

Facing Jazz, Facing Trauma: Modern Trauma and the Jazz Archive

By

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## Abstract

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“Facing Jazz, Facing Trauma” posits American jazz music as a historical archive of an American history of trauma. By reading texts by Gayl Jones, Ralph Ellison, Franz Kafka; music and performances by Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday; the life, art and films of Josephine Baker, and the film *The Jazz Singer* (1927), my goal is to give African American experiences of trauma a place within American trauma studies and to offer jazz as an extensive archive of testimony for witnessing and for study.

Initially, I explore the pivotal historical moment where trauma and jazz converge on a groundbreaking scale, when Billie Holiday sings “Strange Fruit” in 1939. This moment illuminates the fugitive alliance between American blacks and Jews in forming the historical testimony that is jazz. “Strange Fruit,” written by Jewish American Abel Meeropol, and sung by Billie Holiday, evokes the trauma of lynching in an effort to protest the same. In a career that hinges on her ability to convey the result of a traumatic life musically, Holiday nonetheless breaks from an African American coded tradition of music and participates in a Jewish coded tradition of discourse. She allows the lyrics to speak for themselves and protest the crime of lynching for which “Strange Fruit” was controversial and powerful evidence.

I then explore jazz and its connection to trauma, witnessing, and testimony through a literary lens. Juxtaposing larger than life figures with literary counterparts, I focus on vocal jazz where the jazz singer rewrites history from the perspective of the survivors of a legacy of slavery. Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* demonstrate both the trauma of invisibility/inaudibility and the imperative to be acknowledged and heard. Personal and collective traumas are one and the same in these texts. I also analyze a performance of Louis Armstrong to emphasize jazz performance as testimony.

Next, Kafka's "Josefine the Singer or The Mouse People" serves to demonstrate the role of the performer in the representation and creation of a people or nation, while Josephine Baker appears as a concurrent example of the same. The singer (and/or her song) is the voice of the people and the screen upon which they reflect their collective identity. For Kafka, there is no mouse people without Josefine, and her power to create a people transcends even her abilities as a singer. Josephine Baker, too, manages to create a 1920s Paris with a talent that is contested to this day. Her life and art tell a story of survival and triumph that also reveal the history of trauma that made her story possible.

Finally, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) documents the beginning of the end of a very long tradition of blackface minstrelsy, a tradition which was integral in forming American popular music. Viewing this 1920s conception of "jazz" music as "black" music appropriated by American Jews underscores the complex history and place of jazz music in America's modern period. Although blackface minstrelsy has had its history rewritten repeatedly, it will remain implicated in the trauma of American racism.

Understanding jazz and its musical legacy as an archive of American trauma should serve two purposes. Recognizing it as traumatic testimony will hopefully call attention to the imperative to witness to it as such. It should also emphasize what exactly is at stake in this witnessing. The survivors of trauma, the inheritors of the legacy of slavery, will continue to testify to that ever-evolving trauma. Perhaps, if we strive to listen, to recognize and be witnesses to that testimony, the careful formation of new unbroken subjectivities can finally begin.

—For Lula





## Acknowledgements

Were I to say that it takes a village to write a dissertation, that might easily be misconstrued as a concession to the analogy that writing a dissertation is like giving birth—an analogy I will never concede. So no, mother, it's still not the same and I will tell you once again if I ever give birth. However, the village part is true. This already strange text would be absurd without the help of my loving village.

Thank you to my advisers Judith Butler, Chana Kronfeld, and Linda Williams for your alchemy, for turning an inkling into a dissertation. Judith, you continue to teach me independence, acceptance and breakthrough thinking. You are, by far, the sharpest black woman I know. Chana, your genius, strength, and kindness made finishing possible; you truly make me want to be a better Jew. Linda, thank you for challenging me to work outside of my discipline and comfort zone.

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## Introduction

*Birds flying high, you know how I feel  
Sun in the sky, you know how I feel  
Breeze driftin' on by, a you know how I feel*

*It's a new dawn  
It's a new day  
It's a new life  
For me  
And I'm feeling good*

— Nina Simone, “Feeling Good”<sup>1</sup>

The sublime tension between “feeling good” and the distempered, anxious dissonance of minor blues chords I hear when Nina Simone sings “Feeling Good” has led me to connect trauma and jazz. “Is this a happy song?” I’ve asked numerous people and numerous people have said: yes. When I asked my father what he thought, his words summed up the song better than I ever could, which is why I start with them now:

“Feeling Good” is a Nina Simone classic that is historical. If you can sit through this song and not be moved emotionally at least a little, then you should get checked to see if you’re still alive. Like most blues songs, it is not that technical, musically speaking. It is a standard 12 bar blues which is pretty simple for most musicians. I think one of the gripping aspects of the song is the dichotomy of the lyrics that are so happy, hopeful and positive set against a background of music that is somewhat dark, projects sadness, hopelessness and fear, probably associated with the plight of most Black folk at the time (1960s). Not to mention her subtle yet powerful voice that presents the lyrics almost as a plea. Her plea is filled with determination to have what is in those happy lyrics regardless of the grim reality that is in the music—likewise, the reality of unemployment, homelessness, police brutality, disenfranchisement from society and possibly any number of addictions all around her. In spite of all that, she sees a “new dawn and a new day.” These opposite forces stop us in our tracks, confront us and force us to stand there and listen, soak in and feel. Maybe that’s the point of the song—we know we feel something, we are just not sure if what we feel qualifies as feeling good.

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<sup>1</sup> Written by British songwriters Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse for their 1965 musical, *The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd*, the song has been performed by many artists. Simone’s version stands out as the most well-known.

My father, as I had, immediately separated the music from the lyrics and read them independently. We do that because we know that so often, no matter what is being said literally by the lyrics, something else is probably going on. When I listen to the song, I feel the same tension a generation later. I hadn't made the connection to the political climate of the 1960s as my father had, having experienced those years growing up in Oakland and Los Angeles. I had imagined that Simone was singing about very personal, not necessarily historical, experiences and events in her own life that led her to mark her happiest thoughts with the saddest of music and a pleading emotional inflection in her voice. I realize now that we were talking about the same thing, that personal and collective trauma could not be separated, and that the singer of the blues cannot sing of the one without singing of the other.

The climax of the song is when Simone stops singing recognizable words and scats African sounding syllables that say nothing and everything at once. That strange Africanization points to a poignancy I scarcely want to analyze. However, the non-African/African syllables index an irretrievable loss that her voice seeks to recover in a moment that is both impossibly and infinitely repeatable—impossible because it is jazz improvisation and infinite because it is captured, recorded in the age of mechanical reproducibility.<sup>2</sup> The loss of language points to both the African American “loss” of African languages and the traumatized subject’s “loss” of language or the speakability of traumatic experience. However, Simone bridges this loss or, recovers this lost object of language by reconstructing it in a new jazz language that speaks volumes across generations.<sup>3</sup> It resonates with what Brent Hayes Edwards calls “performing alterity in scat.”<sup>4</sup> He writes

The point isn't to find a source for the song, or its proper translation, I would argue; it is instead to recognize the way that the distance to a shared ancestral means of expression and genealogical ground is represented by the distance from those impenetrable phonemes to that music, well understood. ‘Words and music have lost each other,’ Du Bois writes, and the listener must seek a message that is ‘naturally veiled and half articulate.’ Such may be the condition of scat, and a condition of New World African expression in general. (630)

That recognition that he calls for is a kind of witnessing. There is a moment in the scat where Simone holds one of those syllabic notes just long enough to draw attention to it. That A strikes me every time; it is a major ninth interval, one known

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt ed, Harry Zohn, tr. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969). All quotations of Benjamin are from this text.

<sup>3</sup> My nephew has informed me that when he hears this song, especially the scat, he gets chills.

<sup>4</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, “Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), pp. 618-649.627. This is a response to Louis Armstrong’s humorous question, “I think they’re trying to sound like Africans, don’t you?” (628).

for its dissonance. This note serves as the climax of the song both dynamically by its loudness and melodically by its long suspension before the resolution of the song back to its “head.” Simone’s dissonance draws blood; it hurts me every time I hear it. The aching plea of her voice and the stark clash of the ninth interval mirror each other. Together they disturb those borrowed, joyous lyrics which have since fallen away into scat with harsh, coarse despair, which has been transformed into a tumultuous musical sublimity. I listen and listen because she wants to tell me something that she knows and wants me to know too. This painful listening is the only way to understand what she knows. Yet, perhaps I listen because I already know.

By listening for the musical, emotional and political significance of Simone’s recording—the message of her piece—my father and I attempted to witness to an experience being communicated through a song. We treated her song as testimony. For my father, she was testifying to the hardship and turmoil of the 1960s black experience, the hope and optimism of the civil rights movement, and the personal difficulties she may have endured that were reflections of those larger collective experiences. Originally for me, she was testifying to any number of personal experiences that I could only imagine. I simply knew that she was communicating confusion and anguish. Because this is a song in the jazz and blues tradition, not only were we most likely both correct in our conclusions, but she could very well be testifying to the multitude of historical experiences that led up to her present moment. That is to say that by participating in this tradition, using the blues which are a secularized evolution of spirituals, the music of enslaved and freed blacks during and after slavery, she was communicating what their music had communicated; only she was transforming it in her present time. The jazz resonances of this blues piece were the modern rendering of this historical music of lamentation.

This dissertation is an attempt to explore the traumatic testimony in jazz music and the implications of jazz as testimony both for jazz studies and trauma studies. Specifically, I argue that jazz is a significant part of our archive of traumatic testimony of the black American experience of social and institutionalized racism, Jim Crow, lynching and the aftermaths of slavery. Testimony in the form of art, and in this instance music, allows for universal and particular interpretations of its message. This is because the lyrics are only part of its significance, and are often in meaningful tension with the music. This testimonial quality is inherent in the music and the tradition to which it belongs, not just to performances by Nina Simone. As a song performance coming out of a black musical tradition characterized by complex significations, there is an unresolved dialogical tension between lyrics and music in the Bakhtinian sense, as Chana Kronfeld has suggested to me.<sup>5</sup> This tension is part of the

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<sup>5</sup> M.M Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

genre's way of making meaning; it is a tension through which traumatic testimony can become part of the music's substance. Paul Gilroy writes that

Created under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the complementary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque means. This politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth.<sup>6</sup>

This opaque quality of the music persisted and became part of its tradition. However, not only was this music communicating traumatic experience, it was also a significant component of the traumatic experience of slavery. As testimony, black music is speaking to what Saidiya Hartman calls "the violated condition of the vessel of song."<sup>7</sup> This is because not only was music a significant part of slave culture, it was used as a significant part of white dominance over slaves. On some plantations, overseers forced slaves to sing upbeat songs as they worked to increase production which was "performed" to the cadence of their singing. Slaves were forced to sing and dance on the auction block to make themselves marketable to buyers; they were coerced into dancing on the decks of slave ships; they had to sing in chains in the coffle; and they routinely had to sing and dance to entertain and amuse their masters (23). This was all forced under the threat of harsh punishments. Hartman recounts the testimony of former slave Eda Harper:

My old master mean to us. He used to come to the quarters and make us chillum sing. He make us sing Dixie. Seems like Dixie his main song. I tell you I don't like it now. But have mercy! He make us sing it. (46)

Music is both part of the domination and the rare reprieve from the domination of slavery. As such, it is very much complicated as testimony. As Hartman writes, "there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents" (10). This means that the consciousness to which we are trying to gain access is at all times expressed through the media of domination. Following Gayatri Spivak and Walter Benjamin, Hartman suggests that "there is no historical document that is not interested, exclusive, or a vehicle of power and domination"(12). Although

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Saidiya Hartman. *Scenes Of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, And Self-Making In Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 34.



she is writing here about slave testimonies gathered for the political purposes of the Works Progress Administration, the same could be said of testimony as song. The songs like the bodies of the singers were “violated” in the sense that they were co-opted to further the subjugation about which they were often written. This complicates their status as testimony because it caused the singers to have to code their protests and lamentations in the music behind lyrics which were audible to the enslavers. In a sense, they had to sing about *feeling good* in the most horrid of situations, a factor which built the dialogic tension between lyrics and music into the very structure of African American music.

These violations of the music are part of the music itself – reinforcing the status of music as testimony in the ontological sense. Although these violations helped to constitute the music, which complicates its status as testimony, this also reinforces it as testimony. Because of the extreme debasement of slavery, there were no black cultural phenomena that occurred outside of the realm of white domination, a fact which is inherently traumatic. This traumatic experience became part of the music and it followed the music as it changed over time—until and beyond the point when it was inherited by jazz. It may be that traumatic expression is one of the few continuities of the black music tradition –alongside coded language, and the pentatonic (or blues) scale which you can hear in Adele’s hit song “Rolling in the Deep.”<sup>8</sup> Like language, music is embedded in the culture that produces it.<sup>9</sup> Jazz music is of particular interest as the popular music of modernity. Yet, my conception of jazz encompasses the blues (and consequently the spirituals) as part of its heritage and literally part of its musical structure. As the music evolved, it was variational; musicians still often used the pentatonic scale and as rhythms grew more complex, they remained syncopated, though more intricate. Historically, the music carried the traumatic the content of its source and as it developed, it remains connected to the original trauma of slavery and the traumatic modes of existence thereafter. For this reason, when I speak of jazz, I am also speaking of the blues. My goal is to give African American experiences of trauma a place within American trauma studies and to offer jazz as an extensive archive of testimony for witnessing and for study.

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In order to introduce modern African American experience into the growing field of trauma studies, I must first discuss the central concerns of that field in some depth. Much of trauma studies, including my own project, draws from or centers on

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<sup>8</sup>Adele Atkins, “Rolling in the Deep,” 21. XL Recordings (2011).

<sup>9</sup> That is to say, one cannot learn to speak without participating in a culture of some kind and one cannot learn to sing without doing the same. All experimentation with language or music is still produced in a cultural context. This is why music will hold on to its fundamental components even as it changes over time.

the work of Walter Benjamin. Writers like Shoshanna Felman, Kevin Newmark, Ulrich Baer, and others draw on Benjamin's work in their study of the links between trauma and modernity. Although their case studies allow for many figurations of trauma, for them, trauma remains comparatively defined: disastrous catastrophe or as the experience of modernity. Most pronounced is the understanding of Benjamin's trauma as catastrophic destruction and loss.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in a letter to Benjamin, his good friend Theodor Adorno objected to what he thought was an overemphasis on the promising aspect of trauma in Benjamin's writing and offered the suggestion of "more dialectics."<sup>11</sup> However, it is in fact the dialectical character of Benjamin's work that allows critics across fields to invoke his work to support their own theories of memory and trauma from recorded historical events to the theoretical "event" of modernity.

Recognizing the dramatic distinction—and tension—between discussing concrete events and theorizing the conceptual *event*, Shoshana Felman takes interest in the progression of trauma theory to chart how theory develops from the trauma of an event:

What is the relation between the theory and the event (and what in general, is the relationship between events and theories)? How does the theory arise out of the concrete drama (and trauma) of an event? How does the concrete drama (and trauma) of an event become theory?<sup>12</sup>

For Felman, if history signifies the study of events, then the study of trauma is essentially the study of history. Felman invokes Benjamin's famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History* to further develop the connection between the two. In his ninth thesis, Benjamin writes of "the angel of history," after the Paul Klee painting "Angelus Novus." The angel of history faces imagery from the past. However, "where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (257). For Benjamin's angel, not only are historic events traumatic, but so is history itself; in fact, history is conceived as one colossal and cumulative trauma. The history of the oppressed or the

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<sup>10</sup> Or what we *believe* is trauma: Benjamin never directly engages the word trauma. Instead, he discusses that which answers to the description of our current conception of trauma.

Working definitions of trauma for the purpose of this dissertation are as follows:

*From Greek meaning 'wound'. A serious injury or shock to the body, as from violence or an accident. An emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person, often leading to neurosis. An event or situation that causes great distress and disruption. A deeply distressing experience. Emotional shock following a stressful event.*

*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 10th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Henri Lonitz, Ed. *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2001), 131.

<sup>12</sup> Shoshana Felman, "The Storyteller's Silence," in *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 25.

vanquished is the traumatic event that the angel is powerless to impede; it is the monumental damage he cannot repair. He “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (257). The angel finds himself powerless before the event(s) of history, powerless before trauma. According to Felman, what Benjamin requires of history, then, is that it resurrect and remake what has been destroyed. She writes,

Whereas the task of the philosopher of history is thus to take apart ‘the concept of history’ by showing its deceptive continuity to be in fact a process of silencing, the task of the historian is to reconstruct what history has silenced, to give voice to the dead and to the vanquished and to resuscitate the unrecorded, silenced, hidden story of the oppressed.<sup>13</sup>

The *Theses* support Felman’s concept of giving voice to what has been silenced. For as Benjamin states, “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). However, to rewrite history “does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ and it cannot be fully restored to its original state” (255). History must be, in a sense, reborn in the present. The fate of history lies in the hands of the historian who “will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past [and] is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.” This historian, according to Benjamin, can “articulate the past historically,” thus managing to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). For Felman, this capturing of memory involves the writing of history.

Elucidating this point of the historical responsibility to rescue, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub connects this philosophico-historical study of trauma to a clinical study of trauma. He sees the responsibility of seizure and rescue as belonging to both the historian and the psychoanalyst. He argues that “testimony constitutes...a conceptual breakthrough, as well as a historical event in its own right, a historical recovery which I tend to think of as a ‘historical retroaction.’”<sup>14</sup> For Laub, Benjamin’s “seizure” may be equivalent to this ‘historical retroaction.’ For Benjamin, however, it is only the historical materialist who could perform this ‘retroaction,’ or recovery, and who can understand that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’” (255). Put simply, accuracy was irrelevant; the truth was the experience of trauma. The historicist is the positivist historian concerned with accuracy and linearity. Discerning ‘historical truth’ for Benjamin involves neither accuracy nor linearity; it must instead be “charged with the time of the now ...blasted out of the continuum of history” (261). Benjamin’s time of the now (*Jetztzeit*)

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<sup>13</sup> (Felman, 2003), 34.

<sup>14</sup> Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” in his *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 85.

detemporalizes memory and counters a progressive notion of history, just as trauma destabilizes a progressive notion of memory. Laub sees this tension between accuracy and truth emerging in Holocaust testimony. He argues that historians erroneously look to testimony for facts and information. A patient of his, a Holocaust survivor, testified to witnessing an insurrection in Auschwitz. “The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed” (59). The historians shared the frame of mind that Benjamin ascribes to historicists. In a moment of danger, Laub, like Benjamin’s historical materialist, seized this memory, noting that his patient “testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth” (60). After surviving imprisonment in Auschwitz, Charlotte Delbo opens her testimony with: “Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful.” In doing so, she marks her testimony as a historically materialist history.<sup>15</sup> Laub states that the “loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (82). The annihilation resulting from the failure of testimony can then be analogous to the fate of history.

Jürgen Habermas noted the polarizing aspects of Benjamin’s conception of history. However, he criticized Benjamin’s suggestion of history’s dependence on rescuing testimony. He finds fault with historical testimony’s potential to “fall victim to forgetfulness without leaving a trace.”<sup>16</sup> Yet this is the very fear that Benjamin has for history and its victims. The seizing of memories in moments of danger—grabbing hold of the subtleties of testimony—is a continuous act of rescuing.

According to Felman’s reading of Benjamin, history and trauma are definitively catastrophic, with the Holocaust serving as the paradigmatic case of catastrophe *par excellence*. Does Benjamin’s text corroborate such a view of trauma? The retroactive capturing of history is indeed for Benjamin a “leap into the past”; however, “the same leap in the open air of history is the *dialectical* one” (261; my emphasis). If history is trauma, is it necessarily catastrophic? Does redemption always lie in the rescue of history, the recovery of what has been lost? Can it ever lie in the trauma itself? If it can, then trauma is paradoxical. One has to broaden one’s understanding of trauma and its significances to see trauma as redemptive, for it seems problematic to search for redemption in a trauma as catastrophic as the Holocaust.

For Felman, the failure of the angel stands as a metaphor for the loss of experience that characterizes trauma. However, it is precisely Benjamin’s dialectical examination of ‘loss’ and ‘experience’ that complicates the exclusively catastrophic notion of trauma. Felman considers this failure of experience to be deeply intertwined with the conceptual, or as I suggest, the *metatraumatic*, or second-order traumataic experience of modernity, and the incapacity to testify, the failure of language. The

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<sup>15</sup>Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>16</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *German 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy: The Frankfurt School*, ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2000), 214.

metaphor that Felman uses suggests not only that history is traumatic but that so is the *experience* of the angel. Like the modern subject, the angel is bombarded by and unable to make sense of the wreckage. He cannot experience it; he is silenced.

In her essay, *The Storyteller's Silence*, Felman discusses Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* to exemplify what she believes is the pronounced silence of trauma and the modern loss of experience. She sees Benjamin's text as performative of his own silence, a silence that highlights his individual trauma: the suicide of his best friend in protest of the First World War. His silence further emphasizes the experience of modernity and the loss of the communicability of experience—death as the ultimate silence. She quotes Benjamin saying that,

a generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny fragile human body. (23)

In the modern subject's experience of modernity, nothing remains unchanged; as if in warfare, the individual is subjected to constant traumatic shock and decentered by the awareness of his or her own fragility. Thus, Felman observes the "point of the text that the war has left an impact that has struck dumb its survivors, with the effect of interrupting now the continuity of telling and of understanding" (26). This interruption of continuity, according to Benjamin, is a symptom of modernity which can be seen in the rise of the novel which is "the earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling" (87). And such, supposedly, is the experience of modernity.

Habermas argues that "Benjamin's theory of art is a theory of experience" (214). For Benjamin, the loss of experience relates to the experience of modernity and its incommunicability. Making sense of the loss of experience *as* an experience necessitates the understanding that an experience requires the ability to integrate it into one's history and that it be available as memory. This is why Benjamin discerns two types of experience: stimuli become experience (*Erfahrung*) when they are not sufficiently shocking (or traumatic) to "remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*)" (163). A traumatic experience then, is not in fact experience; it remains unassimilable in this respect. The storyteller should be the purveyor of true experience, experience that should be easily integrated into the memory of the listener:

The more completely it [the story] is integrated into his [the listener] own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. (91)

Rarer and rarer, because like the storyteller, the listener also suffers from the loss of experience. However, is the loss of experience equivalent to the loss of human beings? Benjamin's discussion of modern experience and the disappearance of the storyteller sees 'loss' dialectically as a potentiality. This is the missing component of Felman's analysis of Benjamin's notion of experience. "Nothing would be more fatuous," he states, "than to want to see in it merely a 'symptom of decay,' let alone a 'modern' symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing" (87). When Felman discusses *The Storyteller*, the loss of experience is on a par with tragedy as great as the joint suicide of Benjamin's best friend and that friend's wife, and even suggestive of the future catastrophic loss of the Holocaust. She contends that "before the fact, Benjamin foresees that history will know a holocaust" (32). The historical event for Felman is inextricably tied to tragedy. "For Benjamin," she argues, "the event is therefore one of loss, of shock, of disillusionment, and of awakening to the reality of an inexorable, tragic, historical connection between youth and death" (34). If this is the gravity that Benjamin sees in the loss of experience then certainly it would be singular and unequivocally dreadful. But what about redemption? For Felman, Benjamin sees redemption only in the historically materialist, the historian whose task will be "not only to 'resuscitate Carthage' or to narrate extermination but, paradoxically, to *save the dead*" (32). Redemption will never lie in the trauma only in the writing of it.

Benjamin's work is much more dialectical about experience and loss than Felman's assertions suggest. Precisely because there exists the possibility of redemption in traumatic experience in Benjamin's work, we can assume that he was not foreshadowing a holocaust. In his writings on Baudelaire, modernity creates an experience possibly as universal as the "inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism" (157). Habermas recognizes the centrality of dialectics in Benjamin's work. He quotes Benjamin's claim that "truth is not an unveiling, which annihilates the mystery, but a revelation and a manifestation that does it justice" (212). Benjamin does not merely seek to reveal experience as traumatic and trauma as catastrophe.

Experience for Benjamin is profoundly paradoxical. In *The Storyteller* he writes that in modern times, "experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness" (84). This was evidenced in the storyteller's ever-prevalent disappearance. In his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin envisions a less disastrous side of experience. Elements of the shock and loss of modern experience arise not only in the decline of the storyteller, but also in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. As Ulrich Baer notes, "we only speak of this aspect of traumatic shock in Baudelaire because of Benjamin."<sup>17</sup> Baer writes that

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<sup>17</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan*. (Stanford: Stanford University, 2000), 2.

Baudelaire's notion that being modern means being defined through experiences that are only partially available yields a paradoxically ahistorical definition of modernity. He locates the defining historical trait of his time—mid-nineteenth century—in those experiences that seem to elude temporal placement altogether (2).

For Baer, Baudelaire is the first modernist poet for this very reason. However, he compares Baudelaire's poetry with that of Paul Celan, a survivor of the Holocaust. "Both ... are concerned with the representation of experiences that register as unresolved, shocking, and traumatic...and bear witness to the difficulty of fully grasping and giving voice to our increasingly fragmented existence under modern conditions" (1). The difference in the concrete experience and historical context of Baudelaire and Celan is so drastic that it seems difficult to think that they could both be articulating the same concept of trauma, structurally or otherwise. Certainly, the comparison could prove problematic. Here is one of the places where conceptions of trauma overlap in confusing ways that necessitate caution. For this reason Baer qualifies the comparison:

Though Baudelaire first recognized the dissolution of experience that characterizes modern existence, this awareness of shock experience pales in comparison with Celan's literary testimony to the tremendous suffering, unresolved mental anguish, and vast intellectual and cultural crises prompted by the catastrophe of the Holocaust. (4)

Such a qualification is a necessary beginning, but it still begs the question: How do we use Benjamin to get from trauma to experience to modernity to Baudelaire to Paul Celan and the Holocaust, all the while keeping in mind that Benjamin had no foreknowledge of the Holocaust? Is trauma so enigmatic as to be at once as particular as Celan's experience and as universal as modernity? Benjamin's work engenders this paradox. It would appear that he can at once see what we define as trauma in Baudelaire *and* in the catastrophic loss that is history, although we can never know if he would have suggested otherwise given the knowledge of the Holocaust.

Kevin Newmark goes so far as to invoke Benjamin in order to uncover the possibility of trauma in Baudelaire's discussion of his own laughter. Newmark holds that "there must be some aspect of the trauma in this laughter that is as historically 'real' as anything else that leaves its mark on the world."<sup>18</sup> He justifies laughter as experience comparable to trauma by means of Freud's theory of compulsive

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin Newmark, "Traumatic Poetry" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* ed. Cathy Caruth. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1995), 250.

repetition: “Laughter occurs as shock because it occurs semiotically as language, and as language, laughter is traumatic because it always refers to its inability to occur as anything other than a compulsively repeated reference that is never allowed to come to rest in the fullness of a final meaning” (251). Like Felman, Newmark employs a psychoanalytic conception of trauma through the theoretical slippage from one notion of trauma to another. In this sense, laughter also functions as incommunicable experience. It is a human ‘experience’ that cannot take the form of language. In that respect, it seems, to Newmark, to be traumatic experience. He writes:

It is now clear why Walter Benjamin singles Baudelaire out as the exemplary poet, or star, that lights up the sky of our modernity. The laughter that shakes his texts as well as our attempts to understand it emanates from the shock that in modernity dissociates once and for all the traditional cohesion of experience and cognition (253).

Through Benjamin’s texts, as it would appear, Felman, Baer and Newmark have monologically connected Benjamin to trauma, history, catastrophe, holocaust, modernity, experience, loss, and laughter. Benjamin, however, reveals ambivalent possibilities and mysteries in the study of trauma. His work can elucidate loss as traumatic experience and as its inverse. As Baer notes, it can equally function “to account for the loss of experience and the experience of loss” (21). Responding to Benjamin’s discussion of Baudelaire, Newmark asks an important question:

The question that cannot fail to suggest itself here, of course, is how any properly philosophical understanding can have as its basis an aesthetic experience for which the event of shock has become the norm. . . .how is it possible to test Benjamin’s affirmation that a recuperation, or redemption, of unified experience ‘(die Erfahrung der Aura)’ is possible? (240)

In short, where is the possibility of redemption in the loss of experience? Can trauma be redemptive? Felman fails to see the paradoxical part of experience that Benjamin often addresses, most notably in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” The essay displays a redemptive side of loss, experience and trauma. In this work, loss not only has redemptive but even revolutionary potential. He argues that due to its mass reproduction, technically reproduced art has suffered what he conceives of as a loss of *aura*. Benjamin vaguely defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (222). I would like to suggest that the process that Benjamin calls the loss of aura can also be considered a process of trauma. However, this traumatic process is, for Benjamin, paradoxical, hinging on tensions between ruin and renewal. He describes the loss of aura as a “symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art” (221).



Embedded in authenticity, history and tradition, the loss of aura would appear to be for art, a threatening and damaging consequence. Benjamin posits film as an agent in this damage. In the watching of film, the spectator experiences “changes of place and focus which periodically assail [him]”(238). In fact, “no sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested” (238). Without this arresting ability, assimilation would be impossible and experience (*Erfahrung*) is lost. Benjamin writes that “the spectator’s process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (238). This ‘heightened presence of mind,’ comparable to the heightened hyper-vigilance of the post traumatic subject, constitutes a crucial difference in the experience of film from the experience involved in the catastrophic notion of trauma.

Benjamin sees a useful potential in the effect of the disorienting shock of film. “The film,” he argues, “has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory,” since it “has brought about a similar deepening of apperception” (235). How can a deepening of apperception or assimilation into the mind result from a *traumatic* effect? Trauma is thought to be inassimilable, not an aid in assimilation. For Benjamin, assimilation occurs in the state of distraction- through a deepening of consciousness. Film produces this distraction. “Evidently”, Benjamin argues, “a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye- if only because unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for space consciously explored by man” (236-7). The mediation of the camera causes the viewer to see what he may not have seen without it. The loss of aura here has no concrete outcome; though it can constitute a spark of hope for revolution, it can also, in extreme cases, be its own historic catastrophe.

Just as shocking, disorienting, mechanically reproduced and coming out of a profound loss in the center of modernity is jazz. If anything could encompass the dialectically traumatic and redemptive character of Benjamin’s theory of experience, it would be jazz music. Jazz is the convergence of art, intellectual engagement and popular culture; it is musical-cultural resistance reappropriated by the logic and economy of a slave-labor based society. Jazz is a false break from the music of lamentation; it is *feeling good* music in Jim Crow America under societal oppression and the threat of lynching. Jazz is a difficult situation. It is agency coming out of and deeply rooted in the spirit of subjugation, co-opted by American (and European) capitalism. Jazz breaks free of the iron wrist chains of chattel slavery while holding on for dear life to its ectoplasmic ankle chains of industry, Jim Crow and the increasingly oppressive legal system. Although his understanding of it was plagued by his intransigent elitism, even Adorno did not think jazz could be ignored in the discussion of modernity and its far reaching effects. He recognized the counter-cultural potential of jazz, though he saw it as having failed to realize that potential due to its easy distribution and consumerism. Adorno describes

...the technique of improvisation, which developed together with syncopation and the false bar [*Sheintakt*]. The virtuoso saxophonist or clarinetist, or even percussionist, who made his audacious leaps in between the marked beats of the measure, who distorted the accents and dragged out the sounds in bold glissandi—he, at least, should have been exempted from industrialization. His realm was considered to be the realm of freedom; here the solid wall between production and reproduction was evidently demolished, the longed-for immediacy restored, the alienation of man and music mastered out of vital force. It was not, and the fact that it was not constituted the betrayal and the downfall of jazz.<sup>19</sup>

Much of what Adorno said about jazz and consumerism is true but he failed to acknowledge that this was part of its traumatic testimony. Just as slave drivers seized upon the attractive qualities of black music and dance to draw crowds and sell more slaves, and slave holders employed the healing qualities of music to stave off rebellion in the coffer and on plantations, urban big business capitalized on these same qualities to make fortunes off the musical labor of blacks. Finding, as the minstrel tradition had proved, that black music without blacks could produce even more capital than it would with them, mass appropriation ensued and artists of all backgrounds got caught up in the crosshairs of profitability, culpability, and self-expression. Jazz is the inaugural music of America's first post-slavery century. Like the black folk music during slavery, it was as much a part of the subjugation of blacks as it was part of the escape from subjugation. It necessarily has an important place in trauma studies, yet this important new field rarely, if ever, uses it as its paradigm example.

In the wide range of discourse in trauma studies, grave and brutal *material* experience is often juxtaposed with metaphorical and universalizing *conceptions* of experience. The mention of Walter Benjamin's name seems to be the most persistent. His work is the road most traveled: it is either the starting point, the conjunction, or the final destination. Throughout, the same questions arise: How can trauma be both destructive and redemptive, individual and collective, universal and particular? Can we discuss or testify to the experience of laughter and the Holocaust with the same descriptors? Should we? Benjamin's work often embraces internal tensions, embodying the paradoxes that haunt the discourse of trauma.

In conversation and general agreement with these conceptions of trauma is the work of Cathy Caruth, whose groundbreaking move in trauma studies is to apply and reap the benefits of the extensive literature and discourse on trauma within the psychiatric field. She suggests in her *Unclaimed Experience*, that theorizing the traumatic

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<sup>19</sup>Theodor W Adorno. "Farewell to Jazz," in *Essays on Music Theodore W. Adorno*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2002), 497-98.

event as history “ultimately asks what it would mean to understand history as the history of trauma.”<sup>20</sup> Her work deals intimately with questions of representation and its (im)possibilities. Ruth Leys summarizes Caruth following physician Bessel van der Kolk on her stance on the representation of trauma:

Caruth holds that massive trauma precludes all representation because the ordinary mechanisms of consciousness and memory are temporarily destroyed. ...the traumatic event...returns belatedly in the form of ‘flashbacks,’ traumatic nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.”<sup>21</sup>

Caruth’s totalizing theoretical conceptions of trauma at times understandably clash with the more practical applications of the psychiatric field of trauma, which has to account for variations and differences in traumatic response. She seizes upon a paradoxical notion of memory and its representation, and universalizes it to account for trauma as a whole and its effects on memory. She writes:

The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it. ... Indeed, the literal registration of an event—the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail—appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it escapes full consciousness as it occurs.<sup>22</sup>

Although this theoretical understanding of traumatic memory relies on their clinical accounts, it seems to ignore an important point that both John Krystal and Bessel van der Kolk make in regards to this experience. Krystal writes that “recall *may* often be impaired” and that “patients *may* re-experience aspects of the trauma.”<sup>23</sup> Greenberg and van der Kolk say similarly that features of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that affect memory “*range* from amnesia for *part*, or all, of the traumatic events...Such failures of recall *can* paradoxically coexist with ...intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic event.”<sup>24</sup> I highlight these instances because they demonstrate that the clinical conception does and must allow for a range of experiences of trauma in order to treat it and if we refer to them, so must ours.

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<sup>20</sup> Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Leys, *Trauma, A Genealogy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 266.

<sup>22</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Recapturing the Past: Introduction” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1995), 153.

<sup>23</sup> (Caruth 1995) 152, my emphasis. See John Krystal, “Animal Models for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” in ed. Earl L. Giller Jr. *Biological Assessment and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, my emphasis. See Mark Greenberg and Bessel A. van der Kolk. “Retrieval and Integration of Traumatic Memories with the ‘Painting Cure.’” in *Psychological Trauma*, ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1987).

This theoretical paradox of memory, though quite interesting, is neither the rule nor the exception; it is an interesting scenario within the range of possibilities. From these accounts, it would appear that experiences of trauma may in fact be remembered, and that flashbacks may be a traumatic response experienced by some and not all. The instances where events are indeed remembered are in part the reason we have testimonials to turn to. In this sense, Caruth seems to deny the redemptive possibilities of traumatic experience in the way that Felman does. Traumatic experiences are most likely assimilated in some way. In fact, the lack of “accuracy” in traumatic testimony may be itself the work of assimilation. It makes sense that for one to integrate “impossible” memories, they may have to be altered in some way. This does not mean that they are not remembered. Caruth seems to zero in on one type of experience of trauma, memory and its representations, theorizing from a universal conception of trauma that leaves out a range of other possibilities. As Leys recounts,

For Caruth, an analogous ‘deathlike break’ lies at the heart of trauma; the victim of trauma who cannot symbolize or represent the traumatic event or accident that caused her condition nevertheless obsessively ‘performs,’ reenacts or reexperiences it in the form of flashbacks, dreams and related symptoms. (267)

A wide range of experiences seem to be conflated into a single model of trauma. For many reasons, it seems necessary to drastically expand many of these notions of trauma. Related to Benjamin’s redemptive possibilities of theoretical trauma are the healing possibilities of concrete trauma. Leys summarizes some of the basic assumptions that I believe need expanding. She expounds on

a set of widely shared assumptions about the constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era, which Caruth never quite puts forward as her own but which is explicit in the writings of other scholars whom she cites with approval, notably literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub. For those scholars, the Holocaust in particular is the watershed event of the modern age because, uniquely terrible and unspeakable, it radically exceeds our capacity to grasp and understand it. And since this is so, the Holocaust is held to have precipitated, perhaps caused, an epistemological-ontological crisis of witnessing, a crisis manifested at the level of language itself. (268)

The over-arching internationality of these trauma theories draws attention to what they omit. Conspicuously missing from these representations of modernity and trauma are the traumas of American slavery and genocide and their aftermath, and the modernity of which jazz was the official soundtrack. Trauma theorists do not tend to

discuss the trauma of slavery except, on occasion, through the work of Toni Morrison.<sup>25</sup> Texts like Cathy Caruth's foundational collection discusses trauma from the Holocaust to Hiroshima to Vietnam to modernity and the more recent epidemic of AIDS, but the traumatic aftermath of American slavery is not one of the topics of mainstream trauma studies. The cultural trauma of slavery is discussed by sociologist Ron Eyerman in his *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* but even he does not discuss jazz and its relation to trauma in any depth. Although he does not identify himself as working within the field of trauma studies, Eyerman does refer to theorists such as Caruth, whom he uses to argue that "it is not the experience itself that produces traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it." This then becomes his premise for slavery's traumatic effect on a group that has not experienced it personally.<sup>26</sup> However, Eyerman distinguishes psycho-physical trauma from cultural trauma. He writes that

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. (2)

Although this conception of cultural trauma seems applicable to slavery, I take issue with its opposition to psychological trauma. The line between this definition of cultural trauma and psychological trauma is rather blurred in the trauma field which already theorizes the latter to make claims about the former. Furthermore, without the presence of psychological trauma, there is little need to discuss cultural trauma as such. The two seem ineluctably bound. Eyerman further separates slavery from psychological trauma by suggesting that "the 'trauma' in question is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (1). I cannot see a reason for eliding the one in order to discuss the other. Both the institution and the experience of slavery are documented and available for the work of trauma studies. Furthermore, slavery as a collective memory and essential part of identity-formation is wrought from individual traumatic experiences, especially as the culture of slavery which was rooted in racism evolved to take different forms. Eyerman suggests that

slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a 'primal scene' which could, potentially, unite all 'African Americans' in the United States, whether or not

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<sup>25</sup> See Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) and Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber. *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 3.

they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa.  
(1)

This is because, as Eyerman argues, the national memory of slavery changed many times after reconstruction and was only solidified as traumatic after the civil rights movements. Before then, post-reconstruction America had a nostalgic view of the benign and benevolent days of slavery. Of course, black Americans never shared this view and fled the South in mass numbers for fear of the reinstatement of slavery (16). According to Eyerman, it was these frightening remembrances of slavery that finally led to its conception as a cultural trauma. That he discusses slavery and trauma together is laudable; however, like the field of trauma studies in general, the scope of what defines trauma for him seems paradoxically too narrow and too broad at once. To further his own definition of cultural trauma, Eyerman quotes Neil Smelser's, part of which is that it is "regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions"(2).

With regard to slavery, this definition fails. Eyerman argues that slavery served as a "primal scene" for African American identity but, how can slavery violate "fundamental cultural presuppositions" when it is *the* fundamental cultural presupposition? Slavery would appear to violate itself somehow. The importance of this circular logic is what it reveals about slavery's difficult but important placement within the field of trauma studies. Differentiating it from psychological trauma studies only places it in a category that not only cannot adequately define it but also erases its actual psychologically traumatic effects, which should be the most significant reason for returning to it in the first place. Although it is a valuable text on African American identity formation, Eyerman's account does not fill the void as far as the discussion of slavery and its aftermath in the field of trauma studies is concerned. A significant point that I do adopt from Eyerman's text is that "collective forgetting is as important as collective remembering for a society's self-reflection"(11).

What does it mean that the dominant field of trauma studies has selectively "forgotten" the trauma of slavery, considering its sweeping impact on American identity formation as a whole? What is the significance of this forgetting especially as the field insists on invoking Benjamin's theory that argues for the primacy of the history of the oppressed. The universalizing tendency of trauma studies should have prompted it to include a study of slavery. It is because I believe that the contributions of the field have been so phenomenal and deservedly influential that I view this lacuna as particularly striking. The divide seems symptomatic of a larger forgetting and denial of this important trauma. The widely accepted reference to slave testimonies as "slave narratives" as opposed to testimony also points to this omission in that it suggests an

assimilated “story” that may or may not deal with traumatic events, a distinction already well understood in trauma studies.<sup>27</sup>

The study of the cross-generational traumatic effect of slavery could prove invaluable for assessing the effects of Holocaust trauma on the future generations of survivors. The question of *whether* trauma is transmitted from one generation to another would quickly transform into *how* trauma is transmitted across generations. One need not go far in order to see the effect of a “primal scene” of subjection on the identity formation of children of survivors of extreme and brutal subjugation. This is especially the case for those survivors whose very existence in America, like that of many black Americans, is historically the result of a massive crime committed against their ancestors. Similar issues like the relationship between language (or mother-tongue) and culture are necessarily complicated by these historic displacements. A more “integrated” discourse on these topics could initiate healing for all parties involved, as well as make the field of trauma studies theoretically and historically more rigorous.

Discourse on African American and diasporic experience never fails to mention the importance of music in the expression of that experience, but diaspora studies are not in direct communication with the trauma field. Thus, for example, Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, invokes Benjamin’s account of history and modernity to formulate his theory, but is not especially concerned with the trauma that might very well be at the heart of the psychic split that informs the double consciousness he describes. At times, Gilroy’s text stands right at the edge of a discussion of trauma. He writes:

Though they were unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible, and my main aim here is to explore how residual traces of their necessarily painful expression still contribute to historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation. (73)

Were Gilroy in communication with the trauma studies field, he too would have undoubtedly taken issue with the idea of the absolute inexpressibility of trauma. However, the groundwork of the field could contribute to the understanding of symptoms of those “residual traces.” When Gilroy addresses music, he engages previous discussions of the topic and finds fault with both essentialist and anti-essentialist claims about it. He situates himself as

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<sup>27</sup> Because the Works Progress Administration collected thousands of autobiographical testimonies of ex-slaves between 1936-1938, a period that, as Eyerman demonstrates, was overly concerned with a nostalgic view of slavery (easily evidenced by the 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* and its 1939 film adaptation), it makes sense that these testimonies would be collected under the term “narratives.” The important work of trauma studies is to challenge these labels and memory practices and analyze their connotative performances, so to speak.

staging a conversation between those who see the music as the primary means to explore critically and reproduce politically the necessary ethnic essence of blackness and those who would dispute the existence of any such unifying, organic phenomenon. (100)

Interestingly, Gilroy notes that in the argument about racial authenticity in music “the effects of racism’s denials not only of black cultural integrity but of the capacity of blacks to bear and reproduce any culture worth of the name are clearly salient” (97). Gilroy here provides a veiled hint at the traumatic experience behind both sides of this argument. One wonders to what extent are these effects salient in the wealth of trauma studies that omits this racial trauma and the wealth of cultural studies that compulsively returns to it.<sup>28</sup>

Gilroy’s and other texts, notably Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, are especially engaged with discourses on memory, even the memory of trauma, (though named with a different emphasis as terror), but not the trauma of memory that compels us to remember as aggressively as we tend to. Hartman’s text comes closest to a traumatic reading of slave testimonies, focusing on scenes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and charting the striking continuities between slavery and freedom during reconstruction. Although her text does not directly fall within the realm of trauma studies, she cites Laub and Felman, and examines in depth issues of witnessing and testimony, exploring “the uncertain line between witness and spectator”(4). She too invokes Benjamin’s historical imperative to give voice to the history of the oppressed. She writes that

the effort to ‘brush history against the grain’ requires excavations at the margins of monumental history in order that the ruins of the dismembered past be retrieved, turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate of adequate sources for history making and attending to the cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts. (11)

Although music may be one of such “forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry,” the role of music is only one of her many insights, and its function as testimony isn’t fully considered by her.

As a growing field, jazz studies hasn’t as yet focused on trauma directly, preferring so far discussions of literature, history, biographies and the place of jazz in modernity and American culture. Leading jazz theorist Robert O’Meally has collected distinguished works of jazz critics that detail jazz historiography and its cultural and

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<sup>28</sup> My own intervention included.



political implications without any direct focus on trauma or trauma studies.<sup>29</sup> Finally, discussions of black music focus more on resistance and radicalism than they do on memory and trauma, like for example, Angela Davis’s important study of blues and black feminism.<sup>30</sup> An exception would be Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*, a project which, like mine, sees African American music as tantamount to African American history, and necessarily therefore a traumatic history (although his work, originally published in 1963, predates the emergence of the trauma field).<sup>31</sup>

In many ways, all of these fields are talking about the same things with different emphases and using a different language. But even given their divergent foci, they have all shared some assumptions: the importance/difficulty of communicating/remembersing/representing traumatic history. They all also view traumatic histories as necessarily affecting culture formation in the modern age. Outside of the clinical domain, trauma studies does not tend to discuss music, since the genres of memoirs, testimonial interviews, fiction and poetry seem to dominate the realm of testimony.<sup>32</sup> In what follows, I offer my own conception of trauma and its musical expression through jazz.

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*It has been hard for me, as a philosopher, to learn the lesson that knowledge isn't always desirable, that the truth doesn't always set you free.*

—Susan Brison<sup>33</sup>

*Praying Slave  
Jazz band after  
Breaking heart  
To the time of laughter. ...*

—Gwendolyn B. Bennett.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Robert O’Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). And Robert O’Meally, G. B. H. Edwards, et al. *Uptown Conversation : The New Jazz Studies*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> See Angela Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey*. (New York, Vintage, 1999). See also Moten, Fred. *In The Break : The aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues People : Negro Music in White America*. (New York: William Morrow, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> For clinical discussions of trauma and music see Julie Sutton. ed. *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma: International Perspectives*. (London: Kingsly Publishers, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Susan Brison, *Aftermath : Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>34</sup> Bennet, Gwendolyn B. From “Song” in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Alain Locke ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1925).

My conceptual understanding of trauma has taken many turns over the years; numerous books on the subject line the shelves in my living room. One, however, has a place in my own room, and it is to this work that I return when I tire of philosophy. Ironically, it is written by a philosopher. Susan Brison recounts a traumatic experience of sexual assault best told in her own words and not well served by the overdetermined label (of sexual assault) that would act to betray it. Her exploration informs my own understanding of the nature of trauma; and through it, I realize my formation of jazz as the testimony that can begin to close the fissure between a broken subjectivity and the society necessary for continued survival: jazz as the convergence of trauma and redemption.

If I were a philosopher, I would declare that trauma is, at its heart, an epistemic crisis. However, I will say instead that I know that trauma has much to do with knowledge. One is immediately set apart from society because of the secret horror of which she has been made brutally aware. The consciousness of a traumatized subject wants to rejoin the society to which it once belonged, but now it knows too much. Not only does the society not know what the consciousness knows, it cannot believe, conceive or accept this knowledge. Society itself may very well be predicated on the absence or denial of this kind of knowledge which belies the security and community of the very concept of society. A traumatized consciousness can never go back and unknow what it now knows, and society requires this unknowing. Trauma creates a split between the self and her consciousness: the before and the after, the living and the dead.

Certainly, what the traumatized person knows is true; it is a truth beyond the reach of anyone who hasn't learned it for himself. So she cannot go back—cannot imagine going back to the lie or the ignorance. A new and fathomless chasm exists between the knowing and the ignorant which threatens to extinguish whatever existence remains. But the ignorant cannot cross the chasm to reaffirm her existence, and there is only one way to know. So she says, “Look this way! You can't see, but look anyway. Send your intention toward me and the truth that's over here in this nowhere space.” The distance between her and her society is perhaps as unbridgeable as that between her new and former self.

Undoubtedly, conceptualizing the aftermaths of chattel slavery as trauma with this conception in mind is difficult to do. What is the *before* and *after* of this trauma? Many if not most enslaved peoples lived their entire lives in this traumatic circumstance. There was no *before* subjectivity that is destroyed by trauma; rather, these subjectivities are born broken. This is true of the generations of people born after the official end of slavery. Perhaps this is what led Eyerman and others to classify slavery as cultural rather than psychological trauma. However, the length and magnitude of the trauma, namely, the fact that it was not one catastrophic event, shouldn't disqualify it as such. Perhaps the prevalence of individuals who lived their entire lives in extremely traumatic circumstances points to the singularity of the

traumatic mode of existence that was chattel slavery. The absence of a pre-traumatic untraumatized subjectivity does not change the effects of the trauma. These always already traumatized subjects still stand on the non-societal end of the chasm of knowledge that marks traumatic experience.

