't know all the past experiences of the characters in the novel. Thus despite what she assumes the characters will do being based on some knowledge of them, it is not enough information. I feel that Toni Morrison's intention with setting up her novel this way is to highlight the importance of knowing the past and especially the distinctive past of individuals.

The novel's narrative is still important to this understanding because it highlights the story of ordinary people, and calls attention to what is often left out of these stories, by omitting these same things themselves. Furthermore, for the structure of the novel to successfully equal meaning, we have to look at what makes up the structure of the novel, which is the narrative. The novel is set up to have a beat which the narrative builds itself upon, so we have to look at what beat or is established for the reader. One of the key beats in the novel is the City itself. In the novel the city doesn't have a singular meaning. The novel accounts for the city as a semantical field, as well as an ideological one. When the city is mentioned, it becomes its own character, with a capital C, as it is almost an agent in some situations. When the City in the novel is presented with agency, the City is the narrator's interpretation of the systems and culture in place in the city. If the City is said to physically move a character in the novel, it is because the narrator is so certain that the way the city culture is set up will lead the character into doing that set thing, so she pre-emptively moves the character themselves in the guise of the City. For instance when it is said that the "City" has grown up alongside its inhabitants "in the beginning when they first arrive, and twenty years later when they and the City have grown up" (*Jazz* 33). Or when it is stated that the City not only arranges itself, but actively thinks about the weekend (50). Or when Violet questions if it was the city itself which aroused jealousy and mourning:

"the City, with its streets all laid out, aroused jealousy too late for anything but foolishness. Or if it was the City that produced a crooked kind of mourning for a rival young enough to be a daughter" (*Jazz*, 111)

On the other hand, the way the word 'city' is used can refer to the way the dominant culture has designed the city to help perpetuate itself. This part of the understanding of the city is not solely an interpretation by the narrator. This design is enforced through the layout of the city itself in the form of what things are advertised where and to whom, as well who is allowed where, as it is "sending secret messages as public signs" (Jazz 64). Finally it may refer to the artificial rhythm established in the city by the dominant culture (Jazz 50) as it sets up the working lives of the people living there, and subsequently both the need and the method for leisure, as when the city "arranges itself for the weekend" (Jazz 50). Essentially the dominant culture has designed the city so that its inhabitants are forced to remain there. It is also a design which tries to pretend it is not one as part of the city's scheme is making the people think they are free, when they are in fact "bound to the track" (Jazz 120).

The narrator assumes that the characters in the novel all participate in this design without fault, which is why the city is set up by the narrator to be seen as "an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack" (Morrison, Foreword 2). It is an arena which produces a laid-out design for the people within it, and when they follow this design they are bound to the track. The City spins them "like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record" (Jazz 120), in a cycle where events are supposed repeat themselves with similar outcomes, as if a mirror tossed their images "back and forth, back and forth, furiously multiplying the time and the place and the circumstance" (Ellison, *Invisible man* 416). Violet and Joe Trace are seemingly caught up in it the minute they enter the "lip of the city" (Jazz 32), as this essentially implies that they, along with many others, are swallowed up by and subsequently trapped in the City. It is almost as if the City is presented to be a sort of alluring Siren, except that the call is replaced by a movement: dancing. Violet and Joe and many others dance on the train heading into the city, and the City "dances" with them (Jazz 32). Music in the novel is used similarly by the City in several instances: it is often made to essentially represent the same goals as the City does. It is used to push people to be more daring and dangerous. It is stated that one of the key things the city does is make people into their "stronger, riskier selves" (Jazz 33), and the music reflects this idea. The music in the novel is referred to as "lowdown" (56), "below the sash" (56), and "belt buckle tunes" (59) and despite primarily being most potent at parties, its real danger lies in the fact that it is everywhere (56), constantly reminding people of the allure of city life. It is never strictly stated that this music is jazz, but given the title of the novel, it is a logical conclusion, and jazz in the novel certainly reflects the "seduction" of the city (Morrison, Foreword 1).

At the parties in the novel, the music functions like the City does. It is said to directly control people, while letting them believe they still have control: "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” (Jazz 65). The music works like it does because the people it is played for at the parties in the novel have some level of anticipation or hope that something exciting will happen, and in turn it pushes them into causing what they are anticipating. It is also said that if they hesitate, the music will either solve, or dissolve any question, thus either the dancers are convinced that “this is the it” they have been looking for, or they are forced to admit that this is the case regardless of whether they believe it or not (Jazz 188). The music is set up to make those who hear it feel more free and daring, and so is the “venue” itself, the party. Parties are set up as arenas where everything holds another level of excitement because they are ephemeral, and so are the experiences within them (Jazz 191). The party emphasizes this and so does the music; it encourages them to “live a little” (Jazz 188) because “Anything that happens after this party breaks up is nothing. Everything is now” (Jazz 191).

The music, the venue and the city are all perfectly set up for the people within it to heed the design that has been laid out by the dominant culture. It is also participating in a party which opens one up to the possibility of being judged for one’s looks, which is why looks are so important for those who participate in city culture and the purchase of commodities. Dorcas is one of these people, but her obsession with looks grows even more intense after she is rejected at a party, because “a badly dressed body is nobody at all” (Jazz 65). Dorcas feels that if she doesn’t have a look, and the right look at that, she may as well not exist. She is rejected because she is seen as not daring enough at sixteen, since her outfit still bears marks of “the hard hand of a warning grown-up” (65). Subsequently Dorcas feels like her body has “decayed on the vine at budding time” and it is unworthy, despite being young and unformed (Jazz 67). Her outfit has been dictated by her aunt Alice Manfred because keeping Dorcas away from “ready-for-bed-in-the-street clothes” (55) is one of the primary ways she could keep Dorcas away from the threats of city life (119). City life to Alice is “white men who leaned out of cars with folded dollar bills” (Jazz 54), women looking like they had just stepped out of a bathtub despite being in the street (Jazz 55), and the swaying of hips both formed and unformed (Jazz 56). And this isn’t too far from the truth either, as life for someone Dorcas’s age in the city is set up to be oriented around the goal of “lying down somewhere in a dimly lit place enclosed in arms” (Jazz 63), which is in fact set up to be the only thing worth doing (63). It doesn’t matter what city life is to Alice, because she doesn’t manage to keep Dorcas away from the allure of the music, the “below the sash” songs which tempt and beg her to “Come and do wrong” (Jazz 67).

It is said in the novel that “if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can’t hurt you” (Jazz 8), but I feel that the actual meaning is or should be, the city won’t feel the need or want to hurt you, because despite following the laid-out design, Dorcas gets hurt at every turn. This is because, despite participating in the city life and city culture, Dorcas is still marked by her outfit, so the dominant culture rejects her. Alice’s attempts to keep Dorcas away from city life just throw her into its deep end instead, as Dorcas goes from being interested in her looks to being obsessed with them and the need to be daring because of her dismissal at the party. Her influence and hold on Dorcas is broken completely, which is symbolized by the yoke she had knotted around Dorcas’s neck, as it “frayed till it split” in the year after her rejection (Jazz 68).

Dorcas is a character in the novel who represents the generation of African Americans who grew up and had their identity formed entirely in and through the city. Her interest in looks and city life starts quite early on, which is also why Alice was powerless to stop its inception. This process begins with the death of Dorcas’s parents, her father being stomped to death, and her mother dying the same day from being burned alive in her house, which was set ablaze. This all calls attention to the ephemerality of life for Dorcas and how small and quick it can be (Jazz 113). She is marked by the experience both symbolically but also literally as she swallows an ignited wooden chip from the burning house (Jazz 60), and the meaning of the chip to her is decided when she sees the parade of men marching down Fifth Avenue almost immediately after. At least that is the way the narrator puts it, but we aren’t told the exact age Dorcas was when the chip took on its more “belt buckle tuned” meaning. We know that while watching the parade, Alice holds Dorcas’s hand so tightly she almost crushes it, and they both hear the “Fifth Avenue drums,” but they get entirely different meanings out of them (Jazz 61). It is stated in the novel that “what was meant came from the drums” (Jazz 53) and “what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them (Jazz 54), but with the starkly different interpretations by Alice and Dorcas, the message is inconclusive. The initial meaning seems to be freedom given the banner with the “promises from the Declaration of Independence” (Jazz 53), which leaves the question, freedom to do what? For Dorcas the Fifth avenue drums lend meaning to the wooden chip she swallowed, and the chip and meaning settles “somewhere below her navel” (Jazz 61). The drums get irrevocably tied to the idea of ephemerality, city culture and belt buckle tunes (Jazz 59). This is all told retrospectively as Dorcas’s memories, so once again it isn’t certain when Dorcas made these connections.

This connection to and the allure of city culture is only strengthened when Dorcas is watched over by the Miller sisters. One of the sisters, Neola, tries to teach Dorcas and the other children about the virtue of goodness and tries to caution them against sin (Jazz 63). However, Neola has been left by her soon-to-be groom recently and the pain she feels is visible through her arm as it is clutched to her chest as if she was holding the broken pieces of her heart in it (Jazz 62). Consequently Dorcas instead becomes enchanted by the idea that there is a “Paradise” which would make someone “go right back after two days” or “make a girl travel four hundred miles to a camptown,” or most importantly, “fold Neola’s arm” (Jazz 63). Thus the intended meaning of Neola’s stories collapses, and instead Neola helps to set Dorcas on her path to explore the sin her stories deplore and to hopefully find “Paradise”. This type of sin may also be why Alice wanted to keep her away from city life, because she has experienced it herself, as her husband cheated on her (Jazz 85). Alice’s obsession with Dorcas’s body may also have stemmed from the obsession her own parents had with Alice’s body as she was told that there was such a thing as “sitting nasty” (legs open) and “the moment she got breasts they were bound and resented” (Jazz 76). What Alice experienced was from an entirely different time and culture, where no one would question if what her parents said was objective.

