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# Keeping Time, Performing Place: Jazz Heterotopia in Candace Allen's *Valaida*

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ANNE DVINGE

The transatlantic jazz migration narrative circulates in the jazz world as a form of myth. Stories and anecdotes abound of musicians who settled in Europe for a longer period, some of them for good.<sup>1</sup> In jazz fiction, the same type of story is reproduced: a narrative concerned with Europe as a place where art trumps the double jeopardy of race and commerce, where black musicians can find acceptance of both their music and their person. Such narratives are about travelling towards and hoping to arrive at a Self. All too often, Europe fails to fulfill its utopian promise, as exoticism and racism reinforce the sense of being Other.<sup>2</sup>

Candace Allen's biographical novel *Valaida* (2004) traces the life and career of trumpet player, singer, dancer, and bandleader Valaida Snow.<sup>3</sup> It focuses at length on her stay in Denmark and particularly her incarceration in the Vestre Fængsel prison.<sup>4</sup> The novel aligns itself not only with a recently increased focus on transatlantic narratives and performance practice, but moreover with matters of geographical place as well as cultural and personal space.<sup>5</sup> *Valaida* moves through a series of geographical sites that take on the character of Foucauldian heterotopia: from institutionalized and rigid spaces like prisons and mental hospitals, to a series of performance spaces replete with self and community. Through a reading of the heterotopic spaces in the novel, I wish to call attention to the ways heterotopias are intimately connected to the nature of time and the body. I will argue that it is in synesthesia (the coming together of the senses), time, and in people themselves that the utopian potential resides. This is a potential that lies precisely in utopia's double sense of both perfection and deferral; as the novel demonstrates, it is the movement towards, rather than the arrival at perfection, that offers agency. Thus, the more utopian possibilities are to be found in the novel's transitory, musical, and performative time as *heterUtopian* instances of articulation and simultaneity.

## The Symbolic Meaning of Place

Michel Foucault argues that space, in a modern sense, gains meaning by its relation to other sites.<sup>6</sup> He names heterotopias in contrast to utopias as they, like utopias, are counter sites, but unlike utopias, are *real* places. They are “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneous represented, contested, and inverted.” These places of simultaneous reality and immateriality function as “counter sites” that are “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (24).

Recent readings and representations of heterotopias focus on the potential for the re-inventing or re-organizing of social order. For example, Kevin Hetherington posits heterotopias as modernity’s sites of utopian experiment and Margaret Kohn discusses “the heterotopia of resistance.”<sup>7</sup> However, a close reading of Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces” reveals a list of heterotopias that contain both progressive and utopian possibilities as well as more regressive, even dystopian, elements. The former reside in what Foucault refers to as heterotopias of crisis or compensation: places of transition, such as the ship, the theatre, and the mirror.<sup>8</sup> The latter are represented in the heterotopias of deviation, such as the prison or the mental hospital.

As Peter Johnson points out, the interpretations of heterotopia as a space of resistance tend to omit those heterotopias of deviation that would complicate this notion. He rightly argues that heterotopias reflect wider questions of power relations, but then ignores these dynamics when concluding that they ultimately “contest forms of anticipatory utopianism, hold no promise or space of liberation.”<sup>9</sup> It seems to me that readings of heterotopias as either utopian sites of resistance or as disruptions of utopia both tend to avoid the important question of power relations. Clearly, spaces of deviation, such as the prison or the mental hospital, demonstrate the power of one group over another. However, as my reading of *Valaida* will show, there is resistance to be found in such places. In turn, the more affirmative spaces, such as the festival, the theatre, and the garden also reveal complex systems of power.

These relations of power and agency are situated at the very centre of the Diaspora and migration narrative. Farah Jasmine Griffin points to the construction in these texts of what she calls “safe spaces,” which contain elements of Foucault’s heterotopias – especially those of crisis and compensation. The churches and the dance halls function both as “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” and as spaces that are “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” Griffin, however, points to the double nature of safe spaces, as they can be simultaneously progressive and reactionary (e.g., the church as affirming black humanity while consolidating a patriarchal gender hierarchy). The *narrative* safe spaces often take on the more

utopian or progressive function. They appear as moments of ritual, elements of oral culture, song, food etc.<sup>10</sup>