Brison's conception of trauma is different from the rest of the field of trauma studies in concentrating on regaining what has been lost to trauma. She focuses more on the possibility rather than the impossibility of healing traumatized subjectivities. That possibility centers on the imperative to testify that follows the survival of trauma. She cites Primo Levi's recurrent dream, where his family fails to witness to his experience of surviving Auschwitz. He asks, "Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to-story?" (62) The horror of trauma becomes the horror of the eternally unheard. Interestingly, she approaches Levi's question by recounting a scene from the film, *La Famiglia*:

There is a scene in the film *La Famiglia* ... in which a little boy's uncle pretends not to see him, a game that quickly turns from a bit of fun into a kind of torture when the man persists long beyond the boy's tolerance for invisibility. For the child, not to be seen is to be annihilated. Not to be heard means that the self the survivor has become does not exist for these others. Since the earlier self died, the surviving self needs to be known and acknowledged in order to exist. (62)

Not only does the surviving self need to be acknowledged and known, the loss of the former self must be mourned. In the case of the stillborn subjectivity of a victim of the trauma of slavery, there is still this mourning of what never was. Reconciling this loss requires the acknowledgement of the split, no matter when it occurred. As Brison suggests, the existence of the surviving self depends on acknowledgement and also registering the entirety of what has transpired as a result of the traumatic event. The need for recognition, the need to be *known*, makes sense, but the possibility for recognition is complicated by the extreme difficulty for both the survivor to testify and the witness to listen. There is a mutual refusal between language and listening. The language refuses to do justice to the story, while the witness refuses even the inadequate story because of the difficulty of hearing the unbearable. This is perhaps because even the inadequate story nevertheless transmits something of the unbearable. Brison maintains that the refusal of the witness is both personal and cultural in a society that becomes complicit with the trauma by blaming the victim, a failure to witness. However, neither refusal nor failure negates the ever-present imperative to testify and the dire need for witnessing. Brison writes that

nonetheless, the trauma survivor must find empathetic listeners in order to carry on. Piecing together a shattered self requires a process of remembering and working through in which speech and affect converge in a trauma narrative. . . . The communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, but it also reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others. (XI)

This is made especially complicated by bearing witness to one's own trauma. Brison rephrases this imperative as the difference between living to tell and telling to live (110). However, another type of narration serves the purpose of (re)integrating a survivor into a community. There are other ways to "resubjectify a self objectified by trauma"(73). There are other modes of speaking. She writes that

For about a year after the assault, I rarely, if ever, spoke in smoothly flowing sentences. I could sing, though, after about six months, and, like aphasics who cannot say a word, but can still sing verse after verse, I never stumbled over the lyrics. . . . Mainly, it was something I could do, loudly, openly. . . .(114)

She recalls spending an hour's drive "singing every spiritual I'd ever heard" (114). Not only is singing something she could do at a moment when speaking was not possible, but it was the spiritual in particular to which she turned. In the spiritual, she was able to find some comfort and some release.

I believe that music can touch the unknowing and that through it, one can reconnect with society in a shared realm. Felman once wrote about the writing of Paul Celan as a "polyphonic but ironically disjointed art of counterpoint, and . . . the obsessional, compulsive repetitions and the vertiginous explosion of a mad song whose lament—half blasphemy, half prayer—bursts at once into a speechless, voiceless crying and into the dancing tumult of a drunken celebration."<sup>35</sup> It was this description in part that helped solidify my own thoughts on jazz in the realm of trauma. I wondered whether she was speaking of Celan or John Coltrane.<sup>36</sup> As the music of modernity, jazz is constituted by this traumatic process of counterpoint, repetition, lamentation, blasphemy and prayer. Practitioners of great skill have the power to translate the trauma inherent in jazz into something not so easily refused.

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<sup>35</sup>Shoshana Felman. "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. (New York: Routledge 1991), 29.

<sup>36</sup> I remembered the first time I heard a recording of his "My Favorite Things" (Atlantic Records, 1961) and what that experience was for me, and I decided to write about jazz, picking up where language fails. Although, of course, in the case of John Coltrane, there are no lyrics to code the message of the song. With this particular track, the lyrics are absent but hinted at by the melody. These absent lyrics are in direct opposition with the dissonance of the music.

The responsibility for and compulsion of the necessary processes of testifying and witnessing falls to the performer and the audience. In particular, the singer of jazz articulates centuries of oral and musical tradition and the centuries of trauma, chattel slavery and Jim Crow that helped form it. With her breath and body, the jazz musician sings a story that she might not be able to speak; her audience already knows her song, and together they initiate the process of the reformation of subjectivity.

When the jazz singer testifies to trauma through her song, she performs another function that makes her testimony not only essential to her own survival and the rebuilding of her subjectivity, but to the survival of all those to and for whom her song speaks. In another study, I could argue that all trauma is collective, but I'm certain that the social collectivity of the traumatic legacy of slavery needs little argument. The singer's song performs an historical function whose importance cannot be underestimated. The record of her song is history; the recording of her song is the writing of history, a historiography. Not only does she write history, but she writes an extremely important history, the kind of history that can renew a subjectivity and, in a sense, give life to the dead. That is, it gives voice to a silenced community.

Seen in this way, the singer of jazz, has much responsibility, with so many dead to awaken. As she sings her song, which is constructed from and communicating with her ancestors' song, she must "brush history against the grain"(257). Her jazz song not only articulates the past historically, but is nothing if not "charged with the time of the now" (261). Benjamin's time of the now (*Jetztzeit*) defines jazz most succinctly. Without the element of the *Jetztzeit*, her song would no longer be historical testimony, would lose its necessary connection to the present, the place where testimony happens. Her task is not easy: her song contends with the brutality of the past in the ever-present, her America vigorously forgets the barbarism of that past, and simultaneously rejects the possibility of its presence in the right now. At every turn, silence threatens her history; each moment is a moment of danger, for many who love her blues song seek to silence it, or struggle to love it without claiming it, as if ownership were the only way to love.

The concept of jazz and blues music as history is far from new. The poet Sterling Brown suggested this to Amiri Baraka in the fifties. Brown told him, "This is the history. This is your history, my history, the history of the Negro People."<sup>37</sup> A life altering experience for Baraka, he went on to write *Blues People* in the early sixties. He writes,

But as I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. That it was the history of the Afro-American people as a text, as tale, as

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<sup>37</sup> Amiri Baraka. *Blues People : Negro Music in White America*. (New York: William Morrow, 1999), ix.

story, as exposition, narrative, or what have you, that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual, lived lives. That the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, beaten, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history. . . . That the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people! (ix-x)

My purpose here is not to reify the notion of a united people or restate the constitutive relationship between the music and the history but rather to point to the poignancy of Baraka's final exclamation mark. His mark (!), closes not only a sentence of revelation, but an experience of trauma. Baraka wasn't simply shocked to have discovered a relationship between his history and the music he loves but to have found any viable history at all. Yes, this is a controversial statement. However, regardless of what he knew to be true, a large part of the trauma of the African American experience is the lack of access to one's history in the formative years, in a society that looks to its history to formulate its identity. As Hartman mentions following Spivak, Benjamin has told us that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"(256).<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, not only do documents of civilization *contain* barbarism, but "barbarism taints also the manner in which [history] was transmitted from one owner to another"(256). In the history we read to understand ourselves, our culture and our past, barbarism informs both the way it is written and the way it is told to us. I suddenly hear my grandmother saying, "I could've told you that." We already know there's something wrong with the history books even when we cannot quite put a finger on exactly what it is. In his scintillating prose, Benjamin tells us what's wrong. When history consists of stories about who has conquered whom, it isn't the conquered who writes it down. Furthermore, the conquerors write tales of victory, not of agony. Therefore, I do not wish simply to describe the music as historical archive but rather to highlight the archive—music as history—as *trauma*. Because the history is equivalent to a history of trauma, it becomes a rather necessary American history. Because it is a *threatened* history, a history of barbarism not written by the conquerors, or *historicists*, it is the history we should turn to even if it is still implicated in the barbarism to which it testifies.

This history might just be Benjamin's necessary "point where historical materialism cuts through historicism" (255). It may take a faithful leap to see the performer of jazz as a bona fide historical materialist. Adorno certainly couldn't make that leap. Furthermore, many who invoke Benjamin do not truly feel the "state of

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<sup>38</sup> (Hartman 10) See Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

emergency” that he spoke of and will seek to reduce his work to its context rather than apply it to the now time. However, he argued that this “‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (257). Even so, as we try to turn to this musical materialist history, we risk destroying it, for turning to history does not by itself negate the power of the historicist eyes that are looking.

But it still must be done if we are to reverse the endless piling up of wreckage that characterizes the trauma that is history. The survivor of trauma must testify if any renewal of the subject is to occur. A new unshattered subjectivity depends upon giving testimony and that testimony must have a witness in order to have its effect. We must recognize and acknowledge the new self that testifies, the new identity that has a story of loss to tell. I return to Brison to understand how the denial of this testimony reinforces the trauma. She argues that in America we share a “cultural complicity in the refusal to see trauma from the victim’s perspective” (55). She describes the denial of the impact of slavery in the present as the “cultural repression of traumatic memories” (57). That this cultural repression extends even into trauma studies demonstrates its enormous strength. Not only does this repression hinder the recovery of self that is necessary for the survivor of trauma but it amplifies that very trauma. She suggests that “attempting to limit traumatic memories does not make them go away; the signs and symptoms of trauma remain, caused by a source more virulent for being driven underground” (58). So we must bear the burden of history by engaging it in the present. This active engagement is the only way to truly bear the burden, to accept it as a visible mark of our society, to birth a new self that may never be the same but that is *still* a survivor. With this conception of our history, we become witnesses that rebuild rather than further tear down subjectivities destroyed or stillborn by trauma. Understanding jazz as traumatic history does more than this. The archive of trauma is also evidence of the same. Understanding the music in its historical contexts requires one to see the traumatic history which created it, a history that is constantly threatened with erasure by a society that wants to see itself as post-racist. That history—that evidence—is foundational to American history, a history built on trauma. Unfortunately, it is a self-replicating history that relies upon a successful denial of the evidence.

In Chapter 1, I explore both the trauma of invisibility and the imperative to be heard. I will examine the tension between this threat of invisibility and the inaudibility of the traumatized and the need to make oneself heard and recognized as they are expressed in artistic testimony, specifically through the art of singing jazz. First, I consider jazz through a literary lens. In Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, blues singer Ursa bears the burden of evidence. Her trauma is collective and very personal, and she must discover a way to testify to the trauma of her ancestors and her own with the blues. *Corregidora* shows how traumatic content is to be found even in the texture of the voice. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, I emphasize the importance of the witness and his accountability for the testimony. In this text, the protagonist, while listening to

Louis Armstrong's jazz contemporary to 1933, witnesses to the struggles of African American experience in Jim Crow America *as well as* the history and legacy of slavery, all in one performance. He hears the invisibility of himself, Armstrong in Armstrong's music. Finally, I attempt to highlight the traumatic testimony in yet another performance of Armstrong's. I revisit the controversial face of Armstrong and how it testifies to the history of blackface minstrelsy.

Chapter 2 focuses on the power of the singer (and her song) as the voice of the people and the screen upon which they reflect their collective identity. I explore the singer's relationship to the people to whom her song gives voice. In Kafka's "Josefine the Singer or the Mouse People," there is no mouse people without Josefine, and her power to create a people transcends even her abilities as a singer. Josephine Baker also manages to create a 1920s Paris with a talent that is still disputed to this day. Her life and art tell a story of survival and triumph that also reveals the history of trauma that made it possible. Through both Josephines, I explore the idea that a singer can represent a collective, while being reduced to animals by the gaze of mainstream society.

Chapter 3 discusses one song and one aspect of the trauma that underlies American history. "Strange Fruit," written by Jewish American Abel Meeropol and sung by Billie Holiday, evoked the trauma of lynching in America in an effort to protest the same. In a career that hinges on her ability to convey the effects of a traumatic life, Holiday, nonetheless, breaks from a tradition that hides its meaning in the music and allows the lyrics to speak and protest the crime of lynching for which "Strange Fruit" was controversial and ugly evidence. I try to examine "Strange Fruit" as it applies to the present moment.

In the final chapter, I discuss the history of discourse on blackface minstrelsy. Although some have sought to recover blackface minstrelsy from its sordid reputation, it nonetheless cannot be dissociated from the practice of lynching. I discuss Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as evidence par excellence of the trauma implicated in the formation of American popular music. While America's first sound film celebrates an American tradition of minstrelsy, it also documents it. Viewing this popular conception of "jazz" music as "black" music appropriated by American Jews underscores the complex history of jazz and the painful reminders it should but doesn't always call up for those who follow it. As Michael Rogin argues, by donning blackface, Jolson's character effaces both black and Jewish particularity in favor of an assimilated "American" identification with and caricaturization of blacks and their "experience" of slavery.<sup>39</sup> However, the *The Jazz Singer* recognizes only its departure from Jewish religion, evidenced by its legendary atonement scene and not the metaphorical violence of blackface minstrelsy.

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Rogin. *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).



Understanding jazz and its musical legacy as an archive of American trauma should serve two purposes. Recognizing it as traumatic testimony will, I hope, call attention to the imperative to witness it as such, especially in the field of trauma studies. It should also emphasize what is at stake in this witnessing. The survivors of trauma, the inheritors of the legacy of slavery, will continue to testify to that ever-evolving trauma. Perhaps if we strive to listen, to recognize and be witnesses to that testimony, the process of the reformation of broken American subjectivities can finally begin.



## Chapter One

### Strange Fruit: Song of a Century



Robin Carson (1938)

**Strange Fruit**  
*The wailing of a clarinet,  
And then the wounding voice  
Of the woman with the fulgent  
Gardenia in her hair:  
“Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves,  
And blood at the root . . .”  
How can I tell you?  
As a boy,  
I was frightened by Billie’s song,  
The way a child is frightened,  
Begins to fathom his own  
Capacity for mourning,  
Learning a grief  
That is racial,  
Cached in the soul  
From generations of suffering  
—Everything in our people  
That is strangulated, stillborn,  
Welling up  
In a song,  
In a child’s pure sadness  
I came to identify  
By its bitter taste  
As “strange fruit.”  
In school I heard about Emmett Till,  
The boy who was lynched  
For “eyeball rape.”  
And then the strange fruit was given  
A face, a body like my own—  
Tonight I am listening  
To what haunted me as a child:  
Lady Day evoking  
Fear’s murderous harvest, a boy’s body  
Swinging from a tree.  
And I’m dreaming the death of fear,  
That one word, if we could grasp it,  
Which might stop a child from becoming strange fruit.*

—Cyrus Cassells

“How can I tell you?” asks poet Cyrus Cassells.<sup>1</sup> He wants to know how to express something: mourning, racialized grief, the suffering of generations, all stored, hidden in the soul of a child. In his poem, Cassells feels the weight of an entire people, its centuries of suffering as the fear of a single child: “everything... strangulated and stillborn,” rises up to the surface, and when it spills over, it comes out as a song: “Strange Fruit.”

If there is a song that archives a history of trauma—the trauma that is the collective, ever-evolving experience of American racism in the aftermath of American slavery—that song is “Strange Fruit,” and the singer is Billie Holiday. In the above image, a photo taken by Robin Carson, Holiday has just finished a performance of “Strange Fruit.”<sup>2</sup> It is one of several such photos by Carson from that evening. Her signature gardenias don’t quite mask the ugliness for which “Strange Fruit” is a reminder. When Cassells asks, “How can I tell you?” he reveals a great difficulty: how to give testimony to a personal experience of collective trauma. “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol and performed by Billie Holiday, is his answer to the question. What cannot be told in words, or even in poetry, can be said with a jazz song. Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” testifies to an important American history of trauma, what Cassells calls “the shadow reality” of slavery and genocide that stands in opposition to the ideals upon which America was founded.<sup>3</sup> The shadow reality is the *everything*. The song, with its lyrics, music, historical context, and many performances—especially that of Billie Holiday—reflects upon and gives evidence for the complex, intricate and traumatic legacy of slavery in America. “Strange Fruit” sheds light on Cassells’s *everything*—the shadow reality—in a way that demonstrates the lingering quality of this reality. Abel Meeropol’s song, in a sense, paints that reality and takes the American practice of lynching only as a starting point. The controversies that stir in the wake of the song, its mixed reception, the question of authorship, even the racialized discussion of Holiday’s own relationship to the song all demonstrate how lynching is only the door that opens onto the shadow reality of America’s strange fruit. “Strange Fruit” then, is not a metaphor for lynching; lynching is a metaphor for strange fruit: the traumatic experience of racism in America. Meeropol’s lyrics are as follows.

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

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<sup>1</sup> Cassells, Cyrus. “Strange Fruit.” *Callaloo*, No. 18 (1983): 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin. *In Search of Billie Holiday: If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*. (New York: Ballantine Books. 2001), 118.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Frances Jimenez, “Living Witness: An Interview with Cyrus Cassells.” *African American Review*, Volume 43, Number 1, Spring 2009, p.75.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.  
Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.<sup>4</sup>

It is the lyrics of “Strange Fruit” that make it such an exemplary instance of jazz evoking the trauma of the post-slavery African American experience. Although I have already suggested that the traumatic content can be found within the dialogical tension between the lyrics and the music, as in Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good,” it would appear that “Strange Fruit” contradicts this. However, as I will show, in “Strange Fruit,” there is a functional dialogical tension in the lyrics themselves that mirrors and is in communication with the same inherent tension in jazz. These lyrics are, in turn, also in tension with the music, suggesting that a Bakhtinian dialogical tension informs not only African American coded language and music, but Jewish discursive practices as well. The two meet in “Strange Fruit.” Meeropol uses metaphors, graphic imagery and stark contrasts to make explicit the horrors of lynching, specifically in the American South. As in archetypal Jewish discourse, he sets up his audience for a pleasant, sentimental experience (which will later be corrupted with violence) by creating an atmosphere of nostalgia with images of natural beauty, beginning his song with “southern trees.”<sup>5</sup> That they “bear strange fruit” creates a homologous strangeness; one might wonder what is strange about the fruit, while noting the strangeness of the suggestion itself. That the trees have “blood on the leaves and at the root” creates a different set of problems. Perhaps a proud southern ear might even hear “blood” and be reminded of concepts like “sacrifice” and imagine a valorous South, through and through, leaf to root. However, blood here suggests a metaphorical guilt and, of course, literal blood on the trees. That the blood is on the leaves *and* the root has at least two possible meanings. There is the inside\outside dichotomy as well as a suggestion of now and from the very beginning. If the trees are a metaphor for the South here, then the South has a deep seeded culpability beginning with its inception. If there is still confusion about where the song is going the next line does not quite resolve it. “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,” also conveys a dual suggestion. On the one hand, “black bodies” could be an objectified way of saying “black people.” It is the 1930s and swing is the music of the

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<sup>4</sup> David Margolick. *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 1.

<sup>5</sup> As Chana Kronfeld has suggested to me, this “set up” is typical of Jewish discourse, with the caveat against essentializing Jewishness as a fixed/biological identity formation. Sarcasm and irony are particularly salient literary forms. See Benjamin Harshav. *The Meaning of Yiddish*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

time; bodies could be singing or playing swing music on instruments or literally swinging their bodies in dance. And like the southern trees, the “southern breeze” calls upon nostalgia and the imagery of relaxation in the balmy South. On the other hand, as we find out later in the song, those bodies are literal bodies of deceased people and their blackness is not only attributable to race but also the effect of bodies having been burned. That they are burned and swinging from a tree juxtaposed with the southern breeze will prove to be one of many assaults on the South and on the senses this song performs. The dissonant images of the traumatic swinging of bodies from trees and the contemporaneous “swing” musical form, performs the same tension found between the lyrics and music in jazz, exemplified in “Feeling Good.”

In rhyme with the “southern breeze” Meeropol writes, “strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” That the bodies are literally hanging from these trees makes sense but, because the bodies could still be people dancing, their significance as “strange fruit” is still unclear by this point of the song.<sup>6</sup> By the next line, “pastoral scene from the gallant south,” there is still room for that hypothetical southern ear to imagine itself proudly as part of a nostalgic scene where idealized people inhabit a romanticized place. At this point in the song, the South could still be as brave and heroic as it is beautiful. It is the next line that erases all ambiguity, solidifies the tone and changes the mood of the song. Meeropol juxtaposes the “gallant south” with horrific and ugly imagery of “the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth.” The gallantry of the South is now sarcastic and all room for alternate interpretation disappears with this line. What follows are more bitter juxtapositions and a climactic ending. Because rhyming usually belongs to children’s poems and to songs of innocence, the contrasts are especially stark. He contrasts “the scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh” with the “sudden smell of burning flesh.” That sudden reference to both types of smells is aimed at shocking the sense-perception of both the imaginary observer of the lynching and the audience of the song. The smell assaults the senses that were heretofore engaged in remembering the sweet smell of magnolias. The imaginary olfactory sense is now suddenly asked to imagine the smell of burning human flesh. Perhaps the song suggests that only the southern ear could imagine either smell, thus further personalizing the affront to the South’s romantic self-conception that is “Strange Fruit.” The last four lines feature more disturbing imagery thematized through jarring sounds no singer wants to sing. The body or “fruit” remains for nature to decompose, through animals and the elements. It is left for the “crows to

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<sup>6</sup> As Chana Kronfeld has also suggested to me, this is also an allusion to Psalm 137.1-4.:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion/  
There on the poplars we hung our harps/  
for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ / How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

This would suggest that strange fruit, here, is also the aforementioned “the violated condition of the vessel of song,” following Saidiya Hartman (34).

pluck,” “the rain to gather,” “the wind to suck,” “the sun to rot,” and “the trees to drop.” Specifically, the monosyllabic “pluck,” “suck,” “rot” and “drop” evoke a sense of utter abandonment and pure abjection. Meeropol ends the song with “here is a strange and bitter crop,” constructing a homology between the strange and the bitter. Musically, melodically, the song ends just as strangely and bitterly. The song is thus a bitter indictment of a practice, a people and a place. It paints a graphic, ugly picture of the shadow reality of the slave legacy within American culture. It is logical that the song would stir up resentment and be banned on radio stations. Holiday could hardly find a record company willing to record it. Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit” suggests that the product, crop, or fruit of the South is, in fact, these mutilated bodies. However, by creating the metaphor of “strange fruit” Meeropol allowed for the possibility of a larger, wider-reaching metaphor. The significance of “Strange Fruit” then, isn’t that “strange fruit” is a metaphor for victims of lynching but that lynching itself is only a metonymy. Lynching represents both the racism that has produced it and the everyday effects of that racism.

The musical message of “Strange Fruit” differs slightly from the lyrical. Whereas his lyrics take a sarcastic and bitter tone, Meeropol’s music establishes from the start a somber, elegiac mood. His words condemn; the music mourns. Protest and testimony converge in the music and performance, creating an unsettling, yet poignant effect. Although some have argued that the music simply amplifies the impact of the lyrics as they are written, Meeropol’s music actually modifies it. In her insightful musical analysis of “Strange Fruit,” musicologist Nancy Baker finds that the music of “Strange Fruit” emphasizes and augments the lyrics, mirroring closely the mood set by the words themselves. She writes that Meeropol’s 1938 solo score, and Lehman Engel’s 1940 mixed chorus score both have “the dramatic use of the D-flat ninth chord (a tritone substitute for the dominant harmony) that now appears in the solo version.”<sup>7</sup> A ninth chord intends to create dissonance in the music. Dissonance, which is a lack of harmony, clashes ill-fitting notes together supposedly like the sweet scent of magnolias with the smell of burning flesh. According to Baker, in the first strophe Meeropol sparsely repeats similar notes. With the phrase “black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,” “he portrays the swinging by outlining an ascending diminished triad, then descending by a semitone”(48). In other words, Meeropol “swings” the notes to match the words. Baker also notes that he sets the pleasurable imagery in a higher register. For these images he composes triplets, or three notes of equal length to be performed in the time of two notes, and he allows for varied rhythm. The lower register is used for the grotesque images and he “ends the strophe outlining an ascending diminished seventh, which is unresolved in the accompaniment”(52). These choices are supposed to reflect the lyrics. Baker remarks that

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<sup>7</sup>Nancy Kovaleff Baker “Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan): Political Commentator and Social Conscience” in *American Music*, Vol. 20 No. 1 (Spring, 2002), 25-79, 48.

the melody of the third strophe begins like the first but has a chromatically descending accompaniment, which sidles down, forming parallel fifths with the vocal part at ‘crows to pluck.’ He omits the varied repetition of the third and fourth measures of the first strophe, going directly to the fifth and sixth measures. He extends this phrase, concluding with ‘tree to drop’ on half diminished chord. (52)

For the accompaniment to descend chromatically means that the pianist will play all the notes from high to low, including the dissonant ones; all keys black and white will be played. This is supposed to create a creeping effect in the music, to add to the disturbing imagery of the crows plucking and the tree dropping. Baker notes that “Meeropol indicates this last phrase is to be performed *diminuendo* and *ritardando*,” meaning decreasing in loudness and slowing down immediately, “directions that serve to highlight the surprising setting of ‘crop,’ with the melody ascending a fourth to G, and accompanied by a ‘strange and bitter’ chord, a combination of Neapolitan and dominant harmonies. Soft humming concludes the composition, and the harmonies resolve”(52). All of these choices do, in fact, create a dirgeful effect of the music and the humming originally intended by Meeropol probably served to give the song a spiritual feel, drawing from the black music tradition of Spirituals. As Baker’s analysis suggests, Meeropol’s music serves to create an emotional context for the bleak images of the poem. However, these somber and bleak emotions of the music do not necessarily match those of the poem.

By itself, dissonance and tonal discord do not create the impact that Baker suggests they do. Had Meeropol created an atonal score in the manner of Arnold Schoenberg or Alban Berg, his song never would have made it to a mainstream New York night club, and certainly not to Billie Holiday or to a commercial record label. The clash of harmonic dissonance, although it resonates with the clash of Meeropol’s disparate imagery, did not give “Strange Fruit” its destabilizing power. The dissonance had to be housed within the consonance and aesthetic sadness of minor jazz chords; Holiday’s mellifluous yet scratchy voice, her rhythmic and phrasal choices give the destabilizing contrasts necessary for the music to have the desired unsettling effect. The somber music actually serves to subdue rather than augment the bitter sarcasm of the lyrics. The mournful quality of the music turns scathing acrimony into mournful invocation.

The melody (as opposed to the musical accompaniment), as written by Meeropol, does very little to affect the lyrics of the song. Although Baker argues that “lacking in artifice or motivic development, the melody functions only to strengthen the message,” Meeropol’s melody neither strengthens nor weakens the message (52). His spare, often monotone melody with regular quarter and half notes is at times stagnant in its austerity. I have found only one recording by Josh White that uses



Meeropol's melody for "Strange Fruit."<sup>8</sup> White doesn't adhere strictly to the melody but occasionally diverges from Meeropol's basic melody rather than reinterpreting Holiday's famous treatment, as most other artists have done. Although he was a prominent and successful artist, his version did not create the publicity, or make the top charts like Holiday's had. The melody in White's hands is rendered more in the tradition of folk music than jazz, even though White did sing jazz songs during his career. Rather than an exact blueprint, Meeropol's melody is more of a guide or framework for the lyrics and music which hold the critical sentiment and elegiac mood, respectively. If he had intended for the melody to be sung as is, he never would have given the song to Billie Holiday.

It is through performance, especially Holiday's performance, that "Strange Fruit" achieves its original purpose, to destabilize, disturb and force its audience to open its eyes to the horrors of lynching and American racism more generally. As many have noted, such lyrics could have easily been over-sung with the wrong music or the wrong vocal treatment. An American audience desensitized to lynching, would probably have dismissed grand musical gestures as simply sensational or melodramatic, and the song would have failed to have the emotional and political impact it wanted. With lynching established in the contemporary mind as "normal" if not cruel, what was needed was a perfect rendering of the dialogical tension between the harsh lyrics and mournful music. It took an exact combination of the popular rhythmic styling of jazz: sweet minor chords *and* harmonic dissonance; stirring emotion *and* emotional distance, all to create a piece that would have the desired destabilizing effect and world-changing power that "Strange Fruit" has.

In the documentary film *Strange Fruit* (2002), Farah Jasmine Griffin says the song is "part of an artistic tradition that is beautiful but one born in protest."<sup>9</sup> If we understand jazz singing as a performative oral history, it is not surprising that only through performance does "Strange Fruit" become testimony. Holiday's performance is thus both protest *and* testimony. Recognizing that both words share a common root, "test" demonstrates how their distinction is far from clear-cut. Both "testimony" and "protest" can mean "an expression or declaration of disapproval;" "testimony" also once meant "a solemn protest or declaration."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, both words originally suggested a solemn declaration and only later did "protest" come to suggest that the declaration be one of dissent. The root *testis* ("a witness") only blurs the distinction further. The witness is both the observer of an event and the one who testifies to what he or she has observed. A witness can also be the one listening to the testimony. If we consider that "witness" comes from *wit*, an Old English word meaning "knowledge, understanding, and wisdom," it makes sense that the witness to the event

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<sup>8</sup> Josh White. *Strange Fruit*. Keynote Recordings, 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Katz Dir. *Strange Fruit*. Oniera Films, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> OED, (Oxford University Press, 2011) Accessed 7/15/2010.

of trauma is the one who knows. The singer is a witness, and as she bears witness, she literally protests and testifies.

Arguing for the primacy of oral testimony doesn't simply come out of an affinity for the African American oral history tradition. That aspect is certainly present, and as Geneva Smitherman has argued, "in Black America, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for gittin ovah."<sup>11</sup> In fact, however, oral testimony is of crucial importance to American culture as a whole. Especially in the US court system, the primacy of oral testimony is widely recognized. Anything other than oral testimony, where the witness is present, is considered hearsay and subject to strict regulations of admissibility.<sup>12</sup> The issue has to do with establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the witness. The trustworthy witness is present; she speaks only of that which she has personal *knowledge*.<sup>13</sup> For the strongest testimony, one needs to observe the witness, her body language and mannerisms to determine her credibility; one can examine, if not cross-examine the witness. This American oral tradition supports the idea of jazz, specifically vocal jazz, as testimony. This is why Holiday's "Strange Fruit" could testify to poet Cassells's experience of "*everything*," even better than his own poem could. While Meeropol's song protested, Holiday's performance testified to the "shadow reality" of American racism.

In doing so, Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" broke away from one of the popular perceptions of black music of the time, namely, that jazz music was strictly entertainment. In a book-length study of "Strange Fruit," David Margolick writes:

Coming out in 1939—the same year as *Gone With the Wind*, a film that embodied contemporary condescension towards blacks and black performers—and around the time that Ella Fitzgerald's "A Tisket, A Tasket"

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<sup>11</sup> Geneva Smitherman. *Talkin and testifyin': the language of Black America*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Article VIII. Rule 802 of the Federal Rules of Evidence: "Hearsay is not admissible except as provided by these rules or by other rules prescribed by the Supreme Court pursuant to statutory authority or by Act of Congress." From *Elkins v. Superior Court* (2007) 41 Cal.4th 1337: "Ordinarily, written testimony is substantially less valuable for the purpose of evaluating credibility. (*Goldberg v. Kelly* (1970) 397 U.S. 254, 269 ["Particularly where credibility and veracity are at issue . . . written submissions are a wholly unsatisfactory basis for decision"]); *Rosenthal v. Great Western Fin. Securities Corp.* (1996) 14 Cal.4th 394, 414 ["it's pretty difficult to weigh credibility without seeing the witnesses' [.]") "A prepared, concise statement read by counsel may speed up the hearing, but it is no substitute for the real thing. Lost is the opportunity for the trier of fact and counsel to assess the witness's strengths and weaknesses, recollection, and attempts at evasion or spinning the facts . . . [¶] . . . [W]ith a scripted statement, prepared and agreed to by one party in advance, comes the passage of time and with that lapse may come the party's unyielding acceptance of the script. Lost to cross-examination is the opponent's ability to immediately test and dissect adverse testimony." (*Denny H. v. Superior Court, supra*, 131 Cal.App.4th at p. 1514, italics omitted.)"

<sup>13</sup> Article VI. Rule 602. Lack of Personal Knowledge: A witness may not testify to a matter unless evidence is introduced sufficient to support a finding that the witness has personal knowledge of the matter. Evidence to prove personal knowledge may, but need not, consist of the witness' own testimony. This rule is subject to the provisions of rule 703, relating to opinion testimony by expert witnesses.

was more what people expected from black ‘girl singers’—’Strange Fruit’ ‘put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture.’<sup>14</sup>

Quoting Angela Davis, Margolick highlights the political resonance that “Strange Fruit” must have had in its time. It is difficult now, *after* the civil rights movement, to imagine the impact of a song that so boldly protests American racism *before* the civil rights movement. Although Ella really swings that nursery rhyme, it was in no way a song of resistance. Later immortalized in the film *Ride ‘Em Cowboy* (1942), “A Tisket, A Tasket” features Ella walking around singing this lively tune, entertaining a crowded bus full of white people.<sup>15</sup> When she finally sits down at the end of the song, it’s at the back of the bus. “Strange Fruit” isn’t sung from the euphemistic back of the bus. “Strange Fruit” straps an IED to the bottom of the bus.

Not only does “Strange Fruit” shatter the perception of jazz as strictly entertainment, it breaks away from the tradition of resistance as coded expression in mainstream black music. Record producer Ahmet Ertegun said of “Strange Fruit” that messages of resistance were “always guarded in the blues: hidden language. But this was quite open.”<sup>16</sup> When Holiday sang “Strange Fruit” as New York Post’s Samuel Grafton wrote: it was “as if a game of let’s pretend had ended and a blues singer who had been hiding her true sorrow in a set of love ditties had lifted the curtain and told us what it was that made her cry.”<sup>17</sup> It may have been that those “love ditties” weren’t “hiding” anything but that they spoke her “true sorrow” quite well in a manner that wasn’t as easily understood by looking at the transparent meanings of the song lyrics alone. The song and the performances of “Strange Fruit” are protest, conscious and directed, not apparent examples of the more coded and cloistered story of trauma traditionally buried within so much of African American musical expression which dealt with everything from grief to outrage to everyday communication. The most well-known example of “hidden meanings” in the black music tradition is that of Negro Spirituals, which are comprised of sacred and secular songs. According to Josephine Wright,

many freedom songs of the slaves contain encoded messages with double meanings. For example, “Canaan,” “heaven,” or “run to Jesus,” according to Frederick Douglass, ‘simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> (Margolick, 2001), 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ride ‘Em Cowboy*. Dir. Arthur Lubin. Perf. Bud Abbott, Lou Costello, and Dick Foran. Universal Pictures, 1942.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Margolick 2001, 38.

<sup>17</sup> (Margolick 2001), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Josephine Wright. “Songs of Remembrance.” In the *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 91, No. 4, (Autumn 2006), pp. 413-424, 414.

Famously, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” was a song that was said to have detailed instructions for those escaping slavery by following celestial constellations and using rivers to cover up scents for tracking dogs.<sup>19</sup> However, during slave times coded singing was part of everyday life as well, not just in the Underground Railroad. Testimony from former slaves reveals that singing was used to relay messages of all kinds.<sup>20</sup> Former slave Richard Carruthers relayed such coded messages in his experience as a slave:

I kep’ a eye on the niggers down in the cotton patch. Sometime they lazy  
‘round and if I see the overseer comin’ from the big house I sings a song to  
warn ‘em, so they not git whupped, and it go like this:

Hold up, hold up, American Spirit!

Hold up, hold up, H-O-O-O-O-O-O-O!<sup>21</sup>

“American Spirit,” a pithy euphemism for the overseer, uses sarcasm similar to “Strange Fruit” but it would have been too coded to be recognized as such. The following exchange between former slave Bob Ledbetter and interviewer John Lomax demonstrates how everyday singing was coded even when it had nothing to do with resistance or commentary. Singing and singing-in-code were part of the everyday experience.

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<sup>19</sup> This is very much an oral history the discussion of which is filled with ironies. One such irony is the well-documented academic research on coded messages in spirituals by writers who seek to disprove them for lack of “documented evidence.” See James Kelley, “Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd.’” *The Journal of Popular American Culture* 41.2 (April 2008): 262-80.

In this article, Kelley, finds fault with these histories for their “transmission from oral to written culture and from black informant to white scholar only after an initial period of hesitation, a general explanation of what is claimed to have been a complex system of communication kept secret for more than a century, and a reliance on a single source—now dead—with no corroborating evidence. p 277

See also Marc Aronson, “History That Never Happened”, *School Library Journal* (April 1, 2007).

In this article he cites a *publication date* of 1928 as reason for why “Follow the Drinking Gourd” couldn’t have been an Underground Railroad song. I’m trying to imagine the publication house next to the auction block where slaves went to publish their songs about escaping slavery with explanatory appendices and maps. Some songs and Spirituals were published in 1861, but they had been memorized orally for generations by that time. See Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, University of Illinois Press, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that all the songs were deeply coded. Songs like “Go Down, Moses” and “Steal Away” that made it to the mainstream were both religious and explicit freedom songs about escaping slavery. They were coded but plenty of slave owners figured them out and beat people for singing them. (See Wright, “Songs of Remembrance” 415) There were many songs that were not coded at all that weren’t sung directly to whites until later. Examples include “By and By, Gwine Tell God How You Abuse Me,” and “Mother, Is Massa Goin’ To Sell Us Tomorrow?” (419).

<sup>21</sup> eds. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. (New York: The New Press, 1996), 199.

JL: Well when you wanted to summon a boy from across the creek way far off,  
how would you notify him?

BL: I just holler that holler, you hear me a-hollering. An' he'd answer me way  
over yonder.

JL: Well what was the holler?

BL: That same thing I was singing

No soap, no starch,

Nobody to wash my clothes,

Nobody to wash my clothes.

That same ol' holler, An' he'd answer me way out as his field.

JL: What did he say?

BL: Well he'd sing the same thing.

JL: And how would he sing it? Sing it like he did.

BL: [*sings*]

No soap, no starch,

Nobody to wash my clothes,

Nobody to wash my clothes.

An' if he took a notion then he'd say: [*sings*]

I'm going home.

I'm going home.

I'm going home.

I knowed that he's coming soon as he got supper. At the white folk kitchen I  
looking for him.<sup>22</sup>

Coded singing was part of the everyday culture and the musical tradition as a whole.<sup>23</sup> Although one does have to interpret "Strange Fruit" to decipher its metaphors, one does not have to know in advance that something stands for something else; no meanings are previously agreed upon like "I'm going home," meaning: "I'll come by after dinner." This isn't to say that there were no black protest songs or that there isn't a Jewish coded tradition with which "Strange Fruit" communicates. On the

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<sup>22</sup> (Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 183-184)

<sup>23</sup> Code, hidden meanings, wordplay and understated resistance continue to be integral to the black musical tradition. Although hip-hop music has numerous examples of explicit protest and resistance with artists like Nas, Talib Kweli and Mos Def, mainstream hip hop still uses codes to speak about the every day. In fact, part of the fun of listening to an artist like Lil Wayne is deciphering his lyrics. Figuring it out and being part of the group that is "in" on what he is saying is the reward for listening carefully. My most recent Weezy (Lil Wayne) epiphany came a month after hearing these lyrics in his new song "6 foot 7 foot" (2011) (a title which samples the traditional Jamaican "Banana Boat Song" and may also be referring to the dimensions of the jail cell from which he had recently been released): "Paper chasing, tell that paper, "Look, I'm right behind ya'...real G's move in silence like lasagna." Upon hearing this on the radio, I immediately knew that he was talking about aggressively going after or making money (paper), and that authentic G's (gangsters, but not literally) keep a low profile, but I was stumped on lasagna for about a month. It took a while to figure out that he was talking about the silent "g" in lasagna.

contrary. As we have seen, “Strange Fruit participates in its own code and Nancy Baker suggests that “Strange Fruit” is itself inspired by a black protest song. Although “Strange Fruit” is often cited as the first anti-lynching protest song, Baker gives convincing evidence that the song was inspired by a black one called “Sitren an’ Brethren” which could be found in a volume called *Negro Songs of Protest* collected and arranged by Lawrence Gellert, a book found in the collection of Meeropol’s belongings later donated to Boston University:

Yo’ head ‘tain’ no apple  
Fo’ danglin’ from a tree,  
Yo’ body no carcass for barbacin’ on a spree.<sup>24</sup>

According to Baker, the song had been published in 1931 in *New Masses*, the same magazine to which Meeropol later submitted his anti-lynching poem. “Strange Fruit” reveals something significant about itself as a song and about the tradition from which it departs, even while it belongs to a similar coded tradition. It reveals that fear of violent retribution: beatings and whippings during slavery and beatings and lynching after, not only created a culture of coded language and hidden sentiment, but also fostered a sense of community and cohesion that conspires to remain closed to enemies and their potential harm. About the song itself, what is revealed is that “Strange Fruit” comes out of a constellation of circumstances that not only created “Strange Fruit” but assured “Strange Fruit” to have the most powerful impact possible. The writer of such lyrics necessarily had to identify with the black experience of generations of oppression, while coming out of a different though similar coded tradition. He had to have a solid enough socio-economic (and geographical) position of power (1) not to fear being lynched himself and (2) to feel authorized to speak for an underclass. He also had to be an activist, a teacher, a poet, a musician and he had to have the power to get his song to the best successful, mainstream jazz artist for the song, Billie Holiday. The song had to be written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish man born in Manhattan on Valentine’s Day in 1903.

Through Meeropol, “Strange Fruit” epitomizes the empathetic connection that bound American Blacks and Jews. He became a member of the Communist Party in the early 1930s.<sup>25</sup> Always sensitive to social injustices, he had a particularly pronounced opposition to the lynching of blacks in America which he expressed in his poetry:

I am a Jew,  
How may I tell?

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<sup>24</sup> (Baker 46)

<sup>25</sup> (Baker 45)

The Negro lynched  
Reminds me well  
I am a Jew.<sup>26</sup>

The poem “Strange Fruit” first appeared in a Teacher’s Union publication, *New York Teacher* in January 1937 with the title “Bitter Fruit.” The famous photo of the lynching of Tom Shipp and Abe Smith in Marion, Indiana inspired Meeropol to write “Bitter Fruit.” According to Meeropol,

Way back in the early Thirties, I saw a photograph of a lynching published in a magazine devoted to the exposure and elimination of racial injustice. It was a shocking photograph and haunted me for days. As a result, I wrote “Strange Fruit” ... [and later] set it to music.<sup>27</sup>

Meeropol may have also been inspired to write the poem by the state violence of *Kristallnacht*, November 9-10, 1938, since he penned his poem around November 13, 1938.<sup>28</sup> In its moment, “Strange Fruit” held wider reaching significance than many have realized. It was the eve of WWII, and almost six years after Hitler’s rise to power. Meeropol wrote numerous anti-fascist poems and songs, and he struggled against racism both at home and abroad. Interestingly, however, Meeropol writes his poem about lynching specifically in the South even after having seen a photo of a lynching in Indiana. Historian Chris Stone wonders whether Meeropol chose to focus on the South because a majority of lynchings occurred there or whether it was part of “a tendency to project the nation’s racial sins onto the South.”<sup>29</sup> However, the fascist “race theory” threatening Jews in Europe at the time was identical to that of the South.<sup>30</sup> It was a particularly Southern racial concept, as an extension of late capitalism, that Meeropol was contesting. Not only was his anti-racist song anti-fascist, it made no distinction between European fascism and American racism. Considering the multiple layers of “Strange Fruit” as a poem, it is no wonder that the song version would stir controversy and impact its listeners for many generations. If you add to it a meaningful rendering by a consummate jazz musician already famous for her emotionally stirring performances as a singer, one gets the most powerful song of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While “Strange Fruit” is a groundbreaking song of protest, Holiday’s performances made it testimony. Musical scholar Gunther Schuller writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid..

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Brackets belong to Baker

<sup>28</sup> (Baker 46)

<sup>29</sup> Stone, Chris. “Blood at the Root: ‘Strange Fruit’ as Historical Document and Pedagogical Tool.” In *Magazine of History*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Jim Crow (Jan.; 2004), pp. 54-56: 55.

<sup>30</sup> See chapter 4 of this dissertation and the Virginia 1924 Racial Integrity Act, laws which Nazi Germany used for its sterilization program.

It is Billie's pure, un-self-pitying, distilled-emotion approach to the material that haunts our memories. The lyrics, which could have become obvious and maudlin, are treated with cold respect for the awesome facts. The hurt is there, but it is not worn on the sleeve. It never slobbers, Billie's poignant, finely textured voice threading a wary course between the potential pitfalls of pretentious social drama and awkwardly 'serious' pop balladry.<sup>31</sup>

Although the lyrics are far from obvious, Holiday's rendering of the song was what made the song so powerful in 1939. One could argue that she had every right to give a slobbering performance, but, not only was her 1939 audience not already convinced of the absolute evil of lynching, the lyrics don't lend themselves to maudlin interpretations. They vacillate between contrasting imagery and emotion. Holiday skillfully walks a fine line in her performance. Davis too remarks that

"Strange Fruit" is a song that poses serious problems for its singer. Its metaphors are so forceful that an overly dramatic rendition might have transformed its powerful emotional content into histrionics. The intent behind the song-both Allen's and Holiday's-was to evoke solidarity in its listeners.<sup>32</sup>

This was a more difficult task than it seemed: to be emotive but not dramatic, to be serious but not alienating, in an attempt to influence listeners rather than alienate them. The moment of "Strange Fruit" was a delicate one. According to Davis,

Billie Holiday's gift of aesthetic communication did not consist simply in her ability to render in song the profound emotions underlying her own private woes. However skillful she may have been in musically conveying her own state of mind, she also achieved a mode of expression that forged community even as it remained deeply personal.<sup>33</sup>

Holiday fully connected with "Strange Fruit" and made it her own testimony to a life of trauma, personal and historical. The rendition has jazz rhythms and chords; her phrasing was rhythmic and syncopated. She did not overwhelm the lyrics with emotion but emotion is there. Her vocal choices were exactly what they needed to be to reach her 1939 American audience in a way that it could actually hear her. In the above mentioned New York Post review Samuel Grafton writes:

This is about a phonograph record which has obsessed me for two days. It is called "Strange Fruit" and it will, even after the tenth hearing, make you blink

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<sup>31</sup> (Margolick 2001 48)

<sup>32</sup> Angela Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey*. (New York: Vintage, 1999), 194.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



and hold to your chair. Even now, as I think of it, the short hair on the back of my neck tightens and I want to hit somebody. I know who, too.”<sup>34</sup>

It was a rendition that awakened its listeners and shocked them into a receptive silence. Images of lynching victims were spread widely, published in magazines and newspapers. As a columnist, Grafton has undoubtedly seen such images. It was, however, a song that caused him such physical and emotional reactions. Responses to Holiday’s live performances suggest that they were just as powerful. Meeropol himself wrote of her first performance:

She gave a startling, most dramatic and effective interpretation, which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywheres [*sic*]. Billie Holiday’s styling of the song was incomparable and fulfilled the bitterness and shocking quality I had hoped the song would have. The audience gave her a tremendous ovation.<sup>35</sup>

After seeing Holiday at Birdland in 1942, actress Billie Allen Henderson remarks ,

I was trying to be sophisticated and all of a sudden something stabs me in the solar plexus and I was gasping for air. It was so deeply felt. I understood it. I understood it. I could smell the burning flesh; I felt it. She was... ‘unrelenting’ is a good word for it. Some didn’t know how to react. They weren’t quite sure. Nobody stirred. It was startling, and I’ll never forget it. I thought, ‘that’s what art can do.’<sup>36</sup>

For Henderson, Holiday’s performance evoked Meeropol’s graphic sensory imagery of lynching but also the unique power of art. Jack Schiffman describes Holiday singing “Strange Fruit” at the Apollo Theater in Harlem after his father’s initial reluctance to let her sing it in his theater:

When she wrenched the final words from her lips, there was not a soul in that audience, black or white, who did not feel half-strangled,” he wrote. “A moment of oppressively heavy silence followed, and then a kind of rustling sound I had never heard before. It was the sound of almost two thousand people sighing.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Samuel Grafton. “I’d Rather Be Right” *New York Post*. October 21, 1939.

<sup>35</sup> David Margolick. “Performance as a Force for Change: The Case of Billie Holiday and “Strange Fruit” in *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Summer, 1999), pp. 91-109, p.98.

<sup>36</sup> (Margolick 1999 104)

<sup>37</sup> (Margolick 1999 103)

Accounts of her performances of the song range from those that claim she had an emotionless stare to those that saw a “fervor and smoldering hatred in her eyes.”<sup>38</sup> What they all have in common is that they recount an extremely powerful experience. She seemed to be able to meet the individuals of her audience wherever they were mentally. People saw in her performance what they needed to see in order to hear, to witness. Davis writes that “once she decided to sing *Strange Fruit*, she became obsessed with it. ‘I worked like the devil on it;’ she wrote, ‘because I was never sure I could put it across or that I could get across to a plush nightclub audience the things that it meant to me.’”(183) From the accounts of people who were there to see these performances, she must have gotten those “things” across better than she realized. On December 31, 1999 *Time Magazine* named “*Strange Fruit*” the “Best Song of the Century.” The magazine stated that “in this sad, shadowy song about lynching in the South, history’s greatest jazz singer comes to terms with history itself.”<sup>39</sup> Naming Holiday’s “*Strange Fruit*” as the song of the century, acknowledges that the twentieth century saw no American song with a greater impact than “*Strange Fruit*.” A British magazine called *Q* “named “*Strange Fruit*” one of ‘10 songs that actually changed the world.’”<sup>40</sup> According to Davis, “the felt impact of Holiday’s performance of ‘*Strange Fruit*’ is as powerful today as it was in the 1940s.”<sup>41</sup> Few would argue that Holiday hadn’t done exactly what she had set out to do.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “Best of the Century.” *Time Magazine* 31 December 1999.

<sup>40</sup> David Margolick, “Bitter still” in *Jazziz*; Jul 2001; 18, 7; pp. 30-34. 32.

<sup>41</sup> (Davis, 181, 184)

## Holiday's "Strange Fruit"

Over the years, recordings of Holiday's "Strange Fruit" take on more and more emotion and feeling as the civil rights movement begins to find its footing.



In one of Holiday's most famous performances, on February 23, 1959 on London, England's television show *Chelsea at Nine*, a simple piano adds to the dirgeful quality of the song. She gives a strong vocal interpretation with careful and effective melodic choices. Her performance capitalizes on silence. Her silences are frequent, sudden and complete. Although it is barely audible, the performance is quite emotional.



In the above photo, she emphasizes the words "bulging eyes" by bending the notes, dragging the A to B, giving it a "bulging" sound. Her facial expressions are

communicative and her disgust at the imagery she sings is apparent. She ends each phrase with harsh *staccato*, or choppy silences. In the next frame Holiday twists her face as she sings the words “twisted mouth.” Her dynamics vary as she quiets her “twisted mouth’ after loudly bulging the “bulging eyes.” In the next image, one can see Holiday’s reaction to the “sudden smell of burning flesh.”



Respectively, Holiday sings loudly “for the tree to *drop*” and “strange and bitter *crop*” thematizing the rhyming words dramatically by cutting them off quickly with sharp silence. “Crop,” especially, is almost yelled rather than sung, and when she cuts the word off, the music cuts off as quickly. The soft humming originally intended by Meeropol in his written music has no place here. Holiday ended all performances of “Strange Fruit this sharply. At Café Society, she finished the entire set with the song, and never came out for an encore, no matter how much the audience asked for it. The “bitter crop” was always the end of it.