This past makes the Fifth Avenue drums represent something else for Alice. They represent a “rope cast for rescue,” which gathers not just her and Dorcas, but also Dorcas’s parents, and the men playing the drums (Jazz 58). They symbolize a fellowship, a collective experience where presumably everyone shared the same pain and therefore the same anger (Jazz 60). Alice feels she is part of this fellowship because she knows the same pain, but what this pain is concretely is not told to the reader. It may be how she feels about what her parents did to her or it may be something else. The keyword once again is “may be” because of a lack of concrete knowledge. Dorcas does not have or know about this past or this specific pain. Therefore she finds a different meaning in the drums because she doesn’t have any of the historical context of what the drums are supposed to symbolize, and instead imbues them with the meaning provided to her by city culture. This doesn’t all happen at that very moment, but what does happen is that the drums are established as Dorcas’s underlying beat and they linger underneath every choice she makes afterwards. So when Dorcas does become interested, and soon obsessed, with city culture, that can be attributed to her initial beat. This moment is a key example of what Morrison mentions in the foreword of the novel, that the culture represented “the hand of the past being crushed by the present” (4). Instead of

connecting the memory of the parade and the Fifth Avenue drums to the past they are “supposed” to represent, Dorcas connects them to the city culture and erases any other meaning from the drums to herself. What remains is a constant reminder to Dorcas that “life-below-the-sash” life is all there is (Jazz 60). Thus Alice and Neola both help push Dorcas even further along the path to “Paradise.” This path is already laid out for her and many others in the grooves of the city.

We can conclude that the city did not kill Dorcas’s parents, and it did not force her to hear the Fifth avenue drums, but its culture did decide what the drums would represent for her. The death of her parents leaves Dorcas with an “inside nothing” (Jazz 37), a pulsating, stinging pain, because she still remembers her parents and the last slap she got from her mother, precisely because it was the last (Jazz 38). The music’s constant presence in the city works as a constant reminder of this pain which set her on a path towards finding anything to fill the inside nothing. She eventually realizes that one of the ways she can do this is by finding a man to be with. To get a man, she learns from her rejection at sixteen that she needs to look a certain way. Therefore she turns to commodities like certain types of makeup and the “ready-for-bed-in-the-street clothes.” The arena for the party and the rules that dictate if she is “worthy” or not are all decided by the city culture. What she needs to be worthy is also provided to her by the city. However, what is not provided to her or others by the city is other solutions that would perhaps allow someone to evolve past the need for city culture: “everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks)” (Jazz 10). The only places that are immediately available are either places that sell commodities, ship commodities, or tell you about commodities. This is why there is said to be no such thing as “midlife” in the novel: young people like Dorcas get taken in by the allure and need of the city life early (Jazz 11).

When she does find a man in the form of Joe Trace, commodities have been her way to complete herself for so long that they have grown into an obsession. Given the nature of city culture, this feeling of completion is always temporary because whatever is needed to be a “well dressed” body changes constantly. Subsequently, because of her need to be new all the time, Dorcas also eventually finds her relationship with Joe not to be as exciting and giving anymore. She doesn’t break up with him because of something he did do, but because of what he didn’t. She doesn’t feel as challenged in the relationship as she needs to be given her upbringing in the city, and she feels like Joe doesn’t put any value in the one thing Dorcas is

obsessed with, her looks (Jazz 190). The fact that he doesn't really care how she looks but loves her anyway makes Dorcas feel like she doesn't have a "look" that matters, and consequently she feels like she doesn't have a personality either. With her other boyfriend Acton, she feels like her looks are valued precisely because of what Acton says he does not like about them. She would seemingly rather have faults that can be fixed than no faults at all (Jazz 190).

Thus we have to return to the idea of the city's design. It was said that if you heeded the design the city couldn't, or wouldn't, want to hurt you. In fact it is stated that when someone is trying to "do the thing worth doing," the City cooperates. In such cases it would "get down" for you "smoothing its sidewalks," "correcting its curbstones" (Jazz 63), and it does do these things to get Dorcas and others to their desired parties. Dorcas's death is not a part of the city's design, but the design is partly at fault. The city is set up to be a place which makes her and people around her age become increasingly daring in their need to be their stronger, riskier selves and it doesn't provide a way for them to be or do anything else (Jazz 33). This subsequently leads to her need to push others into doing something dangerous, and this part of her personality may not entirely be the fault of the city, but the city sets her on the initial path. This is what she does with Joe and would have seemingly inevitably done with Acton if she had been alive long enough (Jazz 205). Dorcas is one of the characters in the novel whose fate we know, and we are provided the elements of her story to see how she came to meet this fate.

However, what is not set up by the city is Joe killing her for it. The narrator of the novel may not agree. After all she states that while Joe hunts Dorcas, the city "does not object or interfere" (Jazz 180), and she says that the train stops at a precise point "As though it just remembered that this was the stop where Joe needs to get off if he is going to find her" (Jazz 181). If the city truly was an independent entity in the novel, which it is not, it wouldn't have interfered because it didn't know what Joe was doing or intending to do, because it doesn't know his past. Even if it did know his past, his past would tell it that when he hunted his mother, he didn't kill her. (179) This is what the Narrator knows as well. Joe is said to be bound to the track by the city just like Dorcas, but he was mostly formed and moulded outside of the city, and entered the city with all his past "selves" as still part of him. What makes him kill Dorcas is not the design of the city. He may be following a path laid out for him, but he is not bound to it.

Joe, like Dorcas, has an element of the past physically embedded in him in the form of a speck of glass in his foot, which he got in the South during what he calls his “first change” (Jazz 125). He tells Dorcas that he has felt new seven times in his life before he met her, and each time was due to some life-changing event or decision, sometimes entirely out of his hands. The aforementioned first time was choosing to identify himself as Trace rather than Williams (Jazz 123). The second time was when he, in his own words was “trained to be a man” (125) and learned to be a hunter (126). The third time was when he had to run away from the place he called home, as it burned down (126). The fourth time was when he bought a piece of land of his own only to be run off almost immediately afterwards and subsequently left the South (Jazz 126-27). At some point during their initial stay in the North, Joe changed for the fifth time. The cause isn’t entirely clear, but it has to do with Joe and Violet’s move uptown (Jazz 127). His sixth change comes when he is almost killed from being hit in the head with a pipe by white men during what was presumably a race riot (Jazz 128), and his seventh and presumably final change comes when he walks with the three six nine (Jazz 129). In this way, in his own words he has been a “new negro all his life” (Jazz 129). However, it seems like his actual final change is precisely the killing of Dorcas. Prior to this final change, he does become blind in a way, which reflects his own words that “snakes go blind for a while before they shed skin for the last time” (Jazz 129). He goes out to hunt her, and despite telling himself what he was told by Hunter’s hunter, that “she ain’t prey. You got to know the difference” (Jazz 175), he is armed (Jazz 180). At some point he becomes blind to what Dorcas is and he mistakes her footprints for hoof prints, which makes “Something else take over” (130). He doesn’t even have to think, the track speaks to him and moves him all on its own (130). This still doesn’t explain why he shoots Dorcas. He hunted his mother the same way and he was armed then too, so something else taking over shouldn’t have automatically meant that he would kill her.

One of the reasons we are provided is that Joe feels that he has made himself new too many times. Like some other African Americans in the city, he has enough elements of a personality to fill several individuals, and one of these individuals takes over at a crucial moment (Ellison, Working notes 343). What he lacked in life was a mother, and anyone he ends up loving in his life ends up as a substitute for either her (Jazz 97) or the inside nothing that he is burdened with because of her (Jazz 37). Once Joe realizes who his mother might be, all he craves in life is confirmation that she is his mother, or not, so he would at least be filled with just shame instead of just nothing: “say some kind of yes, even if it was a no, so he

would know” (Jazz 37). Since he never gets this confirmation, it becomes the inside nothing, and both Dorcas and Violet serve as substitutes for it, ways to fill the inside nothing (Jazz 38). This pursuit of a substitute for his mother was seemingly what makes him keep changing. Besides his own feeling of change, there is also the identity others see in him. When Violet looks at him, she sees the Joe Trace she met in Virginia (Jazz 96), and she sees past any public façade he puts on trying to be a city man. When others, like the women at Alice Manfred’s house, look at him, or rather hear him, they only hear his southern self as well, as his voice has a pitch “heard only when they visited stubborn old folks who would not budge from their front yards” (Jazz 71). This goes to show that, even throughout his 7 changes, he doesn’t leave any part of himself completely behind.

The city did not set Joe up to hunt Dorcas, just like it did not set up his need for a substitute for his mother. It just set up Dorcas as the substitute and led Dorcas into pushing him too far. It also didn’t set up Joe’s need for a different substitute than Violet which made him end up with Dorcas in the first place. It was Violet’s silence and coldness which made Joe feel the need to be with someone else, as her silence eventually both annoyed and depressed him (Jazz 24). This then leaves the question as to what caused her eventual silence, and this is another question which the reader does not get a conclusive answer to. It is stated that she turns silent to avoid letting a “renegade tongue” say things for her (24). Her progression towards silence initially starts with her responding with “uh” and “have mercy” in conversations until she eventually says nothing at all (24). This renegade tongue is what soon develops into a whole separate self. Violet starts to feel like someone else was inhabiting her body, another Violet. She sees “with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes” (Jazz 22) in which something is being done, but she does not see herself doing these things (22). This other Violet wouldn’t just do things Violet would not do, but it would also see the world differently: “where she saw a lonesome chair left like an orphan in a park strip facing the river that other Violet saw how the ice skim gave the railing’s black poles a weaponry glint” (Jazz 89). As readers, we only manage to differentiate between them because one is referred to as “*that* violet” (Jazz 89), and *that* violet is the violent, hardened southern one because *that* Violet knows where the knife is (Jazz 90). *That* Violet is said to be who Violet was before she moved to the city, before living in the city softened her arms and fingers (Jazz 92). As previously discussed, moving into the city was like moving onto a new plane of consciousness for African Americans, and after staying in the city for 20 years, Violet’s distance from the South, and also in a way from Joe,

may have caused a whole separate self to develop. It is easier to differentiate between them once one is dubbed “Violent” after what she does at Dorcas’s funeral (Jazz 75).

The renegade tongue and subsequent “birth” of Violent could also have something to do with Violet’s sudden “mother hunger” (Jazz 108), as she initially didn’t actually want children because of what happened to her mother, Rose Dear. Her mother committed suicide, throwing herself down a well (Jazz 99), which left Violet with a similar inside nothing to Dorcas and Joe. However, the incident also left Violet with the decision to never have children, which in turn leaves her without a substitute for the mother she lost (Jazz 102). She finds a substitute for her mother when she meets Joe: “Never again would she wake struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small” (Jazz 104). What she hoped would happen being with Joe was that she would think less about that memory and that image. Like Violet, Joe didn’t want kids either, so even when Violet suffered several miscarriages, it was initially not seen as a loss by either of them (Jazz 107).