Music offers a particularly strong instance of safe space. As Josh Kun has eloquently demonstrated, the spatiality of music creates a space that “we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from.”<sup>11</sup> This “audiotopia,” suggests Kun, is akin to Foucault’s heterotopia in its ability to function as a “contact zone,” a sonic space that brings together “sites normally deemed incompatible,” thus opening the possibility of recontextualizing social, geographical, and personal spaces (23). Kun’s study focuses largely on recorded sound and the role of the listener, but as Jayna Brown states, “too often the aural is prioritized over the corporeal.” She argues for an understanding of “bodily utopias” in a more participatory form of liberation, where the body and the sensate are reincorporated into our understanding of sound and music.<sup>12</sup>

The blues, Griffin argues, is not a “passive migrant,” transported and consumed by the diaspora, but rather one that influences and creolizes any form with which it comes into contact.<sup>13</sup> In an inspired reading of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, Griffin suggests that “jazz becomes the metaphor of the migrant” (192), signifying the ability to shape and be shaped by the shift of location as well as musical form. Brent Edwards also points to this trope of jazz in a reading of Langston Hughes’s poem “Jazz Band in Parisian Cabaret” as shifting the “allusion to black modern mobility into another register, now transnational,” and he continues: “The many languages in the poem are a means of apprehending a music so intimately connected with dialogue and exchange among a group of performers and the audience that it can be approached only through a kind of critical multilingualism.”<sup>14</sup> Edwards’s investigation of Paris as the site of black internationalism, and particularly his engagement with the archive, can also be seen as illustrative of the heterotopic. In particular, his insistence on ambivalence and *décalage* reminds us of Foucault’s first mention of heterotopias in *The Order of Things*: “Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things . . . to ‘hold together.’”<sup>15</sup> It is in this ambivalence, in the breaking down of syntax in poetry and music that an alternative (linguistic or material) space can appear. Edwards hints at this in his reading of Hughes’s poem and jazz as forms of transnational articulation: “the articulation of a connection across difference – and also the kernel of what *cannot be carried over*: the sound of another tongue. At the smallest level, then, in the play of that productive ambivalence . . . the possibility of black internationalism is heard to be a matter of music.”<sup>16</sup>

That same internationalism is represented in the geographical movement of American jazz musicians during, between, and after the two World Wars (quite often as servicemen). Importantly, the birth of jazz coincided with the invention and

commercial use of sound technologies, such as the radio and sound recording. This meant a rapid dissemination through almost all corners of the world, bypassing print as means of dissemination. Thus, jazz bypassed literacy (i.e., education and class) and language (i.e., nationality and ethnicity)<sup>17</sup> and destabilized fixed notions of identity through what Kun calls “aural identification,” acting as a mirror that compels us to “take alterity as a sonic sign for who we are, or better, for who we want to become.”<sup>18</sup> Correspondingly, jazz musicians travelled as both arbiters of culture and nomadic others – “heterotopians” as Cauter and Dehaene coin it: “hated and adored, expelled and embraced by the polis; always ambiguously hosted as the representative of otherness.”<sup>19</sup> This otherness can be debilitating, fixing the subject in place. However, the necessity of an alternative modus operandi, one of movement versus stability, may also challenge the construction of not only the “polis,” but also the subject position. The bodies of the heterotopians may thus act as mirrors: throwing the reflections of society and self back and forth until the *mise en abîme* breaks down the syntax.

### **Framing Heterotopias in Allen’s *Valaida***

The multiple mirror images of the *mise en abîme* also establish the frame narrative of Candace Allen’s novel. Most significantly, as we meet Valaida Snow for the first time in the novel, we come face to face not with the woman, but with her reflection. Valaida uses the mirror again and again in the frame narrative, to assess her physical appearance during the course of a day of rehearsals and preparations for a gig at the Palace Theatre in New York. As she recalls and reconstructs her past while waiting to perform, each reflection “mirrors” not just her face, but her inner emotional journey. The repeated use of the mirror as a framing device points to the narrative’s use of heterotopic spaces that both complement and complicate a utopian function. As Foucault argues, the mirror is a “sort of mixed, joint experience”: on the one hand “a utopia, since it is a placeless place” and on the other a heterotopia insofar that it is a real object that “exerts a sort of counteraction” on the realities we view through it.<sup>20</sup> However, it is a counteraction which assumes a more problematic function in a Lacanian understanding of the mirror, as that which initiates alienation through the dialectic between the gestalt and fragmentation of the body.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the frame narrative’s use of the mirror simultaneously points towards the reconstitution of the self and the problematization of that self.