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The historical and popular accounts of Holiday and “Strange Fruit” do almost as much to expose the reality of American racial injustice as does the song itself. In fact, this popular discussion reveals the complexity and intricacy of that racism, whereas “Strange Fruit” itself demonstrates its horror. Although it seems clear that

Meeropol introduced Holiday to “Strange Fruit,” the story of how she first received the song is layered with subtle gendered and racialized condescension. Despite the graphic lyrics and the somber music, much of the popular discussion around the origins of the relationship between Billie Holiday and “Strange Fruit” centers on whether or not Holiday was capable of understanding the song when she first heard it. She had been singing at New York’s Café Society, a fully integrated jazz club with liberal patrons and a liberal owner named Josephson. According to Margolick, “Café Society represented a unique synthesis of cultures, blending the politically radical cabarets of Weimar Berlin and Paris with the jazz clubs and revues of Harlem.”<sup>42</sup> Specifically, Café Society’s owner Barney Josephson’s account of how Holiday received the song is the most questionable. According to Margolick,

Josephson, who rarely asked Holiday to perform anything, later maintained that she ‘didn’t know what the hell the song meant’ and sang it originally only as a favor to him. ‘She looked at me after [Meeropol had] finished and said, ‘what do you want me to do with that, man?’ and said, ‘It would be wonderful if you’d sing it. If you care to. You don’t have to.’ And she said, ‘You wants me to sing it? I sings it.’ And she sang it.’<sup>43</sup>

Holiday here may have been ironically or bitterly miming slave subjugation or, perhaps Josephson himself was enjoying a little mimicry. What is interesting is that Josephson had had a similar reaction when he himself heard the lyrics for the first time. After reading the lyrics and being “floored by them,” he said to Meeropol “What do you want to do with this?”<sup>44</sup> He too must have recognized that it was an unusual song for a New York nightclub. Why he couldn’t attribute that recognition to Holiday seems strange. In her chapter on “Strange Fruit” Angela Davis remarks that “Josephson’s depiction of Holiday is problematic at best: he paints her as an illiterate, ignorant, and passive woman, willing to sing ‘Strange Fruit’ simply because he asked her to do it.”<sup>45</sup>

Although Margolick concedes that “Josephson’s version of events nonetheless seems harsh and patronizing,” he does little to dispel its validity or analyze its significance.<sup>46</sup> He even goes so far as to suggest that the song isn’t jazz. He asserts that because the song was “neither Tin Pan Alley nor jazz, it was utterly alien to her, and she appeared unimpressed.”<sup>47</sup> To say that “Strange Fruit” isn’t a jazz song reveals

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<sup>42</sup> (Margolick 2001 26)

<sup>43</sup> (Margolick 2001 28)

<sup>44</sup> (Margolic 1999 97)

<sup>45</sup> (Davis 184)

<sup>46</sup> (Margolick, 2001 29)

<sup>47</sup> (Margolick 1999 97)

a lack of understanding of jazz. Because jazz is a style if nothing else, a style which Holiday had mastered and then transformed, “Strange Fruit” would be a jazz song just by dint of the fact that Holiday sang it. But even if she hadn’t sung it, Meeropol’s music uses chords popular in jazz. Not only does Margolick divorce “Strange Fruit” from the generic and stylistic tradition of jazz, he suggests that jazz by definition couldn’t constitute resistance music. Writing in 2001, he argues that “‘Strange Fruit’ ... is too artsy to be folk music, too explicitly political and polemical to be jazz.”<sup>48</sup> That he says this about jazz even *after* the civil rights movement is quite astonishing. Others have understandably contested this statement. Specifically, Douglas Henry Daniels takes issue with it writing: “One wonders what he thinks of ‘Tears for Johannesburg,’ or ‘Freedom Suite,’ or ‘Alabama,’ or, for that matter, ‘Sixteen Tons.’”<sup>49</sup> What musical genre “Strange Fruit” falls into seems to be a question few jazz musicians concern themselves with, simply because Holiday sang the song. Like Ella Fitzgerald, Holiday made every song she sang into jazz, Ella’s aforementioned nursery rhyme turned jazz, “A Tisket, A Tasket,” being a good example of this process.<sup>50</sup> So the issue that needs to be raised isn’t whether “Strange Fruit” is a jazz piece but what significance it has *as a jazz* song, and what it says about the power of the genre.

In the same vein as Josephson, John Chilton continues this account of the events. Davis quotes Chilton:

At first, Lady was slow to understand the song’s imagery, but her bewilderment decreased as Allen patiently emphasized the cadences, and their significance. After a few readings, Billie was “into” the song, but was unconvinced that the material was suitable for her. Her incredibly gifted interpretations of lyrics had enhanced many songs, but these songs, for all the varying skills of their composers and lyricists, had only dealt with the problems of love, unrequited or otherwise, skies blue and June moons. Here, Billie was being asked to provide a musical commentary on an issue raw enough to be unmentionable in urban New York.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Margolick, “Bitter Still,” 31.

<sup>49</sup> African American Review, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 154-155. Daniels’ comments refer to Margolick’s statement as it appears in *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, (2000) Margolick’s original book on “Strange Fruit” before it was retitled *Strange Fruit: The Biography a Song* in 2001.

<sup>50</sup> My favorite example is “My Favorite Things” by John Coltrane, 1961, Atlantic Records. In this track, not only does he take this popular happy song and make dissonant jazz out of it, he helps to popularize a new kind of jazz: modal jazz that left behind the basic chord change structure that characterized jazz until the 50s or so. Is “My Favorite Things” a jazz song? It is after Coltrane. Coltrane’s treatment could be interpreted as fairly political itself in how it turns this joyous “white” song into an African-American lamentation.

<sup>51</sup> (Davis 184-85)

That Holiday would be “slow to understand” “Strange Fruit” does seem absurd. According to Chilton’s interpretation, you would think that Billie Holiday wasn’t actually a black woman in Jim Crow America; that her life was so devoid of “issues” that she could simply ignore everyone else’s. In her time, lynching was a national spectacle firmly imprinted on the minds of all Americans, regardless of race. Congress was busy filibustering anti-lynching bills, one after the other, and the political debate was all over the papers. Five years earlier, in 1934, when Holiday was nineteen, one of the most widely publicized lynching spectacles in American history occurred. In Marianna, Florida, Claude Neal was brutally murdered for the alleged rape and murder of a white woman, and a crowd of 5,000 men, women and children had gathered in hopes of watching it.<sup>52</sup> As recently as 1937, Roosevelt Towns and Bootjack McDaniels had been lynched in Duck Hill, Mississippi in an infamous spectacle that would make national news.<sup>53</sup> It had caused such an uproar that it proceeded to drive lynching practices in Mississippi underground.<sup>54</sup> With these tragic and widely publicized murders in recent memory, as well as her own experiences of discrimination under Jim Crow laws, twenty four-year-old Billie Holiday had to know what the song was about.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, as a black woman she would be even more conscious about lynching, especially as someone who traveled the country touring. According to Davis, there were other condescending accounts of Holiday’s reception of the song:

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<sup>52</sup> “Races: They Done Me Wrong.” *Time Magazine* Nov. 5, 1934. “The Cannidys had prepared some sharp sticks and whetted their knives in anticipation of the revenge they would take on Negro Neal. A man said to be a Florida legislator got up and amused the crowd with a funny speech as it waited for the spectacle. It was nearly midnight when one of the “lynching committee” appeared to announce that he feared violence with so many people around; there would be no show until most of the mob went home. Plain truth seemed to be that the lynching committee had so brutalized the Negro that he had died back in the woods on the banks of the Chipola River before the lynchers had a chance to kill him publicly. He was certainly quite dead when, toward morning, the lynchers dumped his mutilated corpse in front of the Cannidy’s door. “Pa” Cannidy was hopping mad. “They done me wrong about this here killing,” he wailed. “They promised me they’d bring him up to my house before they killed him and let me have the first shot. That’s what I wanted.” “Pa” and “Ma” and the eight Cannidy children had to be satisfied with the last shot. They got out the family rabbit gun and pumped a few slugs into the lifeless blackamoor. Then the corpse was taken into Marianna, the county seat, hung up in front of the courthouse. The dirty work of cutting it down went to the county sheriff. National Guardsmen arrived, as usual, too late to do Claude Neal any good.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,882544,00.html#ixzz1PnnaRsiX> accessed June 10, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> “RACES: Lynch & Anti-Lynch.” *Time*. Apr. 26, 1937.

<sup>54</sup> Neil R. McMillen. *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the age of Jim Crow*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 252.

<sup>55</sup> I sent a clip of Holiday singing “Strange Fruit” to my fifteen-year-old niece who had never heard of the song. I asked her what it was about she said “black people that were hung.” I asked her how she figured it out and she said, “She said black bodies and trees.” If at fifteen and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, my niece can figure this out with absolutely no knowledge of any lynchings in her lifetime, I’m sure Holiday understood it at twenty four. Furthermore, coming out of the black musical tradition, Holiday would have been accustomed to looking for more than superficial meanings in songs. Finally, if Holiday’s audience was able to understand “Strange Fruit,” what is the reasoning that would assume she couldn’t?

Donald Clarke, Holiday's most recent biographer, further develops this narrative, emphasizing her alleged illiteracy. 'Lady was nonpolitical; when she first looked at 'Strange Fruit' she didn't know what to make of it. She never read anything but comic books - promoter Ernie Anderson once brought her bundles of them - and she was used to learning songs, not reading poetry' (186).

That "Strange Fruit" was, in fact, a song, must not have registered. According to Margolick, "not until a few months later, when he spotted a tear running down her cheek during one performance, was Josephson convinced that she had finally grasped just what those strange fruit were."<sup>56</sup> That Josephson needed the tear, a prototypically feminine expression of emotion, as a sign of Holiday's comprehension, suggests that her being a woman further fueled his condescension. Davis argues that "Chilton's, Clarke's, and Josephson's stories capture Holiday in a web of gendered, classed, and raced inferiority and present her as capable of producing great work only under the tutelage of her racial superiors" (187). The racialized and gendered assumption is that black women are incapable of understanding metaphors and/or sarcasm.

Early written accounts of Holiday's reception of the song all suggest that she did not understand its meaning, and subsequent accounts, including Margolick's, have perpetuated this idea. Only Meeropol himself seemed to recount the story without condescension. He wrote: "To be perfectly frank, I didn't think she felt comfortable with the song." He adds that Holiday was "not communicative at all." He notes that she "had asked only one question: what did the word "pastoral" mean?"<sup>57</sup> a note which may have added to the men's conception that she was ignorant of the entire meaning of the song. However, registering her discomfort with the song should have opened up room for more obvious interpretations of her reaction to it. After all, lynching was a practice meant to keep blacks in their place, and singing a song openly against it certainly challenges that place. Having personally experienced many acts of racism was enough for Holiday to be cautious about stepping so firmly out of that place. It probably seemed easy for what appeared to be a group of white men to suggest she protest lynching in front of crowds of white people. However, and probably because she *wasn't* apolitical, Holiday did decide to take that courageous step. Margolick never considers her potential fear of singing the song, even though he notes that in her autobiography she actually admits to being afraid to sing it.<sup>58</sup> In 1939, part of the necessity for "Strange Fruit" was that it was coming out of a time and place where lynching was common and impossible to render illegal. To add insult to injury, even the people who were supposed to be allies, those who integrated their clubs and tried to oppose lynching, failed to recognize fear—the very thing that the

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<sup>56</sup> (Margolick 2001 28)

<sup>57</sup> (Margolick 1999 97)

<sup>58</sup> (Margolick 1999 98)



practice of lynching was propagating and the very emotion that Cassells writes about almost fifty years later—and chose to see a lack of comprehension instead. These accounts are extremely important because they testify to the intricacy of American racism, that which *hasn't* changed over time. That it is injury *and* insult, that those with the most honorable of intentions cannot see the way they themselves have subscribed to facets of the same ideology of those with dishonorable intentions is what “Strange Fruit” can teach us.

Not only did Holiday understand “Strange Fruit” as a metonymy for lynching; she fully understood that lynching was a metaphor for *strange fruit*, for what Cassells describes as “Everything in our people/That is strangulated, stillborn,” his shadow reality, the genocide behind the genius of America. It was *this* meaning that the men around her had missed, a meaning which was in dialogical tension with the surface one they *had* understood, and the meaning which makes jazz as testimony to trauma and history possible. Holiday once related the song back to her father’s death. She said that the song “seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop.”<sup>59</sup> Her father had died after being refused service at several segregated hospitals. Chris Stone writes “the more she reflected on his death, the more Holiday stressed that, like Tom Shipp and Abe Smith in Marion, Indiana, Clarence Holiday had been the victim of a lynching.”<sup>60</sup> According to Robert O’Meally, when she performed the song, “Holiday would be in tears and stay in an emotional state for some time before she was able to pull herself together”(138). Her performances were quite personal. Margolick quotes Dorothy Vella’s remarks about Holiday’s performance: “I think we felt as if we had seen more deeply into another person’s suffering than we had any right to see.”<sup>61</sup> To many her life seemed to parallel the sadness of the song. Some remarked that she seemed happy only when she sang and that ‘the rest of the time she was sort of a living lyric to the song ‘Strange Fruit,’ hanging, not on a poplar tree, but on the limbs of life itself.”<sup>62</sup> Although it was painful to hear about, “lynching” as people understood it, involving lawless mobs and nooses, had nothing directly to do with Holiday’s personal traumas. “Lynching” as a metaphor had everything to do with them. Her childhood rape and prostitution by and alongside her own mother, the discrimination she faced in Jim Crow America, domestic abuse and her addiction were all traumatic experiences that were both personal *and* collective.<sup>63</sup> She had understood all of these traumatic moments as the strange fruit of a gendered, classed and racialized American experience, while the men around her were wondering if she’d caught on to the lynching aspect of the song yet. Margolick recounts that

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<sup>59</sup> (Davis 186)

<sup>60</sup> (Stone 56)

<sup>61</sup> (Margolick 2001 94)

<sup>62</sup> Margolick, “Bitter Still” 32.

<sup>63</sup> (Griffin 2001 52)

one of Holiday's most unusual later renditions of the song is described by Maya Angelou in 'Heart of a Woman.' Angelou recounts how, during a visit to Los Angeles in 1958, a year before her death, Holiday, her voice by then dry and hoarse, sang it to her young son, Guy. At one point, the boy interrupted her. 'What's a pastoral scene, Miss Holiday?' he asked. Holiday, Angelou relates, 'looked up slowly and studied Guy for a second. Her face became cruel, and when she spoke her voice was scornful. 'It means when the crackers are killing the niggers. It means when they take a little nigger like you and snatch off his nuts and shove them down his goddamn throat. That's what it means.... That's what they do. That's a goddamn pastoral scene.'<sup>64</sup>

Perfectly capturing the bitterness that "Strange Fruit" evokes, Holiday knew its larger significance and what it meant for her own life. In fact, as Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, Holiday originally wanted to title her autobiography "Bitter Crop," connecting her own life story "to centuries of dispossession, oppression and terrorism experienced by black Americans."<sup>65</sup> That she saw her story as the "bitter crop" of the last line of "Strange Fruit" has many implications. Her performances of "Strange Fruit," as I suggested above, always ended very abruptly on those words; they were the proverbial 'last word' of the song; they were the end of the testimony. It suggests not just that she saw her life as part of America's bitter crop but that she also partly saw her life as the song. This is what critic Hilton Als meant when he said that "she became the song."<sup>66</sup> The irony of the fact that she was not even permitted to name her autobiography what she wanted to must have been lost on her publishers.<sup>67</sup>

### **India.Arie Performs "Strange Fruit"**

India.Arie performs "Strange Fruit" in the concert film *Lightening in a Bottle* (2004) in such a manner that drastically diverges from Holiday's performance while recognizing its historical importance.<sup>68</sup> As discussed previously, in 1939, "Strange Fruit" had to be sung very carefully in order to elicit understanding rather than alienation from its listeners. The gravity of "Strange Fruit" called for an interpretation that allowed the words to be easily understood by an audience that was ideologically invested in being blind to it. In its moment, "Strange Fruit" couldn't be sung with too

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> (Griffin 2001 50)

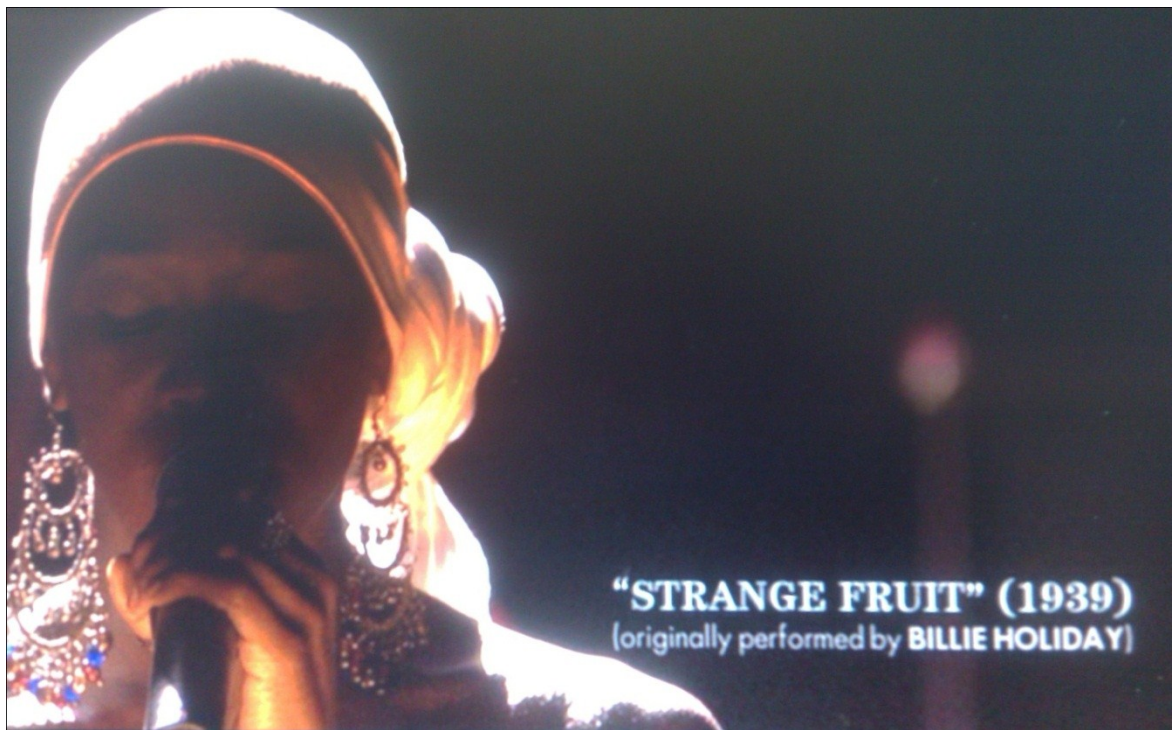
<sup>66</sup> Margolick, 2001 xvi.

<sup>67</sup> (Griffin 2001 50) See Billie Holiday and William Duffy. *Lady Sings the Blues*. (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

<sup>68</sup> *Lightening in a Bottle*. Dir. Antoine Fuqua. Perf. India.Arie, Clarence Brown, and Buddy Guy. Vulcan Productions and Jigsaw Productions, 2004.

many embellishments because it would have seemed overdone, and much of its meaning might have been lost. In 2004, Arie sang “Strange Fruit” to an audience that already knew and celebrated the song at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. With nothing to fear or prove, Arie sang “Strange Fruit” in her own style of the blues, more specifically rhythm and blues, with vocal runs and embellishments characteristic of modern R&B singers like Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill. In this film by Antoine Fuqua, Arie’s performance, foregrounded in the middle of the film, makes a very different statement about “Strange Fruit.” It presents the song as an important piece of history to remember for its significance.

Musical director Steve Jordan “introduces” her performance. He says only this: “The blues is when, you, it feels, when you play one note, and it [thumps his chest with his palm; *boom*, a non-diegetic bass kick drum sounds] grabs you.” The bass kick becomes diegetic when the film cuts to Arie on stage. As Jordan hits his chest right on his heart, the kick drum is meant to imply a heartbeat: thud. Then a cut to Arie’s performance begins with a wide shot of her in a blue darkness, with one light illuminating her from behind. As the camera moves in to a close up, she is lit from below with a yellow light. Her name appears on the bottom left of the screen right before she begins to sing, “Southern trees.” Just as she sings the words, “strange fruit,” a caption appears at the bottom right of the screen: “STRANGE FRUIT (1939)/ [originally performed by BILLIE HOLIDAY].”



The crowd recognizes the song when she sings the words, “strange fruit” and they clap and cheer. The treatment of the song is serious and very respectful, almost prayer-like in its simplicity. Her eyes remain closed until she sings “black bodies swinging in the southern breeze.” They flutter open and close again. She hasn’t planned how she will sing the song—she improvises. Her interpretation of “Strange Fruit” has a classic R&B narrative structure. She’s already changed the melody from the word “bear” on, just as Holiday does in her original recording. She wavers between styles, first sticking to a straight performance and then on occasion



embellishing with difficult vocal runs at the ends of words, for example, “trees” after poplar. She opens her eyes when she sings “pastoral scene,” at which point a famous image of the shadow of a lynching is cut into the performance.

She performs vocal runs on the “south” after “gallant.” The energy of the song grows in a slow crescendo up to the moment where she sings “flesh,” at which point she breaks her momentum and starts to build again. The music slowly increases in volume throughout, while she varies her dynamics to emphasize different lyrics. By the time she gets to “for the sun to rot” she has amassed a lot of volume. When she sings “drop,” the music stops and she sings the word with a controlled “crack,” or “yodel,” by rapidly alternating between her head and chest voices while also “dropping” the word from high notes to low. The effect is *very* bluesy, and the technique is advanced and flawless. Arie becomes quiet and softly sings “here is a strange,” almost in a whisper. The word “bitter” is drawn out with a quavering between two notes like a trill. The note fluctuations are classic. The suspension of “bitter” is the exact same as Gershwin’s “Summertime” in *Porgy and Bess*, when the singer says: “So hush little

baby, don't you cry." Arie suspends "bitter" in the same manner of the "don't" in that phrase. After a vocal run on the word "crop," Arie resolves the suspended "bitter" with the word "crop," just as "cry" resolves the "don't" in "Summertime." It is probably a coincidence that Arie harkens back to "Summertime," another song written by a Jewish man that black people have adopted as their own.

Arie's performance has such sophisticated and accomplished technique that it truly honors the song. The traumatic content lies within the formal aspects of the entire performance rather than in the singer's affect. There is no irony in the delivery of the word "pastoral," no horror at "bulging" and no disgust at "burning flesh." Fuqua's direction and treatment, the dark lighting and the cut to lynching images point to the historical significance of "Strange Fruit." While Holiday's version testifies to trauma, Arie's version celebrates a legacy of black music, remembering and representing a traumatic past. In *Lightening in a Bottle*, "Strange Fruit" is not introduced. It is not the finale and not followed by silence. It occurs in the middle, between other performances. For Fuqua, it is a song along the way in a long journey of the history of the blues and it is classic American music. By connecting the song to Billie Holiday, Fuqua's concert film helped to open a door to the significance that Holiday gave to the song for a new generation of listeners. Those who came for Arie, can also turn to Holiday. Holiday's "Strange Fruit" can give us the significance of and a context for our experience of the now-time (*Jetztzeit*). Although understanding jazz as a document of trauma should elicit the recognition of that experience in the present, Arie's performance demonstrates the importance of recognizing jazz and the blues as a rich and vast archive of the black American experience of the past.

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*Art never achieves greatness through transcendence of socio-historical reality. On the contrary, even as it transcends specific circumstances and conventions, it is deeply rooted in social realities.*

—Angela Davis<sup>69</sup>

On January 4, 1954, *Time Magazine* printed the following message:

Lewis Allan's macabre picture of lynching has faded away. In 1953, for the second year running (and for the second time since the records were begun in 1912), there were no lynchings in the U.S., according to Alabama's Tuskegee Institute.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> (Davis 183)

<sup>70</sup> "Races: No Neckties." *Time Magazine* 4 January 1954.

Adding to the complicated importance of “Strange Fruit” is *Time Magazine’s* title, “No Neckties,” for an article suggesting that the imagery of the song no longer exists. Although the magazine acknowledges that “other methods of mob violence (such as bombings and riots against mixed housing) [are] on the rise,” it fails not recognize the rising instances of racial violence as “strange fruit.” The very next year, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till would be brutally murdered in Mississippi. The desire to see the significance of “Strange Fruit” as having “faded away” was itself already proof that it hadn’t. With Jim Crow laws in full effect and racial violence on the rise, anyone who could actually understand the song could not have made such a claim. “Strange Fruit” continues to have musical and social significance. I asked “*Strange Fruit*” documentary director Joel Katz to comment on its present relevance. He replied:

You don’t need to look very deeply into the headlines to see “Strange Fruit”’s relevance in 2010. The rhetoric of the Tea Party movement, the very recent Shirley Sherrod case, the way the right wing discusses Obama, the Oscar Grant case in Oakland: it’s very clear that although lynching is virtually extinct as a practice in the U.S., racial strife, discord and hatred are still very much alive. As Michael Meeropol says in the film, ‘Until the last racist is dead, ‘Strange Fruit’ will be relevant.’

Katz’s poignant commentary shows an understanding of how “Strange Fruit” is more than a metaphor for lynching. He sees strange fruit in all manner of racial discord and white on black violence. However, as I have argued, “Strange Fruit” also teaches us about the institutional/systematic intricacies of racism that make the death of the “last racist” a little farther off than any of us would want to believe. Holiday’s experience with “Strange Fruit” demonstrated how racism tainted her experience with her enemies *and* her allies. If we look even deeper, we can see not only how lynching was in a sense metaphor for many different forms of racism but that lynching itself—the actual practice of lynching in the US—may still appear in different forms.



(Emmitt Till 1941-1955)



(Oscar Grant 1986-2009)

When Cyrus Cassells wrote his poem “Strange Fruit,” it had recalled for him a childhood memory the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi. For

me, the song recalls the aforementioned execution of Oscar Grant on January 1, 2009, three and a half miles away from where I am writing these words. With friends, I had been celebrating the election of President Barack Obama two months earlier. New Year's had come with a feeling of optimism. I remember how the sobering reality of the shooting cut deeply into the feeling of celebration and hope that we had allowed ourselves to feel for a little while.

“Strange Fruit” brings me back to 2005 and the images of bloated, floating black bodies in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I remember the images of people waiting for days on their roofs and images of police pointing rifles at people holding “looted” groceries and diapers.



(REUTERS: People who used a mail truck to escape the flooded areas of New Orleans East, caused by Hurricane Katrina, are forced to lie on the highway by Texas game wardens. They were freed but forced to continue on foot.)<sup>71</sup>

Going back further, “Strange Fruit” reminds me also of being thirteen in South Central Los Angeles, as it was called then, and four or five days of a dark, smoke-filled sky, and the horror of the fourteen-mile bus ride to school, passing by the ruins of dozens of burnt buildings, wondering if the riots would change the judge’s mind

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<sup>71</sup>“Looting Hampers New Orleans Rescue Effort” ABC News Online, September 2, 2005. Accessed June 12, 2011. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200509/s1451363.htm>

about the Rodney King decision. I remember how everyone, or perhaps just I, had originally been relieved that “it” was *finally* caught on tape. The trial seemed to suggest that it didn’t matter. I had known my whole life about what the police did to black people because they had shot my uncle in the leg from a helicopter during the ‘65 Watts riots, and when I was a baby, our next-door-neighbor, Eulia Love, was murdered by the police. She had been late on the gas bill and owed around \$22 or it was going to be cut off. When the “gas man,” as my grandma called him, came, Love wouldn’t let him touch the gas valve and then an altercation ensued. When he came back with the police, they shot her, even though her three daughters were at home at the time, one of them, seventeen and eight months pregnant. Her husband had just died from sickle cell anemia and she was just about crazy by then, I was told. When I was older, one of her daughters used to do my hair and her granddaughter was my good friend and backyard dance partner. We never talked about Mrs. Love but everyone knew from a young age what had happened.

I was also very familiar with the violent tendencies of the LAPD because my grandmother’s friend’s son used to come over to our house a lot and he had been severely beaten by the police. His name was Sylvester “Syl” Bardwell, and when I was five or six in 1984, a pair of police officers dragged him out of his car because he had been drinking. Instead of taking him straight to jail, they beat him in the street with a flashlight. Then, when they shoved him into the police car, they broke his neck. This must have been before they developed the practice of holding down the heads of people they detain. After breaking his neck, they threw him in the “drunk tank,” as they called it, and left him there from Friday until Sunday screaming for an aspirin and wouldn’t help him until the rest of the inmates began to protest on his behalf. His neck had been broken in three places. The family went lost everything suing the police and lost because he had a record which they said made him not a credible witness. I remember actually hating him as a child because he had that gigantic metal brace on his head and shoulders that scared me into thinking he was an actual monster. He had become a full-blown alcoholic and he smelled bad. He never recovered from that trauma. I knew the police had done that to him, but whenever he came over, I had childish tantrums. When I think back to *why* he looked and smelled that way, I wish I had been nicer to him before he passed away a few years later.

It wasn’t until I was an adult that I was able to get the full facts about the next door neighbor, Eulia Love. She was only thirty-nine, and I had remembered thinking she was an old lady. She had been shot eight times at point blank range, and four bullets had missed her. The only reason I was able to get this information was because a huge scandal had erupted when Jim Bellows of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* saw a mere paragraph on page two of the *LA Times* about the “incident” and decided to do his own twenty-two paragraph story on the front page of his paper. It created a



huge scandal for the police chief and the *LA Times*.<sup>72</sup> Even though an investigation ensued, of course the officers saw no jail time. Still, a young widow with three children getting killed by the police attracted a lot of attention, once the story was finally told. Unfortunately, Syl's story never attracted similar attention, his police record somehow assigning to him part of the blame for his own beating and injury. There are more stories and incidents with the police involving my family; these are just the events surrounding my home on Orchard Ave in Los Angeles. No amount of scandal could hold these police officers accountable for what they did. By the time the LA riots of '92 took place, many, many years of disappointment had been collecting in the hearts of its residents, mine included. The disappointment had turned to shock and then rage. We thought a videotape would finally make the difference and that it would matter. The trial following Oscar Grant's murder strongly suggested that it *still* didn't matter. Some people were shocked by Johannes Meserle's "involuntary manslaughter" conviction, his light sentence and early release, but I can't say that I was.

With the benefit of a close examination of "Strange Fruit," Holiday's performance, and the history of the song's production and reception, none of these events seem all that shocking. If we look at "Strange Fruit" in terms of the right now, it becomes apparent that times may not have changed as much as we think, and that lynching may in fact not be "virtually extinct" in the US. How much of a leap is it to recognize a derivative of lynching in a new term: "Officer Involved Shooting" (OIS), a term used repeatedly to suggest that an officer's weapon has been discharged and a civilian has been shot or killed. If we return to a definition of "lynch": "(of a group) kill (someone) for an alleged offence without a legal trial, especially by hanging" it becomes apparent that OIS often qualifies as a lynching.<sup>73</sup> Not all OISs are deadly, racially motivated, or murder. Not all lynching was racially motivated either, and many people were severely beaten and allowed to escape with their lives.<sup>74</sup> Some were lynched with multiple gunshot wounds.<sup>75</sup> I do not have to cite the numerous cases of "Officer Involved Shootings" across the country where the victim is black and unarmed. It happens next door; it happens a few miles away. The term itself draws attention to its own questionability in that it doesn't let on who is doing the shooting of whom. Namely, the shooting is described both grammatically and ethically as agentless.

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<sup>72</sup> See: Bellows, Jim. *The Last Editor: How I Saved the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times from Dullness and Complacency*. (Riverside: McMeel Publishing, 2002).

<sup>73</sup> Definition of "lynch" Concise Oxford English Dictionary-Tenth Edition, (Oxford University Press 1999, 2001).

<sup>74</sup> Best example is activist James Cameron (February 23, 1914 – June 11, 2006) Survived the famous lynching of Thomas Shipp, 18, and Abram Smith, 19, *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2006, accessed 10 Jun 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Duck Hill MS lynching. "RACES: Lynch & Anti-Lynch." *Time*. Apr. 26, 1937.

Why is it so important to connect OIS to “Strange Fruit” in particular? Only because it is the link between lynching then and now. Through “Strange Fruit,” lynching as metonymy, is then conceptualized, freed from its historical pastness. The numbers we attach to lynching—this many thousands of people between the 1860s and the 1960s—loses its concreteness and we are able to distance ourselves from it. Those numbers and years are finite ...that happened, this many times then... it doesn’t happen anymore. This relates to a conception of trauma as a single catastrophic event. “Strange Fruit” can make us look more closely to see how the rhetoric of lynching then closely resembles the racialized rhetoric of criminality today. If we go back to the picture for which “Strange Fruit” was written, the image of Thomas Shipp and Abe Smith—even the pictures themselves can’t help us identify lynching today because these pictures too deeply index their time and place: black and white photos that point to a past long past. The music doesn’t lie on the page or the screen, it fills the room—and as we look closer we’ find two men who had been involved in a robbery where a man got shot. I bring this up only to suggest that



(Lynching of Tom Shipp and Abe Smith in Marion, Indiana 1930)

a romanticized view of lynching that makes its victims seem completely innocent and its perpetrators completely guilty makes it part of a past that is overcome in our time. But this gets in the way of seeing how the same dynamics appear in the U.S. today, where we pardon the violent acts of police because we fear the violence of criminals.

“Strange Fruit” removes that distance and reopens our eyes that close every time it looks like things have changed drastically. The power lies in jazz, in the eternally *hearable* black voice, Billie Holiday’s immortal testimony. We continue to return to “Strange Fruit” and if we look closer we find that this history isn’t as long ago as we thought. We come to the song for jazz, for Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Cassandra Wilson, India.Arie, for those aesthetically pleasing black voices that sing our favorite American standards *and* “Strange Fruit.” Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” was released in a new Holiday compilation album yet again in 2011: *Simply the Best*, on the TV Music Label.

We continue to return to her song. Through it, though, we return to lynching or lynching returns to us, in the present, which gives us a framework with which to understand the roots of today’s police brutality against mainly black people. The more we forget this history, the easier it is to see these contemporary events of police-sanctioned mob violence as isolated incidents, or as product of contemporary circumstances such as growing crime in the inner city. If we see lynching as one example of a long and continuing history of the forceful control and abuse of black bodies, we can see how that legacy has evolved rather than ended. After all, what exactly ever severed this long line of violence? Cassells’ fear, the “one word, if we could grasp it, /Which might stop a child from becoming strange fruit,” is the same that perpetuates lynching well beyond that of Emmitt Till, whose death was intended to do exactly what it did: cause fear.



## Chapter Two

### Song to the Devil:

#### The Traumatic Voice of *Corregidora*, *Invisible Man*, and Louis Armstrong

*Your question –your answer.  
Your song, what does it know?*

—Paul Celan<sup>1</sup>

In the last album of her lifetime, *Lady in Satin* (1958), Holiday gives a powerful and harrowing performance in a scratchy, wavering voice. The performance is so touching and raw that in *The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings*, the album is said to be little more than “a voyeuristic look at a beaten woman.”<sup>2</sup> However, considering Holiday’s traumatic life, to what extent was her music *always* such a “look” at a beaten woman—beaten in the sense of battered but certainly not defeated for to sing is necessarily to deny defeat. Understanding the trauma behind the music—Holiday’s song and the black music tradition out of which she came—should turn that voyeuristic “looking” into a “witnessing” of traumatic testimony. When Samuel Grafton wrote that before “Strange Fruit,” Holiday had been, as previously quoted, “hiding her true sorrow in a set of love ditties,” and that in singing that song “had lifted the curtain and told us what it was that made her cry,” he too had apparently misunderstood something.<sup>3</sup> Save perhaps the songs Holiday penned herself, those lyrics had had little to do with the content of Holiday’s musical message. It wasn’t so much that the curtain had been lifted as that the code had been broken. Mainstream America had been let in on what everyone already knew if they could hear the Bessie Smith blues in the Holiday jazz. He hadn’t realized that what “made her cry” was why she sang in the first place. That she was already communing with the trauma of the past, of the blues before jazz, the blues *in* the jazz, with a legacy of slavery and the grim reality of Jim Crow America. She was singing about her own traumatic past and the historic trauma of her community and musical foremothers. It was always there in the voice and by the time she recorded *Lady in Satin*, there was nothing left to shield her listeners from the trauma in her song.

The extraordinary lyrics of “Strange Fruit” added to the significance of Holiday’s testimony. “Strange Fruit” was different because its words directly referred to the subject of the testimony: the horrors of lynching and American racism. However, jazz never needed the lyrics to testify to trauma. Holiday more than any other jazz singer, had the ability to convey a traumatic history with just the sound of her voice. It is, in fact, in the voice and the performance where the testimony lies.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Celan. *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. (New York: W.W. Norton. 2001), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Cook, R. M., Morton, Brian. *The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition. (Penguin: 2006), 653.

<sup>3</sup> Margolick *Bio* 56.

## *Corregidora*

In her novel *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones illustrates not only how singing jazz and the blues is traumatic testimony but also how traumatic content is to be found precisely within the voice itself and not necessarily in the lyrics. By creating a heroine, a blues singer, who struggles with the burden of testifying with her entire being, Jones captures both the danger of forgetting and the pain of remembering in the body of Ursa Corregidora. In her family, several generations of women descend from a Portuguese enslaver named Corregidora who used the captive women for forced prostitution. His crimes extend to fathering his own granddaughter. In each generation after Corregidora, the women repeat the story of what happened in the first person as a way to pass down the *evidence* of his crime. When her grandmother tells her the story, Ursa comments that “*it was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory.*”<sup>4</sup> More than memory, the retelling of the story in first person performs the past in the present. Not unlike the performance of a blues song, each woman tells the story as though it has happened to her personally, suggesting that in a sense it has. The narrator recounts her mother’s telling of the story: “Mama kept talking until it wasn’t her that was talking but Great Gram, I stared at her because she wasn’t Mama now, she was Great Gram talking” (124). The words, like a recording, play over and over again but in a different voice. Her mother goes on to relay the story in the first person:

it was as if she had *more* than learned it off by heart, though. It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory, or almost as strong. But now she was Mama again. (129)

One becomes the other in the telling of the story. For the Corregidora women, this testimony serves as evidence for what happened, for the *truth* of what happened:

*When I’m telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying. Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up.* (14 original italics)

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4, Gayl Jones. *Corregidora*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 11. Jones italicizes much of the book, especially parts involving memory.

Not only the story, but the body as well as their name, serve as evidence. The very existence of their bodies is evidence of the trauma that literally created them, the cross-generational rape and incest committed against the Corregidora women. In recognizing and retelling the trauma, they keep record of it:

*...They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood. (72)*

The grandmother recognizes that only the institutionalized practice of slavery ended but not the mentality that went along with it: “*they didn't burn what they put in their minds*” (my emphasis). She also understands that the same mentality was put in “*our*” minds as well. This mentality is its own trauma; in order to stop the metaphorical bleeding, to prevent further infection, it must be cauterized like the flesh of a wound, the etymology of trauma.<sup>5</sup> Continuing the metaphor, she insists that the scar of this cauterized wound be kept as evidence, as visible as blood. But blood isn't visible. Only the skin that holds the blood is. Her conceptualization of evidence, then, is the female bodies of her progeny and their skin. She essentially brings us to a frightening possibility: that in the place where they live, their very skin is the visible scar, the evidence of trauma, the evidence of a massive horrific crime. That's a hard way to live, seeing oneself that way.<sup>6</sup> All of the Corregidora women hold this idea inside themselves on some level. Justice on Judgment Day—or when, as Mama says, “the ground and the sky open up to ask them that question that's going to be ask,”—depends on each woman literally to bear witness. The Corregidora women give this responsibility to Ursa along with the graphic and traumatic story itself, at the age of five.

Unfortunately, her own personal trauma gets in the way of this destiny. Ursa's husband Mutt Thomas both literally and figuratively attempts to silence her by throwing her down a flight of stairs. He can no longer accept that she is a blues singer. In his mind, the men who watch Ursa sing “mess with they eyes,” infringing upon his property rights (3). It is no coincidence that Ursa's “personal” trauma mirrors her family's “collective” one. Mutt even uses the same terms to talk about Ursa as old man Corregidora did to talk about Great Gram. Both Mutt and Corregidora refer to the women as vaginas, as a “little gold piece” (10, 60). This could be interpreted as an effect of Ursa's memories, that remembering has caused her to

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<sup>5</sup> Trauma: from Greek, meaning “wound.” Concise Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> It is probably just as hard for one to see someone else that way. The implication for the progeny of the “criminals” engenders its *own* kind of trauma. It's rather grim either way you look at it. I'm willing to turn this and see these bodies also as evidence of endurance, perseverance and triumph if necessary as long as that necessity is questioned.

repeat Corregidora's crimes in her own life. However, Jones doesn't ask us to blame the victim here; she wants us to see what has been "*put in our minds*," how the mentality and legacy of slavery affects us all on many levels. Abuse has a way of perpetuating itself; it doesn't simply dissipate because of a moratorium on harsh terminology like *slave* or *master* or the abolition of legal contracts. The culture of ownership persists.

Mutt's act of violence not only silences her singing temporarily, it also silences her testimony. The fall aborts her one-month-old fetus and all future possibility of bearing children. Mutt essentially burns the evidence. This fact alone causes Ursa to have a massive crisis of existence. She is faced with what Susan Brison discusses as "the difficulty of regaining one's voice, one's subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or, worse, made into someone else's speech, an instrument of another's agency" (55). Suddenly an instrument of Mutt's agency, transformed into his speech, Ursa must reclaim her voice. After living to tell, she too must tell to live.

Ursa must find a way to narrate her personal trauma, and she has a familial obligation to find a way to tell the story she was born to tell. She has to bear another kind of witness for the atrocities in her family's past. Although rendered sterile, Ursa has her own unique way of retelling the story. She asks, "then let me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee, I'll stain their hands" (54). Ursa cannot produce a living witness but she can give witness by accessing history. The fetus made from coffee, a major crop grown during slavery and a mark of color, provides the evidence. She says to her deceased grandmother, "but still I'll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals" (53-54). Whereas the Corregidora women talk, Ursa will sing instead: their story and her own. In her time of anguish, she turns back to her song. She "wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world" (59). For her, a song of the new world is as much a Portuguese song as it is not. The legacy of slavery and the new world intertwine in one song. Through their generations, the Corregidora women tell the story of the new world, they tell their history. Without the ability to bear a child, Ursa cannot tell the story as they did, but she can sing it. She writes, "they squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return" (103).

The question remains as to exactly how Ursa's, or anyone's jazz or blues song narrates a traumatic history. Where is the testimony? In many ways, it lies within the voice. As Brison explains, a survivor must find her voice, narrate her story. Her voice holds Ursa's story. As to the question of what can be found within the voice, Roland Barthes may be of some assistance.

In *Image Music Text* he writes,



... I want to outline, not with regard to the whole of music but simply to a part of vocal music (*leid* or *mélodie*): the very precise space (genre) of *the encounter between a language and a voice*. ...the *grain*, the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music.<sup>7</sup>

Barthes' conception of the grain of a voice is useful insofar as the word *grain* might refer not only to a texture but also to a direction or a current. However, the encounter of which he speaks between language and a voice would have to be modified. Here the encounter does not take place between a voice and a language but rather between a voice and the *significance* of language. Or better, the voice conveys significance and intention, Barthes's *grain* in the sense of direction. The voice intends toward a significance to which the verbal language may not refer.

Jones often refers to this qualitative aspect of the voice. After Ursa's trauma, her voice perceptibly changes. She remarks about a friend's comment on her voice saying that "the voice [was] better because it tells what you've been through. Consequences. It seems as if you're not singing the past, you're humming it" (45). One man she knows remarks about her "new" voice saying to her, "you got a hard kind of voice, ... you know, like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. Strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen" (96). The performance of jazz, the singing, and the voice communicate Ursa's trauma so that on some level it fosters understanding without the need for semantic transparency, by which I mean that the lyrics themselves do not specifically speak of the trauma of which Ursa sings. The voice tells what she and her people have been through even though the lyrics do not. And this telling is not the offering of a narrative sequence. The hard and calloused voice, not soft or conventionally beautiful, 'can hurt you' in the sense of how it transmits traumatic content, which is always going to be somewhat *wounding* to witness to, as if the callouses of the voice could scratch the listener.

The traumatic content resides in the texture of the song performance. Ursa wonders why her mother tells her only the story of Corregidora and not about her own personal memories of trauma. Ursa says that she would rather sing the memories of her mother if she had to sing at all. She asks, "do you think that's why she kept it from me? Oh, I don't mean in the words, I wouldn't have done that. I mean in the tune, in the whole way I drew out a song. In the way my breath moved, in my whole voice. How could she bear witness to what she's never lived, and refuse me what she had lived?" (103). Her mother can bear witness to the trauma of others by means of

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes. *Image, music, text*. (London: Fontana, 1977), 181. (his italics) I think that Barthes was always searching for this tiny particle of art, like the *punctum* of the photograph that touched upon a communication of the incommunicable, the part that gave access to a pain he couldn't otherwise speak of.

the first person narrative, memorized like a blues song. As quoted earlier, the words themselves serve as a “*substitute for memory*” (11). Mama tells the inherited story as Ursa sings the blues. Ursa would have sung her mother’s song, but even if the words were the same, the song would not have been. The way she “drew out a song,” in her breath and whole voice refers to the physicality of the performance of the blues. If after trauma one must reintegrate oneself with self and body, the blues song begins this process. Farah Jasmine Griffin elucidates this reconnection in a discussion of Nina Simone. She writes:

She is both strength and vulnerability. When not singing we can hear an audible breathiness reminding us that the voice is situated in the body. At times she will substitute her voice with clapping hands, again embodying the song. Instead of hiding the breathing, denying the body of the singer in an effort to mimic an out-of-body spiritual transcendence, here we have a reminder of the relationship between body, breath, and spirit; a reminder that transcendence is acquired through the manipulation of bodily functions (chanting, singing, breathing, shouting dancing).<sup>8</sup>

The transition from spiritual transcendence to the physical anchoring of breath and body poses little difficulty for the blues singer, for she knows that concept of transcendence stems from the *before* of trauma. The abjection of trauma creates full awareness of the sensation of objectification far beyond the concept and as part of a harsh lived reality. Even without the words, the song exudes harsh reality as an everyday experience. Ursa communicates her traumatic experience with her song. She says of the blues that “it helps me to explain what I can’t explain” (56). Singing takes the place of words. She says to her mother, “if you understood me, Mama, you’d see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there. Soot crying out of my eyes” (66). For Ursa, the blues always tells a traumatic history that words cannot, even though the song does in fact have lyrics. The lyrics attest to their own insufficiency. This is the legacy of jazz music, to communicate these incommunicable traumas that lie at the origin of the very concept of “African American.”

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<sup>8</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin. “When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality,” Ed. O’Meally, R. G., B. H. Edwards, et al. *Uptown conversation : the new jazz studies*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 109.

## Song to the Devil

*"I ain't gon have you singing no devil music. Me over there sitting up in church trying to praise God, and you over at Preston's singing to the devil."*

*"Songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing."*

The relationship between trauma and the jazz or blues song has many dimensions. The act of singing jazz has its consequences. Because the event of trauma for the blues singer does not live only in the past, the song becomes implicated in the trauma. Jazz and trauma act upon one another in such a way that one can catalyze the other. Their deep entanglement renders an absolute distinction between them elusive.

One particular institution from which the blues deviates nevertheless permeates it: the church. As the music evolved from spirituals, it carried spiritual roots within. Therefore, an element of the sacred and the secular accompany the music at all times. As Geneva Smitherman writes, "The most striking example of this merging of sacred and secular styles is in the area of black music, where lyrics, musical scores, and singers themselves easily float in and out of both worlds."<sup>10</sup> Discussing the church's role in everyday speech and the clever banter which she called *raps*, Smitherman writes,

The inclusion of church raps here in practically the same breath as street raps is to demonstrate the sacred-secular continuum in the oral tradition and to dramatize the importance of the black church in the culture and verbal style of black people. (88)

As popular black music moved toward the secular, it maintained its spiritual culture; gospel inflected the music and the experience of listening to jazz. People exhibited church behavior in the way they responded to the music they heard. According to Smitherman, in the traditional black church "the worship patterns are characterized by spontaneous preacher-congregation calls and responses, holler and shouts, intensely emotional singing, spirit possession, and extemporaneous testimonials to the power of the Holy Spirit" (90). This pattern extended to everyday life and sometimes had little to do with the spiritual beliefs of the musicians or the audience. She notes, "Here we are in contemporary times finding this [church] behavior being exhibited by blacks who don't even set foot inside the church door!" (93). This behavior includes calling out to performers in the manner in which a congregation responds to its preacher mingling church culture and blues culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, *Corregidora* 146 and 53.

<sup>10</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 93.

The music has never been able to divorce itself from its spiritual underpinnings no matter who practices it. In fact, as it evolves and builds upon itself, the music remains an evolution of the *spiritual* and the Negro Spiritual, in particular. Perhaps that continuum is the place where trauma resides; as the music calls upon the spiritual, the trauma is given voice. In the realm of the spiritual, one will ask for mercy in an expression as commonplace as any given expletive. To hear the invocation of the voice is to hear the spiritual within it.

Despite all this, I'm not so much invested in the concept of the sacred-secular continuum in order to show an inherent spirituality in jazz; rather, I am more interested in showing a constitutive departure of the blues and jazz from the spiritual. This departure has never been accepted easily by those who rest comfortably on the more sacred side of the continuum. Especially since singers often (knowingly or not) use gospel riffs to accentuate their music, a kind of blasphemy marks the performance.<sup>11</sup> Without the message of Christianity, secular music takes on a preoccupation with "worldly matters," and the world is the realm of the devil. Earthly matters, even those of traumatic significance, are still earthly matters. For this reason, when Ursa's mother accuses her of singing to the devil, she isn't wrong. For "*unless your voice is raised up to the glory of God,*" as Mama says, the blues singer's song is essentially to the devil (53). Ursa has not inherited this Christian conception of the blues. "*I don't know where you got that,*" she tells her mother. She feels her songs are her mother's songs. "*Where did you get those songs?*" Mama asks, "*That's devil's music, / I got them from you*" (54). Mama can only hear the lyrics, she cannot hear the generations of trauma behind them. In a sense, however, both are correct. Ursa sings the story indoctrinated in her by her mother and grandmothers, and as she sings this story in the form of the blues, their story becomes the devil's music.

This spiritual departure in the blues is only one of the ways in which the singer communes with the devil in her song. If the content of the song is a traumatic utterance, then, as Mama says, "*It's your own destruction you're singing*"(53). Quite literally, to sing as testimony to trauma is to sing of one's destruction as a subject. The song engages the evil of the world, the devil. The best practitioners of the blues, like the famed Robert Johnson, were said to have made a *deal with the devil* who gave them their talent. Perhaps in the telling, the saying changed from *having to* deal with the devil, to making such a deal. How else could one explain the hardship of existence as a black American? Jill Terry suggests that "the titles of blues songs such as "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Preachin' the Blues" exemplify a rebellion against the religious

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<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, even the most spiritually oriented appreciate the historical importance of the blues and jazz even if they don't listen to it. Today's gospel music is in dialogue with the entire spectrum of American music, as an appeal to younger generations who take less pleasure in the classics. As long as the content—and for religious purposes, that does refer to the actual lyrics of the song—has a Christian message, it qualifies as "gospel music." That includes rock and pop styles adapted to church performance.

community from which they are excluded.”<sup>12</sup> However, I would argue that the departure is never so complete or forced as to be a rebellion. The sacred secular continuum remains intact. This isn’t to say that the continuum represents an uninterrupted evolution of spiritual music. Instead, I mean to say that the music may deviate from spirituality, but a total departure would suggest that for jazz, the tradition of the spiritual fulfills no function at all. The music would have to destroy itself in order to completely divorce itself from the spiritual. The spiritual is the fabric from which the music is made; to remove that fabric would be to exanguinate the body of the music. Furthermore, one can never be so literal in interpreting an art form charged with double entendres; transparent meanings appealed to the dominant society while hidden meanings were meant for insiders only. The devil was always also an epithet for white people and the institution of racism.