However, moving into the city with Joe brings the mother hunger back. It came back so suddenly and aggressively that it “hit her like a hammer, Knocked her down and out” (Jazz 108). It may have been the sheer force that her mother hunger hits her with that gives Violet her renegade tongue. She starts to stare at infants and looks at toys she could buy a child for Christmas, and she even buys herself a present (108), which is revealed to be a doll later on (Jazz 129). Then there is the incident where she is accused of stealing a baby (Jazz 20), and it isn’t entirely clear if she held the baby or the doll in her arms first, but one can assume it was the baby because it leads to her needing to hold something in her arms. While she holds the baby she feels like a “skipping, running light travelled her veins” (Jazz 22), a “brightness that could be carried in her arms” (22), a brightness that could maybe finally truly fill the inside nothing left behind by Rose Dear and the well she fell into (22). A baby would be more than just a substitute, as it would actually be an adequate replacement. In the novel, each time a substitute is mentioned, it is established that it refers to a temporary, necessarily inadequate placeholder for the ideal solution, as shown to us by how all the substitutes in the novel end up being seen as inadequate. Thus a baby wouldn’t just be a substitute. The doll might be what makes Joe realize that he is a substitute for Violet just like Violet is for him. Joe had been a substitute to Violet, but what would truly help her may have been a child. A child may also have filled the other inside nothing Violet had, which Joe also served as a substitute for, Golden Gray.

Her grandmother True Belle had told her stories about Golden Gray and she fell in love with the image of him that was produced by True Belle's Baltimore stories (17). Golden Gray in turn also had a similar need for a substitute for someone. We aren't told Golden Gray's whole story, but we know that he is the son of Henry LesTroy and Vera Louise Gray and due to his father's skin color he is half black, half white. His father, Henry LesTroy is the man who would become known as Hunters hunter (*Jazz* 168), or simply Hunter, and is the man who made Joe Trace a "man". Golden Gray grew up mostly not knowing who his father was and was instead raised by Vera Louise and her servant, True Belle, Violets grandmother. When Golden Gray realized who his father was, and that he was black, he developed a hatred for him, and those that share his skin color (143). However this soon turned into just hatred of the skin color, because of Golden Gray's own struggle of identity and subsequent self-loathing. The fact that his father is black, meant that Golden Gray was black. He has to confront his feelings about his blackness when he comes across "Wild", the woman who lives in the woods who is presumably Joe's mother (*Jazz* 175). He confronts the fact that, despite his horse being black, his feelings towards it are of security and affection, rather than nausea which is what his feelings are towards the similarly black woman, Wild. (144). Because of this he is afraid to actually help Wild since he is afraid to discover something more about himself, something that would "penetrate" him (144). He is afraid to not just discover, but also simultaneously accept his blackness.

If he does accept that he is black, he would no longer hate his father for being the same, but instead he would hate him for not being there and this makes him feel a phantom pain, the pain of his father's absence in his life. Unlike before he feels like something has been taken away from him and he compares it to losing an arm "Before, I thought everybody was one-armed, like me. Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered, the sliced flesh and the tubes of blood cut through, shocking the bloodrun and disturbing the nerves. They dangle and writhe." (*Jazz* 158). This then fills him with an inside nothing just like Joe and Dorcas, he suddenly has something he needs a substitute for. However he doesn't initially want to feel whole again, he wants to essentially prod the wound to "freshen the pain" so he can find purpose for it (158). He doesn't need his father anymore, but his father's absence will remain a singing pain unless he can confront him "I will tell him about the missing part of me and listen for his crying shame. I will exchange then; let him have mine and take his as my own and we will both be free, arm-tangled and whole" (159). However in finally confronting his father he doesn't get much shame from him, because he essentially states he didn't know

Golden Gray existed and that if Golden Gray wants to be his son, he can be, but he has to act like it because “A son ain’t what a woman say. A son is what a man do.” (172). He also states to Golden Gray that, if he does want to be his son, he has to choose if he wants to be white or black, and if he chooses black, he also has to act like it (173). It isn’t stated directly what Golden Gray chooses, but he seems to end up with joining Wild in the wilderness, “To see the two of them together was a regular jolt: the young man’s head of yellow hair long as a dogs tail next to her skein of black wool” (167). So in the end Golden Gray does get a working substitute for his inside nothing, unlike Joe and Dorcas. This substitute is what created the initial inside nothing for Joe in the first place, his supposed mother.

The image of Golden Gray, despite her never actually seeing him, stayed with Violet pretty much her whole life, and any other men in her life were initially substitutes (Jazz 97). The main characters of the novel, Dorcas, Joe, and Violet are all seeking a substitute for some inside nothing, and each of these characters’ inside nothing was established outside of the city. What the city is guilty of in the novel is providing temporary, inadequate substitutes, and also deeming certain substitutes inadequate. It seems to be that going to the city is what made Violet realize that what she actually needs is not Joe, just as Joe’s many changes, some prompted by the city, eventually makes him realize that what he actually needs is not Violet, either. They are both substitutes. Dorcas is a substitute not just for Joe’s mother, but also for Violet, since Violet wasn’t helping fill his inside nothing anymore, and Joe in turn is a substitute for Dorcas’s inside nothing as well. However Golden Gray’s journey towards understanding himself did not take place in the city, thus the city was not a necessarily essential component to the characters reaching their understanding of themselves, although it certainly played a part. This also reflects the ambivalent nature of the city.

What finally makes Joe and Violet see each other as “adequate” substitutes towards the novel’s end is the aftermath of the death of Dorcas, which, as already mentioned, was not entirely what the city intended. Thus the rest of the narrative afterwards is out of the city’s hands. In the aftermath of Dorcas’s death, Violet somehow befriends Dorcas’s aunt, Alice. They have multiple talks and discussions, but the most important one is the one which truly makes Violet realize her identity crisis as she wonders “who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin” (Jazz 89). When she is talking about what Violet did at Dorcas’s funeral, she comes to realize that her current self is not the kind to pick up a knife, but the Violet she was in the South may have done so to keep anyone from stealing “her” Joe Trace from her (96). Thus she comes to realize that just as with her mother hunger, *that* Violet

had hit her liker a hammer upon its return, becoming a whole separate self instead of just a renegade tongue. Subsequently she sees that what these things have in common is that she has tried to suppress them, and the only way to assemble these fragments of herself into a whole self again is to not suppress them. To kill Violent, Violet has to accept that this separate self isn't separate, it is suppressed parts of her personality, it is her (Jazz 95). Once she has come to terms with her inner turmoil, she can finally deal with her life and realize why she needed Joe in the first place. This process is also aided by what Alice tells her: "You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it." (112) she essentially tells her that, even if Joe does cheat on her again, he is still the only substitute that will keep Violet whole, so if there is any part of Joe she still loves, she should focus on loving it. If the death of Dorcas proves anything to her, it is indeed that life can be small and quick. Violet probably won't find anyone to fill her inside nothing like Joe does, so it is worth keeping him around because he is all she has (Jazz 113). It seems like something as simple as loving Joe again makes Joe love Violet again, if he ever stopped loving her. It makes him realize that Dorcas had been a substitute for Violet, and ironically Violet loving him again makes her the substitute to fill the inside nothing left behind by Dorcas's death. In the end of the narrative, Joe and Violet are both made whole, which is why the presence of another girl in their life doesn't lead the girl to the same fate as Dorcas. This is because it wasn't just jealousy which lead to the death of Dorcas, it was that everyone involved had not yet discovered what the singing pain inside of them was, the arm which had been cut off (Jazz 158). They initially didn't do what Golden Gray did, which was to prod the wound so they can locate the source of the pain and then find out what it was for (Jazz 158). In discovering what caused their inside nothing, they can work on how to actually fix it: "Perhaps then the arm will no longer be a phantom, but will takes its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade. Amen" (Jazz 159).

The characters in the novel were searching for the same thing the narrator was searching for, something which is missing, "something rogue" (Jazz 228). And that something is knowledge. The parts of the narrative that the narrator assumed would happen or what she assumed the city would do is essentially substitutes for the knowledge of the characters which she is lacking. The narrator thought that what is going on with Felice, Violet and Joe will end up with someone getting shot again, because they are supposed to be bound to the track. It is not just that they are literally bound to a track, but that the events they go through perfectly set them up for reaching the same conclusion and all evidence points towards someone being

shot. Therefore the “City” would kill someone again. But that is because the evidence the narrator has is just what she has observed, she doesn’t know anything about the inner lives of the characters. She can assume, and sometimes assume right, but she shouldn’t mistake sight for knowledge. Doing so is ignoring the sheer complexity of African Americans:

“beneath the garb of the black laborer, the black cook, and the black elevator operator lies an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space.” (Wright, voices 11)

Subsequently this is the same message the reader is supposed to be left with. The point with the structure of the novel, the meaning Toni Morrison was trying to convey through its structure, is the need for knowledge. Knowledge which can sharpen the moral imagination (Morrison, *Blood IX*), knowledge of the presence of invisible ink and the universe it is describing (Morrison, *Blood IX*). Knowledge which tells the reader that when thinking about how African Americans dealt with living in the city, there is no one answer, because we are dealing with individuals. Arguing that there is a solution which would appease all African Americans is not seeing them as individuals, and it is dangerously close to race essentializing (Baker 5). They are Individuals who are original, complicated, and changeable, but most of all complicated because they are human. That was the initial fight for most African Americans, to be seen as human, and humans must be viewed as individuals if one wishes to have any actual understanding of them. This of course postulates that a person wants to be seen as an individual. Some people prefer staying in a group and that is their prerogative.

4 Chapter 3: Individuality and the city in *Invisible Man*

In this chapter i aim to explore how Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible man* underscores the need for African Americans to assert themselves as individuals in the North. What is at stake for African Americans in the city if they do not assert themselves is the loss of their individuality. We see that the city has various means to rob African Americans of their individuality in the novel, principally in the form of the Brotherhood. The presence of these elements in the novel serve to highlight the importance of the narrator’s self-assertion and subsequently also the

importance of the self-assertion of African Americans in the North as a whole. In the novel the narrator achieves his assertion of self through discovering his own invisibility (*Invisible man* 15). The fact that we are told that the narrator does assert himself as an individual in the novels prologue sets up the rest of the novel to demonstrate to the reader what was at stake until the narrator discovers his invisibility, thus further highlighting the importance of this discovery and the events which lead to it. However a lot of the narrator's process of discovery happens in the city, thus also highlighting the ambivalent nature of the city and its culture in the novel and as a whole. Through looking at what I hold to be key events in the novels narrative I hope to further highlight the importance of this discovery and also the ambivalent nature of the city in the novel. These events are the battle royale which the narrator is made to take part in in the South and the speech he holds afterwards, his brief time working at the Liberty Paints factory in the North and finally the eviction of an old couple which he witnesses. First and foremost, before looking at these events we have to look at the role the city plays in the novel and subsequently what role it plays in the narrator's journey:

“In relation to their Southern background, the cultural history of Negroes in the North reads like the legend of some tragic people out of mythology, a people which aspired to escape from its own unhappy homeland to the apparent peace of a distant mountain; but which, in migrating, made some fatal error of judgement and fell into a great chasm of maze-like passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but end ever against a wall. “

(Ellison, “Harlem is Nowhere” 323)

The North, a word now apparently forever synonymous with the city held a great many promises for African Americans when they migrated there from the South en masse. The North and in turn the city became synonymous with a dream like hope that the conditions which were imposed on them in the South were not universal, that they would get jobs and live in homes while still keeping their dignity (Jones 96). This hope was further bolstered by the subsequent success stories of African Americans who had made the journey North. The people in the South could identify themselves “ritually” with these stories and their belief in these stories in turn kept their hope alive (Ellison, Harlem 324). However these stories also made the North synonymous with the idea that this success was guaranteed as that was all African Americans in the South would hear about. If someone did not make it in the city, they may have felt that it was their own fault, not the city's and in turn their shame would keep them from tainting the image people in the South had of the North. Thus the belief that the

North was some sort of mythical promise land remained untainted for a considerable time (Jones 95).