The frame narrative also takes place in the heterotopia of the theatre and the stage. Foucault refers to the theatre as a heterotopic site in the sense that it brings other places to life, but in the novel the stage also becomes the place where Valaida enacts her own simultaneity. We witness this the first time that Valaida and her sisters are on stage in Chattanooga’s Paradise Theatre:

Valaida can remember how her heart felt, how it had not beat out of her chest. It had slowed. She had felt at the self-same moment to be in and out of the time she lived in, on the stage with her sisters . . . but also in a space all her own, where all her senses seemed to work better, where, between all the singing and the dancing, the grinning and the clowning, she was knowing that next time there needed to be someplace for her to put the violin.<sup>22</sup>

As the time-space compression of the performance constitutes a “slice in time,” what Foucault calls the “heterochronic” of the momentary and fleeting,<sup>23</sup> the stage takes on meaning as a “crisis heterotopia” (24), providing personal transition: “this night had been Valaida’s baptism, this Paradise Theatre stage her river... [H]er Church would be the Night.”<sup>24</sup> This brings to mind Jayna Brown’s reading of the variety show of the early twentieth century, where the “ability to transmute the self” created a “designated site at which the porousness of the self, the way the lines were already blurred, could be acknowledged and played upon.” The variety show became a site where “black women reclaimed their bodies *in*, as well as *from*, the world of work.”<sup>25</sup>

In the novel, Valaida directs her energy towards becoming a performer and joins the cast of the black vaudeville show “Jimtown,” travelling the Theatre Owner’s Booking Association (TOBA) circuit.<sup>26</sup> A predominantly white organization, TOBA was created with the stated intention “to save the colored theatrical industry,” but in African-American circles the acronym was often translated as “Tough on Black Asses,” as it was notorious for exploiting and abusing the performers.<sup>27</sup> As Valaida says in a letter to her sister, “you get some of the best audiences in those states where white folks give coloured the worse kind of time,” citing the more desperate need for laughs and a good time.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, those places also involved a higher risk to black performers, particularly the risk of running into white folks at the wrong place and time. In one such incident, Valaida is lucky to lose only her trumpet.

Throughout these journeys the stage remains the empowering factor. In the letter to her sister, quoted above, Valaida continues: “*I can’t describe the feeling I get when I’m playing Antoine [her trumpet] on a stage, feeling the company all around me and the folks out front surprised and wondering and then clapping so loud and hooping and hollering just for me. There’s nothing like it, nothing*” (135). The stage comes to represent a counter site to the socially and racially oppressive space of the South – a safe space. Here, the community (both the familiar one of the Jimtown cast and the transient one of the crowd) offers support and participation.

However, it is one thing to perform a chorus or two planned for effect and novelty in the frame of a scheduled performance, and another to enter the space and time that musicians take for themselves, to kick back, to play, and to compete. Support is not what Valaida initially encounters when she, as a woman trumpeter, makes her first attempt to claim that space:

[The musicians have] taken no note of the young girl with a horn newly arrived at their side; they're vamping and vamping for Ruby. Only Roy, *Jimtown's* clarinet player, has paid Valada [sic<sup>29</sup>] any mind, and his eyes are saying, 'Not out here you ain't' as he peels off into another solo.

Now. Valada knows it's time to try. The surroundings blur and slow as she moistens her lips and concentrates on the chords, looking for the notes that are going to swing her up into the tune. Antoine's valves are moving smooth and ready. She's listening so hard that she can practically see the notes. . . . It's the chord. Valada closes her eyes and goes. She hits her note, and she's on the music. She's riding its shape; she's thrown a bit between its teeth; she's on it; she's dancing on its back.

When Valada opens her eyes, she finds the room has changed its shape. The young girl on the horn has pulled the room for a moment away from Ruby (142-43).

Again, musical time takes on a central and complex role in the "Now" of the music and the simultaneous slowing down of that very instant. As we enter the scene, the room and the space are defined in traditional gendered terms: male musicians playing (vamping) to and for a woman dancing. Ruby, the star of *Jimtown*, although a gun slinging, bisexual, powerful blues woman, still adheres to gendered rules of performance. The key moment is when Allen lets Valaida use the music to define her own space. The physical characteristics that are attributed to the music enable her to both see and feel for openings and ultimately bend the rules, and space, her way.