## Invisible Witness

*who  
is invisible enough  
to see you?  
—Paul Celan<sup>13</sup>*

Vital to traumatic testimony is its witness. As Gayl Jones wrote in *Mosquito*, “we has got to know that the listener is as important to the story as the storyteller.”<sup>14</sup> If trauma initiates a kind of psychic death and testimony reaches out to facilitate the construction of a new subjectivity, then the witness truly gives the life to the story. Without the witness the testimony falls silent and it too dies. However, the witness must assume accountability for the story. S/he must witness with the kind of virtuosity with which the artist testifies. When the testimony takes the form of jazz, the witness has to have the ability to *hear* it. Jorge Semprun heard the traumatic expression within jazz music. After surviving deportation and Buchenwald, he discusses this expression in his exploration of living with and writing about the memory and trauma of the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup> “That music,” he writes, “—those glittering or sorrowful sax and trumpet solos, the muffled or pounding drums throbbing like a lively pulse—was inexplicably at the heart of the universe I wanted to describe, the

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<sup>12</sup> Terry, Jill. “Oral Culture and Southern Fiction” in Gray, R. J. and O. Robinson. *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. (Malden: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 530.

<sup>13</sup> Celan (2001)274-275. “*ver/ ist unsichtbar genug,/ euch zu sehn?*” “Show-fringes, Sense-fringes,” (*Schaufäden, Sinnfäden*)

<sup>14</sup>Gayl Jones. *Mosquito*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 614.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, there is music that comes out of the trauma of the Holocaust. See: Jerry Silverman. *The Undying Flame: Ballads and Songs of the Holocaust* ( New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

book I wanted to write.”<sup>16</sup> Semprun understood the testimonial function of jazz even if it could not adequately testify for his personal experience. He later writes that “only a cry from the depths of the soul, only a deathly silence could have expressed that suffering,” (159). A dual significance emerges from his recognition. First, that for him, Jazz is a form of traumatic testimony that he, partly because of his own experience, could *witness to*, not one that could *testify to* his own experience. This makes sense because jazz and the blues come out of a radically different traumatic experience, the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, not the Holocaust. Secondly, not anything but an abysmal cry, a mortal silence itself could give voice to his suffering. He places “silence” next to “cry” in apposition, one redefining the other. By an incongruous logic, this deep cry and silence are either one and the same or in conflict with one another. Interestingly, for those who are able to hear, this very conflict lies at the center of jazz. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison’s narrator represents such a witness. To his satisfaction, the invisible man is able to “hear the silence of sound.”<sup>17</sup> That is to say, that he can perhaps hear the cry within the silences of the music.

This conflict between sound and silence touches upon major questions that recur in trauma studies. Cathy Caruth asks, “How does one listen to what is impossible?” and suggests in turn that such listening is “the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*.”<sup>18</sup> The suggestion that language limits the realm of testimony forms the basis for my desire to look toward art, specifically jazz and blues music to expand that realm. However, connecting the aesthetic with the traumatic does raise valid concerns. Shoshana Felman noted in Paul Celan’s own words that his poetry “distrusts the beautiful, . . . [and] insists on having its ‘musicality’ placed in a region where it no longer has anything in common with that ‘melodious sound.’”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the necessity to call upon Celan to help me articulate my introspection about the traumatic content of jazz music at all times carries with it this concern. Theodore Adorno’s famous claim about the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz further strengthens this reservation.<sup>20</sup> However, both Adorno and Celan acknowledge the importance of a dialectical approach. Adorno himself, later concedes that “it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.”<sup>21</sup> It is with this perception that I go forward.

According to Adorno, suffering has the *potential* to find a voice in art. How do we listen to this voice? In *Corregidora*, Ursa tells us that “when [she] did feel [she] had to tell Mama [her] song, she listened, but it was the *quiet kind of listening* one has when they already know. Or maybe just *when it’s a song they’ve sung themselves*, but with different

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Semprún. *Literature or life*. (New York: Viking, 1997), 158. (*L’écriture ou la vie*)

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 13. Referred to as *IM*.

<sup>18</sup> Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 10.

<sup>19</sup> Shoshana Felman. “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Prisms*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Felman (1992), 34.

lyrics” (82, my emphasis). This suggests that to listen, one must already understand in some way that what she listens to is testimony. Ellison’s invisible man possesses that knowledge which allows him to hear Louis Armstrong sing “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue.” The narrator writes that his “own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music” (8). In order to understand how invisibility facilitates witnessing, invisibility itself bears explaining. Ellison’s narrator gives us this explanation in the beginning of his prologue. He writes,

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids-and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

The figment that others see in place of the invisible man is not only race, but race as a concept that accurately represents some identifiable and concrete thing. They see race as a natural phenomenon rather than a manufactured one. Adorno often wrote of this kind of vision, analyzing it via the concept of Marxist *reification*. Race then, cavorts with *racism* as its silent partner since racism refers first to “the belief that there are characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to each race,”<sup>22</sup> and only secondly to discrimination based upon race. Invisibility then is an agentless condition: the tendency to be seen only as a representative of a race. In contrast, those who see in this way are considered blind. Their condition is an expression of agency in that their blindness is a refusal to see, i.e., not to see the narrator confirms what Fanon describes as “to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible.”<sup>23</sup>

Fred Moten writes about how invisibility refers to a way of being seen. He suggests that “the mark of invisibility is a visible, racial mark; invisibility has visibility at its heart. ...Ellison phonographs this problematic paradox, bringing the noise to in/visibility. ...one is interested in what the noise carries...”<sup>24</sup> I have already proposed that “the noise” carries the expression of a traumatic history; now I want to discuss how one can truly hear the noise. In 1947, not only did Ellison already know that African American history could be found in the music, but he was also able to give a vivid image of that history. As an invisible man, his narrator can not only hear that

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<sup>22</sup> From Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University press 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press.1967), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Fred Moten. *In the break : the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 68.

history but can also rewrite it for the rest of the invisible and blind. However, an awareness of one's own invisibility comes only to the enlightened. In what he refers to as a hole in the ground, the invisible man has "exactly 1,369 lights" a probable reference to Ellison's own enlightenment after meeting Richard Wright in 1936.<sup>25</sup> In his own dialectic of enlightenment, the invisible man contemplates his invisibility by means of light. The requisite invisibility, enlightenment, and a good deal of artful virtuosity allow Ellison and his invisible man to write the history of trauma within Armstrong's song. These elements lead to "a new analytical way of listening to music," where he can hear the "unheard sounds" (8). This narrator initiates the processes of listening, or witnessing under the influence of "reefer," and his ensuing surreal vision journeys into depths beneath the music which recall slavery and its aftermath, immediate and otherwise.

*And beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout... (9)*

The shouting comes from a preacher whose sermon formulates a dialectic of blackness:

*"I said black is . . ."  
 "Preach it, brother . . ."  
 ". . . an' black ain't . . ."*

*... "Black will git you . . ."  
 "Yes, it will . . ."  
 ". . . an' black won't . . ."  
 "Naw, it won't!"  
 "It do . . ."  
 "It do, Lawd . . ."  
 ". . . an' it don't."*

*... "Black will make you . . ."  
 "Black . . ."  
 ". . . or black will un-make you." (9)*

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<sup>25</sup> Ellison *IM* (i)



The clever, humorous rhyming style of the sermon is itself a part of the history.<sup>26</sup> He traverses the sacred-secular divide, showing matters of race as an appropriate subject for a preacher's sermon. Within his seemingly light form, the preacher can discuss more serious content. In fact, to his congregation, this short simple rhyming form signals the presence of a real truth. The content of the sermon essentially signifies a paradox of blackness, where something that means nothing also at once means everything. Blackness doesn't have to refer to reality to gravely affect or even create reality. Blackness both forms subjectivity and destroys it without ever really having to exist at all.

In his journey into Armstrong's song, the narrator encounters many people and experiences a range of emotions, from the wailing of a gospel singer to the sadness of a mother who killed a master she loved before her sons could. He emerges from his reverie, to

hear Louis Armstrong innocently asking,  
What did I do  
To be so black  
And blue? (12)

All of this, he hears within the sound of Armstrong's singing, not unlike Ursa's song that can incorporate both her personal trauma and that of her ancestors. What the narrator hears in Armstrong's song is the invisibility of them both. Interestingly, this literary engagement brings us back to the song repeatedly even eighty years later. The narrator writes, "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible" (8). Knowing that Armstrong metaphorically makes poetry from invisibility or literally makes music from trauma, forms the basis of the narrator's enlightenment. Recognizing the traumatic history within the music is his highest achievement. Hearing that history gives him the power to see his own invisibility, to see exactly how the past lives in the present, and share it with whoever will witness. He writes that he "did not come alive until he discovered [his] invisibility" (7). Life here depends upon the awareness of one's new self in the wake of a traumatic existence. "To be unaware of one's form," the narrator suggests, "is to live a death"(7). For a time, and too often for all time, the survivor of trauma does indeed live a death, and further survival depends on the ability to renew the self through a narrative of the experience. The *narrator* lives on because he has to counter that death

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<sup>26</sup> Smitherman (1986) writes that "only those blacks who can perform stunning feats of oral gymnastics become culture heroes and leaders in the community. Such feats are the basic requirement of the trade among preachers." For example, she quotes a preacher who told his congregation that they "better quit all this drankin, smoking, and runnin 'round. Cause, see, for me, I got a home in Heaven, but I ain't homesick!" (76-77)

with a story. He realizes simply that he is invisible, will always *be* invisible, and thank god for Louis Armstrong.

### **5.1 Surround Sound**

After interpreting Armstrong's song, Ellison's narrator feels that he has thus "illuminated the blackness of [his] invisibility—and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation" (13-14). It seems as if the illumination came from the song itself, even as his understanding of the song came from his illumination. Still, he recognizes the difficulty in hearing a traumatic history within music. He addresses us directly: "You hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians" (14). That musicians see sheet music can account for part of what he means, but in a novel about the inner workings of invisibility, it makes sense to pause and read *seeing* as more than viewing. I stress this because I want to highlight the question of who can hear the trauma of music. By this statement, musicians have the "eyes" to see the invisibility of music. Ellison's dialectic of enlightenment is synesthetic: one sees by hearing the invisibility of the trauma in the music. This synesthesia is crucial to what is conveyed and conveyable in the music. It works paradoxically to thematize the contradictory life/death of trauma. However, those who, like the narrator, have both vision and the skill to do so, can write this invisibility for those who care to read it. He asks, "Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (14). This compulsion, goes beyond the need to write down the invisibility within the music; it stems from his need to write *his own* invisibility, to essentially renew his damaged subjectivity. However, it is through music that this process can begin. Seeing one's own invisibility must cause an experience of disintegration. And so to hear Armstrong sing is like having a mirror in which to see and reaffirm your invisible self. Earlier he says that he wishes he could have five phonographs to listen to five recordings of Armstrong singing at once in order to "feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body"(8). But what would this sound like? The sound of many recordings playing at once is not the amplification of sound from many directions as we have come to think of it today, with modern surround-sound reproduction. A single receiver amplifies the five speakers of the today's 5.1 surround-sound.<sup>27</sup> Even if the modern experience of five speakers may have been what he had in his imagination, to hear five machines playing at once is a completely different

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<sup>27</sup> What looks like a sixth speaker in a typical home theater system is actually a subwoofer which is responsible for only the lowest frequencies of sound. This is why it's called 5.1 surround. The subwoofer doesn't count as an actual speaker. On a lighter note, maybe Ellison somehow anticipated the optimum listening experience that was to come several decades down the road. His last line, "who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581) could then be Ellison's identification with the .1 channel of the system. The optimum set up for hearing Armstrong then is 5 parts Armstrong, .1 part Ellison, where Armstrong is the speaker and Ellison the subwoofer. I like the idea of Ellison subwoofering about Armstrong.

experience; five machines means five voices, an excessive instantaneous echo, or the sound of a chorus of one voice. The many voices would be like a reflection, as if he were surrounded by five mirrors and would be able to see his infinite self. But the narrator would hear his infinite invisibility. This would better replace the “mirrors of hard, distorting glass,” that represent the way others see him (8). This echoing bombardment of the sound of Armstrong would at once show him his infinite existence and infinite fragmentation characteristic of a particularly modern experience. Therefore, the relationship between one who testifies and one who witnesses has reflection at its heart. As Celan asks, “who/ is invisible enough/ to see you?” To that end, one must already recognize the sting of invisibility before he can see the invisible.

And those who see will write to the blind. As Fanon wrote, “To educate man to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act” (222, his emphasis). Ellison’s invisible man recognizes this imperative to act at the end of his journey when he asks, “So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself, I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled ‘file and forget,’ and I can neither file nor forget” (579). So rather than forget, Ellison writes the experience of invisibility as reflected in the music of Armstrong.

## Deconstructing Dinah

Ellison gave us an image of the history within Armstrong’s song and a richly contextual meaning behind that song. But what else is there to understand in the song? If when we put down his book we pick up a recording of the song itself, what can *we* hear? Where in the song can we find what we’re now listening for? After all, I have not argued that the history is in *literature* that engages music; these are examples of literature that are *aware* of the traumatic history in the music. Did I not propose that this history is in the *music* itself? How do we recognize it? In my discussion of *Corregidora*, I argued that the traumatic content of the music is irreducible to the lyric, and that a significant portion of that content is in the voice. However, the voice is only a part of the testimony in jazz.<sup>28</sup> Everything that goes into the performance of the song is the testimony. This, of course, includes the voices of the instruments as well. As Ellison’s narrator noted, when he heard Armstrong’s song, “each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak” (8). At its best, the music is a cooperative art, as if individuality itself depended on the collaboration within a collective effort. One must hear each voice as it stands apart from the others. Armstrong’s long career and the

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<sup>28</sup> Instrumental jazz certainly does testify to trauma as well. I only foreground vocal jazz as the strongest form of testimony 1) because it is part of the larger African American oral tradition 2) because it is part larger American oral tradition that recognizes the primacy of oral testimony. See Chapter One on “Strange Fruit.”

extensive archiving of his performances give us a wealth of recordings and footage to view and listen for the history in the music.

By the time Louis Armstrong came along to revolutionize American music, slavery was officially a few decades in the past, and American music had already seen significant change. Just about everything about Louis Armstrong would point to the origins of jazz as constitutively related to trauma. Not just his musical ability, but his actual performances, as well as the biographical details of his life demonstrate the interconnectedness of jazz and trauma – like Holiday. The mere fact that he would play for decades in establishments that would not legally allow his patronage will form a foundation for the bitter irony that will never cease to surround jazz. In his birthplace of New Orleans, jazz music would evolve in part from the funeral march in its early formation, placing it already in the realm of collective mourning. The same city’s government would later reject his offer to perform because of his racially integrated band.

Writers and musicians alike have noted his unsettling mannerisms and especially take issue with his facial expressions, condemning their direct relationship to the painful legacy of American minstrelsy. Some have harshly criticized him for it, and musicians seemed to reject him for it as the civil rights movement grew in momentum. However, I believe that it is precisely the fact that Armstrong’s visage indexes the legacy of minstrelsy as part of the legacy of slavery that situates it as a document of historical trauma. It is hard for some to look at Armstrong’s face in some of his performances without being reminded of the painful mockery of African-Americans in minstrelsy. As Ellison wrote, the musicians of Charlie Parker’s generation rejected the stereotype of “the traditional entertainer’s role—a heritage from the minstrel tradition,” which they saw epitomized in the performances of Louis Armstrong.<sup>29</sup> However, wouldn’t the true crime be if all traces of that heritage were erased? Some want to reject Armstrong for reanimating this memory, while others want to find an alternative meaning in it. For example, Ellison saw Armstrong as a “trickster” who “emphasizes the physicality of his music with sweat, spittle and facial contortions” (106). It is quite possible that this clown-like persona that Ellison wants to attribute to Armstrong also comes out of the minstrel tradition. There is also the possibility that more than what Armstrong looks like comes out of the minstrel tradition. There could even be something of the minstrel tradition in his sound as well, although this is questionable because one would be hard pressed to find a similar style for which Armstrong is supposed to be in anyway imitating. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator suggests that Armstrong is “unaware that he is invisible” (8). This is, perhaps, in defense of the minstrel tradition apparent in Armstrong’s performances. However, doesn’t any defense or condemnation of Armstrong’s performance style

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<sup>29</sup> Ralph Ellison and J. F. Callahan *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 259.

bring us back to Baraka's exclamation mark?<sup>30</sup> Is Armstrong a man or a race? If he is truly invisible, what could he do with his face to make himself seen by the willfully blind as a man rather than a black man? There isn't anything *he* could do; there is nothing he should do. He cannot make himself visible or invisible. How we see him is a reflection of us, not of him. If we reject him because we are hurt by what he makes us remember, we miss the point. If we defend him and deny what he makes us remember, we miss the point. We become caught in a cycle of reification and re-reification, where Armstrong has to take the responsibility for his own trauma because he's not a man—he's a black man. It brings us back to Baraka's exclamation mark because it reminds us of the trauma that marks modern self-conception of many African Americans. After all, these responses dance around a deep and inherent shame that comes from victimization. Armstrong's performances aren't the reinforcement of these painful stereotypes: they are evidence of them.

It is in this unlikely place—unlikely because many discussions of the blues *begin* with this famous quotation—that I will turn to Ellison's definition of the blues. He writes that:

the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching conscious, 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.<sup>31</sup>

Eloquently, Ellison identifies the blues as a traumatic testimony, before trauma theory exists. However, in our romanticizing of the music, we also easily neglect its other side, the part where it communes so naturally with the devil. So yes, while it is a beautifully articulated history of a people and their trauma, it is also an industry. I imagine it is this aspect of the music that effectively blinded Adorno to any other contribution the music had to offer.<sup>32</sup> However, it is an important aspect to note, if one wants to acknowledge the trauma of our musical past. Jazz and the blues were more than a means for testifying; as paid labor, they were a means to eat, pure and simple, perhaps one of the best means available. Musicians created a product that sold by the thousands, and few of them complained about commercial success. Therefore, concession after concession had to be made if one was to make a living as a musician. Rejecting their art because they made concessions to be able to produce it indicts *them* and denies us a significant part of American history and art.

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<sup>30</sup> See introduction and Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*.

<sup>31</sup> *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. (129)

<sup>32</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno. "Farewell to Jazz" in *Essays on Music Theodore W. Adorno*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

So yes, Armstrong's art *did*, in fact, develop within the minstrel tradition which would remain in practice for more than half of his lifetime. Furthermore, that tradition didn't simply disappear with the discontinuing of burnt cork.<sup>33</sup> To witness the face of Louis Armstrong in later years, for example during the civil rights movement and now, is to witness the very trauma within which jazz originated, to brush history against the very grain that wants to forget the derogatory moments of the American past, moments, that if we don't acknowledge and mourn them, will only continue rather than dissolve.

Although, like the stories and bodies of the Corregidora women, Armstrong's face serves as evidence for the legacies of minstrelsy and slavery, neither Armstrong's performances nor his facial expressions can be reduced solely to a throwback to minstrelsy. Armstrong's performances arduously navigate between attesting to minstrelsy's influence on his contemporary modes of performance, which is in itself a traumatic testimony, *and* testifying to the trauma that is the pain of this strained dual existence and finally, the creation of art. By accessing these resources the history itself becomes a paradoxical resource. I thus wish to acknowledge the strange reality—and important role—of aesthetics in this traumatic testimony, the very important part of performance that accounts for the aesthetic pleasure in traumatic testimony to which Benjamin referred. The performance then becomes both the acknowledgment of that painful history and its “turning” into something compelling, a giving sound to what is painful in order to produce a kind of beauty through that very process.

Of all of Armstrong's documented performances, there is one that best demonstrates both Armstrong's connection to and departure from the tradition of minstrelsy. The performance I will discuss is from the early Danish sound film, *København Kalundborg og?* (1934). This is a feature film starring Ludvig Brandstrup, about a variety show where all the actors/performers play themselves, among them Louis Armstrong singing *Dinah* in Copenhagen, in 1933.<sup>34</sup> In many ways, this rare, early performance of Armstrong's demonstrates how testimony permeates the whole of his performance. Taking place in anti-fascist territory in the wake of Hitler's rise to power and rampant dissemination of “scientific” race theory, it shows the various tensions that Armstrong must navigate, tensions always present at the root of jazz performance. Armstrong sings the song *Dinah*, a popular song published in 1925 with an upbeat tempo and upbeat lyrics.<sup>35</sup> This is undoubtedly a happy song, musically and

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<sup>33</sup> Blackface minstrels smeared burnt cork on their faces to make themselves appear literally black. For more on modern day conceptions of the minstrel tradition, see Daphne A. Brooks, “‘This voice which is not one’: Amy Winehouse sings the ballad of sonic blue(s)face culture,” *Woman & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 20/1 (2010), pp. 37-60

<sup>34</sup> *København Kalundborg og?* Dir. Ludvig Brandstrup, Holger-Madsen. Palladium, 1934.

<sup>35</sup> Written by Sam Lewis, Joe Young, Harry Akst. Published in 1925.

Original Lyrics:

Car -o -lin -a gave me Din -ah,  
I'm the proud -est one be -neath the Dix -ie sun,

lyrically but, I want to demonstrate how even in the most unlikely places, jazz can testify to traumatic history and experience. *Dinah*, was a song already firmly grounded in the minstrel tradition by the time Armstrong sang it. It was written by Jewish American Sam Lewis with Joe Young and Harry Akst as a white imitation of the black “voice.” The name Dinah, although originally a Hebrew name, had come to be an epithet for an enslaved black woman and later any woman of African American descent.<sup>36</sup> The song was made famous by Jewish American Eddie Cantor who sang it in blackface. Armstrong’s rendition of the lyrics is roughly as follows:

Oh Dinah,  
Is anyone finer  
In the state of Carolina?  
If there is and you know,  
Show her to me!

Dinah,  
With Dixie eyes blazin',  
Would love to sit and gaze in  
To the eyes of Dinah Lee!

Baby, every night,  
Why I shake with fright, aw  
Cause my Dinah might,  
Change her mind... (scat)

Did you wan-der to China babe,  
I'd hop an ocean liner, oh babe  
Oooh Dinah! Dinah! Oh Dine-Oh babe, Dinah Lee! (scat)Dinah Lee.

Oh Baby, every night why I, oh yeah babe

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News is spread -in' 'bout a wed -din'  
I hear church bells ring -in', Here's the song my heart keeps sing -in':  
"Din -ah, is there an -y -one fin -er in the state of Car -o -lin -a,  
If there is and you know 'er, Show 'er to me?  
Din -ah, with her Dix -ie eyes blaz -in',  
How I love to sit and gaze in to the eyes of Din -ah Lee.  
Ev -'ry night why do I shake with fright,  
Be -cause my Din -ah might change her mind a -bout me.  
Din -ah, if she wan -dered to Chin -a,  
I would hop and o -cean lin -er, Just to be with Din -ah Lee."

<sup>36</sup> Also from OED: "A man's sweetheart or favourite woman."  
"dinah, n." OED Online. June 2011. Oxford University Press. 26 June 2011  
<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/52971>.

Cause my Dinah might, (scat)  
If you wonder to china babe, I'd hop an ocean liner. Yeah.

Armstrong sets the song to a very fast swing. Interestingly, in his performance, the markers of minstrelsy (wide open eyes and giant smile) appear right at the very same place as the markers of trauma: the mouth and eyes. In his performance of the song, he constantly shifts between opening and closing both his eyes and his mouth. The two states are often extreme for and teeth wide, he can sing “Dinah,” as if the proper pronunciation of the word had a direct relationship with minstrelsy. Yet, Armstrong repeatedly closes his mouth, cutting off both the minstrel face and the “proper” word “Dinah.” He reduces “Dinah” to Da—de, da—za, za—zo—za etc., making “nonsense” of the word. Sometimes “Dinah” turns into “Din-oh,” where “oh” sounds like an exclamation of either joy or sadness, familiar to the blues. His scatting is hectic, the “Dinah” repeatedly cut off but then repeated yet again, as if the word must—but cannot be said. Armstrong; when his eyes and/or mouth are open, they are open completely. When they are shut, they are closed tightly, and sometimes prematurely. Armstrong’s face goes from open mouth to closed, big wide toothy smile, to closed-lipped frown. He closes his mouth often before the words have been completely uttered. He turns “Dinah” in to “Din-uv” or “Din-um,” “Carolina” into “Carolin-uv.” “Dinah Lee often becomes Dinah-leave.” His scatting (which by definition is improvisational) and his embellishments expand from the melody and the lyrics, not the chord changes, such as those you might find in an entirely improvisational jazz performance. Literally, with his scatting, he rewrites the song as he sings it; he breaks from both the words and melody. When he opens his mouth

It is worth considering the significance of the scat. Where Armstrong makes nonsense out of the name Dinah, he may be creating a different kind of sense in the process. Brent Hayes Edwards suggests that “even in a musical sense, one could argue that scat does carry semantic content, though not necessarily linguistic content.”<sup>37</sup> Although he does not name the signification, Edwards argues that “scat aesthetics thus involve an augmentation of expressive potential rather than an evacuation or reduction of signification” (649). Edwards even goes so far as to comment on the *scatology* in scat citing Armstrong’s own comparisons of his performances to sexual and excremental release. He links it also to a tradition of “talking shit” by way of Wesley Brown’s Novel *Tragic Magic*.<sup>38</sup> He quotes the opening of the novel:

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<sup>37</sup> Edwards, Brent Hayes. “Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), pp. 618-649: 622.

<sup>38</sup> This comparison of excellent verbal/vocal skill with defecation hasn’t left popular culture to which Nicki Minaj’s hit song “Did It On ‘em” in which she repeats, “shitted on ‘em” will attest. The suggestion is that she has bested all other rappers at their own game. See *Pink Friday* (2011) on the Cash Money Records Label.



Scatology is a branch of science dealing with the diagnosis of dung and other excremental matters of state. Taking shit is a renegade form of scatology developed by people who were fed up with do-do dialogues and created a kind of vocal doodling that suggested other possibilities within the human voice beyond the same old shit. (621)

I'm interested in this metaphor only inasmuch as it makes us wonder what exactly is being expelled in the process of singing and/or scatting. I am inclined to suggest that it is, in fact, traumatic testimony that accounts for the semantic content of scat. This is in line with Edwards's quoting of Nathaniel Mackey's epistolary novel *Bedouin Hornbook* which maintains

that scat's 'apparent mangling of articulate speech testifies to an 'unspeakable' history' of racial violence, lynching in particular.' He elaborates this function as a 'telling 'inarticulacy'—an inarticulacy that nonetheless (or thereby) speaks, carries content. (624)

I cannot say with certainty that lynching is the particular racial violence to which scat testifies, but I am sure it is among the many experiences of trauma found in the testimony of the singer. I am also certain that racialized violence in the form of lynching is exactly what Mackey's character can witness to in his own "analytical way of listening to music" (Ellison *IM*, 8).

For David Copenhafer, the scat speaks directly to the controversy of Armstrong's minstrelsy-inflected facial contortions. The issues surrounding Armstrong's face converge upon his singing the word itself. He argues that "Armstrong fashions a memorable "face" in "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?" by distending and distorting the very word into something scarcely recognizable" (185).<sup>39</sup> In this 1933 recording—the one to which Ellison's Invisible Man listens—specifically in the song's bridge, Armstrong's scat deviates from the lyric, "I'm white inside/But that don't help my case/ Cause I can't hide/ what is in my face," by improvising on and never finishing the pronunciation of the word face. Copenhafer argues that "instead 'face' becomes the point of departure of his scat." That, "Armstrong steps, or perhaps falls, outside of the boundaries of language..."(185-186). This *fall* is perhaps in response to Armstrong's conception of the origins of scat as a *fall* where the lyrics were figuratively dropped and literally dropped on the floor.<sup>40</sup> Copenhafer sees Armstrong as aware of his face as a figure precisely for disfiguration. He asks,

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<sup>39</sup>David Copenhafer. "Invisible Music (Ellison)." *Qui Parle*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring/Summer, 2004), 177-204.

<sup>40</sup> See Louis Armstrong, "Jazz on a High Note," *Esquire* 36 (Dec. 1951), 85.

How else to explain the strange, no doubt improvised, grammar of the line: ‘Cause I/ can’t hide/ what is in my face?’ ‘*In* my face?’ The original lyric had been “on my face.”... He says in effect, that race is not to be seen on his face,... but... ‘in’ what the face signifies. (133)

But what else could “in my face” mean? If we leave behind grammatical signification and consider the expression idiomatically, then Armstrong cannot hide what is trying to dominate him, what is thrust upon him or, right in front of him, confronting him.<sup>41</sup> Race then is not simply signified in his face but it is actually *thrown* in his face. In a sense, then, Armstrong’s minstrel inflected facial contortions perform the performativity of race. Yet, only insofar as any minstrel performance does exactly the same. His face then confronts us with that which confronts him. Edwards suggests that Armstrong’s performance forces a confrontation with “an untamable, prancing set of contradictory indices that seem to be saying all too much at once” (647). Again, we are left to wonder what exactly is being said *in* this facial exchange. Without naming it, Copenhafer corroborates the suggestion of trauma as the semantic content of the scat. He writes that

the scat that emerges to interrupt his pronunciation of the word ‘face’ points towards a history and a pain that cannot be uttered by means of conventional language. Nor, however, can it be uttered by means of “unconventional” language, but it may be more insistently indexed by the breakdown of language than by its untroubled operation. Scat both responds and alludes to the history of slavery and of racial violence but it can also produce a singer who, at least momentarily, is on the way towards losing his or her connection to other speakers. (187)

However, if we look at the scat as traumatic testimony, it is precisely at the moment of this linguistic departure that the connection is regained. Through the medium of scat a traumatic history communicated through the voice approaches the linguistic realm without having to enter it completely, foreclosing the open interpretation of its meanings. In fact, one might better hear the testimony in the scat without the intrusion of irrelevant lyrics to distort or, at best, conceal it.<sup>42</sup> The trauma itself has

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<sup>41</sup>Knowing that the meaning of these expressions has a way of changing over time, I asked my grandmother what it meant and she said that when she was growing up in the South in the 1930s that “in my face” meant someone was “trying to rule you” or he or she was “in your business.” My mother and aunt corroborated a suggestion of confrontation that is the way the phrase is used today.

<sup>42</sup>In the rare case of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?” because they speak to and experience of “blackness,” the lyrics may not necessarily *distort* the testimony but they do offer up the possibility of misinterpretation, “I’m white inside” being the best example where the connotations of “white” would vary greatly depending on the audience.

already severed a connection to other speakers; it is through testimony that the connection can be reformed.

For Copenhafer then, the scat intervenes in the disfiguration of the minstrel face. However, can anything really counteract the significance of the minstrel face? Edwards quotes jazz critic Gary Giddins who argues that the facial contortions are a “mugging” that “transcends the racist trappings by his indifference to every sling and arrow,” and that “genius is the transfiguring agent”(646-7). However, neither Edwards nor I see transcendence in Armstrong’s facial contortions. What Armstrong shows is the unavailability and unsustainability of minstrelsy in jazz singing. Genius does not transfigure this minstrel tradition but, jazz contradicts it. Edwards is right in suggesting that Armstrong “injects self-reflexive commentary into his vocal performance.” But the “self-assured modernist, who negotiates the trumpet parts with brilliant technique” is the *same* scatting modernist whose “brilliant technique” revolutionizes American jazz singing (647).

Armstrong shows us that jazz singing comes out of the minstrel tradition but as testimony it nevertheless departs from it. When he opens his mouth, the sound resonates loudly and clearly, but his voice is never quite clear, he is, after all, Louis Armstrong. Scratchy and aching, Armstrong’s voice sounds hoarse, at once beautiful and painful to the ear. As Ellison wrote, “he performs the magical feat of making romantic melody issue from a throat of gravel” (Ellison *CE*, 106). Armstrong’s voice epitomizes the “hard” and “calloused” sound in jazz singing that *Ursa Corregidora* evokes in the blues. His voice, “strong and hard but gentle underneath,” is the voice that can “hurt you and make you still want to listen” (Jones 96).

At the same time, his eyes enact a tension between the “entertaining” of minstrelsy and the performance of jazz. Although he participates in the conventions of minstrelsy, he shows them to be unsustainable and incommensurate with jazz performance. As the song begins, the camera takes a wide angle, showing the entire band, centering on Armstrong from far away. His eyes are closed as he sings. As the camera begins to move in closer, Armstrong senses its proximity and presence and opens his eyes. It’s time to put on a show. His eyes open wide, unnaturally wide: he is an entertainer. Armstrong was accustomed to entertaining mostly white audiences, as the laws of segregation dictated then. Entertaining an all-white audience had always suggested a sort of minstrelsy before the time of this performance in 1933. His eyes open wider than seemingly possible and his smile spans the camera. Nevertheless, he can’t sustain this expression. Not when he swings that hard. Several times in the short eleven seconds during which his eyes open, he repeatedly closes them until he closes them altogether for the remainder of his vocal solo.

Understanding the tension which Armstrong performance navigates and the ways in which he participates in and departs from the minstrel tradition requires a comparison. Eddie Cantor made “Dinah” famous in the musical *Kid Boots* (1923), and

his performance was later immortalized in the film *Show Business* (1944).<sup>43</sup> In this performance, Cantor sings with George Murphy; both men are in blackface. A whole entourage dances and sings on stage but the song is Cantor's and he gets the close up when he enters the stage. The audience recognizes that it is his song. Other than the obvious markings of burnt cork on his face, the markers of minstrelsy in Cantor's performance are the wide open eyes, high eyebrows and wide open mouth. Other than for the occasional yet rare blinking, Cantor never closes his eyes. His face seems uncomfortably plastered into this position so much that it looks almost painful to maintain. However, Cantor absolutely maintains this expression throughout the performance. His facial expressions show surprise, fear, or exuberant joy, all of which seem caricatured, but his face gives no other emotional suggestion.



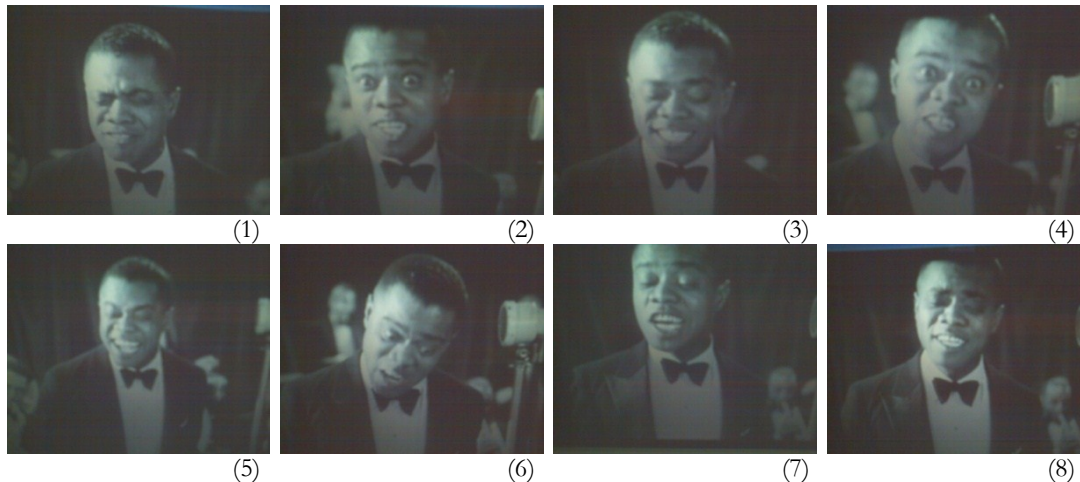
<sup>43</sup> *Show Business*. Dir. Edwin L Marin. Warner Bros., 1944.



What we get from the widely recognized and celebrated Eddie Cantor, is a reference point for both the blackface tradition that “Dinah” comes out of and for just how much Armstrong deviates from this tradition even as he echoes it. Not only physically but musically, Armstrong’s “Dinah” is a different song. It is a jazz song first and foremost by its swing rhythm and then by the vocal jazz treatment Armstrong gives the song that swings on top of the already syncopated rhythm of the accompaniment.



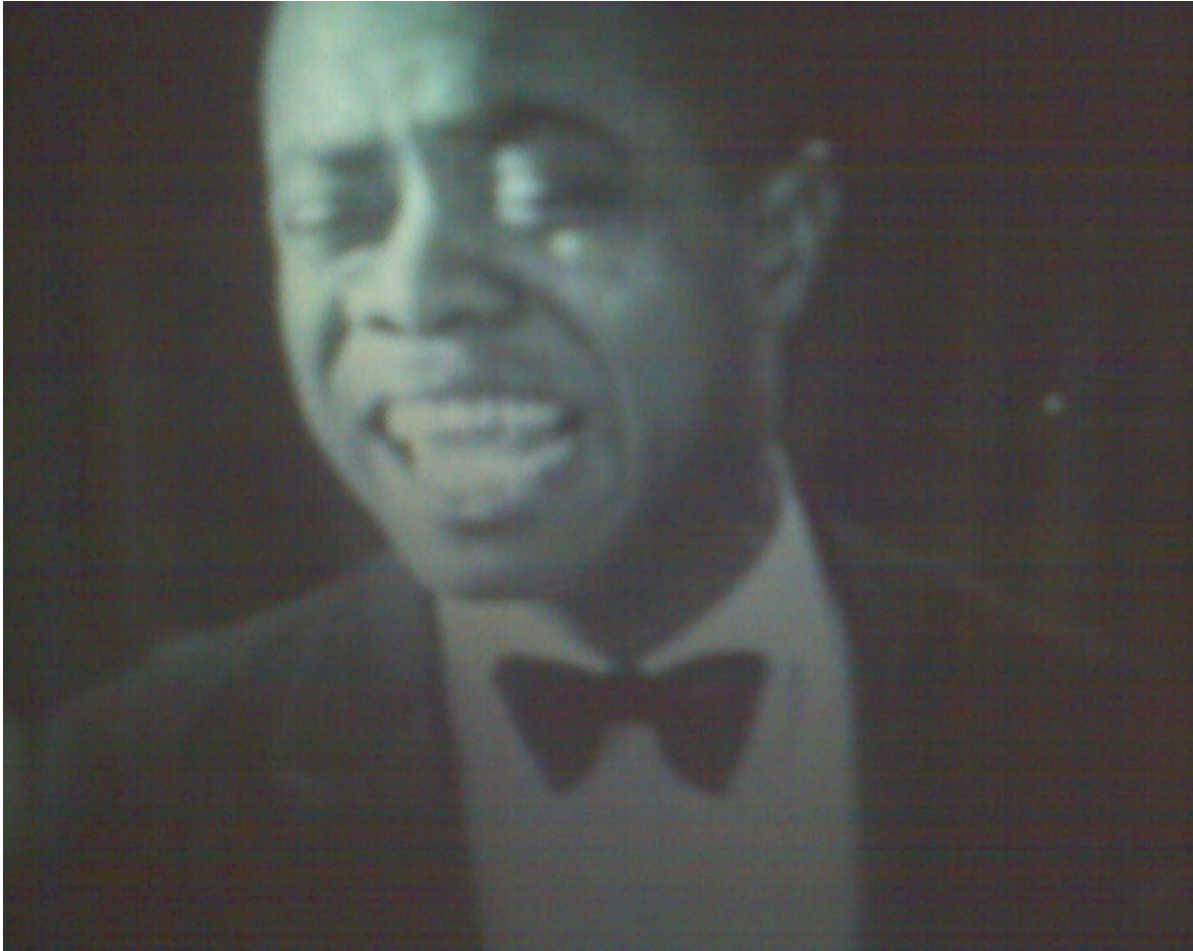
When Armstrong's eyes open, his brows raise, but when they close, the brows close and are often furrowed in an expression that is perhaps sadness, anguish or pain. The eyes and mouth don't necessarily correspond. At times, the eyes close and the smile remains:



The tensions that form between his smiling and furrowing facial expression reflect the tension between having a show to do and having testimony to give. It's hard to do both, but Armstrong does. The trauma is in that tension and what it represents: Armstrong's need to sing, to testify in the face of Jim Crow America and the necessity to adhere to conventions set forth by the dominant culture, that of blackface minstrelsy. Armstrong wavers between his "minstrel face," frames 2, 4, and 6, and his face that is for himself, frames 1, 3, 5, 7 and 8, where he engages the music itself. That is, the jazz rhythm that he masters, the melody that he dominates and reforms, and the lyrics that he deforms. Keep in mind that the face is only part of the physicality of Armstrong's performance of this song. His entire body is involved with the deliverance of the song and his pacing and sense of rhythm depend on it. That is to say that the body has to keep the time of the music in order for the mind to deviate from and rearrange it. Notably, at the end of his frantic "Da—za—Dinah" scat, he says the name Dinah Lee again, transformed into "zah-leave." At this point, his mouth is closed but his smile is wide. His eyes are tightly closed and his expression is pained. (Frame 1) It is the last phrase in the scat, and the last breath of the phrase. His shoulders hunch slightly due to the effort to make this last sound at the tail end of a long breath. He pushes a soft vibrato in the last moment with closed teeth and then a closed mouth. The sound is difficult to make and is executed with next to no air left:<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> I know this from being a singer as a horn player knows the fingering of a note and the embouchure of a pitch. However, it could be possible that as a trumpet player, Armstrong had even more air available to him than your average singer. Even so, he certainly does hunch over for an instant at this part of the song.



This is physically the most difficult part of the scat. It also resolves the long suspension of the scat back to the A flat, the key of the song, adding consonance, stabilizing the dissonance. Without going into the social implications of melodic resolution in general, let me say that this last dimension of Armstrong's performance, the aesthetic one, is quite important. This moment in the song, which is physically demanding, painful, yet beautiful, reveals to us Armstrong's experience of life: physically demanding, painful, yet beautiful. In this moment, Armstrong gives much of himself to the performance of the song, but interestingly, here he gives himself to himself. In answer to Ellison's suggestion that Armstrong may not be aware of the fact of his own invisibility, Armstrong shows that he is not invisible *to himself*. In fact, he can see himself perfectly well with his eyes closed. He remains fully aware of his virtuosity as he sings. When he happens upon these beautiful moments, he too finds them beautiful. This is another aspect of the smile that could, in some sense, point back to minstrelsy, yet also

suggest the aesthetic experience of the now—the now of the performance, bringing us back to Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*. With his eyes closed, the smile isn’t solely for the audience. He smiles also for himself because he is at once singing and listening while testifying and witnessing the aesthetics of his experience. There is a kind of ecstasy to the experience of this pain, beauty and virtuosity that can be seen in the photo above. Edwards suggests that Armstrong sings “in a voice that is not one voice, in a voice that seems haunted by another voice or voices,” (630). But to whom do the haunting voices belong? As in *Corregidora*, these are the voices of familial and musical predecessors making their history known through the testimony of their progeny. But of course Armstrong’s voice is there too. Yes, there is a sort of narration here, but luckily, the exact story can’t be verbalized. Luckily, because, as in the translation of words with multiple meanings, one or more of those meanings can get lost. Verbalizing this experience would mean settling on one meaning, be it the traumatic experience of life in the Jim Crow era, or ecstatic experience of life through music. Testimony as musical performance can always say more irrespective of the words than the words can say themselves. In this way, Armstrong’s performance can be a document of historical trauma, personal trauma and an aesthetic performance of the most remarkable kind.

Ultimately, the renewal of a subjectivity disintegrated by trauma remains an important focus for trauma studies. The possibility of this reformation depends upon the acknowledgement not only of the trauma but its aftermath as well. Trauma creates an invisibility that perpetuates itself. The traumatized subject must testify to his invisibility while the witness must actively see and actively listen to the testimony. The existence of the surviving self depends on this process. When we listen to the jazz or blues singer, we participate in this historical process. The significance is both individual and collective; it resonates in the present in direct conversation with the traumatic past of the chronically invisible.



## Chapter Three

### Josefine, Josephine, and the Power of Song

Until now, I have treated trauma as an epistemic crisis: as the experience of an unbearable knowledge that has split the subject into two—a “before” and “after” the trauma—dual subjectivity. Following Susan Brison, I argued that the reintegration of the subject depends on the ability and opportunity to testify to that knowledge and suggested that jazz and blues performance historically provided a medium with which to transmit such knowledge, a medium that could surpass traditional modes of testimony by circumventing the necessity of speech and thereby the unspeakability of trauma. I also discussed the trauma of invisibility/inaudibility and the paradox of the imperative to be heard/recognized, coupled with both a difficulty to testify and a corresponding difficulty to witness to that testimony for the listener. A singer may have the ability to overcome some of this difficulty by communicating through a musical form that originates from a history of trauma, a music constitutively infused with Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* or *now time*: jazz music. When she communicates in this way, her testimony takes on significance beyond herself. She rewrites and engages history in the present; she becomes a historiographer of the Marxist sort that Benjamin called “historical materialist.” This gives her testimony great social significance: her testimony becomes an archive of an individual and collective traumatic past, which is the very history most in need of rescue according to Benjamin.

This chapter seeks to develop that social significance further. After delving into the specifics of exactly *how* jazz does and does not testify to a history of trauma, I must discuss that which establishes the site of musical performance before the singer even sings her first note. I want to engage the following questions: As historiographer, what is the singer’s relationship to the people for whom she writes? What gives her the authority to rewrite the history of a people? The singer’s relationship to the people she represents, as their historical materialist, is an important part of her function. Her performance does more than document a collective traumatic past. Because she represents her people, her testimony becomes collective and part of the collective archive of trauma. The state of being representative of a people is both felt and projected even when both those projecting and those projected upon are aware of this representation’s existence as mere projection. Because of this representational status, a singer’s performance has a greater cultural and historical function. Not only does the singer come to represent a people, but she might also be responsible for *creating* that very group of people and for providing the conditions of possibility for their sense of collectivity. When the singer assumes her position as a performer before a group, she creates an entity that didn’t exist before: an audience, a people who have gathered (whether knowingly or not) to *become* a people. The jazz singer’s testimony is not just a rich document of a history of a people’s trauma; her

performance then creates the conditions for their existence as a people. She is an orator of history *and* a creator of a people. This creation is represented in modernist literature almost simultaneously with its performative unfolding on stage: in 1924 when Josefina, the heroine of Kafka's final story, sang for her mousefolk and thus united them, and the next year, when the very real Josephine Baker did the same on a Paris stage. In this chapter, I demonstrate through the figures of Josefina and Josephine the power of song and show how they give it the authority it needs to rewrite history.

No one could demonstrate better than Kafka the wide reaching power of the singer and her song. Understanding this power is a task I share with Kafka's narrator in his story "Josefine the Singer, or The Mouse People." Music, and its peculiar relationship to a people resonate throughout the story. It is apparent even from the title that the narrator either cannot decide between the two or cannot definitively distinguish the singer from the people who produced her, or the people she has herself produced. The narrator maintains his indecision, and a story about a singer (Josefine) somehow becomes a story about her people, who, in this case, are not quite people, but mouse people. The one becomes a part of the other.

What exactly happens when Josefina sings? Despite the narrator's claim that the mouse people lack musicality and that Josephine lacks talent, her song has great power. According to the narrator, "Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song." (*die Macht des Gesanges*)<sup>1</sup> Her song holds a mysterious power to, among other things, draw crowds and keep them captivated, and because of this, the main focus of the story is the narrator's difficulty "to solve the puzzle of its huge effect" (*das Rätsel ihrer großen Wirkung zu lösen*)(95, 280).

What is the effect of the singer's song? I have argued that the performance of the song can become testimony for a traumatic history and that that testimony is the archive and the documented history of a people. In addition, I would like to propose that the singer is more than historiographer vis-à-vis Kafka's story and the traditions of thought with which it communicates. Following Nicola Gess, I argue that not only does Kafka's story communicate with the German philosophical "belief in the power of music to create and represent a people," but also that the very same belief can be found historically and today in American culture, especially with regard to the uniquely American music of jazz and the blues, their predecessors and descendants.<sup>2</sup>

German philosophical accounts of "the genius" of a nation attribute to music a special power over people. Gess links this belief to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy out*

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka. ed. Corngold, Stanley. *Kafka's Selected Stories*, Norton Critical Edition. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2008), 95.

Franz Kafka *Erzählungen*. Ed. Michael Müller. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 280.

<sup>2</sup>Nicola Gess. "The Politics of Listening: The Power of Song in Kafka's 'Josephine, the Singer,'" in ed. Corngold, Stanley. *Kafka's Selected Stories*, Norton Critical Edition. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 276.

*of the Spirit of Music* which argued that while listening to music (Wagner in particular), the people in the crowd

are transported, possessed; they lose their individuality and become part of a larger entity, the mass. This mass is then deemed to be itself creative: in a deep sense, it has brought forth the very music it is hearing; it is at once the result and the creative origin of this music. (276)

Not only does the crowd become a people by listening together, it is also responsible for the music to which it listens. This is supposedly in part because of the constructed connection it has with the composer: if he is German, he is one of them, and because they are one, with him included, they—as one—create the music. This is how, as Gess suggests, “the composer’s song is always already a “song of the people,” even though this people will truly be realized as a unity only through listening to his song” (277).