This is because, as presented in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, it is only "the known, the seen, the heard" which end up as part of recorded history (439). Despite all things being recorded in some shape or form, it is another matter what actually "makes history" i.e. is seen as fact (439). An individual can record the events of their own lives, including their inner life or the lives of others through diaries or novels, but it is ultimately someone else who decides if these recordings are made into public truth (Dubey 131). When it comes to the North, this is decided by the dominant culture, thus this culture can decide whether or not the individual is made a part of history as their true, individual self, or just an abstraction. The dominant culture can also decide to only bestow visibility on events which support their idea of reality (131), and what is left out is ultimately "outside the realm of history" (*Invisible Man* 441). In this fashion the dominant culture can make but also erase history, by simply never acknowledging a specific piece of recorded history's existence. Individuals can also erase history, as far as they can decide to simply not attempt to record their life if it does not benefit them, for instance if they view themselves as a failure and would rather recede into a realm of anonymity. Thus the stories of those who did not achieve success in the North would not be able to reach the South unless an individual travelled there with their heavy burden of defeat in tow.

However the immediate problem which arises for and against those who do not wish to make history is that someone else may perceive and interpret their life for them. It is likely that someone attempting to interpret someone's experience of a given thing, without knowing that person past what they can see will inevitably be in error (Ellison, *Indivisible* 382). The stories which were spread across the country of the success of African Americans in the North were not focused on the individuals who achieved said success, the individual was in fact often reduced to merely a symbol of their own achievement. What they sacrificed or what changes they went through on their path to achieving this success rarely became known, as only the end result mattered. For instance, going North was not as simple for African Americans as simply travelling to the North, because it also inevitably involved having to move onto a whole new plane of consciousness (Wright, 99). In the city they were made aware that there was indeed a possibility of a life outside of the physical and mental confines of the South (*Invisible Man* 159). The most immediate example of this is the indifferent attitude which African Americans were met with by white citizens in the city (Wright, 99). In *Invisible Man*

just the fact that someone could simply have a neutral attitude towards an African American individual, or even go as far as to be polite was so surreal to the narrator of the novel that he is startled (168). Nevertheless the narrator still feels in that moment that, despite their politeness, they do not see him, they perhaps did not even see a person, he might as well have been “Jack the Bear” and they would still have apologized to him if he just minded his business (168). This particular psychosomatic aspect of moving to the city was not always recorded (Ellison, *Blues* 138).

Additionally the city they were entering into was also crowded with symbols. The idea of reality which the dominant culture has decided upon is perpetuated in the layout of the city itself as the city is said to be structured as a “Baudelairean forest of symbols” (Berman 289). The symbols in question are all symbols which represent an ideal world in the eyes of the dominant culture and this ideal world was established without the presence of African Americans. Thus African Americans are once again bombarded with words, images and artefacts of a world which is alien to them (Baker 8). Furthermore these symbols imply that, for African Americans to fit in they need to be and act as “white” as possible. This is evidenced in the novel by the advertisement which the narrator happens upon which urges African Americans to give themselves “whiter complexion” so they can be “outstanding” in their social set (*Invisible Man* 262). This immediately creates a dilemma for many African Americans entering the city. On one hand they wish to leave the South behind due to the “incredible fabric of guilt and servitude” which the South represents to them (Jones 105). On the other the South was still their home (105), their sense of self was created and moulded by the South, and it was moulded with the confines of the South in mind (Ellison, *Harlem* 323). In order to fit into the culture which was dominant in the North, they would have to sacrifice this Southern self, in turn making the city the perpetrator in this loss. Thus the price of participating in the dominant culture in the city for African Americans, is their “self”. This may have seemed like a small sacrifice to some since they didn’t have much room to express and assert themselves in the South to begin with. Furthermore they make themselves a part of a collective identity by making themselves citified which removes the immediate need to assert themselves as an individual. When one is participating in a culture, life becomes deceptively simple as you just have to decide to accept the accepted attitudes (*Invisible Man* 267).

There were many ways to make oneself a part of a collective identity in the North. For instance there was working in industry, which was one of the main ways African American’s

could make a living in the North regardless (Wright, *Voices* 117). Doing industry work also allowed African Americans to further assert their “American” self as it was in industry they would encounter the “world-wide forces” which shape and mold the life of citizens in the North (117). In a way African American workers gained the same type of “international sense” of the world as those African American’s who had fought in the war (Jones 118). The other type of work typically available to them wasn’t much different from what they often did in the South, which was working as domestics (Wright, *Voices* 117). However it didn’t matter which type of job they had because once they finished working they went home to participate in a different culture than the one which was dominant in the city. Not necessarily because they wanted to, but because they were kept from participating in parts of the culture because of discrimination; “For people who want to know why Blacks did not melt in the melting pot, it was against the law!” (Baraka, 140).

Coupled with the international sense they had gained through their work, this discrimination inevitably caused some inner turmoil. African American workers felt like they didn’t have a place in the city and in its culture, but they also felt like the culture from the South had limitations which they didn’t want to impose upon themselves now that they knew that those limitations were not universal. Thus they felt like their personality was “out of key” (Ellison, *Harlem*, 325), not just with the city, but with the world around them. An African American individual who is not able to participate in the dominant culture in the North is never allowed to feel complete and instead they were left fragmented, with enough personalities to fill several individuals (Ellison, *Working notes* 343). However unlike the South, the provincial group mentality which they used to depend on as a crutch in these situations had been erased for many (Jones 97). In the South there was a uniformity in the form of a common psychological development; they had all shared the same language, territory, and economic life manifest as a common culture (Baraka 142). This was not automatically carried over when moving North. Some of the African Americans who had arrived in the city first had immediately wanted to discard this cultural heritage, but fresh arrivals from the South kept it alive which inevitably lead to a clear split between citified African Americans and the fresh immigrants from the South (Jones 108). This split eventually grew into a hostile relationship between the two as citified African Americans felt that some of the new arrivals refused to adapt to the culture of the city, which in turn made the citified African Americans look bad. With a new generation this split became even more prevalent as there were now African

Americans who had grown up in the city and to them the culture which the migrants brought with them was just as alien as the culture in the city was to those migrating (Jones 109).

This hostile attitude towards Southern African Americans is made exceptionally clear in *Invisible Man*. Firstly it is shown through the narrator himself as he, in his attempt to be citified yells at someone to “get rid of your cotton patch ways! Act civilized!” (*Invisible Man* 320). However since he is not yet completely familiar with the culture in the city, it is clear to someone else that he must be a newcomer from the South, and they call him out on it when he makes the mistake of trying to throw his trash in their bin (328). They tell the narrator that they do not want “field niggers” like him ruining things (328). Furthermore, when the narrator then tries to just leave his trash on the ground he is called out by someone else and is subsequently called a “young New York Negro” which has connotations all of its own (330). Thus the city in *Invisible Man* serves as an arena which urges its residents to not just leave their past behind, but to view their past as hostile, conflicting idea which they should abhor.

However its purpose becomes ambivalent as it is also the arena for all the elements of the South the narrator encounters. These elements are mostly positive and helps set the narrator on the path to discover that he needs to keep his part as part of him. For instance, the first encounter he has with another African American in the city is a man pushing a cart full of blueprints and singing a blues, Peter Wheatstraw (172). The narrator initially felt embarrassed for the man and also felt the man was embarrassing him (174) but he also finds that he identifies himself with him in a way, because there was something strangely familiar and comforting about him. The blues he was singing makes the narrator homesick, and he feels like he was walked with someone like this man “through other mornings, in other places” (*Invisible Man* 175), essentially he represents the type of African American man that the narrator might have known in the South. However the narrator also misjudges him, as he holds quite a lot of wisdom. He underlines the cities need to inherently be new all the time with the amount of unused blueprints he has in his cart, some of which are for buildings and houses (175). Subsequently the narrator reveals his current naivete in this moment as he states that “You have to stick to the plan” (175), which Wheatstraw then reacts negatively to stating that the narrator must be young to think such a thing (175). I would say that his in turn calls out the people who blindly accepts the accepted attitudes in the city in a way and subsequently reveals that the narrator is going to be one of these people.

The second positive encounter the narrator has with an African American person in the North is after he has attempted to work in industry, when he meets Mary. When the narrator is staying with Mary, he feels an “almost forgotten relief” (*Invisible Man* 253). Just looking at her makes him consider the road that led him here where he is and he views it in a negative light (255). Mary is a figure who represents the collectivistic attitude which was typically found in Southern African Americans. She doesn’t need some larger plan for the narrator to want to take care of him, she just simply states that “Everybody has to be trouble to somebody” (254). She has this attitude despite living in the city for a longer duration, which proves that one doesn’t necessarily have to leave this part of oneself behind when moving into the city. She feels like a lot of other African Americans that have come to the North have forgotten what they fought for in the South, they just found a place for themselves and left the rest behind (255). When she says to the narrator that “I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me” (255), she is essentially saying that she has not allowed herself to become citified, and she views becoming citified as being corrupted by the city. Mary also represents the more collectivistic attitude of African Americans with how she hopes someone can use their individual voice to “move us all on up a little higher” (255). She hopes that those individuals who “knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns” (255) can fight for African Americans in the North just like they had all fought for each other in the South. What she doesn’t know at this point is that this is essentially calling out the narrator, as his whole reason for coming North was to advance his individual goals. It is essentially just bad luck that has kept him from this initial goal. He was going to “slough off” his southern ways of speech and conduct and reinvent himself in the North (*Invisible Man* 164). However, the narrator does feel called out, and this subsequently leads to another conflict within himself.