Valaida's geographical travels continue; true to the jazz migration narrative, she moves north, first to Chicago and then New York. Chicago is where the big time is and where Valaida glimpses "her future." The city is portrayed as a place of bright lights and big chances, as a space wide open to black people where light was "pushing hard into spaces that darkness might have felt were his to have." The first analogy Valaida offers is characteristically that of "a lime-lit stage," but unlike the stage of the theatre this "was true . . . what she'd call True North, the North of her imagination" (165). However, the discordance between "true" and "imagination" and her insistence on the veracity of this North reveals fissures in the fabric of her imaginings. Chicago may be where she first hears Joe "King" Oliver and his orchestra, and realizes that jazz music is her future, but it is also a place of violence and a rape, of low funds, and the realization that although she could cut it with the *Jimtown* musicians, the Chicago musicians keep a different time.

Likewise, in Allen's depiction of Valaida's travels to New York, Valaida is not able to recapture the sense of community and belonging that the music brought her earlier. Even when she joins an old *Jimtown* colleague, in a trio that will eventually take her to New York City, she is in a holding pattern, valuing "the Trio's umbrella while she trained herself to the New York time" (178). And New York itself keeps a different pace: "In Harlem time moves fast and slick. New Yorkers talk fast, think fast, focus in on the rapid buck. Colours are bright. People dress to be seen. Birds of paradise, flash, spats, rings on fingers, rhinestones on shoes, attitude draping high style around shoulders, and possibilities seemingly everywhere" (175). The fast, clipped sentences of the prose reflect the swiftness of the city as a space made up of movement and brief, sharp glimpses into opportunity. It is a fluid and constantly shifting instance of time-space compression. Nevertheless, power relations still rule and thus, the possibilities "seem" available, but rarely materialize. When they do, they involve physical or emotional discomfort, as when the patrons of a club shower the musicians with fistfuls of coins that "could sting and bruise if they actually hit you, but this was the stuff from which dreams were made" (176), or when Valaida finds that in order to get paid in higher and softer currency, she will have to cross the space between the stage and the tables (181) – moving away from the safe space of the stage, however ambiguous, to the more volatile power and gender dynamics of the floor. Those dynamics also rule the music scene in New York. When Valaida tries to sit in at a jam session, the musicians refuse to acknowledge her or let her in, leaving her "hanging in space" (185), the music a mere void.

As New York refuses to yield its promises, Valaida moves on, her migratory patterns expanding, leading her first to China. Here, Valaida is for the first time placed in a context where difference and color take on a different meaning. Rules suddenly change: "The Chinese didn't know that Negroes were niggers. The Chinese didn't know that Negroes existed, and they couldn't have cared less. This was a new sensation, being around people who weren't coloured and, outside of being curious, didn't give a damn about what she was doing there" (220). Interestingly, Valaida doesn't see the Chinese as "coloured," although she catches herself parroting white notions of blacks in her thoughts about the Chinese, and understands that in this new place, white people are once again engaged in a game of exploitation and segregation. But this time it is directed at another ethnic group than African American, and thus, she chooses to close her eyes and mind to the politics and possibilities of third world solidarity. When asked if she knows politics, "Valada shrugs. 'I sing and dance. I play the trumpet'" (224).

Because Valaida refuses to recognize parallels between her own experience of discrimination and that of the people surrounding her, China never becomes real. Valaida stays within the close circle of musicians, never venturing out into the city of Shanghai or the culture more generally. Only when she meets the Russian man, Karol, are intercultural exchanges made: not only in that most basic encounter, the intimacy with and curiosity about the other's body, the differences, the sameness, but also in

the medium they share: “Karol’s [music] was not in the language Valada used. It moved off and against itself; it slid between times, but its stories were the same, love, loneliness, victory, search” (225). When introduced to the Russian exile community, Valaida enjoys moments of affinity in music making. Dance, in particular, seems to hold the potential of translating between musical languages as movement and rhythm transcend cultural and linguistic grammars (227). However, Karol is not much of a cultural guide, lost as he is in memories of the Russia from which his family has been exiled, and escaping frequently to the opium den, sucking Valaida in with him. The nature of time is bound up in Karol’s nostalgia and Valaida’s escapism – an ahistoric and reactionary time. In this instance, her music becomes a heterotopic space that fails to articulate any real alternative constructions of community or self.