This concept of listening as “a people” gives rise to possible political uses of music. According to Gess, “devotees of Wagner,” saw him as “a spiritual leader who impressed his will on his listeners, a higher will that gave form to the mass created by his music; and it is this form that is said to realize... the true essence of the mass as a *German* people, a Volk” (her emphasis 277). She argues that this concept of the Volk “promulgated the nationalist and often racist idea of unifying the modern masses into a Volk in which individual differences would no longer exist” (278). Kafka questioned this theory, however, without ever knowing the extent to which such ideologies would be realized. Gess suggests that Kafka questioned this nationalist/racist political potential of music. His singer Josefina may *think* she has the power Nietzsche attributed to Wagner, but she isn’t at all what Nietzsche had in mind. She is a different kind of musical hero. Her type of heroism, Gess argues, speaks to a second tradition of thought. Whereas a Wagnerian composition might represent high culture and matters of the spirit, the embodied woman singer represents low culture, physical and sensual matters. She writes that

at least since the early nineteenth century, German music critics had been eying musical performance with suspicion since it threatened not only to distort the musical essence laid down in the score but also to invite mere sensual pleasure—and not the spiritual elation of the ‘essential refinement’ of the listener. This was thought to be true in particular of female performers, especially female singers, and even more so if they sang songs rich in musical flourishes. (280-81)

This embodied, sensual pleasure of music accentuated by musical flourishes should easily call to mind American jazz and blues. As I will discuss in the fourth chapter of this project, jazz at its inception evoked very similar commentary. However, the

musical tradition to which Kafka was responding, considered coloratura as the musical flourish *par excellence*. If we consider that literal meaning of coloratura is “coloring,” it stands to reason that African American musical forms would elicit this sort of criticism. Gess writes that “the coloraturas written for the female voice were considered the epitome of mere sensual stimulation in music, lacking any kind of higher quality and purpose” (281). This kind of music was considered “poor” and was attributed by German music critics to “France, Italy, or the Jews” and was accused of being “fake, inauthentic, and theatrical” (281). We know that Josefine identified herself with coloratura, for as Kafka’s narrator tells us, “the rumor spread that unless her demands were accepted, Josefine intended to shorten the coloraturas” (Kafka 106). Such a threat suggests that this part of her song holds great value for her and her audience, and that without the full coloraturas, the performance is incomplete. It implies that her art is in the “coloring” of the music. In place of Wagner’s “high culture” compositions that create the conditions for the German nation, Kafka allows Josefine’s female, sensual, “low culture” bodily singing to create the conditions for a mouse people. It is therefore not the “spiritual” Wagner but the “embodied” female Josefine that creates the condition for the mouse people to become a community.

Not only her coloraturas align Josefine with this physical rather than spiritual (low rather than high) form of singing. Josefine sings with her entire body. Kafka writes,

At once she stands there, this gentle being, vibrating in a terrifying way, especially below her breast: it is as if she had gathered all her strength in song; as if everything in her that does not immediately serve song had been drained of all power, almost all life force, as if she were stripped bare, exposed, entrusted only to the protection of good spirits, as if, while she is thus dwelling in song, totally removed from herself; a cold breeze blowing past could kill her. (97)

*Schon steht sie da, das zarte Wesen, besonders unterhalb der Brust beängstigend vibrierend, es ist, als hätte sie alle ihre Kraft im Gesang versammelt, als sei allem an ihr, was nicht dem Gesange unmittelbar diene, jede Kraft, fast jede Lebensmöglichkeit entzogen, als sei sie entblößt, preisgegeben, nur dem Schutze guter Geister überantwortet, als könne sie, während sie so, sich völlig entzogen, im Gesange wohnt, ein kalter Hauch im Vorüberwehn töten. (284)*

Her entire body and all its strength take part in the performance of Josefine’s song. Apparently, with great power comes great vulnerability. She makes singing as physical an act as possible. Her terrifying vibration (*beängstigend vibrierend*) as well as the mention of her breast (*Brust*) gives an image of this physical act as uniquely feminine, along with the imagery of her being “stripped bare” and “exposed” (*entblößt*). This is

not to say that being stripped bare alone evokes an image of femininity, but that she is particularly subject to harm because of this exposure. Her performance is both physical and characterized by its embodiment.

That she represents a mouse folk is also significant and may associate her with Jewishness. Sander Gilman makes this association “through the popular etymology of *Mauscheln* as meaning ‘mouselike.’”<sup>3</sup> Gilman suggests that Kafka understood both the term and the association, quoting a letter Kafka wrote in 1921 to Max Brod about Viennese satirist Karl Krauss: “The wit principally consists of Yiddish-German, *Mauscheln*: no one can *Mauscheln* like Kraus, although in this German-Jewish world hardly anyone can do anything else” (31-32). Alan Steinweis writes that “the *Mauscheln*, ... had to be seen as a manifestation of “racially specific” sound patterns among Jews who had taken on a new “racially alien language.”<sup>4</sup> *Mauscheln*, used as a derogatory term for Yiddish, suggests that the mouse people are not German and are most likely racialized as Jews. As a consequence, music expresses Jewish trauma and creates a community analogous to the African American and diasporatic experience. This use of music for minoritarian community formation is in direct opposition to majoritarian use of music as a fascist tool for creating nationalist organization.

As an audience, the listeners attribute this power of community formation to the music. That power is attributed rather than inherent in the singer seems particularly true of Josefine. If anything, she is a caricature of Nietzsche’s Wagner. Kafka, in a sense, reduces this Wagnerian power to usher in a German people through nothing more than a diva with very little talent. That is, on the one hand. On the other hand, while Kafka’s narrator (as an ironized entity distinct from Kafka) repeatedly denies any power to Josefine, he also repeatedly reinforces it. Her embodied mannerisms, though dramatic, give her performance its true power. While denying Josefine’s power to affirm that of the mouse people, the narrator nevertheless reveals a relationship between the people and the singer where their existence as a people depends upon her. The narrator may see the mouse people as a force greater than Josefine, but they rely upon her for their existence as a mouse people. Gess argues that

not only the power of music but also the mouse people *itself* is shown to be the result of a performative process, existing only as a fantasy and only for the duration of the performance. Josephine’s singing functions as a space of projection for the audience onto which they project an idealized version of themselves as a unified people. Then, listening to the song, they hear the voice of this people speaking to them, identifying with this voice and thence melting into the very unity they envisioned. (283)

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<sup>3</sup> Sander Gilman. *Franz Kafka, The Jewish Patient*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Alan E. Steinweis, *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006), 37.

This creative process is then one of projection. Josephine projects her unifying position onto the people and they, in turn, project their unity onto her:

Here, in the scant pauses between battles, the people dream; it is as if each individual relaxed his limbs, as if each restless soul might indulge for once his desire to unwind and stretch out in the big, warm, communal bed. And here and there into these dreams comes the sound of Josefine's squeaking; she calls it rippling, we call it bumping; but whatever it is, this is where it belongs more than anywhere else, in the way that music hardly ever finds the moment that is waiting for it. (102-103)

*Hier in den dürftigen Pausen zwischen den Kämpfen träumt das Volk, es ist, als lösten sich dem Einzelnen die Glieder, als dürfte sich der Ruhelose einmal nach seiner Lust im großen warmen Bett des Volkes dehnen und strecken. Und in diese Träume klingt hier und da Josefines Pfeifen; sie nennt es perlend, wir nennen es stoßend; aber jedenfalls ist es hier an seinem Platze, wie nirgends sonst, wie Musik kaum jemals den auf sie wartenden Augenblick findet. (295)*

This listening/dreaming process is pivotal to the making of the mouse people. The performance occurs between everyday struggles and the mouse people relaxing into oneness for a time. In the dream space, the mouse people see themselves as unified, and that unity is held together by the powerful, albeit indefinable song of Josefine. Another way to view the title then, is that either Josephine is the singer or that she is a metonymy for the mouse people.

For Kafka, the political implications of this new sort of musical leadership—his embodied Josefine—offer different possibilities. The music is more body than spirit; the body is female. If Gess is correct, Kafka subverts the second tradition of thought—that theatricality and female vocality were supposed to be somehow lower forms of music—by demonstrating its power to do what “higher” forms of music are “supposed” to do. Josefine’s song, then,

...shows that ‘poor’ music in fact does what ‘good’ music was supposed to do: it creates, however evanescently, a people. ...It turns out that theatricality and make-believe stand at the heart of the power at work in the performance situation. So what was “poor” about the music is actually what makes the whole process work. (Gess 283)

The “squeak,” therefore, is the language and music of the “mouse” or ethnic people. Josefine’s power, then, is to wield that music to form a community. Kafka’s quandary is emblematic of his time and especially relevant to the discussion of how contemporaneous jazz music is being used to different ends in America. Political uses

for the “embodied” and “ethnic” singer in America, particularly the African American singer, also range from the majoritarian to the minoritarian. Jazz scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin sheds light on specifically black women singers’ impact on American culture from spirituals to rhythm and blues through the discussion of the voice and black women’s vocality. American listeners to the black woman’s voice participate in a similar process of projection. Listeners project a vision of themselves as unified. With the advent of national television broadcasts, a mass culture could be reached. Through the commercial appropriation of jazz, an American people could envision themselves as such. Griffin’s study not only gives a context for these women’s influence on American culture and history, but also argues for the dual, and perhaps multiple uses of music that I have discussed as illustrated in Kafka’s story. These “embodied” performances can just as easily be used for nationalistic purposes, as they can for black community formation. Their voices have been racially marked in the manner of Kafka’s Josefina. According to Griffin, early observations report a “distinctive, different sound of black singing,” and a “strange effect that sound had on listeners.”<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the similarly sizable effect of the black woman’s voice, Griffin finds historical references to women slaves whose voices captivated audiences with ancient stories (107). She states that

in all these cases the voice is unfamiliar, uncanny, almost otherworldly (Years later this would hold true for jazz vocalists such as Billie Holiday, Shirley Horne, Carmen McRae, and Cassandra Wilson, all of whom possess the power of holding audiences spellbound with their “stories.” It is a voice capable of casting spells. (107)

Griffin’s observation suggests three important things: that the jazz and blues singer is, in fact, speaking something, be it a story or not; that her method of speaking/telling holds sway over her audience; and finally, that the power lies in the voice itself as I have argued previously, rather than in the lyrics or the semantic content of the song. Griffin makes the spell-casting power of the black women’s voice poetically evident by quoting Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “When Malindy Sings” (1895). He writes that the people “Heish dey moufs an’ hides dey faces/When Malindy sings./She jus spreads huh mouf and hollahs... An’ you fin’ yo’ teah’s a –drappin;/When Malindy sings.”<sup>6</sup> (110) The hushed mouths suggest a ceremonial quiet that attends the singer’s performance, while the hidden faces suggest the transmittance of traumatic testimony. Faces are hidden to conceal dropping tears.

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<sup>5</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin. “When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality” in *Uptown conversation: the new jazz studies*, eds. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin. (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 107.

<sup>6</sup> (“hush their mouths and hide their faces/ When Malindy sings. /She just spreads her mouth and hollers... And you find your tears dropping,/When Malindy sings”)

Kafka's Josefina evokes a similar silence. In fact, some of the power of her song lies in the silence created in order to listen to it. When Kafka's Josefina sings, even just before she sings, a still silence seems to manifest around her so that she can be heard. For a people for whom "peace and quiet is the best music," the silence holds a great power even if, according to the narrator, "the silence that reigns is by no means only for the sake of her singing"(94,100).

Whereas Kafka's Josefina has no trouble seeing herself as pivotal to her people, the narrator wavers repeatedly between augmenting and diminishing that importance. Pinpointing the source of the power of her song poses great difficulty for Kafka's narrator, as he does not want to attribute that power to Josefina. Not only will he not acknowledge her social importance to the mouse people, he remains unconvinced as to whether she can even sing at all. The narrator can neither categorize the song nor distinguish it from other forms of communication that the mouse people have. "Is it really song?" (*Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang?*)(95, 281) he asks. He is so unsure of her song that he can hardly classify it definitively as such. Even though he cannot distinguish her singing from the squeaking or piping of everyday communication, he maintains that, "it actually isn't mere squeaking that she produces" (*Es ist aber eben doch nicht nur Pfeifen, was sie produziert*) (95, 281). Though he cannot put a finger on it, he knows there is something more to her performance and presence than he can explain. "Something else is involved, however," claims the narrator, "that is harder to explain in terms of the relationship between the people and Josefina" (*Nun spricht aber doch noch anderes mit herein, das schwerer aus diesem Verhältnis zwischen Volk und Josefina zu erklären ist.*)(99, 284). In fact, this unknown aspect of performance is pivotal to the power of song in the story. The narrator cannot so easily concede so much power to Josefina. He immediately rejects his own assertions of her power. He argues that "of course she does not save us, and she does not give us strength;" (*Freilich, sie rettet uns nicht und gibt uns keine Kräfte*)(99-100). However, he cannot deny that there may be merit to her claims. He admits: "it is true that it is precisely in times of trouble that we listen to Josefina's voice with even greater intensity" (100). So why the dialectic of Josefina's song? If there is nothing significant about her voice, what drives the people to listen so intently?

Although projection is one source of power for Josefina's song, there are other sources as well. What one hears when she sings makes up only part of the experience of her song. The meaning, whatever it may be, comes through in the performance as a whole. The narrator suggests that "to understand her art you must not only hear but also see her" (*es ist zum Verständnis ihrer Kunst notwendig, sie nicht nur zu hören, sondern auch zu sehen*) (96, 282). Her art is more than sound; it is a spectacle of performance. He argues that "when you are sitting in front of her; you understand her; ... when you sit in front of her, you understand: what she is squeaking here is no squeaking" (*Und wenn man vor ihr sitzt, versteht man sie; ...wenn man vor ihr sitzt, weiß man: was sie hier pfeift, ist kein Pfeifen*) (96, 283). One understands that he is witnessing more than he would expect by



the sound of her voice alone. As discussed above, the bodily involvement in the performance is pivotal to its effectiveness. This performance could be seen as merely a dramatic aspect to Josefine's singing, but that drama is not so easily dismissed. It is an important part of the spectacle.

This very spectacle occurs for mass American audiences of black women singers as well. As Griffin notes, "the recognizably black woman—singing rather than speaking—is a familiar sight for American audiences" (103). The black woman's voice has repeatedly been appropriated by those in power to represent the American voice. This representation results from the social, racial, and gendered projections onto the singer. She continues: "as scholars such as Benedict Anderson have noted, the nation is a fictive construct of community. The image of the 'mother of the nation' is one that allows this construct to figure itself as reproduced" (104). This image is easily recognized, and Griffin goes so far as to call it a spectacle. She asks us to "picture" ten images of black women singing. These images are significant historical moments of black women singing, from Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 to anonymous black women singing immediately after the Oklahoma bombing and the Littleton Colorado shootings, to Chaka Khan at the Republican National Convention in 2000. She asks us to picture them because "these images and our memories of them are as much about the spectacle as the sound" (102-103). Griffin argues that each moment of spectacle "occurs when the nation is trying to present an image of itself to itself and to the world" (103). Just as with Josefine, the images occur in times of war, when the nation most needs a projection of unification.

Kafka gives us insight into this relationship between a singer and her people through the character of Josefine, and her own opinion about what she represents. According to the narrator, she senses her unique role in relation to her society. As the narrator says, "she thinks that she is the one who protects the people. Her singing allegedly (*angeblich*) rescues us from grim political or economic situations, it accomplishes no less than that; and if it does not banish misfortune, at least it gives us the strength (*Kraft*) to endure it" (99). She believes her role has great significance even as the narrator cannot pinpoint the reason for it. In the event of misfortune, Josefine apparently "rises up and cranes her neck and strives to oversee her flock like the shepherd before the storm" (*erhebt sich und streckt den Hals und sucht den Überblick über ihre Herde wie der Hirt vor dem Gewitter*) (99). Thus, Kafka's narrator questions but cannot deny that Josefine's role as entertainer has some political function within her society.

The black woman's voice, as Griffin remarks, can also become a "clarion call following heinous displays of American racism and its ugly relatives" (103). In instances following acts of terrorism, she maintains, "the voice and the spectacle of the singing black woman often has been used to suggest a peacefully interracial version of America... the black woman pulls together and helps to heal national rifts" (Griffin 104). This image persists beyond the period covered by Griffin's article:

recently, when Aretha Franklin sang at President Obama's inauguration, as well as at the memorial for the Fort Hood shootings, where Master Sergeant Natasha Harley sang "Amazing Grace" in uniform on November 10, 2009. The stirring quality of her song and her image in uniform were quite memorable. The choice to have Harley sing was no coincidence. Griffin argues that

it makes perfect sense that this black voice in the United States has become a quintessential American voice. It parallels the development of the nation. It is one of its founding sounds, and the singing black woman one of its founding spectacles. (119)

The spectacle of the black woman we recognize is what Griffin describes as a servile maternal figure, "a figure that serves the unit, who heals and nurtures it but has no rights or privileges within it—more mammy than mother ... This figure of the singing black woman is often similar to the uses of black women's bodies as nurturing, healing life and love giving for the majority culture" (104). Harley's song transforms and amplifies this image, transposing it onto the image of the soldier fighting for her country and singing on behalf of her fallen fellow soldiers. The unit she serves here is her military unit and her country; her duty is to comfort them after tragedy has struck, to, like Kafka's Josefine, "oversee her flock like the shepherd before the storm" (99). Her performance was reserved with only minor gospel inflections, a more bodily performance somehow rendered inappropriate by the uniform. When she sang on national television, a rather large audience was given the opportunity to reflect back upon itself through her. The image was one of patriotism, racial and gender equality, and deep spirituality. As Griffin writes, "It may not be representative of the United States as it is, but it projects an image of what participants long for it to become" (104). Not unlike Nietzsche's view of Wagner ushering in a new German people through his music, this particular black woman's voice (like many others) was mobilized to create a national image of America for itself. But more like Kafka's Josefine, she is one of the common people, one voice—in this case, a black woman's voice—that rather than symbolizing "low culture," is sublimated to a uniquely American representation of culture by way of a spiritual—music written by a slave, words written by a slave holder.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, her voice does more than this; for her American audience, her people, includes the progeny of the enslaved, the enslaver, and many more. As Griffin comments,

If this voice soothed white children in the early days of the nation, then it nurtured whites in the same way those black women nannies and mammies did and thereby became a mark of their identity as well, even

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<sup>7</sup> Wintley Phipps in *Wintley Phipps Spirituals: A Symphonic Celebration*. Day of Discovery, 2007.DVD

as they deny it or view it with condescension. For black Americans, black women's singing has articulated our most heartfelt political, social, spiritual, and romantic longings and in so doing has given us a sense of ourselves as a people beyond the confines of our oppression. (120)

In the latter case, the black woman sings to the invisible—giving voice to their invisibility. Therefore, like Kafka's Josefina, neither her voice nor her performance can be reduced to a dichotomy of nationalistic vs. revolutionary purposes. As an object of a cultural projection, it can and will do both:

If we consider the ways that the American State Department selected jazz to represent national culture abroad during the Cold War, even as the government continued to deny black Americans full citizenship at home, or the contemporary global circulation of contemporary hip hop culture, then the black woman's voice as representative American voice doesn't seem so ironic after all. When we consider the United State's uncanny ability to co-opt and commodify voices of dissent, it doesn't appear so contradictory. (Griffin120)

As a result, many processes occur at once during this vocal performance. In Griffin's article, the singer and her song have two powers or uses. It can reinforce or subvert the nationalistic ideology. She aptly quotes "Jacques Attali, who writes that the 'appropriation and control' of music 'is a reflection of its power ... with music is born power and its opposite: subversion.'" (119). In this instance, the "power of song" takes on multiple meanings, including one that reinforces the nationalistic implications of Nietzsche's argument. But Griffin sees both the power of the state and that of the people in the singer.

Kafka's Josefina, then, is a precursor to the black American singer who will come to represent even more than America. As stated in the previous chapter, the performance testifies to a history of trauma. However, the process of witnessing to this testimony can take on more significance. The witness can project many things onto the singer. The witness can witness through identification with the singer, as does Ellison's narrator who recognizes his own invisibility in that of Louis Armstrong. The witness can also project a political identification onto the singer. Depending on the witness, the singer can be a champion of a disenfranchised people or the symbol of a utopian nationalistic vision, or of imaginarily resolved racial conflict. Where one witness may hear his or her trauma embodied in her voice, another may hear forgiveness for his sins.

My proposal is that we witness to this musical testimony in a manner that actively projects onto the singer her musical leadership. The jazz singer's voice, an embodied voice of the people, can be witnessed to, not necessarily as the maternal

figure or as the sensual, “low culture” figure but instead as the spiritual *and* embodied unifying leader of a multifaceted, talented, triumphant and guilty people. I do not require even that her song be the agent to subvert power, unless of course one sees the reclaiming of one’s history as a form of subversion. I want to look to the singer to remind us of where we have been, what we have been through, what we have done and will continue to do. This is the kind of musical leadership to which I am referring, which merits returning to with Benjamin’s historical materialist’s lens.

This singer is not perfect. She has endured much personal trauma in order to speak for our collective. Her talent is not well defined; it is even disputed. Is she even a singer? She is an inter- and intra-national screen of nationalistic projection. She unites us in times of war and grim political situations. Her story and art document a multifaceted history of trauma, talent, triumph and cultural culpability. Our singer’s name is Josephine Baker and to not know her art is to not know the power of jazz in the western, modern world.

### **Josephine Baker, the Singer, the Dancer, or Paris 1920s**

*At the age of eight I was already working to calm the hunger of my family.*

*I have suffered: hunger, cold—*

*I have a family*

*They said I was homely*

*That I danced like an ape*

*Then I was less homely—Cosmetics*

*I was booted*

*Then I was applauded—The crowd*

*I continued to dance—I loved jazz*

*I continued to sing—I loved sadness; my soul is sick*

*I had an opportunity—Destiny*

*I had a mascot—a panther—Ancestral superstition—*

*I made a tour of the world—In third class and in Pullman*

*I am moral*

*They said I was the reverse*

*I do not smoke—I have white teeth*

*I do not drink—I am an American*

*I have a religion*

*I adore children*

*I love flowers, I aid the poor—I have suffered much*

*I love the animals—they are the sincerest*

*I sing and dance still—Perseverance*

*I earn much money—I do not love money*

*I save my money—for the time when I am no longer an attraction.*<sup>8</sup>

Kafka's heroine was a literary representation of the philosophical relationship between a singer and her people. His Josefina, with all her contradictions, opens up for me all the possibilities for the role of the American jazz singer as historiographer of an American history of trauma. Josephine Baker's work exemplifies the power of song to represent, create, and rewrite the history of a people. Her life and art index a traumatic American past.

*She has endured much personal trauma in order to speak for the collective trauma of many.*

The circumstances that created the possibility of a Josephine Baker were quite traumatic. She was born in St. Louis in 1906 to a life of poverty and repeated exile. Although Baker told her story many times in many different ways, according to Phyllis Rose's biography of Baker, she is reported to have on occasion described her first memory as what have been called the 1917 race riots of East St. Louis. In an effort to reassert power lost during the war, whites went through East St. Louis, a black ghetto, setting fire to buildings and murdering people. Thirty-nine blacks were killed and thousands left homeless. Baker's memory of this atrocity was colored with stories of men being burned and pregnant women being ripped open. That this event is remembered as a "race-riot" rather than as a slaughter or act of terrorism demonstrates the necessity for this history to be retold.

Exile was a recurring trauma in Josephine's life. At a very young age she was sent away after her mother remarried. She was sent away again at age eight to do house work for a white woman who abused her to the point of shoving her hands in boiling water. She screamed so loudly that the neighbors came and rushed her to the hospital. She was, however, sent away yet again and then once again. Since life at home was hardly much better, as Rose writes, she "didn't know which direction exile was in" (13). Despite these earlier personal traumas of abuse and exile, Josephine chose to begin the story of her life with what I'll call the East St. Louis massacre of 1917—a collective trauma in place of her personal ones which came years before. Understandably, she left St. Louis at thirteen and left America at nineteen.

*Her talent is not well defined; it is even disputed. Is she even a singer?*

Much like Kafka's Josefina, her talent may have been in question, while her power over an audience was not. Especially in question was her talent as a singer. Like Kafka's narrator, a reviewer reported that Baker's voice is a mere "squeak in the dark,

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<sup>8</sup>Rose, Phyllis. *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*. (New York: Vintage, 1991),157. Here after referred to as JC. Baker's prose poem is cited from a Pepito book called *Joséphine Baker vue par la presse française*.

beyond the third row.”<sup>9</sup> Despite her obvious draw and influence, the specific nature of her talent was not quite confirmable. As Kafka’s narrator remains unconvinced as to whether Josefine can sing at all, Baker’s reviewers posed the same question. One said she sang in “half-baked French with the voice of a dwarf,” while another said she “sings like a cracked bell with a padded clapper,” clarifying that “that’s swell if you like Chinese music.”<sup>10</sup> However, if Kafka’s Josefine could form a “mouse people” just by gathering in front of them, Josephine Baker could reinvent and redefine Paris with a couple of feathers and a Charleston.

Less a singer in the beginning of her career, Josephine won over hearts with her dancing, which she performed with a wild intensity typical of a subjectivity damaged by trauma. She clowned defensively and arduously. As Rose writes, “she screwed up her face, crossed her eyes, puffed out her cheeks, and made noises in a high pitched voice” (19). “Frenetic” was a word often used to describe her dancing. Not unrelated to frenetic, I would argue that what they saw was frantic *expression* that testified to a traumatic past with her chaos of movement. That is to say, just as Armstrong’s gravelly voice and elided words testified to a traumatic past, Baker’s frantic jazz movements could testify to trauma through dance. Rose comments that “her movements were all so fast no one had time to decide what was happening. ‘Is it a man? Is it a woman?’ people wondered. ‘Is she awful or marvelous? black or white?’” (19). Baker was very self-protective in her performances; she defended herself while exhibiting herself. This could be witnessed in her constant eye crossing. Baker crossed her eyes all the time, even in nude or sexually suggestive poses. According to Rose,

For all her seeming freedom and exhibitionism, she protected herself in some ways, of which lightheartedness was one and clowning another. From the later twenties date the striking photographs of her in glamorous designer dresses crossing her eyes, and at this stage of her life, the eye-crossing seems to me to function like a magical gesture of self-defense in a specially erotic arena. It wards off the relentlessly erotic gaze of whoever might have been looking at her...Afraid in some way of evoking undiluted sexual excitement, she thwarts the deeply provocative contact of the eye with eye not just by averting her own eyes but by jamming them grotesquely up against one another. (109)

In this way, Baker doesn’t divert the gaze upon her but rather averts it, turns it on itself, confusing it and disallowing any final judgment. What she needed to protect herself from were ever-present reminders of the collective trauma that she experienced as a Black American woman. In France, she was able to escape American

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<sup>9</sup> Dir. Brian Gibson. *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991) (USA) (TV) (original airing)

The film quotes: Baker, Jean Claude, and Chase, Chris..*Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart*. (New York: First Cooper Square Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

racism, but could not escape French exoticism and male chauvinism. To watch Baker dance is to witness to a traumatic past that did not defeat her. Her dance is an affirmation of the joy of life that always and never escaped Josephine's grasp. Trauma was the catalyst that set her body in motion. Her frantic performance, especially in her youth, was an overcompensation for a traumatic life. That is to say, constant movement and clowning was a way for her to stave off the kind of rejection she faced earlier in life. Early experiences of exile and abandonment led her to perform in a manner that allowed her to cope with a traumatic past. Her movement was an outward denial of any turmoil within. Her dance testifies to trauma because it is borne from and made possible by it. Her show-stealing, attention-grabbing antics endear her to her audience, giving her the love she lacked in her childhood and homeland. The climate in which she performed, the circumstances that allowed for the possibility of a Josephine Baker make it historic and collective rather than only personal.

*She is an inter- and intra-national screen of nationalistic projection.*

As Baker once said, “the white imagination sure is something, when it comes to blacks” (81). Josephine Baker's relationship to the various peoples and countries she represented is rather complicated. In her time she came to represent so many things to so many people, that no one can demonstrate better than her how representation is mere projection. She rewrites American and French history with her life and performances. Her performances did more than document a collective traumatic past; they served as evidence of the same. Her unparalleled success in France drew attention to the impossibility of a similar success in America, while her exoticization in France demonstrated the limits of her international success. As with so many 20<sup>th</sup> century black performers, her story cannot be told without acknowledging and remembering a history of trauma. Baker experienced the trauma of invisibility all the more strikingly because of her hypervisibility as a nude dancer. Her image was reproduced repeatedly in a society where she was never actually seen. She represented France and America while being truly recognized by neither. As much was projected upon her, she not only knew this, but used it to become perhaps even more successful than she could have been.

Just as Gess argued with regard to Kafka's Josefina, Baker also served as a screen of projection. To reiterate a previous quote, Gess maintained—and the same could be said of Josephine Baker—that,

Josefine's singing functions as a space of projection for the audience onto which they project an idealized version of themselves as a unified people. Then, listening to the song, they hear the voice of this people speaking to them, identifying with this voice and thence melting into the very unity they envisioned. (283)

When Josephine Baker took the stage in 1920s Paris, she helped construct the entity of “1920s Paris,” as large audiences gathered to experience themselves as a colonial power in the jazz age. Like Kafka’s Josefine, she could draw large crowds of people with little effort and, on occasion, the distinction between her and “Paris” could hardly be said to exist. For a time, the story of Josephine *was* the story of Paris in her time.

In 1924, Kafka completes “Josefine the Singer or the Mouse People” and dies soon after, on Baker’s eighteenth birthday. At that time, she was performing in Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s famous show *Shuffle Along*. Baker had been lying about her age for the past three years in order to dance as a chorus girl in Harlem, and she would leave America for Paris the very next year. In Harlem, she had on occasion danced in blackface and would find that Paris had a different, though almost equally suspect, requirement. During the crafting of her show at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the designers felt that “it was noisy and inelegant, and worst of all, it wasn’t black enough” (5). Baker would have to mold her art to a different projection of what blackness was. The designers felt that the French couldn’t associate blackness with chorus lines that featured precision dancing because blacks, “as everyone knew, were instinctive dancers, incapable of discipline” (5). To construct a more “authentic” black dance, Jacques Charles came up with the “Danse Sauvage” (6).

Baker was expected to dance bare-breasted, which was quite shocking to an American. She was allowed to dance without blackface makeup, but the new condition was that she be half-naked: she could show her natural face if she would also show her natural breasts and look like Western projections of African “primitives. The projection onto Baker as African “savage” is part of the trauma that constituted her post-American existence. As Rose writes, “it was time for the French to define themselves again—this time by appropriating what they needed of what they imagined the black soul to be” (10). One reviewer wrote of the dancers that

their lips must have the taste of pickled watermelon, coconut, sweet pepper, and guava. One sips in through the eyes the sweet saltiness of their perspiration, the sweat of a hamadryad bounding across jungles filled with poisonous flowers. (23)

This of course sounds absurd today, but the mythological reference of the hamadryad highlights the possibility that precisely what was being projected onto Baker was no more than mythology. One critic was able to see this projection for what it was. He wrote:

Our romanticism is desperate for renewal and escape. Alas, we can no longer roam over maps of the world with unexplored corners. We have to appease our taste for the unknown by exploring within ourselves the lands we haven’t



penetrated. We lean on our own unconscious and our dreams. As for reality, we like it exotic. These blacks feed our double taste for exoticism and mystery....We are charmed and upset by them, and most satisfied when they mix something upsetting in with their enchantments. (23)

Baker was very good at simultaneously upsetting and enchanting her audiences. She could even upset people before stepping out on stage. When she went on her European tour she stirred up controversy everywhere she went. Some cited her nudity as the reason for their objection, which is ironic since nudity was never her idea in the first place. In Vienna, church bells rang upon her arrival, warning people of the depravity at hand. In Budapest, her audience was attacked by ammonia bombs, for “as the Austrians had been angry that she wasn’t Austrian, the Hungarians were angry that she wasn’t Hungarian” (132). Even her tour of the Americas proved to be controversial. In Argentina, they considered her to be “a lost soul, a femme fatale, an object of scandal, a demon of immorality” (133).

At every turn, Baker found herself a screen for the cultural, racial and gendered projections of her audiences and critics. When she performed Offenbach’s *La Créole* in 1934, critics liked her version of the operetta in some ways more than they enjoyed the original, especially, in contrast to Anna Judic, the original créole performer in that role. Judic had had to wear blackening make-up in order to play the part. As critic Andy Fry notes, the reviewers said of Judic that in retrospect, she “could not evoke exotic islands like Madame Josephine Baker.”<sup>11</sup> Another critic Fry notes, André Frank, said of her a statement that could sum up the racialized aspects of Baker’s career: “The negress, who should not be a negress, will, for our greater enjoyment, really be a negress” (57). For France, Baker should not have been a negress; how then, could she capture the hearts of France with her beauty and talent when such things should logically only originate from France? Because she is loved despite being different, her difference is emphasized to the point of absurdity so that the difference *itself* is the cause of the great pleasure she evokes. And as this caricatured blackness begins to fade and Baker evolves as an artist, the reason for loving her fades with it. Therefore, some reviewers complained that Baker wasn’t really Baker anymore:

There could not have been a better choice for the role of Dora than that of the authentic ex-créole Josephine Baker. I say ‘EX’ because the charming artist, queen of the music hall, has become today almost... ‘a white’. I will add that I regret this because créole Josephine Baker was the inimitable Josephine Baker, whereas half-white, half- créole Josephine Baker is no longer the complete Baker. (58)

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<sup>11</sup> Andy Fry “Du jazz hot à *La Créole*: Josephine Baker Sings Offenbach” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar. 2004), pp. 43-75, 57.

That she was never créole to begin with somehow escaped many reviewers. Becoming créole was part of an effort to make up for the fact that Baker wanted to do more than play the wild woman from the jungle. She couldn't simply perform as just a woman, so she must be part white for any of that to be acceptable. However, without the caricaturization, Josephine becomes incomplete. If she isn't performing blackness, she must be performing whiteness and no such thing could be done in a culture with an essentialized view of race. The créole was the compromise that some couldn't accept.

Without a screen as Josephine Baker upon which to bounce such now bizarre racial ideologies, how else could we witness the extent to which these ideologies were entrenched and may still be? Another reviewer wrote that the show was a “delightful compromise of a young savage brought *à la parisienne*” (58). The myth of the “sauvage” Josephine had been thoroughly digested and accepted. Another review remarking her “transformation” from savage to *la parisienne* wrote that

after having been a cause for surprise, for curiosity, Josephine Baker has tempered this wild instinct that she released to the rhythms of the first *jazz hot* by improvising dances with a frenzy that was ...almost savage. Since, she... has learnt self-discipline. She has let herself be seduced... by gay Paris. (59)

These narratives that attempt to define Baker's “essence” as identical with her earlier performances as though they had been an ethnographic exhibit rather than a performance, demonstrate how she appeared more than anything as a screen of various cultural projections.

These projections extended to the telling of her origin as well. Fry writes: “For many her father was Senegalese; for others it was her mother. One parent was surely white; whether it was a Spanish father or an American mother was unclear”(43). That others rewrote her history even more drastically than she did (she changed her origin story with every retelling) brings to the fore the ideological construction that constituted her career. Many assumed that she was from Louisiana: there had to be *some* part of her that could lay claim to a French heritage. If it wasn't a French part of America, it must have been a French part of Africa. Some wrote that she was born and grew up in Africa. Ignoring that she was from St. Louis, Missouri and placing her at least in Louisiana helped as Fry wrote, to “summon up the requisite nostalgia for *la plus grande France*” (44). The colonial association with Baker and the nostalgia it fostered had begun early. In 1931, France tried to make her Queen of the Colonial Exposition in Paris, until dissenters argued that she was not, in fact, from a colony of France. When she returned to America later in life, the projection continued. As Rose writes, “Baker, who had represented a fantasy America to Europeans in the twenties, now represented a fantasy Europe to Americans of the fifties” (212).

Baker was projected upon and used as a symbol for France even when she died. Rose suggests that it was because of rampant racism in the 1970s and 1980s that France chose to honor Josephine's life in a way usually reserved for statesmen.



Bettmann/CORBIS<sup>12</sup>

“Her flag-draped coffin was carried though an honor guard of two dozen flags, as is done for French Army Veterans. ... During the funeral mass, her coffin rested beneath a massive flower cross, a floral Star of David, a wreath from the President of the Republic, and another in the shape of a heart” (Rose 260-261). France used the opportunity to combat an image of racism and project one of respect for black people. Once again, Baker helped France to create a desired image of itself.

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<sup>12</sup> “15 Apr 1975, Paris, France --- 4/15/1975-Paris, France- Veterans of the French Resistance stand at attention at the bier of Josephine Baker during funeral services in the Madeleine Church in Paris, as Princess Grace of Monaco (with glasses) stands next to them. On extreme left are former French minister Jean Sainteny and General Alain de Boissieu, Chancellor of the Legion d'Honneur. Josephine Baker was active in the Resistance during World War II and was awarded the Legion of Honor for her activities.”

*The voice has to be in the legs today.*<sup>13</sup> To superimpose my theory of trauma and the voice onto Baker's dancing or onto her own willowy voice would not be too difficult a task. Both Armstrong and Baker developed out of and expanded from the minstrel tradition of clowning to perfect an art borne from a collective and personal traumatic past. In Baker's case, trauma is reflected in the screen upon which her societies projected their images of who and what she was. Her life and body testify to a traumatic past through her art as a jazz performer. That she was a performer of jazz could be seen in how she improvised all of her dances and how they were, if nothing else, infused with Benjamin's *Jetzzeit*. Because of its jazz inflection, Baker's dancing recalls a specifically ethnic and objectified version of the "folk-art" with which Kafka's story was in conversation, but. Her dance was a "low-culture" popular dance, and when she sang, she sang popular songs. She danced like many American blacks, America's underclass at the time.

If Kafka's Josefina's performance was embodied, Josephine Baker's was all body. Her art *was* physicality and embodiment especially when she first began performing. After her first shows, reviewers in Paris could do little more than speak about her body. One discussed the "frenetic virtuosity of that dancer with the rubber legs," referring to her as "the pretty coffee-colored ragamuffin" (JC 8). To Parisian audiences, Baker was body and color. Like Ellison's narrator, she would carry this association throughout her life despite her efforts to move past it. When she began to sing in an attempt to assimilate to French music hall culture, reviewers still saw only her body and color. One wrote that

Her caramel-colored body, which overnight became a legend in Europe, is still magnificent, but it has become thinned, trained, almost civilized. Her voice, especially in the voo-deo-do's is still a magic flute that hasn't yet heard of Mozart—though even that, one fears, will come with time. There is a rumor that she wants to sing refined ballads; one is surprised that she doesn't want to play Othello. On that lovely animal visage lies not a sad look, not of captivity, but of dawning intelligence. (JC 152-53)

That Baker's art was considered a sensual form of musical performance stands without question. Therefore, like Kafka's Josefina, Baker's performances potentially had the power to create a people as "higher" forms of music were supposed to have been able to do following Nietzsche and the traditions of thought that Kafka may have subverted with his story. The physicality of the performance mirrors Josefina: the heaving breasts become exposed breasts; the physical strain becomes physical exertion of her body. These are integral parts of the process which are multiplied in the performances of Josephine Baker. Although she went from dancing half nude to

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<sup>13</sup> JC 94.

singing fully dressed, she would always be perceived by her audiences as body and color.

Even though through the process of projection Baker may have come to create a people, her people—Paris 1920s and beyond—were as suspect as Kafka’s mouse people. Furthermore, it wasn’t until she began to sing that she truly came to *represent* Paris. In a section aptly called “Civilized Singing or Dancing Fever,” Andy Fry discusses the implications of Baker’s transformation from dancer to singer when she appeared in Offenbach’s *La Créole* in 1934.<sup>14</sup>



(Baker in Offenbach’s *La Créole*)<sup>15</sup>

If her dancing had established her as an exotic other, becoming a singer signaled to her French audience that she was becoming “civilized” or synonymous with Parisian. According to Fry, “in terms of the (re)construction of Baker’s identity, the ‘Berceuse créole’ ...played an important role: it established both her vocal credentials and her ability to sustain a more ‘civilised’ (and more conventionally feminine) persona” (66). Reviews for the most part were ecstatic to see this transformation and viewed it as a compliment to their French superiority. Fry notes that “for Madeleine Porter, for example, it was in ... song, rather than in her feistier moments, that Baker created ‘the most astonishing image’ and showed ‘what the new Josephine is capable of’” (66). In the acceptable context of playing the créole, Baker’s voice was more than tolerated, it was praised. One reviewer found her “pure and supple voice simply ravishing” (Fry

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<sup>14</sup> (Fry 65)

<sup>15</sup> “France - circa 1934: Josephine Baker (1906-1975), American artist of music-hall in 'La Creole' of Jacques Offenbach. Paris, Theatre Marigny, December 1934. Photo by Gaston Paris/Roger Viollet/Getty Images”

66). In a sense, Baker's "transformation" projected her own view of "Paris" onto an audience that was in turn delighted with the projection. Still others managed to hear even her voice in terms of body and color. One Louis Laloy, according to Fry, said this of her singing:

Her voice, which is coloured like her complexion in the normal register, possesses in the upper fifth, between G and D above the stave, notes of an incomparable brilliance and purity. She uses them skillfully, and nothing is more touching than... the murmured lullaby. (67)

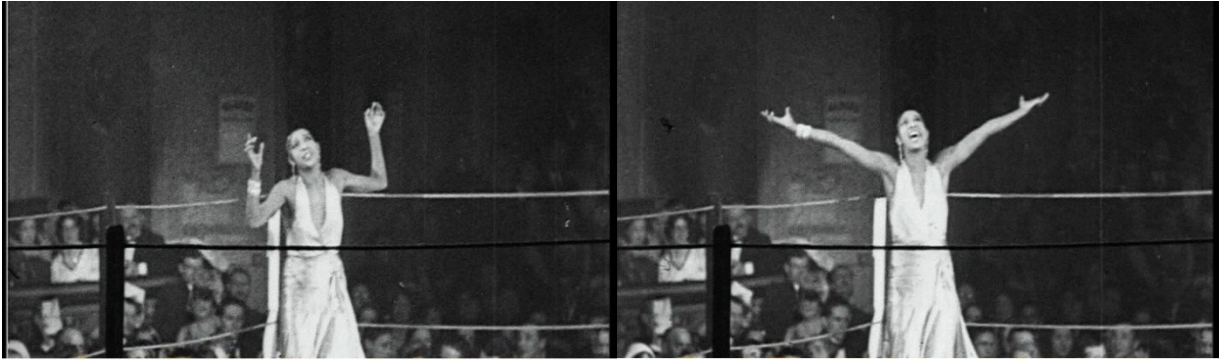
Laloy literally correlates her higher and lower registers with lighter and darker colors, respectively, as if her low notes could be black and her high notes white. Though it is true that a chest voice is used more with African-inflected music while the head voice is common in European, to make such a distinction within the voice of one singer speaks to the striking preoccupation with racial difference typical of her French and American audiences. For some reviewers the "transformation" created an anxiety that could only be quieted by a return to her early performances. One "noted with some relief that Josephine Baker was at last *au naturel*, 'that's to say just about nude and dancing a frenzied jig in which her long sinewy thighs and her wiggling buttocks perform wonders' (Fry 67-68). In this way, audiences could still enjoy her new refined and civilized talents "without ...[her] native qualities ... having been lost, spoilt or weakened' (68). Whether she had ever had any native qualities to begin with was never questioned. People were either for or against this "new" Baker. Either way, it was easier to recognize themselves as Parisians, to project a self-image onto Baker when she performed in ways they associated with a Parisian songstress. It was then that Baker truly became Paris.

While early Baker danced Paris into a primitivist frenzy, 1930s Baker sang Paris into its refined vision of itself. Her voice was unlike the famous American blues singers Mamie Smith and Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. She had a high pitched operatic sound that could be heard among opera singers like the French Emma Calvé and Ninon Vallin or the Americans Rosa Ponselle and Ruby Elzy. Her voice also closely favored American popular singers like Marion Harris or the famous Helen Kane (Betty Boop). What these singers have in common is that they all participate in a rather European song tradition, so that while France was projecting "exotic blackness" onto Baker, she was, in turn, performing "whiteness." Baker's love for Paris, though most likely genuine, was highly scripted. It was, more than anything, a performance. Her love was performed most often in the form of her signature song "J'ai Deux Amours" (1931).<sup>16</sup> In this famous song, Baker pronounces that her two loves are her country and Paris, (*mon pays et Paris*) yet what enchants her most is Paris,

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<sup>16</sup> Vincent Scotto, George Koger, "J'ai Deux Amours" (New York : Miller Music, 1931).

Paris in its entirety (*ce qui m'ensorcelle c'est Paris, Paris tout entier*). It is this song that Baker sang most and which endeared her to France for the rest of her life. However her performances of the song suggest that her undying love for Paris was itself part of the performance. She sings as a Parisian songstress and her gestures imply complete devotion. Two performances in particular demonstrate this performed devotion.



1931 (top); 1933 (bottom)



The first is in 1931 in what looks like a boxing ring in Paris.<sup>17</sup> The second is in 1933 of Baker singing at a charity ball. Baker sings the songs quite differently; in the first she sings without words for the most part in what sounds like an imitation of a flute. In the second she sings just the words. The phrasing and melody are distinct in each performance. Not distinct are the gestures of devotion that Josephine shows in each performance, two years apart from one another. At the exact moments in each song, Baker makes the same gestures with her arms. She begins with a longing prayer

<sup>17</sup> The locations of the clips of Baker singing are unknown. The footage credits give a description: [1931] “Miss Josephine Baker.’ Paris, France. M/S of Josephine Baker in an evening gown, kneeling on a small stage (it looks like a boxing ring) and singing a French song about Paris. People sitting around the stage watch her then cheer and applaud as she hits the final high note. She gets up, bows, then runs across the stage and down the steps. 28/09/1931 (issue date)” ©BritishPathe

[1933] “Josephine Baker’ Paris, France. L/S of cabaret star Josephine Baker standing on a platform at a ball and singing a song about Paris in French. She looks very glamorous with sleek hair and a spangled costume. Other performers stand either side of her and sing in reply to her. At the end of the song Josephine takes a bow, then starts to waggle her hips as the music picks up tempo. She takes off her skirt (sparkling costume underneath) and hands her large earrings to another performer as if she is about to dance.” 12/10/1933 (issue date)

©BritishPathe

position and at the song's climax she raises her arms and yells, rather than sings "Paris!" to the ecstatic approval of the crowd. The repetition of the same gestures in two performances two years apart suggests that this is how she must have performed the song every time. Additionally, the choreographed nature of these gestures of love and devotion belies the fact of their being genuine. Not that Baker was not devoted to Paris but, the devotion was, in part, scripted and performed, not improvised like her jazz dancing. Baker's dance of devotion is affective because Parisian audiences who expected gratitude and reverence from their Josephine Baker got exactly what they paid for, an image of Paris with which they could identify. Paris was the enchanting city that could civilize, refine and love a colored girl, and who a colored girl could love back. Her devotion was the patriotism and indebted piety it wanted from its own population, especially its colored one. Her ability to script this devotion so well suggests that she was able to ensure her continued success in this foreign place. This was the power of her song, to create a Paris that would devote itself to her even well beyond her death.

*She unites us in times of war and grim political situations.*

In "Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse People," Kafka's narrator makes Josefine's role as entertainer into a higher political function within her society; or rather, he constantly denies that function while reaffirming it. In any case, Josefine herself is fully committed to her role as protector of the people. When she begins to sing, Josefine apparently "rises up and cranes her neck and strives to oversee her flock like the shepherd before the storm"(Kafka 99). Like Josefine, Baker saw herself as a protector of her people, France who had loved her for her color when America had hated her for it. France had offered her an invisibility that was bearable, and she was determined to repay them for it. During World War II, Baker took on a political role that was absolutely astounding considering her humble beginnings. At the beginning of the war, Baker joined the French Resistance and, even when others didn't, she remained faithful to de Gaulle even years afterward. She was recruited by the Deuxième Bureau, French military intelligence, and smuggled intelligence on her sheet music in invisible ink from Paillole to Portugal for transmission to England (JC 187). Unlike other performers like Mistinguett and Chavalier, she refused to sing during the German occupation of France. She vowed, "As long as there's a German in France, Josephine won't sing" (JC 189). The one exception was in 1940 when she was in Marseille on assignment and needed money and a reason for being there. It was suggested that she open a new performance of the aforementioned *La Créole* which she was able to get up and going ten days later. For her dedication and hard work, Baker earned a *Croix de Guerre*. Making her way to Northern Africa, Baker's role in the resistance was halted by a sudden and near deadly illness. She was so ill that people began to presume that she had in fact died. *Time Magazine* was just about to run her



obituary but, the day before, they discovered she was not actually dead. They ran instead: “Negro Dancer Reported Dead Is Living in Morocco” (JC 199). To America, Baker was still a colored body, even a nameless one. It took years for her to recover and in March 1943 she sang for French and black soldiers in Casablanca. She sang her famous song, “J’ai deux amours.” The sight of her singing was quite poignant for many. According to Rose, “Baker singing this *was* Paris, as she had been on the stage of the Casino, but now, in North Africa, in her polka-dot dress, Paris *in extremis*, a Paris many of these men had not seen for years and were not sure they would ever see again” (201). In this moment, Baker’s projection of herself and the projection onto her overlap. In 1946, she was awarded the Medal of the Resistance.

Even in America she became a representation of her people. Facing such rampant discrimination on her American tour gave her a mission to fight back. In this fight, she came to represent black America. In 1951, the NAACP declared May 20<sup>th</sup> Josephine Baker Day, in response to her fighting for desegregation and jobs for blacks everywhere she went. She went so far as to make a citizen’s arrest when a white man said he “wouldn’t stay in the same room with niggers”(JC 214). In 1963, she spoke at the March on Washington in her Free French Air Force uniform. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* said of her that “her appearances have been marked by perhaps the most outspoken opposition to racial discrimination and segregation ever shown by a Negro artist, except Robeson” (JC 215).

It was, therefore, through both performance and protest that Baker came to represent black America. When in America, Josephine gave protest by insisting on integrated audiences and by performing roles that weren’t caricaturized representations of blackness. When she was compared to Ethel Waters, the only other famous black woman entertainer at the time, she responded that

Any artist must develop a technique of his own, and I have tried to avoid singing ‘colored mammy, back to Alabammy’ songs. Not all Negroes have to jump around as though they were monkeys or African savages. Besides, I sing soprano, and that would hardly adapt itself to the traditional blues and other Beale Street ballads. (JC 170)

That Baker had had to do exactly that—jump around like a monkey or an “African savage” —makes this declaration of hers quite poignant, yet also slightly humorous. In America, she had had to dance to

Bettmann/CORBIS<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>1927, Paris, France --Josephine Baker performs in blackface in imitation of minstrel performer Johnny Hudgins.