This conflict plays a part in the narrator’s discovery of The Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is an organization in the novel which could be said to be an interpretation and subsequent stand in for the Communist party (J. Maxwell 4). Historically, many African Americans joined the Communist party, in a way joining a political organization was another way to find a collective identity in the city (J. Maxwell 1). However, The Brotherhood is an entity in the novel which is the main perpetrator in the erasure of individuals, thus it is essentially just an extension of what the city does. The Brotherhood wishes to impose a new image of an ideal world onto the citizens in the North, in the guise of having the “peoples” interests in mind. The messianic image of the Brotherhood is gradually torn apart as the narrative in the novel progresses and the narrator slowly but surely discovers the “harsh red rawness” hiding

underneath (*Invisible Man* 507). They ultimately just need the people as pawns which can be sacrificed in order to build a “world of brotherhood” (391), a world where society is ordered by “scientific” “objectivity” (505). The Brotherhood’s method of rule would be scientific only as far as it being decided by self-declared “scientists” (306) and objective as far as the Brotherhood believing that their ideas are objectively superior to the “infantile” notions of the people (472).

The Brotherhoods willingness to sacrifice individuals is established quite early on in the narrative, with the narrator’s initial meeting with Jack, after he has witnessed an eviction. While the narrator was clearly driven by his connection with the old couple he sees evicted, he is immediately told that individuals don’t matter, not in the larger scheme of things (*Invisible Man* 291). What Jack was actually saying in this moment was that these specific individuals are not useful to the vision of the world that he and the Brotherhood wishes to push forward. This is because “agrarian types” (290) like the old couple have no need for organizations like the Brotherhood, since they have either found support for their identity in being citified, like the old couple, or they have kept the collectivistic attitude from the South alive in themselves, like Mary. Thus when Jack says that history has passed the old couple by, he is actually saying that they are not useful to the vision of the world that he and the Brotherhood wishes to push forward and instead they are like “dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit (291). The eviction of the old couple, and people like them is “necessary” for the “master plan” (504).

However the narrator is seen as a possibly very useful resource to the Brotherhood. People like the narrator i.e. new young arrivals from the South who show clear indignation and also haven’t found their purpose in the city yet have a need for the Brotherhood (*Invisible Man* 293). The narrators own ambition is used to lure him into the Brotherhood’s plans as they tempt him with the idea of becoming something like a new Booker T. Washington under their employ (305). However to achieve this goal he needs to abandon his agrarian himself and embrace the self which the Brotherhoods creates for him. What the narrator was told by Emerson earlier in the narrative rings consistently true “The only trouble with ambition is that it sometimes blinds one to realities...” (184). The narrator’s eagerness to become a Booker T. Washington type figure blinds him from the true intentions of the Brotherhood and how much of himself he has to sacrifice. The Brotherhoods subterfuge and hypocrisy is already clear as day in the narrators initial meeting with them as despite Jack getting annoyed at the narrator for “his” “people” always talking in terms of race when they last met, the first thing which is

brought up when he meets the group is the narrator's race. A member questions if the narrator qualifies as "black enough" to visibly represent his race (303), which should have immediately made it clear to the narrator that they want him as a resource; a "black amorphous thing", not a man (95). This should have been made even clearer to the narrator when he is told to put aside his past and his current knowledge and instead only read books which the Brotherhood provides for him (305). He is also given a brotherhood name, although we never learn it (309). Essentially what will be left of the narrator, as an individual, is just his skin, the rest of him will be someone else, someone entirely new and it is this person who is becoming part of history (380). It is the intention of the Brotherhood to make the narrator's new name synonymous with the Brotherhood, so while he feels he is making a name for himself, he is really making a name for the Brotherhood (380). The reason the narrator is told to put aside his past is in order for the Brotherhood to make sure that the narrator does not make a name for himself.

The Brotherhood's intention is made clear during the narrator's first speech as an orator under their employ as when the narrator forgets the wording of the pamphlets he was given about what his speech should be about, he has to use an element of his past to hold his speech (342). Initially this only comes through in the technique he uses to present the message of the pamphlets, the "old down-to-earth" (342) approach, and the Brotherhood doesn't mind him using this aspect of the past because it is not an aspect solely connected to the narrator as an individual. It is when the narrator starts to insert himself into the meaning of what is being said that Jack stops him, because they don't want him to establish himself as anything but a member of the Brotherhood (345). The narrator is urged to not end his usefulness before he has begun, (345) and it is in this moment that it should be clear as day to the narrator that the Brotherhood only wants the narrator for his skin and voice and not his self. The Brotherhood will let the narrator use pieces of his past as long as it is in the form of abstractions, techniques and ideas which can help him sway the narrator's people in the Brotherhood's favour, nothing more. The narrator is supposed to make himself a symbol which the Brotherhood can use to gain support from the narrator's people, and he is a symbol which can be torn down further down the road to incite the people he has gathered. This plan is not even concealed in subterfuge, it is said outright during his initial meeting with the Brotherhood that "their leaders are made, not born. Then they are destroyed" (*Invisible Man* 302). The narrator is being set up as a symbol to later be destroyed, so they can use his destruction to further bolster their own goals. He is pushed forward as a new Booker T. Washington figure whose

success the people can identify with ritually (305), so that when he is torn down, his death is felt by the people just like a lynching (Bland) (qtd. in Ellison, *Blues* 134). Despite something like a hanging clearly bringing visibility to his body, it would not bring any visibility to the individual whom the body once belonged to. The Brotherhood do not want his death for him, he is not being sacrificed because he did something wrong, he is sacrificed because it is “necessary” for the “master plan” (*Invisible Man* 504). The narrator was simply one of several investments into this master plan. He is also made a literal investment for the Brotherhood through them paying him for his work and buying him an apartment while under their employ (309).

Ultimately we know that the narrator is not sacrificed, and he realizes his role in the narrative in retrospect. However the Brotherhood does seemingly succeed in one aspect. We never learn the narrator’s name, not his Brotherhood name nor his actual one. He is never actually made known to the reader as a named individual. Thus his story in a sense could be the story of any African American who went to the city. The absence of the narrator’s name even further underscores the importance of self-assertion for African Americans. However regardless of if he made history or not, the narrator did discover who he is and in turn his purpose in the world and that was always his ultimate goal. The principal mistake which the narrator kept making was that he kept asking everyone but himself who he is (*Invisible man*, 15). The words of the letter which Bledsoe gives the narrator to hand out to potential employer’s actually works in a premonitory fashion for the whole narrative to follow in this regard: “I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond that hopeful traveler” (191). The narrator’s journey consists of constantly seeking his purpose, and the signs along the way promise him that he is on the right path, Canaan is within reach, until it recedes, and it is revealed his journey will be longer still (DuBois, *Souls* 367). However, like the “child of Emancipation” in DuBois’ writing, the narrator must realize that it is not the destination, which is important, it is the journey because it gives “leisure for reflection and self-examination” (*Souls* 368). Precisely, it is in “those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, --darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission.” (*Souls* 368), likewise the narrator must go through the events of the novel to find himself, and in turn his purpose.

The fundamental element of this discovery is the narrator realizing that he has been an invisible man through the whole narrative. As previously mentioned, the narrators condition

of invisibility is presented in the novel's prologue, but the events of the prologue take place after the main narrative; "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" (*Invisible Man*, Prologue 6). The narrator states that "I am an invisible man," (3), the key facet of this condition is also immediately added: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." (3). Thus immediately invisibility is established as a condition which is imposed upon another by an observer, this is subsequently further elaborated: "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). A person is not invisible in Ellison's terms because they cannot be seen, but because someone refuses to see them, or even because someone's perception of the world refuses to let the person see them. I interpret seeing to mean actually seeing someone's true "self" not the self-projected onto them by the dominant culture (or any culture).

Furthermore, the narrator states that upon realizing he was invisible, he could use it to his advantage, and so could others who come to the same realization. He states that invisibility has given him a "slightly different sense of time, your 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" (*Invisible Man*, Prologue 8). Thus returning to the novel *Jazz* for a brief moment, realizing one is invisible means that you are never bound to the track (Morrison, *Jazz* 120), because you are never quite on the beat. If someone is able to see the points where time stands still, one can see that the limits imposed on African Americans which are presented as universal and ethereal, are not. If one can see the points from which time leaps ahead, one could also see a possible future which is not dominated by the current dominant culture (Barnhart 37).

It is the narrators different sense of time which allows him to look at all his past humiliations and realize that they are all essential elements which make up a whole being: himself. He sees that all the humiliations have a collective meaning, they define him and in a sense they are him. In turn he realizes that to assemble these fragments, he needs to accept this past, every "itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it" (*Invisible Man* 508). With a different sense of time, all the fragments of the narrators past gain significance past the moments themselves (Special 350). It is precisely this which the narrator goes through when he is listening to music during the novel's prologue "under the spell of the reefer" (*Invisible Man*, Prologue 9): "The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself,

stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths (Prologue 9). The narrative of the novel is essentially the same thing, we descend into the depths of the narrators being through seeing moments of his past, in essence the elements which make up his being and each moment gets to say its piece. Some of these elements are also present in the depths of the music, like the Old woman the narrator encounters, their conversation essentially represents the narrators ultimate goal of gaining the freedom to decide who he is; to say what he has up in his head and not just regurgitate the ideas that others feed to him (Prologue 11). The other figures he encounters represent the inner turmoil which the narrator has building throughout the narrative, most of all the image of his grandfather (Prologue 10). It is the narrator's grandfather who may be said to be the catalyst of the narrator's inner turmoil as he told the narrator on his deathbed that he felt like a traitor his whole life. (*Invisible Man* 16)

The first of the narrators past humiliations which we encounter in our descent into his being is the battle royal which takes place in the South. The South in *Invisible Man* is set up to be an arena where the only option for success is on the premises of the dominant white culture. It was the dominant white culture which decided the limitations of the lives of African Americans, they essentially decided their whole existence; "This is our world, they said as they described it to us, this our horizon and its earth, its seasons and its climate, its spring and its summer, and its fall and harvest some unknown millennium ahead; and these its floods and cyclones and they themselves our thunder and lightning; and this we must accept and love and accept even if we did not love." (*Invisible Man*, 112). The South is also set up to be a place where the boundaries of life were "simple" as one of the chief concerns for African Americans was to not offend white people (168). One has to use scare quotes in this instance because not offending white people was anything but simple, African Americans could be lynched in the South for something as minor as painting their own home (Ellison, *Blues* 70). Thus self-expression was discouraged, and its discouragement could almost be seen as a survival mechanism (71). The need to curtail individual expression was also strengthened by the fact that lynching was an act which was intended to make the whole race suffer, not just the individual being lynched (66). Therefore it also became a personal responsibility for a lot of African Americans to affirm humility above all, to keep their loved ones from suffering. (*Invisible Man* 17). To be invisible was all but inevitable in the South, as African Americans were often not seen as individuals but as a generalized group. The image of a black person

and of blackness which the white world created was not based in fact, it was based in generalization (Baker 5). An image was assembled, which was woven out of anecdotes and stories, but lacking the actual presence of a black person to base it on. Subsequently the visage which African Americans were meant to apply to themselves was not based in reality, it was their body returned “spread-eagled, disjointed” and most importantly redone (Fanon 93). As stated by the narrator, it was “A treacherous and fluid knowledge of our being, imbibed at our source and now regurgitated foul upon us” (*Invisible Man*, 112).