Neither in Valaida’s travels to the big jazz cities in the US, Chicago and New York, or in her wider transnational travels, do the heterotopias encountered bring about any significant utopian potential or moment. Thus, the narrative demonstrates that mobility is not in itself liberating. Blatant racism may be exchanged for a more insinuating exoticism, but objecthood may remain or gender roles still be reinforced. This is particularly clear in the ways time either seems to be too fast or too static for Valaida; her travels paradoxically lock her in place.

### **Keeping Time, Constructing Self**

As the narrative moves to Europe, Denmark in particular is constructed as the setting for a whole series of heterotopic spaces. Initially, Valaida is introduced to Copenhagen by a young Danish man, Norbert Nilsson, who courts her. But Norbert’s Copenhagen remains a place that is not a place. With its gardens and renaissance palaces, it reminds her most of all of a fairy tale “like one of Alvada’s storybooks” (292).

Similarly, when she is taken to visit Norbert’s family, her impression is quite detached. The Nilsson home is a place where time has come to a halt, with its high ceilings, subtle shades of blue and grey, and emphasis on form (Allen’s depiction seems inspired by the interiors of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi). The word “soporific” sums up the experience for Valaida (293). The heterochronic nature of the central heterotopia in Valaida’s life, the stage, is based primarily on simultaneity, the suspension *and* speeding up of time in the spectacle. In contrast, the heterotopic space of the Nilsson home is based on the accumulation of time and the refinement of custom over time. The moment is static rather than fluid, in effect creating a space in which openness is illusory and “where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Valaida’s *entrance* into the Nilsson home, as the exotic and racialized other, simultaneously *excludes* her.

Those same factors, exclusion and time, also play a part in Valaida’s experience of the amusement park, Tivoli. Tivoli is yet another site with fairy-tale qualities – a counter site to the grim realities of German occupation, placed

somewhere between the eternal aspect of the accumulation of time (like the Nilsson home) and the temporal aspects of what Foucault terms “the mode of the festival” (26). This time, though, Valaida is not the excluded party: the German occupation forces are, as they are studiously ignored by the Danes. As Valaida muses, “Tivoli was Denmark’s wonderland. Every wonderland had its ogres, but they lost much of their power when you paid them no particular mind.”<sup>31</sup>

During the occupation Valaida experiences a new side to the Danes. An appreciative audience before, they now see a greater symbolism in both Valaida and the music. The racial and cultural “other” is suddenly hailed as representing dissent and rebelliousness – as a means of opposing the German occupation forces – but also as a sort of “same,” offering release and affirmation: “To the Danes, particularly the younger ones, jazz music seemed to be more than entertainment, it seemed to be providing them with some kind of release. . . . Taking to the music and dancing in a way that reminded Valaida how folks did back home, as though music was the one way that they were allowed to feel free” (290-91). The racial other, through the music, becomes the political same. As in the meeting with the Russian exiles, it is through music and movement that a sense of shared humanity arises.

Despite this, the Danish winter and the continued presence of the German forces cuts into the sociability of the Danes and without the chance to perform, Valaida becomes increasingly isolated. Arrested on theft and drug charges, Valaida is incarcerated in Vestre Fængsel in Copenhagen. The prison is represented as a void, a non-place consisting of hard surfaces, rough texture and grating noises; the culmination and the final, extreme representation of the Danish heterotopias and Valaida’s own inner void. Here, I want to suggest a third type of heterochrony in addition to Foucault’s accumulatory and transitory same. This is a heterochrony linked to the end of time, the static, frozen time of places of incarceration and banishment, where time slows down to such an extent that it seems to stop altogether. Significantly, there is no music to be found in the prison, where all the sounds “are in echo, clangs and scrapes and whistles and guttural shouts in a language she is not understanding” (240). Left with no music and no musical, dynamic time, Valaida has no escape.

Foucault lists prisons as heterotopias of deviation, places where society confines those that deviate from the desired norm.<sup>32</sup> In *Discipline and Punish* he points specifically to the power of surveillance, or panopticism, where the effect is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Valaida feels the powerlessness of being the one observed, deprived of the agency of looking back: “They don’t help her; they barely talk to her, and she sees almost nothing of them; but they won’t leave her alone. Opening the grate, sometimes she sees a flick of eye, sometimes she hears breathing, sometimes she catches their odour. . . . The gate closes, then hardly a moment to recover from the last invasion before the iron grates open again.”<sup>34</sup> Like Fanon, Valaida is fixated by that gaze, “sealed into [a] crushing objecthood”<sup>35</sup> – a

gaze that has followed her from the Atlantic passage, the gaze of the Danish bourgeoisie in their drawing rooms, the gaze of the occupying Germans, and finally the doctor who diagnoses her drug addiction.