“colored mammy, back to Alabammy” songs, and in France not only did she play the “African savage” she also played the blackface clown. That she was trying to separate herself from that past by disowning it altogether speaks to the trauma such concessions must have caused her and the community she represented in those portrayals. Because France had allowed her to explore other roles, she thought America would be able to do the same. However, the race-colored glasses with which America sees the world rendered her home country incapable of accepting a black face without blackface. When touring, she was asked to use service entrances and was denied entrance to dozens of hotels. According to Rose, “Every snub registered deeply. She had two responses: One was to say in effect, I am not black, I am French. The other was to say, I am black and I will take refuge from these insults with my people” (171). These seemingly contradictory responses reveal something not so oppositional. On the one hand, she wanted to say that she did not have a race, she had an allegiance, a country. Perhaps she understood the fictionality of race. On the other hand, fictions hold great and often deadly power. Since she had blackness forced upon her, she would accept it, take strength from it. After all, being from America, a culture that roots for the underdog, how could she refuse an alignment with the same? Some blacks embraced her for this alignment arguing that “she is our wedge and we should force her in” (JC 172) Columnist Roy Ottley made a formal appeal to those who did not, saying: “Harlem, instead of taking up the cudgel of prejudiced whites, should rally to the side of this courageous Negro woman. We should make her insults our insults” (JC 172). This was in response to reports he heard of people saying that “it serves her right [because] she had no business trying to be white” (JC 172). That she saw little success in America despite her booming success in France was evidence of America’s position on blacks at the time. *Time* magazine said of her performance in Manhattan,



Josephine Baker is a St. Louis washerwoman’s daughter who stepped out of a Negro burlesque show into a life of adulation and luxury in Paris during the booming 1920’s. In sex appeal to jaded Europeans of the jazz-loving type, a Negro wench always has a head start. The particular tawny hue of tall and

stringy Josephine Baker's bare skin stirred French pulses. But to Manhattan theatergoers last week she was just a slightly buck-toothed young Negro woman whose figure might be matched in a night-club show, and whose dancing and singing might be topped practically anywhere outside of Paris. (JC 169)

To white American audiences, not only was Baker just a body and a color, she was an unremarkable colored body. One wonders how or if she would have been remembered had she never left America. It was as if her success in Paris shed light on a shady part of American entertainment. Unfortunately for Baker, such comments were very painful to her. After being sent away from yet another hotel, Baker exclaimed: "That is enough for me. I get up and nearly run out of the hotel. Paris! I had lived there for years without experiencing such humiliation and without knowing how happy one is when he does not feel the weight of this horrible prejudice. After two hours I am in a nightmare"(JC 173). As with all black performers in her time, her experience would prove to be part of the evidence of a collective and personal trauma.

Baker made use of her projected status as a cultural leader of Black America and spoke at the March on Washington in 1963. She told the crowd, "You are on the eye of a complete victory. You can't go wrong. The world is behind you. ...Salt and pepper. Just what it should be" (242). According to Rose, she was considered to be, along with Martin Luther King, the most hopeful speaker that day (242). She said this later about the March,

Until the March on Washington, I always had this little feeling in my stomach. I was always afraid. I couldn't meet white American people. I didn't want to be around them. But now that little gnawing feeling is gone. For the first time in my life I feel free. I know that everything is right now. (JC 242)

Her protests were successful at times and unsuccessful at others. However, it could be that the exoticism of France may have undermined some of the racism of America. Although both stem from racism, primitivism in France allowed for a possibility that American racism had refused. Baker's portrayals and photographs when juxtaposed with her imagery in America, are rather humanizing in comparison. Images of her in Hollywood gowns were very different from the ragamuffin blackface look Josephine had had in America. Whereas France saw these images as the "New Josephine" that they had themselves created through Parisian "civilization," American audiences would have to have been shocked by these images. They showed no distinction between her and a white woman, save the coloring of her skin. America had never thought Baker had come from a jungle. She had gone from urban poor to urban rich. She had lived the American dream and had done so outside of America proving that for blacks at the time, it was never possible to begin with. While perhaps reinforcing her gender invisibility, these images must have torn down racial invisibility in America even without intending to do so.



## Baker on Film

*People have done me the honor of believing I'm an animal.*<sup>19</sup>

—Josephine Baker

If Baker was a screen upon which to project national fantasies, in no place is this projection more evident than on the screen of popular French film. The trauma documented by Baker's films is the collective experience of the lack of alternatives to racism and or exoticization and primitivism. The films document how the world's most glamorized African American woman could not be depicted as fully human even in the best of depictions. However, it is not entirely as simple as this. I argue that even as the films depict a projection of primitivism, they expose more than anything how imaginary and projected this concept was, how it had very little to do with Baker herself. Not only do they reveal the scope of the exoticist imagination of France, but they constantly point to and create holes in the logic of exoticism. They show the inner framework of their constructions and demonstrate the fragility of the foundation upon which these constructions were built.

All three of Baker's films seek to display her talents as uncontrollable, animalistic, and natural characteristics rather than as performance. They feature scenes that are voyeuristic glances into her "private life" in which dance and eroticism are presented as natural as breathing. They try to extend this essential quality of Josephine Baker to the music hall where Josephine is on exhibit rather than performing. All she has to do is show up and "be herself"; she doesn't have to (or maybe even cannot) perform. She *is* her nature; all films conflate her *self* with her exhibitionistic performances. Animals, nature and freedom are almost interchangeable concepts in Baker's films. Baker is animal; she is nature; she represents a freedom that the society of contemporary France sorely lacks.

In her first film, *La Sirène des Tropiques* (1927) Baker is more nature than animal.<sup>20</sup> Directed by Henri Étievant and Mario Nalpas, and assistant directed by the now famous Luis Buñuel, *The Siren of the Tropics* tells the story of a rich married man, Marquis Sévéro (Régina Dalthy) who has his sights on his goddaughter Denise who is, however, in love with André Berval (Pierre Batcheff), employee of the marquis. To advance his scheme, Sévéro sends Berval to the Tropics and directs his site manager Alvarez, to kill him so that he will never return. Part of the natural landscape of the Tropics is Papitou, played by Josephine Baker. She and the local natives serve as a window for France to look into the unspoiled, wild landscape from which their society has torn itself. The natives dance around a fire in a moment to which we are allowed rare, special access. Josephine dances with them. She doesn't "perform", but rather the camera catches her in her "native habitat." The "naturalness" of the scene

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<sup>19</sup> JC 118

<sup>20</sup> *La Sirène des Tropiques*. Dir. Henri Étievant, Mario Nalpas, Luis Buñuel, Perf. Josephine Baker, Pierre Batcheff, and Régina Dalthy. La Centrale Cinématographique, 1927.

falls apart, however, when we see that her “African” dance is anything but. In a field next to a fire and a straw hut, Josephine dances the urban and very American Charleston.



Later on in the film, we get another glimpse of Baker’s “naturalness” when a large group of passengers chase Papitou around a ship that she has boarded without paying. When she is finally caught, she is in a bathtub, completely naked. Her nakedness is her “natural state,” and she splashes in the water like a child playfully unaware of being watched. The scene suggests that her nakedness is not performative, that perhaps her clothing was the costume.

In *Sirène* the closest Baker comes to appearing animalistic is her anthropomorphizing other animals. It isn’t until her film *Zou Zou* (1934), directed by Marc Allégret, that Baker as nature becomes Baker as animal.<sup>21</sup> As *Zou Zou*, Baker assumes a moniker that delineates difference, specifically an animalistic, African difference. The diminutive *Zou Zou* comes from *Zouaoua*, the name of an Algerian tribe, but it is also a play on the French word *zoo* the same spelling and meaning as the English “zoo” though pronounced “zoh.” The title alone establishes her as both animal and African in one short phrase.<sup>22</sup>

In *Zou Zou*, Baker is not just an animal but a caged one. This comes across best in her performance. When Baker goes on, it isn’t actually to dance. She appears miniaturized in a large birdcage only very minimally covered in white feathers. She sings a nostalgic song about Haiti and how “the most beautiful cage is nothing but a jail.” Her arms are raised high during the scene as she holds on to the bars of the swinging perch upon which she is seated. The position is quite vulnerable, as if she is surrendering with her hands up. As is evident by the image, Baker’s animal appearance is quite erotic as well. Locked in a cage, her nearly naked arms also give the suggestion of sexual availability.

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<sup>21</sup> *Zou Zou*. Dir. Marc Allégret. Perf. Josephine Baker, Jean Gabin, and Pierre Larquey. Les Films H. Roussillon, 1934.

<sup>22</sup> Krom “Kabyle [the Berber dialect] *Zouaoua*, the name of a tribe; a Berber people of northern Algeria.” Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Tenth Edition), (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999).



She swings back and forth and sings in a thin soprano like a refined Parisian songstress. When she finishes, the cage door is opened and she takes an actual dive into a crowd of men who catch her. That the primitivist projections show themselves to be flawed is most evident by the end of the film when Papitou is back in her cage. However, her cage could very well be a metaphor for the cage of her constructed cultural identifications. She is allowed to be a success but not a woman, not an individual. She can dance for the entire world as long as she remains a screen for its racial and gendered projections. If she is willing to be put in a box/cage as either the “colored mammy” in America, or the “African savage” in Europe, then her success will be unlimited. She can even on occasion leap from her cage as long as she is willing to go back in the next day. “The most beautiful cage is nothing but a jail,” her song says. The cage is more than the bars that hold her in. It is the feathers glued to her breasts that suggest that her sexuality represents her animality. It is also the brownness of her skin which was imbued with too much meaning. Perhaps her success is also her cage, beautiful but stiflingly limited. She did everything right; she was domesticated, infantilized and modest. She was the opposite of blonde Barbara. She was just like Claire minus one thing: she wasn’t white. So there was nothing she could ever do to be good enough for Jean who was also most definitely a modest ambition. But even a dishonorably discharged sailor who grew up in the circus is still a white Frenchman, and therefore—out of her reach.

While singing in her cage scenes, Baker's high thin voice could be associated with European or French femininity, but instead it is likened to the sound of a bird. To compare the black singing voice to animal sounds, in particular that of a bird, is not new. As Farah Jasmine Griffin noted, this was quite common. Quoting Lucy Kim Garrison from *Slave Songs in the United States*, she writes,

It is difficult to express the entire character of these Negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs. The odd turns made in the throat and the curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals, seem almost as impossible to place on the scale as the singing of birds or the tones of an Aeolian Harp. (106)

Not only should a wild bird not be caged, but its notes can't be caged by the lines and bars on a musical staff. Other writers agreed that the music was birdlike and impossible to represent in writing. William Allen writes:

What makes it all the harder to unravel a thread of melody out of this strange network is that, like birds, they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented by the gamut and abound in 'slides from one note to the [sic] another and in turns and cadences not in articulated notes. (Griffin 106)

Baker's bird scene, therefore, is part of a long tradition that posits the black body and voice as animalistic in nature.

By her last film, *Princesse Tam Tam* (1935), nature had become a concept of savagery and civilization's direct opposition.<sup>23</sup> If *Zou Zou* had possibly taken a half step forward, *Princesse Tam Tam* took about three steps backward. That it came after *Zou Zou* is not as strange as it seems. *Zou Zou* was released in 1934 and most likely filmed in 1933. Europe was just beginning to lash out against the wayward ways of the Roaring Twenties or "*les années folles*," and by 1934-35, it was at a turning point.<sup>24</sup> America, too, was trying to redefine racial boundaries with its 1934 production of the Hays code which forbid any miscegenation on the Hollywood screen. Filmmakers all over the world were willingly and unwillingly creating films that reinforced the idea that blackness and whiteness were to be separate. Because nature was associated with blackness, it was no longer a source of romance and glamour; it was taboo with all the excitement that accompanies the term. Nature was now dirty and sexual desire for Baker was likened to the bestial and scatological. *Princesse Tam Tam* debuted in 1935,

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<sup>23</sup> *Princesse Tam Tam*. Dir. Edmond T. Gréville. Perf. Josephine Baker, Albert Préjean, and Robert Arnoux. Productions Arys, 1935.

<sup>24</sup> Karen C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes" In *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 903-934.(1998) (903)



directed by Edmond T. Gréville and cowritten by Pepito Albatino, Baker's lover and manager at the time. Having grown impatient with his high-society wife and under pressure to produce another bestselling novel, Max de Mirecourt decides to take a trip to Tunisia, "to a real savage land," he says, to find new material. Like modern France, he is overwhelmed by his own "civilization" and seeks renewal in something exotic and primitive—something African. In its imagination, Paris transported itself to a "savage" land when watching Baker. She was the material for the new France. In Tunisia he comes across the feisty and beautiful Aouina (played by Baker) who is stealing fruit in the market place. She is exactly what he needs to reinvigorate himself, so he decides to create an experiment to "civilize" her and use these adventures for his novel.

The natural, the primitive and savage are one in this film, and therefore, the first time we see Baker in *Princesse*, she is part of the landscape. In this instance, the landscape is a field of cactus plants. Her face sticks out of a little hole among a large group of them. She jumps out and grabs a sheep, carries it across the desert. Max witnesses this scene as "Getting back to nature." As a reflection of France's racial attitude *du jour*, projections onto Baker have gone from natural to animalistic to scatological. Max says to his friend and ghostwriter Cotòn about Aouina, "that little animal is touching. She's so naive." When Cotòn says, "I prefer the perfumed chicks of the rue de la Paix," Max replies, "But nature has a better fragrance than perfume!" To which Cotòn retorts, "Manure is natural." "So?" Max decides, "Isn't that where pretty roses grow?" *Princesse* makes its scatological point with a cut to a scene about the beautiful flowers that grow from manure. However, it isn't clear whether Baker's character is closer to the flower or the manure. Cotòn says that that flowers outside are too wild and not ready for the parlor. Dar, a dark man who is apparently in their service says, "African flowers aren't meant for parlors."

The film displays nostalgia for what it believes is the freedom and independence of life as a "savage." Max's wife back home is being seduced by a Maharajah who says, "you call us savages, but the poorest among us has more independence than you could imagine." Aouina, uncomfortable with sleeping in a bed and not eating with her hands is told by Dar, "If the birds of the sky eat from the hands of man, they lose their freedom." It is odd that in 1935 a Parisian audience would fantasize that their beloved Josephine had come to them having never slept in a bed, worn shoes, or eaten with a fork.

One scene in *Princesse* conflates animals, nature, savagery and Baker all at once. "You wouldn't subject us to the presence of that savage," says a white woman in reaction to Aouina's presence on a day trip. Another outraged woman says, "I understand the love of nature but to this extent!" Finally, a man complains that "the smell of game makes [him] lose [his] appetite." Aouina asks Max what game is. He says it is wild animals. "So I am a wild animal?" Aouina protests. Of course, the film doesn't side with these "civilized" characters. Their words are harsh and Aouina is

allowed revenge in the form of harmless pranks with the salt shaker. However, the distastefulness of their remarks is not due to the comparison of Baker with all things wild and savage but rather to their sense of superiority over all things wild and savage. Her natural wild savagery becomes something to envy.

In Baker's films, the strongest link to her supposed animal nature is established through dance. It is always when dancing that Baker gets "discovered", be it as a wild creature or as a potential hit in the music hall. Her films link dancing and discovery in such a way that suggests that everything about her may be a performance, except for the dancing. She is always dancing for herself or for friends or children, when she is "caught" and expected to dance for someone else's purposes. In *Sirène*, Baker as Papitou dances in order to "teach her students the dances of her native country." Here, as in her other films, dance is either a natural state or an innocent effort to entertain children. She doesn't know what a music hall is, but agrees to dance in one if her desired André Berval will be there. They tell her that the music hall is a "paradise where you make a fortune with your legs." Papitou's desire is not for fortune or fame, but only for the man she cannot have. Just as in *Sirène*, her dancing stems from a desire to entertain a child rather than herself in *Zou Zou*. The first time she dances she is playing with a child. She dances a short tap dance on a table, then plays a small guitar and sings a lullaby to the child. Here Baker is like the maternal figure that Griffin wrote of, one who serves the white family unit. However, she doesn't have the full agency of an actual adult. She is as childish as the white child—even more so. As *Zou Zou*, Baker is "discovered" to be a talented dancer on a stage while playing around (innocently dancing for herself and perhaps Jean, played by the famous Jean Gabin). Jean has asked *Zou Zou* to get on stage so that he can check the lighting for Barbara's show. She sees a shadow of herself on the wall, and like a child, performs to see what she can make her shadow do. There is music so she improvises dances. Jean raises the curtain at his coworker's suggestion. When she realizes the curtain has been lifted she freezes. Her arms are raised and for split second, you can see that her breasts have fallen out of her leotard; she is doubly exposed as her dancing and sexuality are conflated in that moment. Once again, she is "caught" naked in a semiprivate moment. It almost seems accidental because it happens almost too quickly to see. However, this seems deliberate as there is an obvious cut between the dancing and the freeze—as if it took several tries to get her breasts to fall out perfectly. This was the desired shot. She runs away and is chased by the director and producer. They love her, but she refuses to join their show until she needs the money to help Jean escape a wrongful murder charge. As in *Sirène*, she will dance if it will help her find or save the man she loves—not for herself, and not for money or fame.

Dance is always linked to discovery, which is linked to nudity and sexuality. Baker gets exposed in both senses of the word in each film. When she is naked she is "caught" off guard by a white man. Baker's animalistic nature is eroticized and part of her discovery is that of her private parts. In *Sirène*, our transition from Europe to the

Tropics is marked by the title, “Down there in the tropics.” Of course, “down there” has a double meaning, which conflates the Tropics with the genital region. When we first see her, she is swinging on a large phallically curved tree. What is interesting about these discovery moments is that because everyone dis-covers Baker and she never exposes herself, the sense is that there is a kind of rape involved. This is true especially in *Sirène*, where Baker as Papitou narrowly escapes an attempted rape by Alvarez. Because he strips her for *us* to see her nakedness, we participate in that. In *Zou Zou*, once Baker has jumped out of her cage, she is no longer a rare exotic bird on display behind bars, but a black woman sexually available for the numerous white men on stage with her. The rape suggestion is especially overt in *Princesse*, when she is caught by Dar. He strips her from the waste up and is about to whip her when Max makes him stop. Here, Baker’s nudity takes on new dimensions. Once again, her character is “caught” but this time is stripped *because* of it. Her naked body then, is not meant to remind us of the mythological “hamadryad bounding across jungles filled with poisonous flowers,” that Baker had evoked with her premier in France, or even as Papitou in *Sirène* (JC 23). Instead, her nudity evokes the racial and sexual violence of slavery and plantation life. She is spared the whip however and Max decides to pretend to be in love with her as an experiment for his novel.

What these scenes possibly reveal about the contemporary French consciousness is particularly striking. If animals represent nature and Baker is nature and animal, then the films characters’ (as metonymic for France) repeated exposure and attempted rape of Baker’s characters reveals something about the society’s relationship to nature at the time. Nature, then, is seen as not only available for exploitation, but readily and continually exploited. These projections on to Baker, then, reveal something about the nature of colonialism at the time.

Part of the nature of colonialism is the sacrificing of the other. Without fail, Baker is asked to sacrifice in her films. As Rose writes, “If in real life, it all began with desire, in the film versions of her transformation all traces of desire are erased.” (JC 164) Baker never wants to be a performer in her films; she only does so in order to fulfill a desire that she is never allowed to. And as always for her troubles,

Her reward was not marriage, the heroine’s usual reward, but Parisianization, a reward without a man attached. For Baker, compulsively displaying the poor little girl she no longer was constituted a way of holding on to her racial identity while enjoying a glamour that transcended color. (JC 163)

Unfortunately, and as is always the case in Baker’s films, the man she loves and protects is devoted to a white woman and she must ultimately sacrifice her happiness for his. In *Sirène*, Papitou sacrifices herself: “Papitou give her life for happiness to you.” She tells Denise, Berval’s fiancée, “Papitou be nothing for M’ssou André.”

Denise gives her Berval's little prayer book and it reads: "Sacrifice is our purest source of joy on earth." As Zou Zou, Baker manages to save her man from false imprisonment and become quite successful in the process only to find that it is her friend Claire who goes to retrieve him from the prison gates. She is forced to sacrifice and is rewarded with a successful career but no husband. So Claire, *clearly* the best choice, gets the guy, while Zou Zou must suffer alone. She can have many lovers or be alone; she cannot have the man, the French husband. However, she can be a huge success and her show is just that. In *Princesse*, after Aouina's great revealing dance, the Maharajah tells her that she should go home right away. "Go back to your country. The sooner the better." Of course, Max goes back to his wife and Aouina must sacrifice her love. In the end, the Maharajah says, "My house has two kinds of windows: those facing the west and those facing the east." He shows her a window—which incidentally is so ornamented as to be cage-like and very difficult to look out of—and to the west is the man she loves kissing his wife. The Maharajah shows her the window facing east where her dark Arabic friend Dar is—the man with whom she is expected to be. When she sees him there she yells, "Dar, I'm coming!" She realizes her place. All three films ask for the same sacrifice of Baker's character, suggesting the sacrificial nature of the colonial relationship France has with the countries into which the films superimpose Baker.

Baker felt that *Sirène* was a bit of a disaster as far as films go. She said, "The finished film brought tears to my eyes. Was that ugly, silly person me?" (JC 120) There had been some intense over-acting but such things were not unheard of in silent films. What was silly and ugly may have been her portrayal as the "African savage" which she had desperately wanted to leave behind. What Baker felt was the traumatic effect of these cultural projections. In the world of film, France was able to bring its colonial fantasies to fruition. All three films were written just for her. They are like a documented dream that France had about Josephine Baker.

However, despite the heavy handedness of the films' notions about race, they can't help but show these notions to be nothing more than projections. This is most evident in *Sirène* when a crowd of passengers chase Papitou around the ship. At one point she hides in a coal bin. The crowd grows larger as they run around the ship in pursuit of this wild black thing. After hiding in the coal bin, she hides in a flour bin and comes out completely white. Just then a woman says she is "easy to recognize... she's all black." Papitou surprises and frightens the lady because she's all white now, "a ghost" as she says. Even as the film plays with blackface and white face and the differences between Papitou and the rest of the ship, this slipping in and out of whiteness and blackness shows these states to be performative, that race is the makeup worn for the show. In *Zou Zou*, her adopted father tells her that the reason she and her white brother look differently is that the stork brought them both but had accidentally dropped her in the chimney. The joke is distorted by the fact of Baker's

lighter skin. It is as if pitch blackness and light brownness were the same color. The joke reflects back on the teller much more than it does the object of the joke, Baker. *Sirène* ends with Papitou's last music hall dance where "she pretends to be gay" while "mourning her illusions." One can't help but see the irony of pitying her illusions when in fact she is herself all illusion. In reality, Baker did have a difficult time finding a French husband but not because of her own illusions. As Rose argues, Baker "embodied the jazz age and people reacted to her not so much as an individual but as a cultural symbol" (JC 125). It was difficult at first to find a man willing to marry a symbol. Of course a symbol, though conceptual, is still an object rather than a person.

For everything that *Zou Zou* projected, *Princesse* managed to add slightly more insult to its injuries. Not only is she not allowed to be with her love interest, but Baker's character doesn't even get the fame or the success. Rather, she must go back to where she came from—a metaphorical one-way ticket home. However, Aouina never actually goes to Europe, this is all from Max's book. Cotòn says that it may have ended differently if Aouina had really gone to Europe. The film here acknowledges that its entire plot has been nothing more than imagination and projection onto Aouina/Baker. Such an acknowledgement might admit that this is how *we* see her but that we don't really know who she is. There may be an agency there that has been overshadowed by projection. Max contends that "Aouina is better off where she is." He is suggesting that she is all the better for having never gone to Paris because "civilization" has deteriorated. Max leaves his villa to Aouina. When we see her again she has had a baby with Dar and the baby doesn't seem to have African American features. The house Max has left for Aouina is overrun by nature. There are baby chickens in the indoor fountain and a monkey behind the bookcase. Goats are all over the place and the film fades out with a shot of a donkey in the house eating the cover off Max's wildly successful novel, *Civilisation*. The possibility of such a transformation from "savage to civilized" was doomed from the beginning, as the inherent inferiority of Aouina prevented her from being capable of such a thing. In *Princesse*, Baker's character not only fails to get the man of her dreams but can't even become a dancer in Paris. She cannot have the life of pretend royalty that Baker herself had. She can't even stay in Europe. She must disappear. Such expulsion and effacement of difference was brought to its extreme in the war that soon followed the film.

What Baker's films reveal is not necessarily new. It isn't difficult to understand that Baker's films document the scope of an international experience of a not quite human subjectivity; it is the significance of this that I'm trying to get across. From Kafka's Josephine we learned how the singer's position represents and creates her people. Griffin helped to explain that the non-Wagnerian, embodied female performer is just as easily used for political, nationalistic purposes as Wagner himself was. What Baker helps us to see is that even if you accept the premise that the singer could possibly have this projected representational, creative unifying experience, in actuality, her life and work tell a different truth, that there was no amount of success

or talent that could fully humanize a black woman in the modern western world. The trauma documented is the personal trauma of surviving a massacre, poverty, and everything else she endured. That which France projected onto Baker reflects a collective experience—that is the impossibility of recognition, or the lack of proof of one’s own humanity.

The embodied singer does not usher in a new German people or a post-racist, unified, nationalistic America. She attests to the falsity of these concepts. She is proof of those very nationalistic tendencies, proof that they cannot be attributed solely to pre-fascist Germany. She is proof that even the poor, female, colored body/singer/dancer can be a screen for these projections. She is extraordinary; she is successful. Hers is the only black woman’s voice that the world would listen to, but the world still could not recognize her. Luckily, her vast success and eventful life give us a place to come back to, a history to reconsider. There is the potential to project a different ideology onto Baker. She can be seen as the musical and cultural leader she most likely already thought herself to be. Her wild success and the love and devotion of millions do not cover up the reality of the cultural climate in which she lived. The fact of her success in that climate attests to an extraordinary power that I believe her work possesses to this day.

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Two years after I completed a draft of this chapter on Baker, Anne Cheng published an important study on Baker’s work that I am compelled to discuss precisely because it seems to take issue with the repeated critical return to the traumatic history that constitutes Baker’s life and work. She writes,

One has only to invoke her name (no, even just hint at the barest gestural outline of her figure) and all that she stands for—the racist and sexist history of objectification and of desire that makes up the phenomenon of European Primitivism or, conversely, the idealization of black female agency—immediately materializes.<sup>25</sup>

In her study, she seeks to challenge the traditional notions of visibility and representation as they relate to Baker. She asks, “what would it mean to see Baker not as an example of but as a fracture in the representational history of the black female body?” (2-3) This is in response to the continuing debate that either denies or over-attributes agency to Baker in her objectification. In the previous chapter, I discuss a similar phenomenon about the work of Louis Armstrong. The issue concerns the

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<sup>25</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2-3

anxiety surrounding the idea of performers participating in their own racist portrayal. Either the performers are seen as ignorant victims without agency or they have somehow subverted the racism by parodying these portrayals. However, as Cheng has stated, “when it comes to the spectacle of the stereotype, execution and parody look uncomfortably similar” (42). Cheng suggests that these discussions of Baker’s agency are attempts to rescue her from criticism for this possible complicity.

I, too, am concerned about the impulse to see either culpability or protest in the work of these performers. Cheng’s answer to this difficult debate, however, tends to participate in the same process of rescuing Baker. She argues that Baker “is neither the willfully subversive agent that critics hoped for, nor the broken subject that history demanded” (172). However, considering the concept of “broken subjectivity” from a standpoint of trauma studies need not conjure up the uncomfortable language of victimhood. A split subjectivity of the trauma survivor allows for the post traumatic experience to be one of remarkable adaptation rather than victimhood. Baker’s still-forming subjectivity was effectively “broken” when she witnessed the massacre of St. Louis African Americans, of which she was one, and by repeated exile and lack of parental acceptance, all of this before she ever left for Paris. That split subjectivity could not and would not be transformed back into one by any clever theoretical angle with which we can view her life. If it could have, Baker probably would not have spent her remaining years obsessively adopting children of different races and nationalities to prove something to the world. Facing bankruptcy and divorce as she was, she would have stopped before she had amassed twelve children and lost everything, including her home. Allowing for the possibility of a thriving broken subjectivity requires that we understand the difference between being victimized and being a victim. That Baker was victimized in her lifetime home and abroad is simply factual. It is a part of her history that can neither be denied nor ignored. That she rose above her victimization and did not remain a victim is perhaps a part of her more easily celebrated. Not even the loss of her husband, home and many of her children defeated Baker who stayed on the stage until the last week of her life.

Cheng’s work also seeks to engage with and perhaps transform the discourse on racial visibility. She argues that in order to “go beyond the established terms of racial visibility,” we must ask “what are the visual conditions under which a (raced and gendered) body comes into visibility at all? (167-168) For my purposes, the rhetoric of visibility always speaks and pays homage to Ellison’s literary confrontation with the racial consciousness of Jim Crow America. This rhetoric is always both metaphor and irony. Visibility is a metaphor for the acknowledgement of one’s human subjectivity while the irony plays on the hyper-visibility of racialized and gendered subjects.

Baker’s history is an American history of trauma to which we must repeatedly return, less we forget its referents. If we etch out this history without its traumatic elements, we take great risks. While rewriting the significance of Baker’s signature skin

shine, Cheng argues “that it may be the plasticity and metallurgy of Baker imagery that renders it most resistant to consumption” (119). However, after imagining Baker’s skin as the fruit of a still-life, she suggests that perhaps “the woman-as-fruit is pleasurable both because she/it can be consumed and because she/it cannot be eaten, a strange fruit? (118-119) Without the referents of trauma, Baker’s image can call up a “strange fruit” without calling up the real, non-theoretical images of American lynching that the term should easily recall and would certainly be recalled by Baker in her lifetime. Considering the history of the term and the trauma associated with it, what does it mean then to see Baker as a strange fruit? Ultimately it would mean to equate her with the burned body of a lynching victim or a product of American racism. Baker cannot be reduced to either of those things. The challenge of recognizing the common origins of burning flesh and oiled flesh is the work of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—as is the challenge of recognizing the life-affirming, embodied existence that oiled flesh can represent. However, one cannot do one without the other. Baker cannot be likened to a strange fruit without recognition of the trauma to which that song testifies. The subversions and deflections of racism in Baker’s work do not reverse the personal and collective impact of these historical circumstances. They also don’t circumvent the need to remember and return to these same historical circumstances. If, as is the case with the present project, out of love, we necessarily have to return to Baker at all, we have also to return to the traumatic as well as the triumphant aspects of her history.

When Cheng makes the point to turn Picasso’s “colonial projection” into “a passionate confrontation with colonial fantasy’s violent preconditions,” she sees painting in a way that best describes what Baker’s life and work do for me (21). She argues that

painting does not fend off violent invasion, nor revive that which has been killed. Instead, it, like relics, congeals (“giving form to”) the memory of violence. The canvas becomes artifact, testifying to desire and its trauma. (21)

That Baker’s life and work give form to the memory of violence and testify to trauma is exactly the point I have sought to make, that art can not only “*record loss in the wake of reification,*” but also record those powerful, aesthetic and redemptive moments to which we cannot help but return (21 her emphasis). Then we can address what I believe is her most important question:

What does it mean to have and to assume a body that does not crumble when objectified and made to disappear? (60)

And we can see that the answer does not lie in Baker’s skin or her modern surface appeal. Rather, if we consider the traumatic history that constitutes the life and art of



Josephine Baker, this question becomes a very powerful way to understand the collectivity of the Baker experience. Then, we could understand that to have this objectified, disappearing yet, non-crumbling body may very well be part of the lived experience of the black American for which Josephine Baker speaks.



## Chapter 4

### Civil Memory Wars: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Battle over Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.*

—Walter Benjamin

#### A Moment of Danger

I return to this famous sixth thesis of Benjamin once again to address the controversial historiography of American blackface minstrelsy. What follows is not an attempt to rewrite a history of blackface minstrelsy, nor is it a history of blackface historiography. Rather, I seek to contextualize the existing histories in an effort to understand and explain their ardor, salience, and inevitable political commitments. It is with this contextualized understanding that I argue that blackface minstrelsy, and finally *The Jazz Singer* (1927), can be viewed as another important document of the trauma of modernity in the jazz archive.

A recent article in *Time Magazine* marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Civil War suggested that the war was still being waged. David von Drehle put forward that in the American cultural memory, the cause of the Civil War was still very much contested among white Americans.<sup>1</sup> In fact, he notes that in a survey of over 2,500 participants across the country, “two-thirds of white respondents in the 11 states that formed the Confederacy, answered that the South was mainly motivated by ‘states’ rights’ rather than the future of slavery”(40). Drehle suggests that this denial of slavery as the cause of the Civil War has evolved over time but maintains that is in part due to the war, which he calls “the most traumatic and transformational event in U. S. history”(40). He suggests that cultural attempts at reconstructing the memory of

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<sup>1</sup> David Von Drehle. “150 Years After Fort Sumpter: Why We’re Still Fighting the Civil War.” *Time Magazine*. (18 Apr. 2011): 40.

the war took place in popular culture in the forms of minstrel shows and “happy-slave stories” because “white society was not ready to deal with the humanity and needs of freed slaves, and these entertainments assured them that there was no need to. Reconstruction was scorned as a fool’s errand, and Jim Crow laws were touted as sensible reforms to restore a harmonious land”(47). Ira Berlin has noted a similar ‘war’ over the memory of slavery, positing that “the struggle over slavery’s memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself.”<sup>2</sup> He writes:

But during the late nineteenth century, after attempts to reconstruct the nation on the basis of equality collapsed and demands for sectional reconciliation mounted, the portrayal of slavery changed. White Northerners and White Southerners began to depict slavery as a benign and even benevolent institution, echoing themes from the planters’ defense of the antebellum order. They contrasted the violence and enmity of the postwar period with the supposed tranquility of slave times, when happy slaves frolicked in the service of indulgent masters. Such views, popularized in the stories of Joel Chandler Harris and the songs of Stephen Foster, became pervasive during the first third of the twentieth century. (xvi)

Although Berlin does not attribute these historical revisions of slavery to the trauma of the Civil War, both he and Drehle charge films like Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939) with revising the histories that they depict. Drehle argues that it was these “Lost Cause melodrama[s]” that fostered this forgetting (48). That the latter film is considered the highest grossing film ever suggests that the public was eager to create histories that would unite and valorize soldiers of the North and the South and, although Drehle does not mention it, the common enemy became the freed slaves and their white advocates (48). Most importantly, as Drehle notes, “such powerful cultural images were buttressed by the academic work of leading historians”(48). Leading historians at Columbia University, the University of Illinois and Yale University, argued that Reconstruction was an injustice to whites, that the abolitionists were villains, and that slavery had been a civilizing force for African Americans, respectively (48). He acknowledges that the civil rights movement began to dismantle many of these histories and that new historians tried to reverse these perspectives on slavery and Reconstruction. Notably, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* by C. Vann Woodard of Johns Hopkins successfully challenged the predominant aforementioned conception of Reconstruction that William A. Dunning had professed at Columbia.<sup>3</sup> The academic studies on the civil rights movement apparently did not change all American opinions about the cause of

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<sup>2</sup> Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller. Eds. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. (New York: The New Press, 1996), xv.

<sup>3</sup> C. Vann Woodard, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

the Civil War. Remarkably, in his noble effort to bring slavery's importance back to the history of the Civil War, Drehle does not acknowledge any racial significance of this massive denial of the cause of the civil war. He, too, tries to reconcile northern and southern concerns by suggesting that if secession had succeeded, strife would have continued and "slaves would have continued running away"(48). He also suggests that the continuation of slavery would have increased American isolation from the rest of the world. The biggest benefit seems to be that now Americans can "order a Coke from Atlanta and some New England clam chowder at a diner in Las Vegas"(48). His effort to settle the dispute about slavery's role in the Civil War continues to ignore the issues of racism and the trauma that slavery itself had caused to all Americans. All of these revisions of the histories of the Civil War, slavery and Reconstruction were inescapably wrapped up in trauma, race and racial grievances.

Since the beginning of these rewritings, there were dissenters. In fact, some of the testimonials that we have about the nature and experience of slavery were given by ex-slaves and abolitionists who came forward distinctly for the purpose of disputing these rewritings. According to Berlin, "Frederick Douglass and other members of the old abolitionist generation railed against the rehabilitation of slavery's reputation, testifying from personal experience to its ugly power"(xvi).

Of special interest to me is the way in which historians rejected these testimonies of ex-slaves about their experiences of slavery. This was not the beginning of the denial of the trauma of slavery, for as Saidiya Hartman has chronicled, forced dancing and singing from the slave ships to the coffle to the auction block did precisely the work of denying the trauma of slavery. She sees these "amusements, as part of a larger effort to dissimulate the extreme violence of the institution [of slavery] and disavow the pain of captivity"(23). Although the rejection of ex-slave testimonials by historians wasn't the first example of the denial of the trauma of slavery, they marked the beginning of the post-slavery struggle over American history and its relationship to slavery. So began the unspoken tug of war over how or whether to recognize the trauma of slavery and whether that recognition should entail any form of reparations. In fact, the denial of this trauma is inseparable from the fear of its redress and the fear that acknowledgement would suggest direct and personal responsibility as well as monetary const. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> How else to explain the twenty senators who refused to sign the 2005 Resolution 39, in which the senate apologized for its role in the history of lynching? It was nothing like the financial redress that often accompanies such acknowledgements, for example the \$20,000 for over eighty thousand Japanese Americans who had been interned in WWII and their descendants, which totaled over a billion and a half dollars in payments from 1992-1999. About 200 hundred descendants and family members of lynching victims received an apology and a lunch. Looming in the background of these arguments over reparations is the implicit acknowledgement that 250 years of unpaid labor of over four million enslaved African Americans is an astronomical national debt. Anything more than a free lunch to lynching victims could be construed as an acknowledgement of this debt. Apparently, even the apology was too much of an admission for the senators from Mississippi. Interestingly, many of the 200 in attendance were relieved by the apology and those that

While minstrelsy fostered and facilitated the denial of the trauma of slavery, historians did the work of legitimizing this denial by rejecting the testimonies of slaves as academically unreliable historical evidence. Although in the 1920s Fisk University began gathering slave testimonials,

white historians either discounted the validity of these accounts or saw them as peripheral to what they believed to be slavery's larger meaning in American life—its role in the coming of the Civil War...According to historian Ulrich B. Phillips, whose view of slavery as a benign institution dominated the field, the 'asseverations of politicians, pamphleteers, and aged survivors' were hopelessly tainted, unfit to use even as a "supplement" to other, superior sources. (Berlin xvi-xvii)

The majority of historians claimed that the memories of elderly survivors were unreliable and did not provide proper historical evidence (xix). These scholars were historicists true to form as Benjamin would probably suggest. Interestingly, much of the slave testimony that is available today was gathered during the 1930s, when historians were in agreement that slavery had been a benign institution. They were called "narratives," not testimonies, and they often, though not always, became what the interviewers wanted them to be through editing. It wasn't until the civil rights movement that the testimonies of slaves became widely available and validated as historical, for all their possible inaccuracies. "Concerned with slavery less as a cause of the Civil War than as the primary experience of millions of Americans, historians poured over the narratives as a means of gaining access to the slaves' voices"(xix).

After the civil rights movement, it is unlikely that slavery, lynching, or Jim Crow (laws) would ever be rewritten as benign or morally just. During and just after the civil rights movement, critics had begun to deconstruct blackface minstrelsy recognizing that it did not depict authentic blackness. Rather, the language of ideology, racism and stereotyping was employed for research on minstrelsy, race, and all manner of diverse and complex cultural and gender studies.<sup>5</sup> However, since the mid-1990s, the memory of minstrelsy has become involved in its own civil memory war. As a departure from the prevailing sentiments on minstrelsy, critics such as Eric Lott, W. T. Lhamon, and Peter Stanfield have begun a campaign to restore the reputation of minstrelsy.<sup>6</sup> The arguments are varied and complex, and the pundits do

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wanted more than this apology, demanded an apology for slavery as well. Avis Thomas-Lester, "A Senate Apology for History on Lynching" *Washington Post*, 14 Jun. 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Johnson, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, David Roediger, Michael Rogin, bell hooks and Toni Morrison are among the many critics who participate in this discussion from the early 80s to the mid-1990s.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); W. T. Lhamon Jr. *Raising Cain Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*.

not all agree on particular matters, but they are part of a general and subtle effort to uproot American popular cultural studies from its anchorage in racialized discourses.

I want to focus on Eric Lott as the most influential of these figures. Widely celebrated is his learned study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Having grown weary of what he sees as the reprimand/apology format of cultural studies, Lott wants to explore the intricacies of racial feeling involved in minstrelsy and consider the possibility of contradictions, inconsistencies and even counter-impulses that can be found in the minstrel tradition. He sees this potential especially in minstrelsy before the Civil War. He attributes these liberating possibilities to the volatile state of the working class of that time. However, in an effort to turn the focus away from race and racial domination toward issues of the popular and working classes, he nevertheless restricts his focus on race and racial domination to the terms of class.

His text begins with three epigraphs. The first concerns the frenzy created by the Jim Crow dance from the *New York Tribune* in 1855. He then quotes two black men: Ralph Ellison's remark that essentially, minstrelsy is not authentic and comparing the white minstrel in blackface to "primitive tribesmen" preparing for battle, and C. L. R. James's argument that "the race question is subsidiary to the class question"(3). The epigraphs set a scene in which the Jim Crow dance sounds like the first Charleston; one black man sees "Africanness" in the white impulse toward blackface, and another black man justifies the shift from race to class. Then, Lott goes on to set aside the race issue in minstrelsy in favor of a discussion of class which then amounts to how "white working people lived their whiteness"(4). By diverting the focus away from race to class through a rhetorical turn, Lott undermines racial discourse that focuses on blacks with regard to blackface, in order to proffer racial discourse that focuses on whites with regard to blackface.

Somehow, even though C. L. R James was most likely referring to the socio-economic *class* status of blacks as being more important than their "racial" status, the concept of class does not apply to blacks for Lott; it refers to whites. This is because to move away from race necessarily meant to move away from blacks, and the pain or trauma of minstrelsy that the reprimand/apology format of discourse was seeking to redress. Recall that the major changes in racialized historiography were all reactions to traumatic historical events: slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and most likely also the Great Depression, all caused the need to write "healing histories." After these events, minstrelsy became its own form of distorted musical historiography. During the civil rights movements, efforts to heal those traumatic distortions took the form of the reprimand/apology discourse of which Lott's generation of scholarship seems to have grown weary. He writes that "critics of minstrelsy have too often

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Peter Stanfield, *Body and Soul: Jazz and Blues in American Film, 1927-63*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

dismissed working-class racial feeling as uncomplicated and monolithic,” citing Roediger (Lott’s chosen apologist) as his emblematic case (4). It is perhaps because Lott has announced a need to focus on class rather than race that he has substituted “white” for “working class.”

What Lott seems to have missed is the possibility that “racial feeling” might also fall under a definition of racism, so that the complexity he attributes to minstrelsy may actually be a reflection of the complexity of racism.<sup>7</sup> If it is the recognition of the racism in minstrelsy that seems oversimplified, this suggests that racism itself is uncomplicated. Although this idea of racism is both problematic and simplistic, it underlies much of the scholarship that seeks to recover the complexities of minstrelsy through a turn away from its sedimentation within discourses of racism. Indeed, Lott’s argument that “in blackface minstrelsy’s audiences there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show’s working-class partisans” was true of lynching partisans as well.<sup>8</sup> Lott argues that

it was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure. As it turned out, the

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<sup>7</sup> If we agree (which no one ever does) on the definition of racism as “the belief that there are characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to each race,” then all racial feeling would have to qualify as racism. *Concise Oxford Dictionary* 10<sup>th</sup> ed., 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of the contradictory racial impulses of lynch mobs would be the over-sexualization of black male victims and the obsession with their genitalia. The numerous severe beatings that took the place of hangings would also have to suggest a range of racial sentiments. In addition, according to Jennifer Harvey, in the 1920s, “twice as many lynchings were prevented as were carried out.” Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 104. Although many of these resulted in legal death sentences for individuals who would have otherwise been lynched, black and white Americans worked together in these instances to effect some concrete, albeit unsatisfactory change. Lynching was the cause of these collaborations. Harvey also maintains that

[a]t the same time, while prevented lynchings might protect a potential victim from a less tortured death, a prevented lynching in the 1920s was usually deadly nonetheless. The pressures applied by a thwarted lynch mob, and the refusal of the federal government to protect due process at the state level, typically resulted in a hasty trial and all but guaranteed that the victim would be executed. (Such trials were referred to as ‘legal lynchings.’) In short, the numbers of Black Americans lynched in the United States, by any measure, are astronomical and stomach-turning. (104-105)

Finally, there is the extraordinary example of James Cameron, the only known survivor of a lynching attempt. An audience member asked that Cameron be cut down from the tree where his friends were being lynched. Cameron hadn’t been present for the robbing and shooting of the victim, according to the individual who asked that he be cut down; he was thus allowed to live. Cameron was in attendance at the 2005 80% Senate’s apology lunch and had said that he wanted an apology for slavery. He died the next year. Avis Thomas-Lester, “A Senate Apology for History on Lynching,” *Washington Post*, 14 Jun. 2005.



minstrel show worked for over a hundred years to facilitate safely an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures, a shape-shifting middle term in racial conflict which began to disappear (in the 1920s) once its historical function had been performed. (6)

Saidiya Hartman responds rather indirectly to Lott, arguing that such ambivalence of feeling can describe much more than blackface minstrelsy. She writes that

[m]elodrama presented blackness as a vehicle of protest and dissent, and minstrelsy made it the embodiment of unmentionable and transgressive pleasures. In both instances, the fashioning of blackness aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and terror and pleasure. [T]his ambivalent complex of feelings describes not only the emotional appeals of the popular stage but also the spectacle of the auction block. (27)

The complicated and contradictory impulses behind and range of reactions to blackface minstrelsy suggest “an instability of contradiction in the form itself” no more than do the same contradictions in slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynching or any other contemporaneous racialized cultural forms. If it does, then chattel slavery must itself be considered America’s ultimate act of love and theft (15). The same fascination and cross-racial desires account for the ubiquitous rape of black women during chattel slavery as signs of absolute white power. What could be safe about any cultural “exchanges” under the rule and domination of slavery? Where is the possibility for a “middle term” when one “culture” is enslaved? Hartman argues that “the pageantry of the coffle, stepping it up lively on the auction block, going before the master, and the blackface mask of minstrelsy and melodrama all evidenced the entanglements of terror and enjoyment”(23). While she does not designate it as such, Hartman’s study of minstrelsy, relating as it does to the many “scenes of subjection” during chattel slavery, seems directly to oppose Lott’s restoration of minstrelsy’s reputation through its audience. With or without irony (in a text about slavery), Hartman maintains that although Lott’s study is “masterful,” she “take[s] issue with his claims about cross-racial solidarity and the subversive effects of minstrelsy,” which seem to be the crux of his argument (212 n. 53). She writes that

[w]hile the dynamics of ‘romance and repulsion,’ to borrow Eric Lott’s terms, enabled acts of transgression licensed by the blackface mask, blackness was also policed through derision, ridicule, and violence; thus, in the end, the white flights of imagination and transgressive exploits facilitated by donning blackface ultimately restored the racial terms of social order”(29).

Therefore, in essence, minstrelsy is not the love and theft of Lott's text but rather an extension of the mastery and servitude of slavery. Hartman argues that "when one is considering the crimes of slavery, the popular theater is as central as the courthouse"(27).

Lott reveals a need for the considerations that a Benjaminian trauma studies should afford. He literally calls for "a much more sensitively historicist look at the uneven class, gender, and racial politics of form such as the minstrel show"(8). A much more historical materialist look at the same would focus on the history of the oppressed: the traumatic repercussions of minstrelsy. By contextualizing and recognizing the importance of the *trauma* of slavery perpetuated in these cultural forms, rather than the embarrassment or even shame of racism that is the impetus behind much of the "politics" of these revisionist studies on minstrelsy, the similarities between the contradictory spectacle of blackface minstrelsy and that of the auction block would have already been clear. The dancing, the nakedness, the "inspections," even the beatings on the auction block were all part of the contradictory "racial feelings" of the potential buyers. Because there is no way to reconcile these contradictions as liberating properties of the auction block, the carnivalesque context of the auction block will remain unnoticed as one of America's first popular cultural "art forms."<sup>9</sup> Recognizing minstrelsy's origins within slavery and discussing the conditions and experiences of slavery do not amount to the same thing. The one does not have to acknowledge trauma, while the other must.

Having executed the turn from black racial blackface discourse to white racial blackface discourse vis-à-vis class discourse, Lott proceeds in his first chapter to turn minstrelsy away from its negative portrayals. He positions himself as deviating from the "current consensus on blackface minstrelsy" which, he argues, can be "summed up by Frederick Douglass's righteous response in the *North Star*"(15). Douglass maintains that those in blackface were "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens"(15).<sup>10</sup> In historicist fashion, Lott sees Douglass's testimony to the pain of minstrelsy as part of the discourse in need of more historicity. He fails to recognize the truthfulness of a position that never needed to be *true*. He even dismisses the prevalence of "blackface-on-black violence"(where whites wore blackface to commit crimes for which blacks would later be lynched), to which David Roediger calls attention, by arguing that "such a notion generally underrates the complexity of both antebellum racial politics and minstrelsy itself"(29). How does this phenomenon of blackface-on-black violence become a notion adversative to the complexity of racial politics?

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<sup>9</sup> As will the thousands of lynching shows that were America's sensational street theater for over a hundred years.

<sup>10</sup> Lott gives the date of this *North Star* publication: October 27, 1848.

Although Lott's purposes are no doubt antithetical to the Reconstructionist historians who have rejected slave testimonies for nearly a hundred years after the official end of chattel slavery, his language inevitably mirrors theirs. He writes of the aforementioned reprimand/apology discourse and the original discourse on the authenticity of minstrelsy, arguing that minstrelsy had neither to be considered authentic *or* racist. He argues:

Ultimately, however, this stubborn dualism is an impoverished, not to say obsolete, way of thinking about one of America's first culture industries. Our simplistic (and almost completely ahistorical) understanding of minstrel shows comes partly as a result of swinging between one position and the other—or at least of the notion that these are our only choices. (17)

Thus, Lott fuses the “antiracist” historians together with their opposition and declares both groups to be historically incompetent. Lott's adjectives: “impoverished”, “simplistic” and “ahistorical” are strikingly similar to those used to discredit the testimonies of ex-slaves like Douglass as not being actual history. What he seems to be misinterpreting is the instability and contradictions of racism itself (not just its many manifestations) which depend upon both an overdetermined and constructed referent of race. The manufacture of both whiteness and blackness could never fully hide the fact of their having been manufactured. That manufacture does not undermine the power of racism or its cultural forms. Even if the minstrel shows revealed instabilities and contradictions, these were reflections of racism, and not specific to minstrelsy, as racial violence and minstrelsy corresponded more than they ever diverged. Ultimately, using “class” discourse to decontextualize minstrelsy from its legal counterparts (slavery and then Jim Crow laws) and its extralegal counterpart (lynching) is as political as contextualizing it with racialized discourse. Absolutely none of this is to suggest that research into the complexities of minstrelsy shouldn't be undertaken. To do this would be a bigger mistake than celebrating it. Those contradictory impulses, ranges of responses and stark inconsistencies are phenomena of racism that have not changed and continue to be important. Understanding how they play out in minstrelsy could be a key to understanding how they play out in the now time (*Jetztzeit*) and the ever present past.