It is this same world and these same people which view the narrator as “an example of desirable conduct” (*Invisible Man* 17). This is because the narrator held a speech on his graduation day, the speech in question was one about putting humility above all as an African American. The narrator in fact stated that humility is the “very essence of progress” (17). He also immediately clarifies to the reader that he doesn’t actually believe this to be the case (17). His own feelings about the speech do not matter in the long run because it is the contents of the speech which subsequently get him invited to hold the same speech at a gathering with some of the town’s leading white citizens (17). All we know about his speech is that he put humility above all, and this is probably the same message that the leading white citizens got from it and wanted to get from it. It is this same message that makes these men state that if the narrator continues on this path, he may make a good leader for his “people” (*Invisible Man* 32). They are hoping that the narrator can convince other African Americans that humility above all is the proper path. His ideas are “good” ideas and will be presented to others as “good” ideas, as long as these ideas are exclusively based in existing ideals in the South. This is a moment where the narrator is supposed to tell his white audience the kind of lie they want to hear as Bledsoe urges him to do later on (*Invisible Man* 143). Thus immediately this is reflecting the typical ideas imposed on African Americans, they are urged to make themselves scarce (Fanon 94) and they are urged to be black, but only in terms of the configuration made by white society, i.e. “in relation to the white man” (Fanon 89).

When he does hold his speech the audience can mostly ignore the narrator while he regurgitates their ideas, but they immediately pay attention the second he strays from this idea. When he mentions social responsibility, the group sees fit to laugh at him and have him repeat the word many times, as if they find him just saying it entertaining (*Invisible man* 31). However, when he mentions “equality,” they react rather negatively and aggressively, as a stark contrast to their behavior at the speech seconds prior: “The laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes, puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room” (31).

They then demand that he admits that to mention the word equality was a mistake, essentially forcing him to accept that the idea of equality is wrong for him and subsequently for his people (31). This should have told the narrator something about the attitude of the men in that room, if the battle royale beforehand had not done so already. This is essentially what the Brotherhood does later on as well, they are happy to let him speak for them until he is “out of line”.

Despite this reaction, the audience of white men still claim that they are trying to “do right by him,” but for them to do so, he has to know his place at all times, and his “place” is one where he is not equal with “the white man” and has accepted this (*Invisible Man* 31). If he strays from his “place,” he goes from not occupying a single space in their world or head, to occupying too much and essentially taking up space, becoming hyper visible and essentially “existing in triple” (Fanon 92). It is in this moment that he is seen as a fly in the milk, just as he was afraid he would be (*Invisible Man* 17). It is telling that they are talking about “doing right by him” after just having watched him fight others, blindfolded, for their own entertainment. The narrator was initially not meant to participate in the battle royale in the first place, but he was told that, since he was going to hold his speech there, he “might as well take part” (17). He naturally feels that it may not be a good idea, since it might detract from the dignity of his speech (18), and this just nails down the fact that his speech is going to be used as simple entertainment, not as something profound.

Another testament to this fact is the pre-fight “entertainment” in the form of the dancing naked blonde woman. Despite being hyper visible to the audience, she is still said to have a sort of “abstract mask” in the form of her makeup (*Invisible Man* 19) which leaves her anonymous in a way. The audience do not see “her” they only see her body, and her body is an abstraction, a symbol of desire. Most of the descriptions of her are of her body and there is no mention of her personality or emotion until her expression of terror and disgust near the end of her “performance” (19-20). Her “self” is concealed by her mask alongside the excessive amount of cigar smoke which coats her “like the thinnest of veils” (19) and she is never given a name. Thus despite being the center of attention, her “self” is invisible, although in her case her anonymity may be in her favor. The cigar smoke which had worked as a thin veil for the woman is functioning more like a blindfold by the time the fight starts, alongside the literal blindfolds which the fighters are made to wear. The blindfolds robs all the participants involved of the possibility of fighting in a dignified way (*Invisible Man* 22), they also point to the fact that the audience of the battle royale would prefer to keep the

narrator and the other participants as anonymous and invisible as possible, including from each other. With the blindfolds on, the opponents of the narrator are robbed of their humanity and are reduced to abstractions; “black, sweat-washed forms weaving in the smoky-blue atmosphere” (23).

The aspect of blindness present at the battle royale is echoed later by the narrator when he holds his speech for the Brotherhood where he states that “if we aren’t careful, they’ll slip up on our blind side and –plop! out goes our last good eye and we’re blind as bats!” (*Invisible Man* 343). This part of the narrator’s speech is about avoiding infighting, and while people participating in a battle royale is not infighting, the scene sets up the relationship between African Americans in both the South and the North. There are few African American characters in the novel who are allies of the narrator and there are few African American characters in the novel who are allies with each other, as already established the general attitude between African Americans from the South and those who were citified was hostile. Infighting is an aspect which stays throughout the narrative. What the narrator states in his speech in the North rings true for most of the novel “Up to now we’ve been like a couple of one-eyed men walking down opposite sides of the street. Someone starts throwing bricks and we start blaming each other and fighting among ourselves But we are mistaken! Because there’s a third party present” (*Invisible Man* 344). The third party is present at the battle royale too in the form of the audience of white men. The audience consists of important men from the town—as we are told by what the narrator observes, bankers, lawyers, even judges and teachers, which tells us something about the culture in the city he is in (18). One of them even calls the narrator “Sambo” as he is made to pick up coins from an electrified carpet (26). This is a way of calling back to the racist construction of “primitive aspects” attributed to African Americans, as well as the equally racist set identity of The Negro. We are never told which one of these important men this is in particular, it could essentially be any one of them, and this is further evidenced by how they behave at the narrator’s speech. This all speaks to the larger, unfortunate realization that, even when African Americans do “make it” in some professional or prestigious capacity in the South at the time, they can still be used as simple entertainment. The battle royale and the speech are a snapshot of the then-current conditions of the South for African Americans. We see rich, upper-class white men watching African Americans fight each other blindly for entertainment, and yet the fighters are supposed to accept that these same men have their best interests in mind. The electrified carpet is a statement all on its own as its used to answer the question “how much would you sacrifice for

money?“. On top of all of this the narrator is also supposed to accept that fighting for these upper-class men is an ideal he should strive for, that his being there should be seen as a personal victory and a sign that he is on the “right” path.

The events in the South are events which are not directly affected by the city, but they are important to look at regardless because the events that follow in the narrative mirror this initial one. For instance there is a constant presence of someone in the narrative who is describing the limitations of the narrator’s life and the “staggering folly” of his impatience to rise at all (*Invisible Man* 112). It is also important because it shows what the South represents for the narrator, thus setting up why he initially wants to distance himself from his past experiences when he goes to the North. The next key event in the narrator’s journey is his experiences at the Liberty Paints factory.

When the narrator travelled to the North, he had hoped to find a job in some important office (*Invisible Man* 157), but due to Bledsoe’s betrayal, the narrator’s initial plan is an impossibility. One of the first things the narrator had to face when he came North, was that Bledsoe did not have his best interests in mind after all which further underscores his naivete (189). This should not have come as a surprise, after all Bledsoe directly told him that he would “have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning” if it meant preserving his position of power (143). Similarly to the citified African Americans, Bledsoe does not want the narrator to “taint” his reputation, and therefore throws him under the bus (191). However one of the men the narrator meets on his fruitless quest to finding an important job, Emerson offers him an alternative which he ends up taking (192). The alternative is a job at the Liberty Paints factory, a job which Emerson tells the narrator that several “fellows” like the narrator himself have been sent to (192).

The main issue with the narrator’s job at the Liberty Paints factory is that he immediately learns that the reason so many African American’s get hired is so the factory do not have to pay union wages (*Invisible Man* 197). This in turn means that someone whom the factory did pay union wages to was fired in order to hire people like the narrator. This immediately puts the narrator in opposition to the rest of the workers whether he intended to or not. What the narrator does not know is that the other typical job for African Americans has been strike breaking (Wright 118), which makes his relationship with his fellow workers even more strained before it has even started to form. Thus before the narrator even knows the meaning of the word, he is made into a Scab (*Invisible Man* 197). He barely has time to deal with this

aspect of his work existence as he also has to actually learn his job, every part of which is brand new information (199). His boss is aware of this fact, but he does not care, it seems like just throwing new employees into the work with this disadvantage is typical procedure since if he does fail, they can find a new worker to replace him easily and it seems like this has happened a few times already (203). Consequently the narrator barely has time to acquaint himself with this section of the factory before his work is deemed inadequate and he is sent somewhere else. If the narrator's experience working at the Liberty Paints factory accurately reflects the typical experience of African Americans working in industry, then we can immediately see that, despite being seen as the ideal way for African Americans to become citified, it was not an easy task. Working in industry for African Americans was, like many of the other aspects of their life in the North, a constant battle (Wright, *Voices* 123).

The only other African American that he meets working there is essentially another Bledsoe type figure, a man who has sacrificed dignity for power (*Invisible Man* 145). I keep referring back to Dr Bledsoe, so I must clarify his role in the narrator's journey with a brief step back to the South. Dr Bledsoe is a figure who represents the end result of the narrator's initial path. The narrator initially wanted to be the mirror image of Bledsoe, down to the way he checked his watch "his lips pursed, chin pulled in, so it multiplied, his forehead wrinkled." (*Invisible man* 163) and the way he gave an order "as though each syllable were pregnant with nuances of profoundly important meaning" (163). The narrator didn't know Bledsoe, and felt he didn't need to, all the things the narrator wanted to take from Bledsoe were symbolic gestures which to the narrator represented importance, influence, and power. These symbolic gestures had little to nothing to do with the physical, living man and what he did to get his influence and power. I believe that the narrator initially wanted to actually be like Bledsoe, not just the image of him, because he respected him to a certain extent. But Bledsoe showed the narrator what was behind the curtain (*Invisible man* 142) and it was ultimately an utter absence of dignity and soul because what Bledsoe did to gain and to keep his influence was to "act the nigger" (143). In his own words, Bledsoe always tells white people "The kind of lie they want to hear" (143), and he urges the narrator to do the same.

Lucious Brockway is similar to Bledsoe in many ways, down to the way he checks his watch with an immediate aura of perceived importance (*Invisible Man* 211). Also similarly to Bledsoe, Brockway has a relationship with white people where, despite fearing and bowing to them, he also imitates them in having some authority over other workers, or in this case other African Americans (225). Consequently he addresses the narrator as if he himself was a white

man and refers to the narrator as part of some other, “inferior” group “To you and all like you I’m Mister Brockway” (207). Mr. Brockway is in charge of actually making the paint in the factory, a fact he takes great pride in, referring to himself and the narrator as “the machines inside the machine” (217). Similarly to how things worked in “Building 1”, the narrator is tossed into his work with Brockway, and when he inevitably fails, due to the disadvantage of having no information, it is again the narrator who is blamed (213). However he never gets fired from his job working for Brockway, although he soon stops working for him. Mr. Brockway violently rejects him once he learns that the narrator attended a union meeting, it does not matter that it was a meeting the narrator literally stumbled into as Mr. Brockway never cares to hear him out on what happened (224). He calls the narrator a variety of things including a “troublemaking foreigner” (224) as if the South was an entirely different country and “a two-bit, trouble-making union louse” (225). The center of both the derogatory phrases is trouble making, reflecting the exact same attitude as many other citified African Americans towards the newcomers from the South.

All of this derogatory name-calling happens to the narrator after he was just berated out of the union meeting which he never intended to go to. This all happened because the narrator said the “wrong” thing, which was that he worked for Lucious Brockway (*Invisible Man* 219). However he had no prior knowledge which would indicate that this would be met with hostility. Nevertheless, due to his lack of knowledge of the relationships between the workers, he is suspected to be and labelled as a “fink” (219). It seems that the narrator doesn’t know the actual connotations behind the word fink, so instead the word takes on the same connotations as “`nigger`” in an angry southern mouth” (219). Furthermore it is stated that “Finkism is born into some guys” and the narrator might just be “Naturally fink-minded!” (221), an alleged fact which is presented as “the honest, scientific truth” (221). Thus here in a factory in the North the narrator is pretty much reliving events from the South as he is being assigned to a generalized group and just like in the South there is “scientific” proof that he possesses qualities which designate him to this group (Fanon 99).

Thus just like he will experience with the Brotherhood later on, he is faced with a group of people which view themselves above him in a way as evidenced by the fact that they state that the narrator might just be not as “highly developed” as them, them being those who have been in the labor movement for longer (122). It is not his race that is presented as inferior in this instance, but the phrase is still the same. They conclude that due to this the narrator simply cannot help his condition and this conclusion is ultimately what settles the matter and lets the

narrator of the hook. As this is the narrator's first and only experience with a union, he naturally isn't tempted to join one afterwards. The same phrase comes up later in the narrative during his initial meeting with the Brotherhood. When another brother asks if the narrator could sing them a spiritual, because "all colored people sing" (312), the narrator does not get the chance to respond before someone else turns down the request for him, and apologizes to the narrator with the statement that "Some of our brothers aren't so highly developed, you know. Although they mean very well" (*Invisible Man*, 314). In this instance it is actually the racist stereotyping which is taken to be the sign of not being as developed as the rest. The use of the phrase "highly developed" in these contexts reflects an attitude which was not entirely uncommon in the South at the time (32), but its recurrence in the North shows the narrator that, perhaps the North is not as far removed from the South as he had hoped. It is its continued repetition which makes it a topic of interest, if he only heard it once it may have just reflected the attitude of one individual.

Nevertheless the narrator's attempt to work in Industry abruptly ends with the explosion at the Liberty Paints factory (*Invisible Man* 230) and the narrator is left having to find another way to assemble his fragmented self, which is more fragmented than ever after the explosion. It is after this event that he is found and taken care of by Mary (251) whom we have already elaborated on. After staying with Mary, who is a positive element of the South to the narrator, he inevitably encounters one of the more negative elements of his past. In a display window the narrator has seen a rather stereotypical statue of a black Nubian slave (262) which "grinned out at me from beneath a turban of gold" (262). This image seems to swiftly revive stereotypes of African Americans in the South and shows the narrator that the image of African Americans in the North may not be so different, it is just used for a different purpose. He also happens upon a window advertising skin whitening ointments along with switches of hair which present the idea that African Americans can also (and only) be beautiful if they look more "white" (*Invisible Man* 262). The advertisement does not directly state that African Americans are not beautiful, but it not so subtly implies it. The other element of the South which the narrator finds on his walk is a man selling Yams. The yams serve as both a positive and negative element of his past, as they simultaneously bring the narrator a sense of freedom and a memory of shame (264). The shame he feels is not necessarily his own, it is the shame which has been made inherent for some African Americans and in remembering it, coupled with the freedom he is feeling, he realizes that he doesn't need to feel that shame in the city. This seemingly insignificant act of eating yams in public makes the narrator contemplate

himself and how he feels about certain things as he had never formed a personal attitude towards much at all (*Invisible Man* 267).

Consequently this is the state of mind the narrator is in when he stumbles over the eviction of an old couple. He literally stumbles over the eviction as he stumbles over some of the old woman's furniture (*Invisible Man* 268) because smoke from a packing box is obscuring his vision (267). The whole event is immediately quite surreal due to its alien nature coupled with his obscured vision. It is not alien because it is a scenario which is unknown to the narrator, it is alien to the image he has formed of the North. Before the narrator knows what is actually going on he just sees white men carrying a chair in which an old woman is sitting, an image which might be eerily familiar. Seeing an eviction is not strange to the narrator because African Americans were never thrown out of their own house in the South, but because white people probably wouldn't even need legal precedence to do so in the South (*Invisible Man* 269). The eviction is the first significant event that shows the narrator that life in the North can be just as precarious as life in the South, people can still be thrown out of their home, it is just that the reason is different (*Invisible Man* 269). The old couple is presumably not thrown out because someone disliked them or something they did, they are thrown out because they haven't paid rent (272).

Like the stable elements of the South he has already encountered, this eerily familiar image roots the narrator, but in this instance the rooting is literal as he feels "too much a part of it to leave" (*Invisible Man* 271). In staying the narrator is forced to encounter certain objects, which inspire feelings of recognition so deep that it feels like he is looking at his own past and in turn his own shame (273). The first object he sees is a portrait of the old couple when they were young in which they have an expression which seems to imply a certain level of knowledge on their part for the narrator. He feels that it looks like even when new to the city, the couple had low expectations of what their life would be, they were unillusioned to the promises of the city and had accepted this reality with pride (*Invisible Man* 271). After seeing the portrait, the narrator sees a pair of "knocking bones" which reminds him of the black face minstrels popular in the South (*Invisible Man* 271), calling attention to the reluctant participation ("gesture of acceptance") (111) of African Americans in their own humiliation. It also tells the narrator that the husband of the woman may have participated in minstrelsy. These objects, alongside the rest essentially show the narrator the whole life of the old couple through what they have owned, a lot of these objects reflect a desperate attempt to be citified:

“In a basket I saw a straightening comb, switches of false hair, a curling iron, a card with silvery letters against a background of dark red velvet, reading “God bless our home”; and scattered across the top of a chiffonier were nuggets of High John the Conqueror, the lucky stone; and as I watched the white men put down a basket in which I saw a whiskey bottle filled with rock candy and camphor, a small Ethiopian flag, a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, and the smiling image of a Hollywood star torn from a magazine. And on a pillow several badly cracked pieces of delicate china, a commemorative plate celebrating the St. Louis World’s Fair...” (*Invisible Man* 271)

The first objects of particular interest are the ones that pertain to looks: The straightening comb, the curling iron, the switches of false hair and the image of a Hollywood star. These objects all point towards the old woman, or perhaps her children or grandchildren, wanting to be as white as possible, using the Hollywood star as inspiration. The narrator sees these switches of hair right after he saw another pair in the window which urged people towards whiter complexion (262).

The commemorative plate of the St. Louis World’s fair is a souvenir from the couples past. The St. Louis Worlds fair was the site of discrimination and the abuse of scientific objectivity, which essentially didn’t make it much different from the daily lives of African Americans in the South (Friswold). What is important to mention is that African Americans were not invited to attend the fair “unless they wanted to work a menial job behind the scenes or be in one of the anthropological displays designed to "prove" their subhuman nature.” (Friswold). The narrator, and in turn the reader does not know what part the couple played at the fair, but the plate shows that they presumably were there in some capacity, the plate can serve as a reluctant gesture of acceptance, or an eternal reminder that things have changed, or even both. The knocking bones may point towards it being the former, but given that we do not know, its purpose or meaning is ambiguous.

Another object of particular interest is the nuggets of the root of High John the conqueror which, when paired with the rabbit’s foot which are mentioned on the next page (*Invisible man* 272) indicates a level of superstition on the couple’s part. In African American folklore High John the conqueror was a folk hero who was an always present symbol of hope for the slaves (Hurston 69). He was a figure which inspired the slaves to use the power of laughter even when their work was the hardest and laughter in turn reminded those who believed in High John that the trouble they were going through would not last forever (69). In retrospect

it doesn't matter if this hope was founded on fact or not, because it still helped the slaves endure, and the idea of High John the conqueror really did "make a way out of no-way" (Hurstun 70). Once the slaves were freed it was said that High John the conqueror went back to Africa but, he left his power in the root of the plant which bears his name (Hurstun 72). People who still believe in High John the conqueror would often keep this plant in their home or on their person and it would help them overcome things just like High John had helped the slaves (Hurstun 78). The presence of the root indicates that the couple had needed its reassurance at some point, and it indicates that they have endured something, although that something is unknown to the narrator and the reader.

The narrator knew the name of the root High John the conqueror, but there is no guarantee that he knew the meaning behind it, or believed in this meaning. Regardless the object that really sets things into perspective for the narrator (or rather, shatters his whole current perspective) is the free papers belonging to someone either currently or formerly known as Primus Provo: "Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. Signed: John Samuels. Macon" (*Invisible Man* 272). The free papers tell the narrator that the old couple being evicted are former slaves and what he has found is essentially the ticket and key to their life in the North, which is now falling apart in front of him and them. It also tells the narrator that the past the old couple represents, and is keeping alive with some of the objects they own, is not such a distant past (272). The fact that the couple lived in the city for as long as they did, as shown to us through the various objects, shows that the city actually is a place of opportunity, even for a former slave. It lends credibility to the image African Americans had of the city as "the Promised land" (Jones 95), but simultaneously, the fact that the objects which reflect their long life are now on the ground and in pieces, shows us that their existence in the North was always tenuous.