Following Lott, W. T. Lhamon Jr.'s *Raising Cain Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, has a similar focus on blackface minstrelsy that seeks to turn it away from racialized discourse. His stated argument differs from Lott, in that he wants to prove that the white working classes in certain places did have extensive contact with blacks which should, apparently debunk the arguments of the 1960s that denied the authenticity of blackface performance, citing this lack of contact as proof. In a sense, Lhamon wants to overturn the view of minstrelsy as inauthentic that critics since the civil rights movement have taken for granted. Although he differs from Lott, he

recognizes in *Love and Theft*, “a *newly* sophisticated understanding of minstrelsy”(230 n. 7 my emphasis). Lhamon’s understanding of minstrelsy is even less contextualized than Lott’s and his attempts to wrestle little jim crow (dance) from big Jim Crow (law) are markedly formalistic which, for criticism on race, culture, and history, is strikingly singular. As he charts the historical discourse on blackface minstrelsy, it too is read out of context. He writes, “The first chroniclers of blackface performance accepted its declared premises. These first historians said blackface was about happy Negroes”(5). Lhamon does not wonder why historians, especially during and after the Civil War would accept “happy Negroes” as reality. He does not understand it as pro-slavery propaganda before—and national effort to unite the North and South after—the Civil War. He does not recognize how historians were pivotal to these efforts. When he writes of the changes to blackface historiography in 1962 and 1974, where Hans Nathan and Robert Toll sought to challenge popular beliefs in the validity of these stereotypes, he makes no mention of the civil rights movement or the reason for the significant shift so many decades after the first historians.<sup>11</sup> He argues that “the newly conventional embarrassment at white racism popularized in the fifties and sixties had so determined public responses that simply underlining the stereotypes in minstrelsy served as a satisfactory analytic maneuver for this new wave of scholarship”(6). The suggestion that the shifts in the American consciousness of racism during the civil rights movement was a result of white *embarrassment* about racism, rather than acknowledgment of it, ignores: the *trauma* of racism for people of color; the sincere *regret* for racism of white civil rights advocates; and the violent struggle against racism of the entire diverse movement. Seeing only embarrassment where extremely complex emotions and sentiments were at work led literally to an annoyance with said embarrassment which seemed to Lhamon to be outmoded and unnecessary in his present moment. It is no wonder that Lhamon cites Wittgenstein’s “Duck Rabbit” drawing, where in the same drawing one can see either or both a duck and a rabbit, because “the doodle allows us to separate common issues from the emotional and political commitments that have overwhelmed Jim Crow”(136-7).

Although he is seemingly unaware of them, Lhamon does reveal his political and emotional commitments. In a chapter entitled “Finding Jim Crow,” Lhamon writes, “I want to find this callow crow before it became law, while it remained fledgling and distinctly anti-sovereign”(151). He insists that Jim Crow minstrelsy and Jim Crow law are “birds of different feathers”(150). He maintains that he is “of course not trying to scare up the crow that C. Vann Woodard studied”(151). He wants instead to wrestle the one away from the other, to see them as distinct and perhaps coincidentally paired. Although minstrelsy was a significant part of an

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<sup>11</sup> See Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962). And Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

overarching campaign of a nation attempting to heal its trauma by scapegoating and traumatizing a less powerful group within it, Lhamon seems to think that minstrelsy deserves a decontextualized reading and so he treats the two Jim Crows as if they have been misunderstood as false cognates. Why separate “Jim Crow” from emotional and political commitments when it is constituted by emotion and politics? What is the emotional and political commitment that would seek such a separation? What is at stake in the divorce of the Jim Crow minstrel from the Jim Crow law?

Like Lott, Lhamon wants to see minstrelsy as somehow having liberating aspects. However, instead of using the unpredictable responses to minstrelsy as evidence of the form’s instability, Lhamon sees liberation in the content of minstrelsy itself, especially early minstrelsy.<sup>12</sup> He argues that “many of the workers in minstrelsy, most often early but also late, took the racism that was the given of their days and raised it against its original wielders”(6). He maintains that “the way minstrelsy saps racism from within, has almost never been mentioned”(6). However, his examples of such “sapping” are more literary than musical. For the most part, they are outside the boundaries of what most consider blackface minstrelsy.<sup>13</sup> Lhamon asks, “How does the process of cultural work produce liberatory change even through racism, and in spite of it?”(141). The issue of actual liberatory change—as opposed to the desire for it—would have to be contextualized and evidenced by concrete measurements of education, poverty rates, lynching rates, the emergence of a black middle class or anything by which change could be assessed.

Lhamon makes the case that blackface minstrelsy has carried on in popular entertainment through and presumably beyond the 1990s. Black cultural forms are still celebrated, copied and transformed to this day. Supposing that the celebration, copying, and transformation of black cultural forms are all in some way blackface minstrelsy (which is a problematic supposition), minstrelsy’s redemption would have

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<sup>12</sup> Lhamon and Lott both see these liberation moments in the earliest minstrelsy probably because of its lack of sedimentation as an art form. They never think to attribute moments of identification and sympathy to be predicated on the reassuring fact of blacks being safely “in their place” as slaves. White sympathy for and identification with slaves was not unique to minstrelsy and it virtually disappeared after the trauma of the Civil War.

<sup>13</sup> His best examples of counter-aspects in blackface minstrelsy never consist of white men singing and dancing in blackface, which is the kind of blackface minstrelsy most often objected to in criticism. His best examples are the New York Catherine Market, Harriet B. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Wesley Brown’s *Darktown Strutters*. The market features slaves dancing and receiving actual payment, but they are not in blackface and their dancing predates it. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* is a problematic example because it is a novel written by a woman (not danced or sung by a white man in blackface). It is its original form that can be credited with its potentially liberating aspects. The fact that the novel featured minstrelsy, or that its later adaptations used blackface does not allow the form of minstrelsy to take credit for the politics of a novel. The uses of blackface within the text itself is not an example of minstrelsy using minstrelsy to subvert itself, but literature using minstrelsy to subvert racism—but ultimately failing to do so. That this is even possible is not a quality inherent in minstrelsy, especially considering the singularity of the text. That she ultimately fails to subvert racism with her text points to an important quality of racism, not to a moral or character failing of Stowe. *Darktown Strutters*, Lhamon’s last good example of counter-aspects of minstrelsy, is also not about a white man performing in blackface.

to be that while minstrelsy persisted, racist law and culture did not. This would mean that something of the form was essentially harmless if it outlasted institutionalized racism. It would have to be true that black men are no longer villainized, hypersexualized targets of racist law and white racial violence as they were in the prime of blackface minstrelsy. Unfortunately, this isn't nearly the case. While black cultural forms are celebrated, appropriated and commodified, black men continue to be the targets of racial violence and an oppressive legal system. After all, what form did this liberation take? If anything, looking at the remnants and transformations of minstrelsy in the present should be a means to recognize the remnants and transformations of Jim Crow in the present.

Aside from white embarrassment, Lhamon explores the possibilities as to why anyone would *want* to highlight the implicit racism of a text with such positive intentions as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Could it be the beginning of understanding how racism *continues* to be implicit in texts that are not actively racist, even in those that may believe themselves to be anti-racist? Perhaps understanding this sort of passive racism could explain how racial oppression, especially in its insidious psychological and brutally violent forms, managed to outlast slavery, traditional minstrelsy, traditional lynching and Jim Crow. When Lhamon suggests that "one does not approve the abhorrent racism in most minstrelsy by emphasizing its presence, then moving on to discuss the form's other—even its counter-aspects," he fails to see how instead, his approach minimizes the abhorrent racism by effectively ignoring its presence though purporting to emphasize it (6). Lhamon acknowledges not only that "commentator's shifting analyses say as much or more about the needs of successive eras as about minstrelsy," but that he, too, is "doubtless misusing, therefore abusing, the legacy of blackface minstrelsy"(7). He therefore suggests that both those historians who remembered blackface minstrelsy in order to validate Jim Crow laws and reinforce the construction of racially segregated society and the historians who sought to deconstruct those laws and that segregation were abusing the legacy of blackface minstrelsy. This effectively gives blackface minstrelsy an intrinsic value outside its uses, a value which he only states implicitly by conflating all black American musical and dance forms with blackface minstrelsy. It is unclear how he justifies this conflation as it seems to be taken for granted. His acknowledgement of his own potential abuses of the legacy of blackface minstrelsy is unaccompanied by a statement of exactly what his abuses are or in what context they take place. He argues that while drawing attention to the racist elements in minstrelsy "has its importance, it is also diversionary"(141). This suggests that blackface minstrelsy discourse has a proper path, but that racism is not its destination. He writes: "I don't want the question of racism to be an end in itself"(141). What is that statement if not a political commitment that is also, most likely, emotionally invested?

Lhamon never gives a reason for this desire to finally get past racism, but it, like all other discourse on blackface minstrelsy, has a context. Part of the failure of

Reconstruction (1865-1877) was white fear and outrage over the government making concessions for freed slaves. Building schools and programs that would help them adjust to the transition to “freedom” cost money, and since slavery had been such a “benevolent” and “civilizing” institution for blacks and no real harm had been done, what was the need for expensive reparations?<sup>14</sup> There was no need, especially when whites were suffering after this catastrophic war that wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for these same ungrateful slaves. This is, at least, how it was viewed by the historians whose historiography helped to end all attempts at habilitation. They feared that anything the government gave to ex-slaves or their descendants was essentially taken out of the pockets of whites.

Lott, Lhamon and those that follow in their retrospective divergence from “the race question” come out of a different historical context with similar effects. During the civil rights movement, a different form of reconstruction was attempted. Desegregation began and The Civil Rights Act of 1964 rendered overt forms of discrimination against minorities illegal. The most complex and controversial attempt to reverse less overt forms of discrimination was affirmative action. Linda Williams suggests that the end of affirmative action began in 1978 with Allan Bakke’s historic case against U. C. Davis, and culminated with the 1995 O. J. Simpson criminal trial.<sup>15</sup> Bakke had sued the medical school because minority students with lower grade point averages had been admitted and he had not. As Williams writes, “Significantly, Bakke did not challenge any of the white students with lower grade point averages who were also admitted over him. Nor did he challenge the enrollment of students admitted because their parents had either attended or given money to the school”(290). Class and legacy privileges were, in actuality, invisible. What *was* visible was the minority presence of students who, Bakke had assumed, had taken spots to which he was entitled. This entitlement/fear of black “privileges” was documented in what Lott calls “the egregious post-affirmative action *Soul Man* (1986)”(5). In this film, a privileged white teen whose father has refused to pay for Harvard claims to be black and wears blackface in order to get a scholarship. Although the film suggests that blackness comes with more than just privileges (he experiences discrimination as a result of being black), it reifies the idea that blackness does, in fact, come with privileges, the reverse of which is discrimination against whites. Such entitlement and the societal/legal recourse to assure said entitlement was part the backlash of the O. J. Simpson trial, where Simpson was accused of murdering his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman. Simpson had realized the fears that Griffith’s *Birth of the Nation* (1915) had ignited: a free and newly rich black man had taken a white wife and murdered her. Not only that, but his acquittal signaled the ultimate “advantage” that blacks had won after the civil rights movement. Just as in the Bakke case, the

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<sup>14</sup> See Ira Berlin, *Remembering Slavery*.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

issue of class or financial privilege was nearly invisible; Simpson could not have won his case with a public defender. What *was* visible was race: a black defendant, a black lawyer, eight black women jury members, a white victim, a white prosecutor. The Jewish male victim, Ronald Goldman was even less visible than the class issue. All aspects of the case, including the verdict, became extremely racialized and *then* gendered. Williams argues that

the Simpson trial now seems permanently linked in the public imagination with a bitter legacy of white *ressentiment* against the perceived ‘advantages’ won by blacks or by any racial or ethnic category of peoples. Thus I would argue that it coincided significantly with an ethos sanctioning the dismantling of affirmative action across the nation. (290)

Although terms and ideas like “reverse discrimination” fueled this ethos, its ramifications spread well beyond the fear of “perceived advantages.” The general *ressentiment* spread quickly and resulted in the renewal of traditional racial hierarchies albeit without the benefit of legal discrimination. Williams argues that the spectacle of the demolition of Simpson’s property after the civil trial “seemed to symbolize the end of white good will toward assimilation. Behind it stood the end of affirmative action in the state of California, and soon throughout the nation”(289). If the implementation of affirmative action was in part a recognition that discrimination and oppression would most likely persist beyond their lost legality, the reversal of affirmative action would necessarily deny that recognition. What ensued was the new post-racist ideology that assumes that racism only exists as slavery, lynching (by vigilantes, not police), Jim Crow laws, and other obvious racist cultural forms like blackface minstrelsy that are all officially “over.” What Williams fails to mention is that fear of black privilege and anger over the Simpson verdict was responded to not only by the dismantling of affirmative action but also with the racialization of welfare and the rhetoric of welfare reform. Williams writes, “Thus Simpson became, as Kimberlé Crenshaw puts it, ‘a new symbol in a reconfigured vision of racism.’ In this reconfigured vision there is a denial of overt racial prejudice”(291). It is this denial that flourished so that even those in favor of affirmative action would unwittingly participate in it.

A denial of overt racial prejudice necessarily facilitated that of covert racial prejudice and it fueled an ethos of discontent and exhaustion with racialized discourse. In a nation where racial prejudice is, supposedly, a thing of the past, such discourse becomes “obsolete” and “diversionary” from more pressing issues. Those who “dwell” on issues of racism become players of the “race card,” looking for handouts, special treatment or excuses. This “reconfigured vision of racism” so conflates all racism to its most extreme elements (the KKK and the Nazis), that to draw attention to any racism is to accuse the offender of possessing the same “racial



feeling” of the most hated and despicable agents of white supremacy. So began the silencing of dissenters against anything but the most brutal or obvious forms of racism. Even *those*, like blackface minstrelsy, began to be contested. Because few Americans today possess such extreme racial ideology, America must no longer be a racist society and obvious forms of racism, like police brutality and the mass incarceration of black men for nonviolent crimes, must have other explanations.

Out of this “uncomplicated and monolithic” view of racism that identifies it only with its most extreme manifestations comes Lott’s study of blackface minstrelsy, which highlights the shift from the ethos of civil rights to that of the unmitigated exhaustion with the discourse on racism. Lott’s text is written in the early 1990s and published in 1993, making it “unexpectedly timely” according to the *New York Times* in an article entitled: “Books of The Times; The Minstrel Tradition: Not Just a Racist Relic.”<sup>16</sup> Thus began the historical retrospection that looks back to cultural forms of racism that may have *seemed* obvious in their racism, and considers the idea that they were not as racist as we were all were led to believe.

Lott was also responding to one of the assumptions of American post-racism, which is that all traces of racism need to be destroyed or buried, and because of this, his project was in a sense a rescue mission. This assumption, however, was based on the false idea that all traces of racism *could* in fact be destroyed or buried. That blackface minstrelsy was removed from popular entertainment made sense in that these images were destructive and painful rather than entertaining; that it be removed from cultural history and historiography was never the point. These texts were rich in cultural clues to American identity formations, and it could be that their removal from history was partially responsible for the current post-racism.

Lott’s text was important because it was unafraid to touch forbidden subjects and to explore them in depth. The problem was most likely the fear that exploring these topics could cause the text to be associated with the racism of its subject. Most texts in danger of that association avoided it by participating in the reprimand/apology format which acknowledges the trauma of minstrelsy without repeating it. However, for Lott, both racist and antiracist accounts of minstrelsy were part of a “stubborn dualism” that was no longer acceptable to a generation with nothing for which to apologize. To prevent the possible association with the racism of minstrelsy, Lott’s text minimizes the racism of blackface in favor of a more liberating view of it; the text could then be associated with the liberation of blackface minstrelsy rather than the racism of it. Unfortunately, writing out the racism of blackface doesn’t differ significantly from emphasizing it. What it does do is contribute to the denial of racial prejudice that is “post-racism.”

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<sup>16</sup> Margo Jefferson, “Books of The Times; The Minstrel Tradition: Not Just a Racist Relic,” *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1993.

Lhamon follows Lott's highly praised example and takes the erasure of racism one step further by placing the liberating aspects of minstrelsy not in its diverse and contradictory audience but, in the form itself. He does this by returning to the original view of minstrelsy as authentic (at least in part). He seeks to prove authenticity by proving extensive contact between whites and blacks, and places liberation within that contact by suggesting that it was a "mingling of disdained equals"(3). Both Lhamon and Lott have to go back to pre-Civil War minstrelsy to find "liberation" which is the most ironic attribute of these texts. That the most liberating time period of minstrelsy was during slavery seems perfectly acceptable to these writers. Both texts failed to consider how any sympathy that whites had for blacks during slavery had to be measured against the fact that they had absolute control and dominion over them. That this sympathy and identification virtually disappeared after the Civil War calls the previous sympathy into doubt. Both Lott and Lhamon could have circumvented this problem by acknowledging both the trauma *and* the importance of blackface minstrelsy without trying to minimize the trauma or creating cultural liberation within the brutal domination of slavery. It is the idea that acknowledgement might suggest *responsibility* that makes this "apologetic" course of action so intolerable, for to acknowledge trauma seems synonymous with apologizing for it.

After Lott and Lhamon, others followed in their footsteps and referred back to them to justify a general denial of the trauma of minstrelsy in order to point to its liberation and counter-possibilities. Mikko Tuhkanen (2001) followed Lhamon in many respects. Although he acknowledges the emotions involved in the debates on minstrelsy and recognizes the trauma of slavery communicated by it, for him minstrelsy itself does not constitute another form of the trauma of slavery. He tries not to "adjudicate the historical veracity of the different interpretations;" he wants instead to "delineate blackface minstrelsy's lore cycle as a potential articulation of *strategies of resistance* that are never clearly distinguished from *forms of collaboration*."<sup>17</sup> The ideological effect of emphasizing resistance in minstrelsy over the trauma is the same as that of his predecessors. He agrees with Lhamon on a pivotal point, that "the politically necessary work of pointing out the racism in blackface performance may prevent us from understanding the unpredictable ways in which 'cultural work [can] produce liberatory change even through racism, and in spite of it'(14). Importantly, Tuhkanen uses the term "politically necessary" in place of the more obvious term "politically correct" to avoid the possible implications of his rejection of the latter term.

Peter Stanfield continues in the vein of post-racist blackface discourse. He, as did Lott and Lhamon, participates in a new tradition of reprimand without apology.

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<sup>17</sup> Mikko Tuhkanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jacques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy." *Diacritics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), pp. 9-34. 14. His emphasis.

The new objects of reprimand are now the early 90s “apologist” critics like Michael Rogin and David Roediger.<sup>18</sup> They are being reprimanded essentially, for their “ahistorical apologies.” Stanfield writes,

The meaning produced in the performance of blackface in Hollywood movies is the particular focus of Michael Rogin’s *Blackface, White Noise* (1996), but the emphasis on the form’s latent connotations leaves little space for an assessment of blackface’s performance legacy in Hollywood, a subject demanding a more historically grounded reading of its accents and disguises. (10)

With terms like “latent connotations,” Stanfield does the work of writing an entire book on jazz and blues in American film without discussing racism. In fact, Stanfield uses the term only six times, two of which are to quote, and argue against, Angela Davis. Not that obvious racism doesn’t factor into Stanfield’s study; he uses terms like “nigger” and “coon” a total of 39 times, while the term “racist” is used four times, one of which occurs in his critical treatment of Angela Davis (31, 92). The term “lynching,” which is endemic to his chosen time period of “1927-63” is never mentioned, neither is “Jim Crow,” in the sense of the laws that are in effect during this time. The effect of this is to canonize these films, while denying their racism and the racism of their historical contexts. Stanfield and Lhamon leave the work of the recognition of racism and its resulting trauma to the preceding “apologists,” even as they deny their historicity. As a result, these texts at times cross the line between passive post-racism to the old-fashioned kind. Lhamon does this with his own “blackface” performance, where he speaks for minstrel performers in defense of their song, “The New York Nigger”(1840; 1863). He writes, “It looks to me that the singer and his public are *identifying* with ‘De New York Nigger’ at least as much as they are distinguishing themselves from him. The New York Nigger is us, Sir or Missy—says this song—may we Jims neber want a friend nor a hoe-cake to bake”(49). To Lhamon, not only has identification overturned the racism of this song, but the song’s

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<sup>18</sup> “Lott and Rogin offer crucial insights into how the systematic objectification of Blackness in the most popular form of American mass culture of the last two centuries enabled the vast ideological task of homogenizing diverse white ethnic clienteles. But their accounts unwittingly replicate the marginalization of Blackness that characterizes minstrelsy and the dominant cinema by obscuring the roles African Americans have played as the subjects of their own history with mass culture, as individuals and communities who consistently challenged these racist and exclusionary representations.” Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating To The Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6. Stanfield’s text repeats this marginalization by failing to discuss, in any depth, all but one film with a black cast, *St. Louis Blues* (1929). The many films starring jazz musicians like Duke Ellington, *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1929); *Check and Double Check* (1933); Lena Horne, *The Duke is Tops* (1938); Fats Waller, *Ain’t Misbehavin’* (1941); Cab Calloway, *Hi-De-Ho* (1943); Nat King Cole, *Killer Diller* (1948); Mamie Smith, *Paradise in Harlem* (1939); Louis Jordan, *Reet, Petite and Gone* (1947); Dorothy Dandridge, *Carmen Jones* (1954), *Porgy and Bess* (1959); or Ethel Waters, *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and many others are omitted from this text on jazz and blues in films from 1927-1963.

lack of racism justifies the repetition of its racism; it also eliminates the need for quotation marks around the word “nigger.” White identification with blacks has never, by itself, canceled racism. Only a view of racism as unambiguous hatred would support this notion. As Saidiya Hartman suggests,

the ambivalent character of empathy—more exactly, the repressive effects of empathy—as Jonathan Boyarin notes, can be located in the “obliteration of otherness’ or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we ‘feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves.’ (20)<sup>19</sup>

Hartman’s desire to emphasize “the violence of identification” is not meant to dismiss completely identification and its liberating possibilities, but to recognize the ways in which, through empathy, the other is supplanted by the self. In other words, as whites take the place of blacks through identification, it is the white suffering that arouses sympathy and horror; black suffering therefore is not sufficiently horrific in and of itself. Interestingly, in a revealing gesture, Lhamon rejects Lott’s interpretation of guilt in this same song (“The New York Nigger”) arguing that “early minstrelsy shows no guilt about black oppression,” and he justifies this lack of guilt by the fact that “blackface performers owned no slaves, minted no guineas, often could not vote, could make no Fugitive Slave Laws, set no demeaning wages”(236 n. 51).

In this move, Lhamon retrospectively rejects the supposed “guilt” of minstrel performers with the same justifications that rejected the “guilt” for past racism in the 1990s. White Americans of the 90s owned no slaves, performed no vigilante lynchings, supported no Jim Crow laws and for the most part, felt no conscious overt hatred for black Americans. Thus, they had nothing to feel guilty about. Lhamon’s post-racist projection of guiltlessness is as telling as Lott’s post-racist projection of guilt. Both are projections and both are political. Lhamon’s identification with the white working class minstrels evidenced in his becoming one through imitation is equally revealing. He is unaware of how participating in the subjugation of black Americans through minstrelsy was, in fact, “black oppression” because he has written the racism out of blackface. Not only does he not recognize minstrelsy’s racism as representative of the same racism as the auction block, but he is also unaware of how denying the racism in minstrelsy is representative of the same post-racism that, with nothing to feel guilty about, abolished affirmative action on the basis of reverse discrimination. It isn’t the fact of political investments in minstrelsy that is at stake here; it is the lack of awareness or acknowledgement of political investments that is problematic.

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<sup>19</sup> See Jonathan Boyarin. *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)

Stanfield's use of racist cultural art forms and vernacular without the use of the dreaded "R" word (racism), threatens to align his text with the racism of its subject. With little to no problematizing of the gesture, Stanfield entitles his first chapter, "An Octoroon in the Kindling: A Black and White Minstrel Show"(11). Although he accepts that the phrase is "no less derogatory" than its referent "nigger in the woodpile," and argues that he is "using the phrase to suggest the cultural miscegenation that informs much of the material discussed," he neither discusses the phrase any further, nor does he give reason why his use of it is different from its previous popular uses (42).

In a discussion of early black cinema, Jacqueline Stewart also employs the phrase for not only "its seeming typicality of Black representation in early films but also because it serves more broadly as a metaphor for the treatment of African Americans in the study of silent cinema"(4). Stewart's ironic turning of the phrase back upon itself aims to demonstrate that what is amiss is in fact racism and marginalization in film and film criticism, and she uses the racist phrase to emphasize this. Not only does Stanfield employ the term in a chapter that minimizes and turns *away* from all discussion of racism; he uses it to further racialize the cultural interactions between whites and blacks of his chosen time period. He suggests that "the focus on minstrelsy is not only a recognition of its historical role in the development of American theater but also of its role in dramatizing racial crossings—the cross-pollination and contamination of black and white cultures—that are central to any realization of an American vernacular"(10). The reified language of racial mixing with blood metaphors used by Stanfield and borrowed from Lhamon, Lott and Rogin to describe black and white interactions as miscegenated and contaminated, would be much less problematic if it factored in the previous uses of these metaphors in the service of domination and racial oppression. He quotes Lhamon: "while blackface carries its 'inevitable quotient of demeaning attributes' and its 'opposing urge to authenticity' in its 'radical portion' it highlights 'contamination, literal overlap, and identification with [the] muddier process' of self-generating identities"(11). Such facile uses of racially loaded terminology reify race in these "cross-pollinations;" they ignore the history of rape associated with early American "miscegenation;" they ignore the brutal legal system that punished only black Americans for these "crossings;" and they dismiss the history of lynching which justified itself based on the fear of this "contamination."

It is only through ignoring these contexts that blackface becomes radical. Furthering Lhamon's view of minstrelsy as subversive, Stanfield also quotes Dale Cockrell: "minstrelsy's play with fluid identities in the nineteenth century subverted 'knowing' gained through image—the eye is drawn to representation, which might not

be the real—just as a Western mask is not really as it appears: it conceals and promises reordering.”<sup>20</sup>

Stanfield’s arguments about of the liberating aspects of racial-crossings are never “contaminated” by uncomfortable juxtapositions with discussions on the Production or Hays Code of 1934 which censured even suggestions of miscegenation.<sup>21</sup> If minstrelsy ever disrupted racial identities in American film it would have to have been despite concerted efforts to the contrary even before the production code. The “one-drop-rule” carried over from slavery, where anyone of any black ancestry was considered black (even people who appeared white), conflicted with the new medium of film which had to rely on visible designations of racial difference. Although films like *Imitation of Life* (1934) managed ideologically to reinforce the “one-drop-rule,” it did so with visible racial markers, like proving the “blackness” of a woman who could pass for white by giving her a dark skinned black mother.<sup>22</sup> The significance is that any racial subversions enacted through blackface need to be contextualized within a culture that not only discouraged racial crossings, but rendered them felonies, criminal offences with possible penalties of death. If racial crossings and “musical miscegenation” via burnt cork were taking place on the stage and on film during Stanfield’s chosen period of 1927-1963, it was against a backdrop of racial terrorism, eugenics projects, and mass involuntary sterilizations of “unfit” peoples sanctioned by the Supreme Court.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, Lhamon’s “contamination” argument refers to Wesley Brown’s novel *Darktown Strutters* (1994) which not only follows a black (not white) blackface minstrel, but one whose travels are riddled with racial violence. Somehow, Lhamon finds a “radical portion” of white blackface minstrelsy vis-à-vis a 1990s fictional reworking of black blackface minstrelsy. Stanfield parlays Lhamon’s radical liberation into a defense and then reversal of the racism in *The Jazz Singer* (1927). How does a 1990s novel prove an otherwise formalist argument about nineteenth and early twentieth century blackface? In fact, although Lhamon makes no mention of it, the same novel that projects liberating agency onto black blackface minstrelsy makes a point of also connecting said minstrelsy with lynching. Brown writes:

A crowd had gathered in a square and was looking up at a show of some kind. Jim, Zulema, and Jubilee moved to the edge of the crowd, but all they could see

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<sup>20</sup> (Stanfield 11). See Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive study of miscegenation in Hollywood Film, see Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

<sup>22</sup> See Courtney (2005). In order to get around the Code, the film had to suggest that the father was also black so that the “whiteness” of the daughter could not be attributed to miscegenation.

<sup>23</sup> See Gregory Michael Dorr. “*Buck v. Bell* (1927).” *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Ed. Brendan Wolfe. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. 7 Apr. 2011 <[http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Buck\\_v\\_Bell\\_1927](http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Buck_v_Bell_1927)>.

was the upper body of a man going through the motions of the strangest dance Jim had ever seen. He flailed about like he was trying to keep from drowning. Jim had never seen a dancer who could make people believe he was sinking while standing on solid ground. Suddenly, all the life dropped out of the man's head, shoulders and arms. It was then that Jim realized that the man wasn't being held up by the platform below but from a rope above! (111-112)<sup>24</sup>

For all the complexity that Lott, Lhamon, Stanfield and others find lacking in histories that emphasize the racism of blackface, their accounts belie their own complexity with what they omit. Recognizing potential liberation *and* violent oppression in the same cultural form, as Brown does, is a complex understanding of blackface minstrelsy that imagines agency while acknowledging the trauma of its context. As Jennifer Harvey argues,

[t]oo often, cultural history fails to make racial violence implicit to analysis. Ann Douglas' mammoth work, *Terrible Honesty* (1995), for example, documents the intense cross-racial cultural exchange of the 1920s and argues for the centrality of African American cultural forms to what is understood as 'American' culture. Douglas manages to celebrate this cross-racial exchange in 606 pages without a word about the prevalence of white racial violence in the 1920s—lynching or in any other form.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, not considering the trauma that the images of blackface minstrelsy can cause for those caricatured reinforces trauma rather than erases it; it is the trauma that will remain attached to discourses of blackface minstrelsy, no matter how obsolete it is considered by historians.

## **Blackface and Lynching**

The association of blackface minstrelsy with radicalism and subversion is less revelatory than its obvious connection to chattel slavery, which anchors it to its traumatic history and renders it evidence of that trauma. If minstrelsy reflects the contradictory desires and repulsions evidenced by slavery before the Civil War, it continued to do so afterward. As it did so, it transformed with the times to reflect similar ranges of white responses to the failure of Reconstruction, the historical

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<sup>24</sup> Wesley Brown, *Darktown Strutters* (New York: Cane Hill Press, 1994), 111-112.

<sup>25</sup> (Harvey 102). See Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995)

reconfiguring of slavery as benign, lynching and Jim Crow, which all served to maintain racial hierarches in the new absence of legal slavery.<sup>26</sup>

Both lynching and blackface minstrelsy concern the ever complicated relationship between American blacks and American Jews. Lynching informed a black American experience to which Jews, American and European, were not immune.<sup>27</sup> In and around 1939, Jewish American Abel Meeropol chose to protest the deaths of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, murdered by lynching on August 7, 1930 and to admonish bitterly the practice of lynching in America—and its similarity to the growing European fascism marked by the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in 1933 and the state violence of *Kristallnacht* in October of 1939—with his poem “Strange Fruit.” Later, he set the poem to music using the conventions of jazz and allowed Billie Holiday to become the immortal face of his song. To imagine Al Jolson singing “Strange Fruit” (a song obvious in its subversive and radical content) in blackface is to note how blackface minstrelsy actually works not to “sap... racism from within,” but rather to sap all radical potential from within, with its racism (6). Blackface minstrelsy is “strange fruit.” The lyrics cannot cancel out the mockery and violence of the burnt cork.

Blackface and lynching served similar purposes, and produced similar effects. As Harvey suggests, lynching and blackface were prevalent during the same time period though blackface began before lynching (102). Although minstrelsy was more prevalent in the North as lynching was in the South, Harvey suggests that “the ease with which northern white minstrels commodified blackness and distorted Black culture grew directly from the exploitative power and economic relations established through southern slavery”(102). Blackface drew upon the ongoing trauma of lynching but also helped to conceal that ongoing practice and its reverberating traumatic effects. It did this through its portrayals of blacks as inferior and black men as hyper-sexualized threats to which lynching was the response.

Lott’s argument that the conflict of desire and revulsion experienced in minstrelsy audiences was a sign of minstrelsy’s subversive quality only holds by failing to consider that lynching was a product of that very same conflict. The heated debates and failed attempts at passing an anti-lynching bill suggest that not only the lynching audiences, but the U. S as a whole was divided on the lynching issue. What made it tolerable to white Americans who didn’t necessarily condone lynching was the dogma of black male hyper-sexuality and lasciviousness that was proffered through

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<sup>26</sup> Not forgetting, of course, the constitutional caveat that allows the enslavement of persons convicted of a crime.

<sup>27</sup> African Americans, Jews, Native Americans, Italians, Asian Americans, and Latinos were all victims of lynchings. Although the number of Jews lynched in America didn’t make them a special target of lynching, the lynchings that did occur were markedly racist (anti-Semitic) in nature, the most famous being the Leo Frank (1915) lynching. Several Jews who fought for civil rights from Reconstruction Era to the civil rights movement were targeted. See David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. (New York: Basic Books, 2005).



blackface minstrelsy. Phillip Dray quotes the *New York Herald* that “the difference between bad citizens who believe in lynch law, and good citizens who abhor lynch law, is largely in the fact that the good citizens live where their wives and daughters are perfectly safe.”<sup>28</sup> These fears of black male sexuality permeated both the minstrelsy and lynching audiences, and they fed off of one another. That unconscious desire was at the heart of much of this violence can be seen in the sexual nature of the murders and dismemberments, as well as the sexualizing of lynching accounts. Harvey writes:

Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has described the whole event of lynching—from the myths that might set a lynching in motion to its later recall—as ‘folk pornography.’ ‘Rape and rumors of rape became a kind of acceptable folk pornography in the Bible Belt,’ she writes. ‘They were lurid sexual tales that people told and retold. Hall adds further, ‘the imagery of lynching—in literature, poetry, music, in the minds of men—was inescapably erotic.’ . . .Hall is not the only one to write of lynching in this way. As Dray writes, ‘Turn-of-the-century news accounts . . . made for welcome, titillating reading. Stories of sexual assault, insatiable black rapists, tender white virgins, and manhunts led by ‘determined men’ that culminated in lynchings were the bodice rippers of their day.’ (107; 213 n. 53)

The same “panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure,” that Lott assigns as blackface minstrelsy’s subversion, attended lynching as well; it was also “a sign of absolute white power and control”(6). As they supported and fueled one another, lynching and blackface cannot be separated as entirely distinct cultural forms.<sup>29</sup>

Not only do the practices of minstrelsy and lynching share an ideology of black male embodiment and sexuality, but they also imply a similar physicality. Harvey refers to Lott’s description of minstrel performance, where “the body was always grotesquely contorted, even when sitting [and] stiffness and extension of arms and legs announced themselves as unsuccessful sublimations of sexual desire”(116). Using this description, Harvey argues that the spectacle of minstrelsy was visually similar to “the mythmaking indulgence of lynching. Minstrels’ tropes relied on highly sexualized and fetishized images of the Black body”(116). In her insightful text on blackface, Susan Gubar demonstrates further the frightening similarities between the two.<sup>30</sup> She

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<sup>28</sup> (Harvey 107)

<sup>29</sup> Harvey quotes via Dray a very important statement by Frederick Douglass: “[T]he sin against the Negro is both sectional and national, and until the North is heard in emphatic condemnation, it will remain equally involved with the South in this common crime”(213 n. 46). This places the mostly northern phenomenon of minstrelsy in a context of silent complicity. It is difficult to imagine liberation of minstrelsy contextually performed to a backdrop of lynching.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Gubar. *Racechange: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

argues that “blackface performances can be considered a symbolic rite of scapegoating, the flip side of lynching: burnt cork instead of charred flesh, the grin and the grimace of pain, bulging eye balls, and twitching limbs or stiffness of body parts. . . an uncanny enactment of a punitive supremacist ideology”(78). If the makeup signifies the metaphorical effacement of blacks, then the gesticulations certainly resemble the horrors of lynching, a performance that white Americans enjoyed by the thousands. As theatrical “shows,” both relied on the pleasures of racist visual consumption. As Gubar writes, “racial mimesis of the Hollywood variety engages white impersonators in a love-hate relationship, for the wish to represent the absent black body intersects with the desire not only to replace it but also to obliterate it with a surrogate that is debased as well as debasing”(75). She notes that even the legislation known as “Jim Crow” takes its name from a minstrelsy performance, where to “jump Jim Crow” was to perform as a black person. The bizarre moments in blackface where the performer looks frightened or in pain draw upon the performance of lynching. This suggests that “black-faced performers appear to suffer the torture they inflict on the black male body,” that “the grin of the minstrel mimes the tortured grimace of the body in pain”(75, 82). Gubar argues that

Characteristic expressions of astonishment, stupidity, fear, or delight on the actor wearing burnt cork mimic a look as easily understood to stand for strangulation and terror. Rolling or bulging white eyes may appear frenzied. . . Frenzied but jerky in motion, the black figure who looks like a wind-up toy or mechanical doll on stage grotesquely shudders his way through death throes or convulsions that recall bodies hung, burnt alive, or dismembered in lynching performances. (83-84)

That these practices were both so commonplace at the time of the *The Jazz Singer* makes it difficult to divorce them from one another.<sup>31</sup>

Although Lhamon recognizes “both community authority and a strong argument with that authority” playing out in blackface minstrelsy, he doesn’t see a similar struggle occurring contemporaneously with lynching. Harvey, following Phillip Dray argues “that a strong, violent antiauthoritarian sentiment and active vigilantism was a force in U. S. history since at least the Revolutionary War.”<sup>32</sup> The antiauthoritarian culture that Lott and Lhamon find in blackface minstrelsy is the same that fueled lynching for almost the same time span. Harvey quotes the 1930 director of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) Arthur F. Raper who writes that “the forces that occasionally burst into the aggressive lawlessness of mob

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<sup>31</sup> See also Linda G. Tucker “The Legacy of Type: Minstrelsy, Lynching, and White Lore Cycles,” in *Lockstep and Dance: Images of Black Men in Popular Culture*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> (Harvey 103). See Philip Dray. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

violence are always present, though perhaps unrecognized”(105). Therefore, as Harvey suggests,

Lynching was, in a sense, omnipresent: an environment in which such outbursts were possible and unpunished created ‘a poisoned atmosphere, one that permeated life far beyond those counties where a lynching had actually taken place, one that pervaded all the dealings each race had with the other.’<sup>33</sup>

These dealings most certainly include the minstrel stage. That poisoned atmosphere was especially traumatic for African Americans who were the intended “students” for the “lessons” that minstrelsy and lynching taught. Whereas lynching was most often the punishment for an alleged crime, it was also at times a warning to blacks who ventured to become successful in business and professions associated with whiteness. Successful business owners and community leaders were therefore also targets of lynching.<sup>34</sup> This delivered a message that not only white women but other “possessions” of white men were off limits to blacks. That included advanced education, business ownership, and bodily integrity.

Whereas Lott, Rogin, and Roediger acknowledge the creation of whiteness through blackface minstrelsy, only Harvey acknowledges the same effects created by the practice of lynching. Harvey argues that

Lynching violence created white selves and/or a white group as it helped to secure race as a line of demarcation between groups; an enforcer of social power and oppression. Social permission to lynch those with dark skin ensured access to a kind of dominance for those who possessed white skin. ... Indeed ... whiteness has historically been dangled before the eyes of the working class and stuffed with some benefits to prevent cross-racial class solidarity, and as a distraction from white working-class exploitation at the hands of upper-class whites. (108-109)

Not only were minstrelsy and lynching historically designated as white working class practices, they both created solidarity among whites across classes. Harvey quotes the CIC:

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<sup>33</sup> Harvey (105) See Stewart E. Tolnay, Glenn Deane, and E. M. Beck, “Vicarious Violence: Spatial Effects on Southern Lynchings, 1890–1919,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (November 1996): 790.

<sup>34</sup> As Harvey writes, “Self-sufficiency of African Americans in a local community did not appease a white supremacist nation. It often resulted in Blacks being made the prime targets of white hatred and violence. ... The sad irony of this truth was made clear in the near lynching of Booker T. Washington himself. Despite his having been, in many ways, embraced by white advocates of social separation and accommodationist strategies for equality, Washington was severely beaten and nearly lynched in New York City in 1911. Police intervention was all that stopped what would assuredly have been his murder”(108; 214. n59). See Dray, 2002, 188.

The *anti-social and inhumane desires* which find expression in lynchings *often serve as socializing forces within the white group* . . . Lynchings tend to minimize social and class distinctions between white plantation owners and white tenants, mill owners, and textile workers, Methodists and Baptists, and so on . . . . This prejudice against the Negro forms a common meeting place for whites . . . . (109 Harvey's emphasis)

Just as during chattel slavery, dominance depended on psychological as well as physical violence. Lynching and representations in minstrelsy until the civil rights movement worked to reinforce a value system that devalued difference and made blackness inferior at its best, and villainized at its worst. Such psychological trauma outlasted these practices in their traditional forms and their effects can be witnessed today in the criminalization of black men and the marginalization of all black cultural production save sports and other forms of entertainment. This is still so much the case that racialized class hierarchies largely remain intact, even as lynching and minstrelsy have become invisible. What Harvey suggests about the two historical forms can be read as applicable current realities:

From economic exploitation to indulgence in white mythology, from a national, public spectacle-making to an obscene consumption of commodified blackness, the effects and expressions of blackface and the resonance such effects and expression shared with those of lynching put white obsession and violence, and racial subjugations, at the center of white U. S. -American identity. Each produced mythology of a racial other. Each relied on actual subjugations of Black communities. Each ensured that white supremacy remained at the center of U. S. national life. (117-118)

And so do these present, though difficult to discern, forms reflect American identity today. Associating criminality with black men has created a self-replicating hopelessness in poverty-stricken areas. These association result in racial profiling which creates mass incarceration for nonviolent crimes and probation laws that virtually guarantee repeat "offences." These combined with automatic life sentences for "three strikes" ensure a large and profitable prison population that can legally be enslaved.<sup>35</sup> Legal "lynchings" on urban streets are inevitably justified by the overabundance of criminal records supplied by racial profiling in poor, crime-ridden communities. Blackface representations and their reappearance through demeaning and criminalized roles for blacks in film and television ensure the repetition of this

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<sup>35</sup> See Angela Davis, *The Prison Industrial Complex and its Impact on Communities of Color*. Videocassette. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2000.

cycle of criminality. They ensure that enough Americans, regardless of class, gender or race, remain sufficiently afraid enough to protect the interests of law enforcement over citizens. Disconnecting blackface from its traumatic repercussions decontextualizes, normalizes and conceals these repercussions. This is also why blackface minstrelsy is tremendously important for understanding the formation of American identities. Rewriting blackface as America's revolutionary art form is a mistake second only to burying blackface as America's unspeakable shame. It is a document of a traumatic experience of the past that has continued into the present. Within it can be found the roots of much of American "cultural consciousness" and ethos reflected in present popular culture forms. The question was never whether to return to blackface minstrelsy, but why and how.

## 1927

If the 20s were roaring in America, 1927 could be heard loudest above the din. Charles Lindbergh completes his solo flight from New York to Paris while Al "Scarface" Capone makes over 165 million dollars by investing in everything from alcohol to prostitution. The very first Academy Awards gives its Oscar award for best picture to William Wellman's *Wings*; Fritz Lang releases *Metropolis*, and America sees its first passionate kiss on film in Clarence Brown's *Flesh and the Devil*. Charlie Chaplin divorces his second wife, and Winston Churchill announces that he finds Benito Mussolini charming<sup>36</sup>—Josephine Baker also had a "soft spot" for the dictator.<sup>37</sup> Hitler kisses the dying hand of Houston Stewart Chamberlain whose anti-Semitic dogma Hitler had adopted as his own.<sup>38</sup> Duke Ellington and his band open at The Cotton Club. Louis Armstrong at age twenty-five, playing trumpet and cornet, was burning with creative productivity, recording track after track, ten just in the month of May, on the Okeh record label. He was actively changing the sound and face of jazz in a very segregated Jim Crow America. An African American cast (not in blackface) opens on Broadway with the play *Porgy*, directed by Armenian immigrant Rouben Mamoulian.<sup>39</sup> Josephine Baker at the height of her career has just begun to overtake Paris, finding a fame and notoriety impossible for her in America. She stars in her first film, *La Sirène des Tropiques*. At the age of twelve, Billie Holiday is released from protective custody as a state witness in her own rape case and moves into a brothel.<sup>40</sup> She would hear Louis Armstrong's recording of "West End Blues" the following year. Ralph Ellison, a year older than Holiday, enters high school but hasn't yet realized his

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<sup>36</sup> Gerald Leinwald. *1927: High Tide of the 20s*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 1-8.

<sup>37</sup> Phyllis Rose. *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*. New York: Vintage, 1991), 184.

<sup>38</sup> (Leinwald 6)

<sup>39</sup> Burns Mantle, *Best Plays of 1927-1928 (Best Plays Series)* (Manchester: Ayer, 1976), 425.

<sup>40</sup> Stuart Nicholson, *Billie Holiday*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 27.

invisibility.<sup>41</sup> An African American Man in Harlem is arrested resulting in a riot of one hundred and fifty police officers and twenty-five hundred citizens. Police prevent a lynching attempt in Queens. Twelve lynchings take place. Fourteen deaths occur in retaliation for prevented lynchings.<sup>42</sup> Ten southern and midwestern states are devastated in a massive flood of the Mississippi River that kills hundreds of people. Blacks are forced at gunpoint to build levees for no pay; one is killed for refusing to work after having worked all night. Most are left to fend for themselves, while whites are rescued. Thousands of blacks are put into refugee and squalid concentration camps where they are held prisoner by plantation owners who fear that if they escape the flooded areas, they will never return to work the plantations.<sup>43</sup> The Supreme Court upholds the 1924 Racial Integrity Act and allows forced sterilizations of Carrie Buck and eventually over 60,000 Americans.<sup>44</sup> America, who hadn't "heard nothin' yet," sees and hears its first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, featuring Al Jolson in blackface.

### ***The Jazz Singer* (1927)**

*The Jazz Singer* has been of particular interest in the reprimand/apology and later, post-racist constellation of the discourse on blackface. This is, in part, because of its place in the pivotal moment of 1927 as the first talking picture, which makes it exceptionally important for American film, popular, and for cultural studies generally regardless of its content. However, its content is as significant as its form. It documents a history of the American popular art forms of blackface minstrelsy, melodrama and vaudeville, all associated with ethnic minorities, while also recording a historic (though fictionalized). Jewish liminality not found in any other major Hollywood film. The question is how do we canonize this important film when it features the racist underbelly of American popular culture (and society)? This question comes out of the idea that said underbelly must be hidden or destroyed because of its racism. On the other hand, one wonders if there is triumph in this film that should be celebrated for its historic achievements. The answer, I suggest, is not in emphasizing the film's triumphs while ignoring its casualties, for this is the eventuality of an imperialist historicism. Neither is the answer to transform its casualties into triumphs, for this is worse than the former, as it celebrates and therefore perpetuates violence. The dilemma is not to be solved without asking many more questions, for the same dilemma may be a microcosm of a much larger American historical quandary. Although *The Jazz Singer* commits all manner of violence on the cultures of Jewish and

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<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Patrick Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> (Harvey 103)

<sup>43</sup> T. H. Watkins, "Boiling Over" *New York Times* (1923-Current file); 13 Apr 1997; Proquest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851-2007), BR34.

<sup>44</sup> In 1933, Nazi Germany will go on to model its eugenics laws after Virginia's. Dorr, "*Buck v. Bell* (1927)."

African Americans, its virtue lies in how it documents its own offenses. For a project investigating jazz and trauma, *The Jazz Singer* provides a wealth of evidence for the trauma in jazz, the trauma of jazz, as well as the trauma to which only jazz can give a face. Jazz is the fulcrum upon which modern American trauma revolves. It is the result, the release, and the source of trauma.

The plot of *The Jazz Singer* is simple. One young Jakie Rabinowitz, having come from five generations of Jewish cantors, wants to use his God-given talents to serve something other than God. He wants to be a jazz singer, which at the time was considered the musical equivalent of pornography by older generations. His father cannot accept this decision and beats him. Jakie runs away, becomes Jack Robin, meets the gentile Mary Dale and does well enough out West that he can return to his native New York to headline a Broadway show. His success does not sway his father and he is forced to leave home again, until his mother comes looking for him with the announcement that his father is dying. She wants him to chant “Kol Nidre,” as the synagogue cantor on the eve of Yom Kippur, which was also the opening night of the film in 1927. Jack chooses to perform as cantor in the Synagogue, and his father dies with the impression that his son has returned home to the tradition of their family and the religion of his ancestors. Of course, this proves not to be the case, as later Jack sings on Broadway, having replaced his traditional Yom Kippur white clothing for blackface.

Much of the recent criticism of *The Jazz Singer*, without saying so, attempts to address the predicament of how to represent cultural phenomena which are both important and racist. Lhamon responds by rewriting the film as radical and liberationist, much in the way he discussed all of his chosen minstrel texts. Although his text centers on the radicalism of blackface itself, in *The Jazz Singer* he locates the radical moment in Jack’s collar in the final scene. He writes that “The last light fading on the screen as the scene and film go dark is the tight white collar round Jolson’s neck. It is brilliant bricolage of success and failure, of blackness championed and choked”(115). This acknowledgement of the travesty of black representation by means of a collar is tenuous at best, although it is the closest Lhamon ever comes to remembering the concomitant practice of lynching. The site where blackness was championed is never mentioned, only somehow contained within the blackface itself, which is also the site of the choking. Stanfield corroborates Lhamon’s view suggesting that his is the “most engaging analysis of the film published in recent years”(13). Stanfield argues that blackface in *The Jazz Singer* is “radical and provocative; it enables the crossing of cultural, ethnic, gender, and racial boundaries”(19). He too locates this radicalism in the final scene. He writes that “by ending the film with Jolson in blackface, the question—is he Jewish Jakie Rabinowitz, Americanized Jack Robin, or a cowed black man?—becomes momentarily mute. He is all of these identities and he is none of them”(13). He even sees the lack of black actors in the film as part of its radicalism. “*The Jazz Singer*, the signified of blackface, the African American, is

absent, but rather than simplify matters this lack enables competing identities to be contained, none dominating, because blackness operates in the world of the imaginary rather than the real”(22). The context and concrete effects of blackface and exclusion: segregation and Jim Crow, the increasing social emphasis on racial purity, black actors and musicians unable to represent themselves or profit from their own creations and labor, and the ideological teachings of blackness as white intellectual property, completely cancels out any potential radicalism that could possibly be found within a conformity so extraordinarily common as blackface minstrelsy.

Another rarely mentioned concern in the quandary of canonizing racist cultural artifacts is the fact that the perpetrators of late blackface minstrelsy were most often Jewish. Consequently, Jeffrey Melnick notes that “any chronicle of Jews making money out of African Americans and representations of Blackness flirts uncomfortably with conventional anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish opportunism and parasitism.”<sup>45</sup> What has ensued from this danger is that Jewish empathy and identification with African Americans has been overemphasized as justification. Not only this, but the same empathy has been attributed to the whole of the practice of minstrelsy. As Melnick suggests, “a proper sensitivity to ethnic typecasting of Jews should not foreclose on an investigation of how racist effects issued from the involvement of Jews with African American musical forms”(42). The suggestion that to identify Jewish racism (or more specifically, racism perpetrated by Jews) is anti-Semitic is terribly ironic, in that the term itself is already racially dividing, a way to distinguish racism against Jews from racism against other racialized groups. If anything, sublimating Al Jolson’s blackface performances to radicalism on the basis of his Jewishness is an insult to actual Jewish radicals who didn’t see a difference between racism and anti-Semitism. While Jolson was conforming to racist cultural conventions, there were plenty of Jewish activists fighting for the rights of African Americans. For example, as Rogin writes,

The Yiddish press, protesting against lynchings and other antiblack violence, likened race riots against blacks to pogroms against Jews. Wealthy German Jews made common cause with ‘talented tenth’ educated members of the black middle class in the struggle for civil rights; Jewish clothing unions organized black workers even as AFL craft organizations excluded them; and Jewish philanthropy and legal services supported black civic institutions and court fights.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 41.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 99.



Just as how decades before, some Jews had been slaveholders while others, abolitionists and many more neither, 1927 neither possessed a homogenous body of Jewish Americans.<sup>47</sup> As Lhamon suggests, “By Jolson’s time in the teens and twenties of this century, his churning gestures were both a thorough register of actual historical pain and thoroughly conventional”(103). Part of the work of the civil rights movement was to teach America that racism was more than hatred or even derision, but this seems to be precisely what has been forgotten. *The Jazz Singer* was not subversive art for Jews or African Americans. Instead it was a symbolic murder-suicide of not only two important American cultures, but of the collaborative relationship between them. Note this preface to *The Jazz Singer*:

*He who wishes to picture today’s America must do it kaleidoscopically; he must show you a vivid contrast of surfaces, raucous, sentimental, egotistical, vulgar, ineffably busy—surfaces whirling in a dance which sometimes is a dance to Aphrodite and more frequently a dance to Jehovah.*

*In seeking a symbol of the vital chaos of America’s soul, I find no more adequate one than jazz. Here you have the rhythm of frenzy staggering against a symphonic background—a background composed of lewdness, heart’s delight, soul-racked madness, monumental boldness, exquisite humility, but principally prayer.*

*I hear jazz, and I am given a vision of cathedrals and temples collapsing and, silhouetted against the setting sun, a solitary figure, a lost soul, dancing grotesquely on the ruins. . . Thus do I see the jazz singer.*

*Jazz is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else. It is prayer distorted, sick unconscious of its destination. The singer of jazz is what Mathew Arnold said of the Jew, “lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.” In this, my first play, I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1927—that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical revues, and the dance halls—is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the America which goes sedately to church and synagogue. The jazz American is different from the dancing dervish, from the Zulu medicine man, from the negro evangelist only in that he doesn’t know he is praying.*

*I have used a Jewish youth as my protagonist because the Jews are determining the nature and scope of jazz more than any other race—more than the negroes, from whom they have taken<sup>48</sup> jazz and given it a new color and meaning. Jazz is Irving Berlin, Al Jolson,*

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<sup>47</sup>My most obvious musical counterexample to *The Jazz Singer* is, of course, Abel Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit”(1939). Also, one does not have to search hard to find Jewish radicals who fought and even died alongside blacks in the civil rights movement: Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner died with James Chaney in Mississippi in 1964. Heather Booth, Judith Wright, Beatrice Mayer, Carol Silver, and Abraham Heschel are more of the known Jewish civil rights advocates.

<sup>48</sup> Somewhere in the thirty years between Miles Kreuger’s 1977 *Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies, 1927-1941*, as quoted by Linda Williams (142), and my 2007 DVD reprinted program, the word “stolen” has been replaced with “taken.”

*George Gershwin, Sophie Tucker, These are Jews with their roots in the synagogue. And these are expressing in evangelical terms the nature of our chaos today.*

*You find the soul of a people in the songs they sing. You find the meaning of the songs in the soul of the minstrels who create and interpret them. In "The Jazz Singer" I have attempted an exploration of the soul of one of these minstrels.*

—Samson Raphaelson<sup>49</sup>

If you couldn't tell by these prefatory remarks that Mr. Raphaelson was, in fact, himself a Jewish artist, it is because he didn't tell you. As Raphaelson introduces the film based on a short story-turned-play that he wrote with Jolson in mind, he discusses "the Jews" and the accomplishments he feels "they" have made, without including himself in that group. That Raphaelson leaves himself out of the Jewish picture presages a whole host of exclusions that characterize *The Jazz Singer*. He manifests his "vision of cathedrals and temples collapsing" to make way for the "lewd" and "mad" jazz singer to dance "grotesquely on the ruins." He attempts to rescue religion in the jazz itself, calling it prayer, "distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination," suggesting that the singer is unaware of the spirituality of his song. Raphaelson quotes what British poet Matthew Arnold actually said only about himself, namely, that he was 'lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.' Raphaelson, however, revises the quotation, claiming that Arnold had said this about "the Jew." The condition of being lost between a dead world and one that cannot be born suggests a stillbirth. This may well be poetic as a characterization of oneself, but surely problematic as a characterization of an entire culture or religion. Yet this is how he saw that culture of origin with which he refused to align himself when discussing his play and film. Metaphorically, he manifests this Jewish stillbirth just as he manifests the religious deaths of cathedrals and temples. The film enacts these images and metaphors, and so completes the act of destruction.

Although singing jazz was considered heretical even by the religious African American community at the time, it is linked with prayer in *The Jazz Singer* to lessen the blow of its sacrilege. The first title reads: "In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression—perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of Jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer." The connection between jazz music and spirituality is not hard to find, and I discussed it at length in the first chapter. Understanding Jazz music as a continuation of the Negro spirituals from which it evolved is easy enough to concede, but *The Jazz Singer* makes that spirituality explicit while connecting it to a spirituality derived in part from Judaism or Jewishness. The fact that Jolson wears blackface to perform suggests that the film takes as its premise that jazz music is first and foremost African American music, and second, that

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<sup>49</sup> *The Jazz Singer*. Dir. Alan Crosland. Perf. Al Jolson, May McAvoy, Warner Orland, and Joseph Rosenblatt. Warner Bros., 1927.

African American music of the modern period, around the time of the film in 1927, can necessarily come under the category of jazz music. This premise was widely accepted at the time and any arguments to the contrary were the unsuccessful attempts of artists to elevate the music from the very negative connotations suggested by anything related to blackness or jazz. Before white Americans came to accept the art form of jazz, it was unequivocally “race” music. However, when the film depicts the Jewish ghetto, it seems to link jazz music right back to Jewishness, as the second title reads, “The New York Ghetto-throbbing to that rhythm of music which is older than civilization.” This suggests that “ancient” here can refer to African or Jewish culture, or to Jewish as African culture, and both are exoticized and orientalized. On the one hand, the ghetto is throbbing with rhythm; on the other, well, there’s blackface pointing to an absent “blackness.”

Today, although Lhamon and Stanfield disagree, the most controversial issue in *The Jazz Singer* is the use it makes of blackface minstrelsy, which is why the film isn’t aired on network television. Were it not for this one feature, the film would not have to be “rescued” by post-racist criticism. In the film, blackness is linked with suffering and both Rogin and Lhamon suggest that it was the Jewish identification with that suffering that led the actors to wear blackface in their performances. All four chapters of the current project take as their premise that the music is an archive of black American trauma. Williams also suggests that “music in slave culture had a special power to speak the sorrows that otherwise could not be spoken” (136). Picking up on this quality of the music, white performers capitalized on the sympathy for this suffering by using blackface. As Williams writes, “white characters acquire virtue by musically expressing a suffering that is recognizable as ‘black’”(136). However, that sympathy was most often narcissistically reflected back to white America and its post-traumatic (due to the devastating Civil War) nostalgia for antebellum slavery.

Although Lhamon disagrees, Rogin, Roediger, Williams and Susan Gubar accept the argument that blackface was in part a strategy to “whiten” Jewish Americans. Some Jewish immigrants looking to assimilate into mainstream American culture found a wealth of opportunity to do so using blackface. Jolson, a member of this very group, found this medium to be profitable in numerous ways. Blackface, or the process of what Gubar has called “racechange,” “enables the Warner Brothers’ American hero to wash himself white by siphoning off Otherness from the Hebrew to the African” (73). She continues by maintaining that, “if the African American is dramatized as Otherness incarnate, then surely the Jew who plays him becomes less Other, more centrally human”(73). In theory this strategy of displacement should work for assimilation. However, blackface inevitably dehumanizes everyone involved. Furthermore, how do we explain the many black Americans who performed in blackface? Did they also become assimilated? Surely not. What do we make of the white Americans who didn’t wear the makeup but whose performances achieved the

same end? As Williams remarks, “with and without blackface, white characters achieve virtue by posing as—and singing like-blacks,” which she calls “literal and metaphorical blackface”(140). Metaphorical blackface has never lost its power or popularity.<sup>50</sup>

However, as Gubar herself notes, this act didn’t convince everyone of Jewish “whiteness.” She recalls the Nazi propaganda poster of the “Jazz-Jew” which showed “that the division of labor meant to be executed by blackface never could successfully divide the dark Hebrew from the African or, for that matter, the white from the black”(75). Although this is an odd claim given the many Jews from Ethiopia and Egypt who are clearly black and African, it suggests that blackface couldn’t guarantee assimilation. Intent on liberating Al Jolson’s blackface in particular, Stanfield also suggests that “there could be no certain route via minstrelsy to an authentic American identity.” Williams briefly touches on another possible use of blackface when she recounts the story of how Jolson came to use it. Jolson, she relates, “was advised by James Francis Dooley, an Irish blackface monologist, that burnt cork could function as a mask that would make him feel comfortable on stage. The blackface mask promised to hide the discomfort of the embarrassed Jew”(140). Apparently, blackface had given similar ‘whitening’ perks to the Irish, while it also helped to hide “embarrassed,” or not yet assimilated faces. It may even have obscured features regularly identified as Jewish. However, the fact that blackface minstrelsy had been in practice for a century before Al Jolson suggests that it was standard and normalized by his time. The most significant reason for donning blackface to sing as a Jew in the early twentieth century would have to be the easiest explanation: that’s what everyone—whites, blacks, immigrants of many backgrounds—did at the time. Al Jolson was a very talented singer and a “black face” offered more success than his own. Neither Jolson nor blackface can be absolved of racism by way of his immigrant struggles or aspirations.

Another perhaps unconscious method of rescuing *The Jazz Singer* has been to recognize the mourning and prayer for atonement in the film’s Yom Kippur theme and elsewhere as referring to the travesty of blackface. Gubar sees the mourning in *The Jazz Singer* as following upon the concept of spirit-murder which may be drawing on the psychoanalytic idea of soul murder. A kind of mourning is indeed present in the film. When Jack meets dancer Mary Dale, she tells him, “there are lots of jazz singers, but you have a tear in your voice.” The ambiguity of “tear” (crying) and “tear” (ripping) is precisely what is responsible for Jack’s success: his mourning (tear) over the separation (tear) from his origins (or mother); it is what allows him to wield the

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<sup>50</sup> Note the international and five-time Grammy winning success of the prematurely deceased, Amy Winehouse. See Daphne A. Brooks, “‘This Voice which is not One’: Amy Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic Blue(s)face Culture”, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 2010: 1, 37-60.

power of song over his audience.<sup>51</sup> As Gubar suggests, “weeping is also part of his singing style: when his father advises a young boy to chant ‘with a sigh--like you are crying out to your God,’ he remembers how Jackie ‘had a voice like an angel’”(67). That crying out to God predates Jack’s jazzy days. It is what Raphaelson uses to suggest the prayer in Jolson’s jazz singing. The suffering that leads to the tear is perhaps this tear or ripping himself away from Judaism or Jewishness, but this suffering is conflated with the generic suffering of blacks in America.

That there is mourning in the film seems undeniable. However, what exactly is being mourned is still up for debate. Gubar argues that “blackface here seems to stage a mourning over precisely the unjust spirit-murder it repeatedly enacts”(72). However, there is no context for the film to be in any way apologetic about its blackface. What the type of music in the *The Jazz Singer* mourns is less about blacks than it is about an imagined past of a prosperous and expanding America before the Civil War. Williams writes that “a melodramatic melos associated with the sufferings of African Americans links the virtue of a lost rural America with the music that continues to be associated with the sorrows of former slaves”(136). Williams’ borrowed term “imperialist nostalgia” gets even closer to what *The Jazz Singer*’s music politically mourns. She argues that it “can help to explain the peculiar mixture of brutal domination and sorrowing lament in white appropriations and imitations of putative African culture;” that Jolson’s music mourns “a racialized ‘space of innocence,’” lost in the years following the end of hundreds of years of slavery.<sup>52</sup> Of course, as a Jewish immigrant whose family arrived in 1891, Jolson has no obvious reason to mourn the passing of the plantation era. However, by participating in that collective mourning, he associates himself with those who mourn the loss of slavery rather than those who mourn the total loss of humanity for which slavery, lynching and blackface are in part responsible. As Williams writes,

Racial suffering has here become a more diffuse pain--a generalized longing for a lost home. Black is a symbol of the triumph of assimilation as well as of its attendant loss. Uncoupled from the specific historical persecution of blacks and the specific persecution of the Jews, it is a suffering that becomes embodied in the melodramatic performing persona of Al Jolson, the Jewish, blackface mammy singer. (152)

In those days, black-identified people who could “pass” often did so when possible. Tapping into that general nostalgia that Jolson saw or projected onto the white American public may have been a complex form of passing. In both instances, one takes on white identity in order to escape one’s own history of oppression and further

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<sup>51</sup> As Chana Kronfeld has suggested to me, the “tearing” is also symbolic, referring to the ritual of mourning in Jewish funerals where one tears a part of one’s clothing—“Kri’ah.”

<sup>52</sup> (Williams 138-139). I believe this is Williams quoting Gubar quoting Renato Rosaldo.

the oppression of another group, to escape the subjugated status and profit by crossing over into whiteness. Both are seeking to escape histories of subjugation while also repeating them—even though blackface carries with it a fugitive identification of the subjugation of one group by another—which is why blackface can carry both black and Jewish suffering even as it effaces the one and exacerbates the other. However, Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer* differ from the African American experience of passing in that Jolson doesn't simply “whiten” himself, he effectively “whitens” Jewishness. Jolson can be white *and* Jewish at the same time. He does not have to renounce his immediate family or all other Jews; he can still be Jewish, and help other Jews, like George Gershwin achieve success in his chosen field.<sup>53</sup> Granted, the “whitened” Jewishness is a virtually annihilated Jewishness, until it is brought back into visibility by Nazi race theory just a few years later.

It is this annihilation for which the *The Jazz Singer* seeks penance. Gubar envisions Jolson's suffering as penance for the “spirit murder” of blackface. She writes that “if *The Birth of a Nation* uses blackface to effect a kind of spiritual assassination, *The Jazz Singer* remains haunted by the need to atone for that crime,” that “in blackface Jolson looks like he is doing penance for the fact that ethnic acceptance and integration into American society are attained by stereotyping or scapegoating black people”(66,73). Gubar wonders whether the film focuses on Yom Kippur because one sin for which atonement is requested is the scapegoating of others (73). However, the only part where Jack asks for atonement is during the “Kol Nidre,” where he never seeks atonement for the sin of scapegoating. Joel Rosenberg translates and transliterates (from Aramaic) the actual sung lyrics of the “Kol Nidre” in *The Jazz Singer*.

All vows [*Kol nidrei*],  
 and formulas of prohibition [*ve'esorei*],  
 and oaths [*ushevu'ei*],  
 and declarations of taboo [*vahromei*],  
 and promises of abstinence [*vekonomei*],  
 and pledges one assumes on penalty [*vekinnusei*],  
 and names of God [*vekhinnuyei*].  
 and pledges one assumes on penalty [*vekinnusei*],  
 and names of God [*vekhinnuyei*],  
 and oaths [*ushevu'ei*],  
 eeeeeiiii  
 and declarations of taboo [*vahromei*],  
 and promises of abstinence [*vekonamei*],  
 eeeeeiiii,

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<sup>53</sup> See Melnick, 1999.

and pledges . . . on penalty [*vekinnusei*],  
 and names of God [*vekhinnuyei*],  
 and pledges . . . on penalty [*vekinnusei*]  
*eeeeiiii*, and names . . . [*vekhinnu. . . .*].  
*Kol nidrei, ve'esorei ushevu'ei,*  
*vahromei vekonamei, vekinnusei, vekhinnuyei*  
*vekinnusei vekhinnuyei*  
*ushevu 'eiiii,*  
*aaaaaaaaahhhhhh,*  
*ushevu 'eiiii!* ...<sup>54</sup>

The asking of forgiveness for scapegoating others is never uttered in the film. Even if, as Rosenberg suggests, the untranslated “Kol Nidre” is “truncated in such a way that its force is metonymic—a part standing for a concealed whole”(19), the “concealed” but hinted at forgiveness is as absent as the hinted at African Americans in the film.

If the “Kol Nidre” in *The Jazz Singer* secretly asks forgiveness for the people of Israel, it isn’t for crimes against American blacks (crimes which neither Jolson nor The Warner Bros. would have considered to be crimes); the penance is for the crimes the film commits against Jewishness. One need look no further than the film’s plot to see what Jack and Al Jolson, formerly Asa Yoelson are mourning. Although Gubar sites the “Kol Nidre”: “May all the people of Israel be forgiven including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all people are at fault,” as evidence of the film’s penance for its treatment of blacks, the “strangers who live in their midst” are the American people complicit in the erasure of American Jewishness, for they too are at fault. The guilt for obliterating all traces of (traditional) Jewish identity from the growing and evolving American culture constituted a more practical motivation for seeking atonement. Gubar argues that the words

make explicit the moral urgency of mourning over past misdeeds so as to gain absolution. Penitential like the ashes of Ash Wednesday or the sackcloth and ashes of Nineveh, burnt cork evokes the dust of the grave, reparation for past losses and lapses, all of which find analogues in a soundtrack that returns not only to ‘Kol Nidre’ but also to ‘Yahrzeit,’ the prayer for the dead. (73)

Erasure of the culture and religion of a people that had already suffered centuries of persecution and threatened effacement would be cause for a pervasive guilt that most likely resulted in its own trauma; assimilating to racist norms in America, Jews were doing to themselves and to others what had been done to them, thus identifying with

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<sup>54</sup> Joel Rosenberg, “What You Ain’t Heard Yet: The Languages of The Jazz Singer.” *Prooftexts*, Vol. 22, No. 1-2, Special Issue: the Cinema of Jewish Experience (Winter/Spring 2002)pgs. 11-54. 36.

persecutors. The donning of blackface itself already suggests that the suffering of others is less important than that of the minstrel. Blackface functionalizes the suffering of others. It cannot also act as penance for that functionalization. Jolson's penance in *The Jazz Singer* is for being complicit in his own cultural annihilation. The victim of trauma who feels he is in part responsible for his own victimization suffers indefinitely. Raphaelson both praised and denied the Jews in his preface; and he did so in the very same sentence. This admiration and rejection destabilizes *The Jazz Singer*. Quoting Michael Rogin, Gubar writes that "Dirt was the magical, transforming substance in blackface carnivalesque (particularly transgressed for the blackface Jew, since the term ham actor originated from the use of ham fat to wipe off burnt cork)"(81). That transgressed act of putting ham fat on one's face to clean off the already unclean mask of blackness had to have given pause to the son of a cantor. I imagine that tapping into the suffering of a people far from a "home" that no longer exists was less of an effort than one might think. If blackface is the spirit murder of black Americans, it is spirit-suicide for Jews. And suicide is a difficult crime for which to atone.

Lhamon and Jeffrey Knapp also locate the actualization of atonement in the "Kol Nidre" scene. Jack's father hears him singing and dies in peace believing that his son has returned to him. We see the father's ghost behind Jack accepting his return. Although the film solidifies all things Jewish: race, religion and culture into one character, Cantor Rabinowitz, and then kills him off, Lhamon suggests that "the Warner Brothers thesis is that, really to succeed, a man must first acknowledge his ethnic self"(109). He locates this acknowledgement in Jack's singing "Kol Nidre" and argues that he "reaffirms his tradition against an insistent secular inquisition"(109). Knapp is in agreement, arguing that "even the seemingly irreversible rupture of Cantor Rabinowitz's death is mitigated first by Jakie's assumption of his father's cantorship and then by the father's ghostly return to the synagogue, where he blesses Jakie's succession to the altar"(332). However, this fictional atonement in the film does not suggest actual atonement. The film cannot absolve itself. The ghostly Cantor's approval is mere wish fulfillment. Jack's chanting does not revive the Cantor; it does not awaken the dead. Despite what Knapp calls a "histrionic return to Jewishness," not only does his father die during the song, but his singing of the song has become a sort of minstrel performance (316). The performance is theatrical, jerky and attention-grabbing, although the singing is moving and beautiful. His erratic side-to-side motions are not the sways of davening in prayer. It is Jolson singing "My Yiddishe Mammy," to the tune and lyrics of "Kol Nidre." Although Jack here is attempting to perform the Hollywood vision of "Jewishness," his "Jewish" act is inflected with his "black" act which is inevitably neither. That is to say, *The Jazz Singer* never shows a "Jewish" Jakie Rabinowitz—he is always already Jack Robin and his version of Kol Nidre is scarcely different from his version of "My Mammy."





In both, he dresses up in otherness: blackness or religious Jewishness. He is neither of them, yet were he to take off either there would be nothing left. Joel Rosenberg describes the singing in the scene as “jazz—its riffs circling endlessly around the same first clause in a kind of atonement reverie”(36-7). He continues:

Considered as documentary, Jolson’s erosion of the traditional text is again a meaningful portrait of the mutual incomprehensibility of the traditional and the modern word. It is left unclear whether Jolson here forgets, revises, or improvises on the sacred song. ... The mangled state of the Kol Nidre text is thus likewise a portrait of forgetting or revision—simultaneously a document in the life history of Al Jolson and a token of American Jewry’s cultural erosion, a hidden slaying of the past that is represented. (37)

Although I see the performance as closer to minstrelsy than jazz (with the caveat that two are not mutually exclusive), the effect is still the same. This is not a performance of the “Kol Nidre” that is distinct from his performances of “jazz” in blackface; it only *looks* like one. The “return” to Jewishness is still inflected with “blackness.”

Believing that the issue of secularization has been elided in favor of discourse on assimilation, Knapp argues that the film is instead a tale of secularization. He quotes Rabbi Nathan Krass writing in 1924 that “the real meaning of assimilation...means taking into one’s soul’ of American ‘political ideals’ and ‘the adoption of the modus vivendi that best expresses these ideals’(316). He argues that “without saying so directly, Rabbi Krass implies that total integration would violate one of America’s fundamental ‘political ideals,’ the separation of church and state”(317). Because Knapp, following Lhamon, Lott, and Stanfield, has written an essay on *The Jazz Singer* without any discussion of race, he doesn’t recognize white

supremacy (and racial purity as evidenced by the Racial Integrity Act) as one of the American political ideals of 1924—the year that began America’s 60,000 Supreme Court Sanctioned involuntary sterilizations, a third of which took place in California.

<sup>55</sup> By this definition, assimilation necessarily meant complicity with the exact same political ideology that would eventually lead to the murder of countless millions of genetically “unfit” peoples at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. <sup>56</sup>

Assimilation does not, as Knapp suggests, “vindicate the ideal of ‘diverse individualities’ that Rabbi Krass defended”(317). Assimilation was markedly racial (blackface is a clue to the importance of race in the film) and cultural: it mandated a separation from the multilingualism and textual culture that characterized Judaism. If anything the secularization of Jewish religion in *The Jazz Singer* is mitigated (as Knapp himself notes) by the secularization of Christianity in the film, so that all religion, not just Judaism is left behind. Although Knapp suggests that “the absence of Christianity from *The Jazz Singer*, [is] so complete as to go unremarked in the criticism,” it is an especially *Christian* understanding of Judaism that structures the film. The incompatibility of the spiritual and the secular is as much a Christian puritan ideology as anything else. The father recalls a childhood religious authority to which the film’s Christian audience could easily relate. It is an “American” identification with strict and religious Christian parents that gets the sympathy for Jakie who never appears as religious in the film until the scene of the “Kol Nidre.” The Jack that sings “Kol Nidre” is the prodigal son returned and the ghost of the Cantor is welcoming him back. The fact that he returns to Broadway suggests that he has not in fact returned, for, despite its wishes, the film cannot actually reconcile the secular/spiritual divide that it depicts. Not even the ghost of the Cantor will welcome Jack home in blackface.

Rogin and Gubar do not discuss in detail the crime *The Jazz Singer* commits against Jewishness, perhaps in an effort to atone for the crimes that blackface has committed against blacks. Participating in reprimand/apologetic criticism, Gubar tries to “atone” for this crime by reading said atonement into the film, where it does not exist. However, focusing only on the crime committed against blacks misses the dimension of the history of suffering from which Jews sought to escape through the practice of blackface. This further hinders the fugitive site of alliance that is constantly articulated and negated by the practice itself. As Gubar herself writes, “the Jew, standing in the place of the stigmatized African American, suffers the scapegoated Other’s fate even as he inflicts a violence on the absent Other”(73).

It is my aim to give importance to Black and Jewish traumatic trajectories while absolutely condemning the practice of blackface minstrelsy. In agreement with Rogin,

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<sup>55</sup> See Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> As cited earlier, it was Virginia’s eugenics laws (which were especially concerned with the mixing of African Americans, Latinos and other “racially visible” groups with white Americans) that Nazi Germany adopted.

Williams writes that “blackface has been used to obliterate two histories and cultures: those of Jews *and* those of African Americans. Blackface performance is to him an obliteration of ‘real’ African-American jazz that it might otherwise have been possible to hear”(154). For Rogin, the real crime is the lack of “real” jazz in the film. All Rogin hears in Jolson’s singing is “white noise”(154). Williams calls “white noise” “a conceptually brilliant response to the visual stereotype of blackface,”(156). and I concur. Although Rogin’s scathing admonishments of blackface and its noisy product are deliciously satisfying at times, the music in *The Jazz Singer* comes out of its own American tradition—it just happens to be one deeply entangled in racism. Rogin’s dismissal of Jolson’s jazz singing as not ‘real’ could on one level emerge from his respect for the art form of jazz as well as the hardworking jazz musicians who went unacknowledged and unpaid. On another level, however, he may be paradoxically yet another Jewish man offering his authoritative definition of “authentic” jazz. Either way, although “the eradication of Jewish particularism” is noted by Rogin, no, heartfelt sadness for the loss of an authentic “Kol Nidre” is registered (Williams 141). As Williams notes, “for Rogin, then, anti-Semitism is the film’s structuring absence”(154). However, although anti-Semitism can’t be seen in the genteel treatment of Jews in the film, anti-Semitism (or better, racism against Jewish culture) structures the film. Noting that Jewish Hollywood moguls had “mostly eliminated Jewish life from the screen,” Rogin fails to see the seriousness of how “Jewish life” is first conflated with theology, then demonized, and finally destroyed on screen (86). He writes that “Jack’s *judenfrei*-ing of the Rabinowitz name, so central to the story... responds only to the attractions of Americanization, not to prejudices against Jews”(87).

However, the prejudices against Jews are surely there in the one-dimensional portrayals of the Jewish patriarchal figures. The father pulls Jakie by the ear in the film, rather than the collar in the story. The father is harshly criticized for choosing to stay faithful and wanting his son to do the same. The third title reads: “Cantor Rabinowitz, chanter of hymns in the synagogue, stubbornly held to the ancient traditions of his race.” Conflating his religion and his race, the film suggests that neither are worth maintaining. The father’s narrow-minded adherence to Jewish tradition is emphasized when several characters buy him a prayer shawl for his birthday. Judaism becomes a racial marker; religion becomes culture, which then becomes the tradition of an older and dying generation that will not be missed. The film even projects mainstream American racism onto the immigrants. It is the father who says that for Jack to sing jazz is to “debase the voice God gave him.” It is Moishe Yudelson (meaning: son-of-Jew) whose moniker “nigger songs” from the original 1922 short story, had to be changed to “raggy time songs.”<sup>57</sup> If it were not racist enough that Yudelson says “He talks like Jakie but he looks like his shadow,” it was

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<sup>57</sup> Samson Raphaelson, “*The Day of Atonement*” *Everybody’s Magazine*, Jan 1922, pgs. 44-55.

the cleaner version, “his shadow” having replaced “a nigger.” When Jack Robin sings “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face,” an audience would have probably chuckled at the suggestion of blackness as dirty, but quaint. However, Jack’s hands were metaphorically dirty with the very murder-suicide that was his blackface performance.

### **From Ghost to Body**

*‘Why is we niggas like a slave ship on de Coast of Africa?’ one joke asked. ‘Because’, came the reply, ‘we both make money by taking off the negroes.’*<sup>58</sup>

Although Lott, Lhamon and Stanfield have sought to rescue blackface minstrelsy through various avenues: the range of responses to it (Lott), its identification with the black experience (Lhamon), or its inability to fix identity (Stanfield), blackface nevertheless remains historically linked to chattel slavery and the many subsequent forms of racial oppression that followed it, a fact to which even a 19<sup>th</sup> century minstrel joke attests. Not only does the entanglement of terror and pleasure connect the minstrelsy stage to the auction block’s spectacle and festivities, but the culture of ownership characterized by the spectacle of the auction block relates to and persists through minstrelsy. Hartman writes that “the seeming transgressions of the color line and the identification forged with the blackface mask through aversion and/or desire ultimately served only to reinforce relations of mastery and servitude”(29). Much of Hegel’s philosophy would still be intriguing even if it were never so graphically demonstrated by American commercialism. However, just after the death of said philosopher, America decides to see what financial gain could be made if Hegel’s Otherness were made into an All-American show. In fact, as David Roediger also notes (without going into detail) how Hegel’s Unhappy Consciousness is quite applicable to minstrelsy, suggesting that the minstrel “like the doomed master...blackfaced whites derived their consciousness by measuring themselves against a group they defined as largely worthless and ineffectual”(118). Eric Lott places the beginning of blackface minstrelsy at around the beginning of the 1830s (5).

It is as if the white blackface performer does not have a body (or face) of his own until he has painted it black. He transubstantiates from ghost to body, that is, from no body to just a body. Blackface disintegrates the white body into pure spirit. It accentuates a lack: that the white man has no body, no voice, no physicality at all, and that, as a result, American musical art is either black or black artifice. Not to have a body has its advantages, since it implies a powerful transcending of all destructibility. A disembodied spirit is more God than human. It is associated with masculine authority well above and beyond the body. Elaine Scarry writes that “the relation between man and God. . . becomes a power relation based on the fact that one has a

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<sup>58</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Revised Edition*. (New York: Verso, 1999), 119. Here he quotes *Negro Singers Own Book*. n.d.

body and the other does not.”<sup>59</sup> Because the black body exists, and the white body does not, the black body belongs to the white spirit, recalling Hegel’s Master/slave dialectic. The white person in blackface becomes God posed as human. It dehumanizes both parties, the white because he has no body and the black because he becomes all body, a physical figure without a soul.

Blackface attempts to debase an entire “race” while, at once (unwittingly), graphically demonstrating the fact of race’s constructed existence; according to Gubar, “burnt cork draws attention to its own artifice”(79). Hegel writes that “spirit, therefore. . . appears, as an *artificer*, and its action whereby it produces itself as an object without having yet grasped the thought of itself is an instinctive operation.”<sup>60</sup> The blackface artist, the artificer, the master craftsman of artificiality is only spirit until he paints himself as object before having formed even a thought of who he himself is without the painted body. In the case of *The Jazz Singer*, that uncreated self is an abjected former self, a Jakie Rabinowitz already destroyed to form a Jack Robin who becomes all spirit, taking temporary form in an illusory black body: all unpainted parts are covered in clothing, invisible, nonexistent—only face and hands exist in corporeal form, the rest is illusion. Jakie Rabinowitz is already dead the moment that he decides that Jewish and American identities are irreconcilable; he kills the former to create the latter. And yet, that idealized American identity is the narcissistic spirit of a disembodied God-like man who manipulates and controls colored bodies for his own end, suggesting that ideal whiteness is full disembodiment. Interestingly, the film suggests that this master slave relationship (both metaphorical and physical). is incommensurate with what it sees as authentic Jewish identity. It is as if the cantors would much rather praise God than become him, the latter constituting the imperative of assimilation. Jack wants to be God and avoid “hell” at the same time, and on the Hollywood screen, anything seems possible.

In a section in Gubar’s chapter aptly titled “Hollywood’s ‘Artificial Nigger’” she attempts to show the master/slave relationship at work in blackface and hints at the spirit/god complex that underlies it. She uses Laurence Olivier’s discussion of his production of *Othello* (1965) to elaborate on how “the transformation [of] blackening triggered within him. . . a kind of incorporation or even enslavement of the Other”(Gubar 93). She quotes Olivier:

Black all over my body, Max Factor 2880, then a lighter brown. Then Negro No. 2, a stronger brown. Brown on black to give a rich mahogany. Then the great trick: that glorious half-yard of chiffon with which I polished myself all over until I shone. . . . I am, I. . . I am Othello. . . but Olivier is in charge. The actor is in control. The actor breathes into the nostrils of the character and the

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<sup>59</sup> Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 184.

<sup>60</sup> Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 421.

character comes to life. For this moment in my time, Othello is my character—he's mine. He belongs to no one else; he belongs to me. When I sigh, he sighs, When I laugh, he laughs. When I cry, he cries. (93)

Yes, ownership is definitely here, but the only nostril breather I can think of is the Hebrew God himself, “the Lord God [who] formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”(Gen 2:7). He is also the God who, like Olivier, says “I am [that] I am.” rather than the extra narcissistic “I am I . . . I am.” Now, whether Olivier’s “I am” is akin to God’s “I am” or to what Judith Butler, regarding Althusser, calls “the language of self-ascription—‘Here I am’—through the appropriation of guilt,” is a worthy question.<sup>61</sup> As if foreshadowing fellow wife-murderer Althusser, Othello too utters the guilty “I am” or, “That’s he that was Othello; here I am” when he is ‘hailed’ by Lodovico representing the law. However, Othello’s self-ascription accepts guilt; he is no longer who is because of his rage and his (acknowledged) murder (Othello, 5. 2. 284). As a blackface artist, Olivier is both God and guilty man, but the guilt goes unacknowledged. As it turns out, Gubar’s ellipses hide yet another “I am” written by Olivier. In his book *On Acting*, Olivier writes, “I am. . . I am, I . . . I am Othello. . . but Olivier is in charge”(159). When God breathes life into Adam’s nostrils, he is the same God who later utters “I am *that* I am” when Moses asks for a name (Exodus 3:14). Perhaps the demonstrative article “that” was all that was needed for a creator to separate himself from his creation. Olivier’s “I am. . . I . . . I am” may be what turns himself *into* his creation, *I am I* rather than *I am that*. Perhaps the added “I am” and the “I” taking the place of the “that” provides an allegorical utterance that would pervert the “creation” that is blackface. Whatever happened there, the blackface god-complex has a bizarre relationship to power, and Olivier’s musings on Othello as a master/slave relationship are not really different from constituting himself in a God/creation relationship. After all, it is Himself who God has created in His image and *himself* who the blackface performer enslaves. Butler’s discussion of Hegel’s “The Unhappy Consciousness” connects self-enslavement and bodily subjection (32). However, if slavery was “Power” in the manner of Butler’s Althusserian/Hegelian subjection, blackface adds the extra stuttering “I” into the story of origin and turns subjection into *abjection* in the manner of Julia Kristeva. Gubar writes that

If the blackened body part looks like absence imposed (through burial or eradication of a process of petrifying (or putrefying), burnt cork on the face means a brain-dead minstrel who becomes all body. Black-face destroys the human subject on stage, replacing it with the black Other as corporeal object

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61 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 107.

whose insignificance makes him invisible (like a pet, a servant, a child, a corpse) or hypervisible (like a pet, a servant, a child, a corpse) (81).

This putrefaction that Gubar sees as penance can also be viewed as a process of self-abjection. Even closer to abjection is the idea that the blackface makeup represents feces smeared on the face of the performer:

Although blackface in film frequently attends narratives of disguise or camouflage, cosmetically darkened skin is as often conflated with mud or grease or coal as with make-up; it is smeared on like tar, soot, dirt, feces, enabling the wearer to regress back to what one critic calls ‘the height of polymorphous perversity’ through ‘infantile play with excrement or dirt’ (Gubar 79, quoting David Roediger).

Kristeva’s notion of abjection insists on the perpetual processes of subjectivation that requires a turning on oneself that must sustain itself. Here, abjection as a requirement for subjectivation and quite possibly, a precondition for subjection, sets a scene for the bizarre enactment of making and unmaking of the subject in blackface. As Kristeva writes, “I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.”<sup>62</sup> In this instance, the “I” is the subject, rejecting that which “disturbs identity, system, order. . . what does not respect borders, positions, rules. . . the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”(4). Nothing could be truer of blackface, where the “I” is the minstrel who has abjected himself in performance. For its purposes, the abject denotes the grotesque as in the literal vomit, blood, shit and the “skin on the surface of milk” as made into metaphor by burnt cork (2). The abject crosses the boundaries between inside and outside. She writes, “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself”(3). Jackie Rabinowitz vis-à-vis Jack Robin expels Jackie for Jack, Rabinowitz for Robin, and white skin for black makeup. He destroys himself to become himself or to become an “I.” The example of the abject as separated milk for Kristeva causes “a gagging sensation . . . spasms in the stomach, the belly... nausea”(3). The milk that has turned has initiated another turn: that of the stomach. Spasms become Jolson’s strange bodily movements that evolve historically melodramatic histrionics into the uncontrolled hysterics that characterize his hysterical or *womb* obsessed “my mammy” song. Raphaelson’s stillbirth as an embodied figure for Jewishness is enacted through abjection. The condition for abjection becomes an expulsion outwards of what is within as a way of forming subjectivity. For God as for Laurence Olivier, it is through the breath they expel into Adam and Othello respectively that they reinstate their divine selves. This way of establishing the god-like “I” through expulsion stages

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<sup>62</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

the link between the scene of dual subjection and dual subjectivation. God's subjectivity necessitates an expulsion that both creates and subjugates Adam and his own self. Jolson's subjectivity engages an expulsion (of Jewishness) that ends up subjugating a black body (which carries the trace of his very own abjected Jewish body) to create a new self.

When he eats the prohibited fruit, Adam turns against his subjection by God and blurs the distinction between himself and God, thereby threatening the conditions of God's own subjectivity: "the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil (Gen 3:22). Adam's turn to the tree and away from God is an assumption of power as well as an assumption of knowledge. It subverts the power of God so that He must once again expel the abject Adam from his garden, redrawing the barriers between God and man, the transgressor of boundaries. "Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken"(Gen 3:23). With this, God abjects Adam, turning his power back on himself, re-subordinating him, pressing his Power upon him, and sending him to work the very substance of his formation (the earth from which his body was formed), to (re)create himself with the material of his own body.

Such work under subjection can be likened to Butler's discussion of Hegel. She states that "work is, for Hegel, a form of desire, a form which ideally suppresses the transitory character of desire. . . To work on an object is to give it form, and to give it form is to give it existence that overcomes transitoriness"(40). In this instance, Adam becomes the bondsman in Hegel's master/slave dialectic. Not only is Adam "embodied or signified in what he makes" but he was once the very substance he is 'making' (40). He tills (turns) the earth that he once was in order to establish his self once more. In blackface, all of this plays out in one body/spirit which is the amalgamation of two: a white body that has been destroyed with cork or something that looks like earth and thus made into spirit, and a black spirit that has been destroyed with the same substance and been rendered soulless body. The blackface artificer abjects himself, creates himself, subjugates and subjects himself, enslaving himself, making himself toil (where performance is the work) in the substance that has created him: the earth, the dirt, the burnt cork. He is playing God, punishing Adam, but he is also the punished one. He is taking and appropriating the power of whiteness and using it against himself. He is creating whiteness by annihilating blackness and Jewishness. If putting on blackface turns the white body into spirit, and the black body into body without spirit, then blackface is the melodramatic staging of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness played out by jesters who think their hats are crowns, and self-deceived angels who do not know they have already caused their own fall. Blackface is the *Aufhebung* or 'sublation' that Butler takes from Hegel to



refer to the “unifying or synthesizing of opposites into a form in which they are simultaneously cancelled and preserved.”<sup>63</sup> Only blackface is more abject than that.

### **Last Words on “Jazz”**

A lot of time and print has been devoted to the questions: what is jazz, to whom does it belong, and who created it. Not nearly enough of these studies have tried to analyze the questions themselves. These questions about jazz are a product of the culture that asks them. In a project about jazz and its relationship to trauma and in a chapter about *The Jazz Singer*, I’d be remiss to ignore the same questions. That naming and ownership are rather Western precepts to begin with is no secret. However, the ways in which both naming and ownership relate to African Americans demands a certain sensitivity which is rarely on display. Not only does the search for a racial “purity” of the origins of jazz participate in a Western, imperialistic, hyper-racialized vernacular (the gift that keeps on giving), but the desire to diffuse those “origins” or the “ownership” of those origins among multiple racialized groups stems from the same imperialist impulse. This is frankly because black scholarship (as in Baraka and Ellison) that seeks to originate jazz in an essentialized blackness is a reaction to a trauma that has repeatedly denied black subjectivity and culture. Even though this essentialization participates in the European culture of ownership, it is a traumatic response, an attempt to build a subjectivity that was always already destroyed. Scholarship that repeatedly denies these essentialized notions of jazz is in effect once again denying the subjectivity that was being sought through jazz “ownership.” Blacks were first denied the financial wealth that jazz produced and later the “credit” of its creation. That Jewish artists significantly contributed to jazz must be understood within a context of this repeated denial, the travesty of blackface minstrelsy, and the fact that Jewish musicians were not denied the commercial wealth of jazz, or the ability to patronize it in segregated clubs. The “truth” about jazz is irrelevant. If we recognize the trauma that has created the impulse for these revisions of jazz, it will be easier to uncover the reasons behind the emotional impulse to deny them.

The invisible, impossible, improbable atom that is race has an awesome power of destruction and it behooves me to handle it with care. I’ll never forget the day a young white male fellow college student decided to belabor his point to me that American blacks had never created anything. I remember suggesting that soul food was a black creation and his response that it was actually Southern food, not black food. I remember suggesting that jazz music was a black creation and his response that it was a mixture of races and groups of which blacks were only one. I don’t know how the conversation ended but I remember how the unwelcome taste it left in

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<sup>63</sup> Sara Salih, *Judith Butler*. (London: Routledge 2002), 25.

my mouth lingered. This was well before I learned to question race as a concept or the language of who gets credit for what, or even to ask him why he wanted *me* in particular to ‘know’ this. Since then, I can’t help but find epistemic discussions of jazz suspicious. However, that suspicion doesn’t relieve me of my responsibility to address these continuing debates.

A concept just as reified as race, what people project onto jazz is more powerful as an object of projection than the “truth” of the genre. Rarely do we discuss the linguistic influences that went into the making of the term and how they shape our many different ways of understanding it. For starters, a quick search in the Oxford English Dictionary returned three hundred and twenty-two definitions and twenty six etymologies of the word jazz. The mere fact that I start with the OED is already problematic since that text shouldn’t necessarily be considered a definitive authority on the question of what jazz means. However, putting that aside for a moment, the term has always been vague, to say the least. The scope of the present project does not permit me to trace a full genealogy of the word, but I would like to make the point that the original uses of the word and its etymology of the word do help to explain why attempts at definition must always fail to escape an essentializing and frankly racist ideology.

The OED assumes that the origin of the word jazz comes from the more lurid term “jizz.” This naming of jazz for peppy, lively semen gave the term its originally negative and hyper-sexualized connotations, which led conservative Americans of all backgrounds to reject it—as well as the people playing the music who were also seen negatively and cast as hyper-sexualized. Part of the culture of jazz was fending off the naysayers. By 1920, Paris was already losing its “war on jazz.”<sup>64</sup> That same year the United States “Dance Masters” launched their very own “campaign to take the ‘jazz’ out of music,” citing jazz as responsible for the nation’s “objectionable dancing.”<sup>65</sup> People literally saw it as music from the jungle, and a group of professors at the Boston Zoological Garden even staged experiments to prove it. They played jazz music for a number of different animals and, of course, only the monkeys responded. “The monkeys, it was seen, easily appreciated the rhythm, and when the music became faster, stamped and stamped in a near frenzy. Finally they fell into a delirium. Suspended from the wires of the cage, they were completely crazy and threatened to demolish everything.”<sup>66</sup> According to New York’s 1922 first place high school essay winner, Elmer Kleefield, “Nothing is bad enough to say about this pestilence (jazz). It is a distortion of music. Austria had a form of so-called music similar to jazz. Look

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<sup>64</sup> “Still Jazzing,” James M. Shaw. *The Chicago Defender* (Big weekend Edition) (1905-1966); Apr 10, 1920; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975)p. 8

<sup>65</sup> “Dance Masters to Fight ‘Jazz,’” *The Chicago Defender* (Big weekend Edition) (1905-1966 Jul 17, 1920; ; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975)p. 7

<sup>66</sup> “Animals and Jazz,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967); Jun 25, 1921; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975)p. 12

at that country now. The war was not the only cause. This disease has made the people of Austria a country of maniacs.”<sup>67</sup> The second place winner asked the question, “Why does jazz music, despite its lack of beauty, originality and idealism, appeal to the youth?” Her answer was that the music answered the “call of the wild.” “The same call that found an answering note thousands of years ago in the Far East, in Greece and Rome, in the barbarians of Africa and the savage Indians of America.”<sup>68</sup> I can and do laugh at this, but I imagine it wasn’t funny to the audience reading the black newspaper in which it was reprinted. This is evidenced by the paper’s defensive response at the end of the essays, that the best jazz musicians can play classical music as well as jazz. Even my own colleagues have felt the need to qualify Adorno’s dislike of jazz with the suggestion that he hadn’t heard the “real” thing...whatever this is.

Obviously, the name and much of the discussion of the music was shrouded in the language of racism and exoticism from its beginnings. Back when the music started, it was generally hated enough for its perceived connection to black Americans to be left alone. In fact, it was this association with black Americans that made it an object of hatred by extension. No one wanted to take credit for jazz just yet. Only when the popularity of jazz begins to grow exponentially and exceed the confines of the US and its racial politics do people start asking where it comes from. People start to ask because it is hard to believe that something so successful and popular could have come from one of America’s most hated peoples.

America began its campaign to divorce jazz from the same people it had so gingerly pinned it on, back when it was considered a sin. Only, that process of defining and redefining jazz in terms of race and ethnicity never stopped. In “The Jazz Singer,” Jolson paints his face black in order to sing music that the writer of the original story attributes more to Jews than to anyone else. For a very long time, scholars and critics alike got to “have it both ways” by looking for and professing any origins of jazz that were not to be found in the American Negro population, while white American performers continued to dress in blackface in its name. This recurring question of where jazz came from began as absurd in its hilarity (and painful in its racism). One scholar argued that

Jazz songs are more Egyptian than Negroid in their origin [according to]. . . . the French Academy of Inscriptions and Belles Lettres. After years of study, the academy has come to the conclusion that modern African Languages have

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<sup>67</sup> “Jazz vs. Classical Music,” *Billboard*, *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967); June 10, 1922; ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The Chicago Defender* (1910-1975) pg. 8

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

as their base the Egyptian [indecipherable] rather than being languages based on roots of their own.<sup>69</sup>

The suggestion is that Egypt, which is somehow not African, is the only culture capable of producing jazz by virtue of the fact that its root words are borrowed from more acceptable civilizations? What? In 1929, the origin of jazz had become a “dark and dizzy mystery” and, as it would be generally agreed upon henceforth, “No race can claim the sole right to the title of the creators of American jazz,” or so says *New York Times*’ Gay Stevens.<sup>70</sup> In other words, black people can’t claim they created jazz. In 1936, Jewish American poet Louis Untermeyer speaks to students and faculty members at Morehouse and Spellman colleges to inform them that jazz had been “brought into being” by Jews and blacks.<sup>71</sup> It isn’t my intention to correct the many people who have tried to see the diversity present at the beginnings of jazz. Instead, I want to draw attention to racial discourse (another civil memory war) at the root of the whole discussion. Why do we even ask the question? To whom are we giving the answer? These attempts at convincing black people that they did not create the jungle monkey jizm music for which they had been so recently demonized were not successful. On October 15, 1927, a little over a week after *The Jazz Singer* was released, *The Chicago Defender* printed this warning:

Our musicians, who started this vogue in American music, have become satisfied with their creation and are sitting idly by and allowing white musicians to capitalize on their gift to the world. Many of these musicians who started the jazz age of music are without work, having been forced out by white musicians who are daily getting better in rendering this class of music. Musicians must not permit themselves to reach a point of satisfaction but must continue to improve on the music they gave this country and the world.<sup>72</sup>

All the scholars in the world hadn’t convinced anyone of anything. A year earlier, in Georgetown, Delaware, thousands of white Americans played and sang jazz at the lynching of Harry Butler, accused of attacking a 12-year-old girl, an unbearable coincidence that brings out the complicity of the white appropriation of the music, like the white appropriation in blackface, with the practice of lynching.

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<sup>69</sup> “Credit Egyptians With Starting Jazz Music,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967); April 20, 1929 ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975)pg. 13.

<sup>70</sup> “Birthplace of Jazz Music Is Still Unfixed in Many Minds,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967) Aug 31, 1929, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> “Race Is Praised for Gift of Jazz,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967) March 28, 1936; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> “Vote to Continue Jazz Music in Movie Houses,” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967) Oct 15, 1927; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Chicago Defender (1910-1975) p. 2.

Like so many other contested concepts, at any given time and place jazz happens to be whatever the person speaking of it says it is. Whatever it is, it is organically grown in the rich soils of American trauma. No way of reckoning who should receive credit for jazz will change that. As composer Noble Sissle has said, “Jazz is not compensation enough for what our fathers and mothers paid to give us these folk melodies. . . . Thousands of lives paid just for the rhythm of this jungle symphony.”<sup>73</sup> Whether *The Jazz Singer* contains any jazz music became irrelevant the moment the title was chosen. Jolson is a jazz singer because his face appears next to those very words. He blackened his face because he thought blackness was somehow connected to jazz, which was somehow connected to his art. When I use the term “jazz” to signify so many divergent ideas and musical styles, each time it is a reappropriation of a dirty word that has been used against me too many times. I love *The Jazz Singer* for its evidence, even as what that evidence proves has been so contested. No revisionist account of jazz or any American popular music can take the burnt cork off of Jolson’s face, once he has put it on. It’s there. It is jazz for some, trauma for others, and it is staring us in the face.

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<sup>73</sup> “What Price Jazz?” *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967) Apr 7, 1934; ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The Chicago Defender* (1910-1975), pg. 12



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