The crucial aspect of the eviction is that the narrator starts to view and in turn imbue each object with a meaning past their intrinsic meaning as objects (*Invisible man* 273). He attaches meanings found in his own past to them, but these meanings are made up of fragments, "linked verbal echoes" of things heard even when he wasn't aware he was listening (273). Ultimately what happens is that the meaning imbued in the objects come together to collectively give the narrator one image, an image of his mother "hanging wash on a cold windy day" (273); an image of the South. This image underscores the narrators own tenuous existence in the North, as it shows him that even if he does make himself citified, he may end up evicted himself at some point, and at that point it doesn't matter how long he participated

in the dominant culture in the city. It could be because of something he did, or something entirely out of his control, either way it reinforces the idea that life in the North for African Americans is always hanging by a thread (Wright, *Voices* 116).

The narrator discovers the fragments and the subsequent image by staring “inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago” (*Invisible man* 273). It is this ability which will later allow him to truly discover who he is, and in turn his invisibility. This returns us to concepts which we have already covered which were presented in the novels prologue. The narrator realizing he is invisible and was invisible throughout all of the major events of the novel makes him view each scene in a new light. He also realizes that he was always outside the realm of history, even when he was in the Brotherhood. He ironically goes through a similar thought process to what Ellison himself did entering a haunted wood: “wherein every detail of scene, each thought and incipient action, sprang together and became endowed with a surreal and sinister significance” (Special 350).

This thinking process, coupled with the novel itself highlights the importance of the past as well as the importance of the individual and their individual past. But it also, like *Jazz* highlights the importance of knowing an individual’s inner life if one is to judge them correctly (Morrison 220.) Even without the concept of invisibility this would probably have been the point which Ellison was trying to make, as evidenced by the narrative of the war novel which *Invisible man* initially was. The narrative of this novel was focused on a captured American pilot who found himself in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp. This American pilot, like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, is black and he is also the only black man of his “fellow countrymen” (*Invisible Man*, Introduction XII). Similarly to the narrator of *Invisible Man* he undergoes a struggle of self-perception, and subsequently identity as he wants to see himself as equal with his fellow white countrymen, as they are all equally prisoners of war. This struggle arises because he is designated the spokesman of the Americans, since he is of the highest rank among them (Introduction XII). The other Americans refuse to see him as equal and certainly not as superior, so therefore he has to try to view himself outside of the unit, which leads to a struggle of self. The main point of this narrative would lie in the fact that, the crux of the matter would be the man’s inner struggle, which neither of his adversaries would ever be aware of (Introduction XII). By the same token, the crux of the matter, and a bulk of the narrative of *Invisible Man* is the narrator’s inner struggle, the key difference is that we know that he finds a way to live with himself. Hence for me the novel serves as a kind of suggested path towards this discovery, while also serving as a warning as to what may be lost

if one does not have this discovery. What is left in the narrative is demonstrating to the reader what was at stake until the narrator discovers his invisibility, thus further highlighting the importance of this discovery and the events which lead to it.

5 Conclusion

In the novel *Jazz*, one of the main points was to realize that both the narrator and the reader themselves are lacking the knowledge to accurately continue telling the story which is being told, because they don't know anything about the characters past what they can observe. This is because the message the reader is supposed to be left with is that when one is dealing with individuals, one has to keep in mind that they are unique, because they have a unique past and set of elements which made them who they are. This unique past and their self is what decides how they deal with living in the city, it is also the knowledge of this self which helps the characters from being objectified. This in turn is supposed to underscore the importance of asserting oneself. In *Invisible Man* the narrator is in a different part of the process as he for most of the narrative has not yet realized who he is. It is when he does that he can actually decide where he fits in, in society. He eventually feels that he doesn't actually fit in anywhere, because that would require fitting into a pattern which is what he has spent the narrative trying to avoid. The main point then is having the ability to choose where one fits in, and not letting someone else choose for you. Thus the conclusion is, inconclusive.

When I initially started to write this thesis I was hoping that I could find some common denominator which suggested that there was a key to understanding and enduring life in the city. But everywhere I looked there were ambiguous and ambivalent phrases and meanings. Consequently, I did not find an answer to the question which I initially envisioned answering. However, in not finding an answer I eventually realized that perhaps the point is that there isn't one, not a universal one. What *Invisible man* and *Jazz* tells us, is that the solution is just, ironically simply, far more complicated, because African Americans are far more complicated. We are dealing with individuals, individuals whom we don't know anything about except what we can observe, we do not know anything about their inner lives, and we only know their past if it has been recorded. There is no universal solution which applies to all African Americans, because they have different needs and a different basis for those needs. The past is still a useful element because it can lead an individual into realizing there is a

problem which needs a solution in the first place. They can realize that it is partly the fault of the city, but also partly the fault of something in the past, or the past itself. No part of the self can be left entirely behind. There has to be a “simply me” like Violet achieves in *Jazz*. In merging all the selves, one needs for neither of the selves to be lost, paraphrasing DuBois (*Souls* 365). To attain ones place in the world, one must be oneself (DuBois, *Souls* 368).

To find ones “self”, one first has to realize there is a lack of self which is what the narrator in *Invisible man* does in discovering his invisibility and what Violet does in discovering and subsequently killing “Violent”. The ultimate threat of the city and the dominant culture in the city is that it makes African Americans part of the human river instead, and in turn it bleaches their “Negro soul” (*Souls* 365) as DuBois put it. This keeps them from finding themselves, and when they finally might need to do so, it may be too late. These novels are not meant as a lesson for African Americans exclusively. They are not meant to provide some miracle solution. What they do is that they highlight the need to be, and see someone as an individual, as a person. And also to realize that, one cannot judge a person, or a people based on just what is recorded.

Works cited

- A. Baker Jr., Houston. *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and culture*, The University Press of Virginia, 1972.
- Appadurai, Arjun. “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value.” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge University Press, 1986. pp. 3-63.
- Baldwin, James. “The Language of the Streets.” *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 133-137.
- . “Stranger in the village” *Notes of A Native Son*, edited by Toni Morrison, The Library of America, 1998, pp.117-129.

- Baraka, Amiri. "Black Literature and the Afro-American Nation: The Urban Voice." *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 139-159.
- Barnhart E, Bruce. *Jazz in the time of the novel: the temporal politics of American race and culture*. University of Alabama Press, 2013.
- Berman, Marshall. *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity*. New York, Penguin Books, 1988.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday life*. Translated by Steven Randall, University of California Press, 1988.
- Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- DuBois, W.E.B. "Criteria Of Negro Art." *African American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, edited by Hazel Arnett Ervin, Twayne Publishers, 1999, pp. 39-43.
- . "The Souls of Black Folk" *W.E.B DuBois: Writings: The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, The Souls of Black Folk, Dusk of Dawn, Essays and Articles*, edited by Nathan Huggins, The Library of America, 1986. pp. 363-371.
- Ellison, Ralph. "A Special Message to Subscribers" *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan, Random House, Inc. 1995, pp. 347-351.
- . *Invisible Man*. New York, Vintage, 1995.
- . "Living with music." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan, Random House, Inc. 1995, pp. 227-236.
- . "Harlem is nowhere." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan, Random House, Inc. 1995, pp. 320-327.
- . "Richard Wright's Blues." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan, Random House, Inc. 1995, pp. 128-144.
- . "Working Notes for *Invisible Man*." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan, Random House, Inc. 1995, pp. 341-345.

- Ellison, Ralph and James Alan McPherson. "Indivisible Man." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan, Random House, Inc. 1995, pp. 353-395.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2008.
- Fiedler, Leslie. "Mythicizing the city." *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 113-121.
- Friswold, Paul. "The Forgotten History of Racism at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis." RFT, www.riverfronttimes.com/arts/the-forgotten-history-of-racism-at-the-1904-worlds-fair-in-st-louis-18277369. Accessed 10 May 2023.
- Jackson, Lawrence. "Ralph Ellison's Invented Life: A Meeting with the Ancestors." *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, Cambridge. Edited by Ross Posnock. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005. ProQuest, www.proquest.com/books/ralph-ellisons-invented-life-meeting-with/docview/2137989211/se-2.
- Johnson, J. Weldon. "Harlem: The Culture Capital" *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Alain Locke. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997, pp. 301-311.
- Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. Harper Collins, 2002.
- Lawson, Henry. "Faces in the Street." *In the Days when the World was Wide and Other Verses*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1896, pp. 28-32.
- Marx, Leo. "The Puzzle of Anti-Urbanism in Classic American Literature." *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 63-79.
- Maxwell, William J. *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*. Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Morrison, Toni. "A Race in Mind: The Press in Deed." *Mouth Full of Blood*, edited by Toni Morrison, Vintage, 2020, pp. 33-40.
- . "Black Matter(s)." *Mouth Full of Blood*, edited by Toni Morrison, Vintage, 2020, pp. 140-160.

- . "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighbourhood in Black Fiction." *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp.35-43.
- . *Jazz*. London, Vintage, 2016.
- . "Unspeakable things unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" *Mouth Full of Blood*, edited by Toni Morrison, Vintage, 2020, pp. 161-197.
- Munton, Alan. "Misreading Morrison, Mishearing Jazz: A Response to Toni Morrison's Jazz Critics." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, 235-251.
- Oates, J. Carol. "Imaginary Cities: America." *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 11-12.
- Paquet-Deyris, Anne-Marie. "Toni Morrison's Jazz and the City." *African American Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2001, pp. 219–31. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2903254. Accessed 5 May 2023.
- Raynor, Deirdre J. "Morrison and the Critical Community." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, Cambridge. Edited by Justine Tally. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/books/morrison-critical-community/docview/2138005764/se-2>.
- Roach, Max. "Jazz" *African American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, edited by Hazel Arnett Ervin, Twayne Publishers, 1999, pp. 113-116.
- Spaulding, A. Timothy. "Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" *Callaloo*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2004, pp. 481–501. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3300683. Accessed 11 May 2023.
- Stave, Shirley A. "Jazz and Paradise: Pivotal Moments in Black History." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, Cambridge. Edited by Justine Tally. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007. ProQuest, www.proquest.com/books/jazz-paradise-pivotal-moments-black-history/docview/2137998841/se-2.
- Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices*. Echo Point Books & Media, 2019.