The hospital that Valaida is subsequently taken to is yet another heterotopia. It is on one hand a more open place than the prison, and on the other it remains closed. In the place *between* outside and inside Valaida once again faces herself, as she catches a glimpse of her own reflection in a window. In this strange liminal space, signified not just by the heterotopia of the mirror, but also by the transparency and ambiguity of a reflection in a window pane, she regains a little piece of herself:

Yesterday she'd caught sight of her reflection in a window. . . . To see what? Sunken cheeks, hollow eyes, hair on end and matted all over her head. Repeated splashing with ice cold water had brought some life back to her complexion, she had felt the face blood rushing and its muscles tensing and relaxing, tensing and relaxing. She could almost feel herself returning to herself; but there was next to nothing that could be done about her head . . . nothing she could do but braid it down along her scalp like some sharecropper's wife. It felt better, yes, but no way would she allow non-crazy people to see her. A Coloured Queen of Rhythm had her pride after all.<sup>36</sup>

This passage marks a significant shift in the nature of the gaze. Here, Valaida re-associates the “see/being seen dyad,” viewing herself simultaneously as subject and object, or public persona, thereby gaining control of what is being seen.<sup>37</sup> Vision, as Foucault's treatment of the panopticon so clearly reveals, is about control and knowledge.<sup>38</sup> He also suggests in his treatment of the mirror as a heterotopic site that vision offers a space where the self is reframed and reconstituted: “Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.”<sup>39</sup> However, keeping a Lacanian sense of the mirror in mind, this sort of reconstituting requires the creation of symbolic order. As Valaida reclaims her sense of pride, she does so through the self that is interconnected most strongly with her distinctive symbolic order and source of *jouissance*, that of music. Scholar Jayna Brown's work on black women performers offers an insight into the dynamics of music and body as she describes dance as a “lexicon reflecting the dialectic process of the modern transformation: the modern body continually reinventing itself, in and against its environment.”<sup>40</sup> It is through and in the music as embodiment that Valaida rehabilitates her “body as a site of joy and exaltation”<sup>41</sup>: “She needs to dance in reminder of what she's been and shall be. Valaida is a prisoner, but she has at her

disposal the freedom of the insane. Any freedom is better than none and Valaida takes it. Within herself she finds some music, she marks its time, and then she dances. Folks are watching, as well they should, because Valaida Snow is the Coloured Queen of Rhythm; and she's dancing" (324). Significantly, Valaida finds and keeps this music within herself. In jazz, the term "ghost notes" refers to notes that are barely audible, often resulting in an indeterminacy of pitch. Valaida's ghosting of her music allows her to reinvent herself, as she uses musical ambiguity to unfold her space and her own self.

### **Music as Dynamic Space-Time and Agency**

In Allen's narrative, music has the power to transcend or change not only circumstances, but also space and time. Its very tangible qualities can be used as a ride or stepladder to another plane or space, with the physical place around it changing character as well. As a young girl, Valaida invests the music with the sheer joy of playing, but as she grows so does the space the music inhabits. It moves from being a joyride to more of an actual structure – an architectural composition:

Valaida listened hard and entered the music. . . . After the melody's intro and Earl's left-hand-to-the-right-hand cascades of piano sound, her space was opened and Valaida jumped in. She blew. . . . She entered the music and saw its symmetry all around her. She saw the chords, embellishes, the references to other songs as plain as day behind her eyeballs, and she used them. She jumped from bar to bar like a benzine-fuelled billy goat. . . . She was aware of nothing but the construction of this architecture of sound. (327)

The characteristics of that space change with the circumstances. For instance, at a recording session in London, the British musicians provide not a sense of swing (with the elasticity of the beat that this requires), but a steady time, like a "metronome" that has to be approached differently (351). But as Valaida and the musicians form a relationship and reach a more complex level of communication, space opens up in this setting too:

Duncan held out a platform, and Valaida took off. She wasn't flying like she had with Earl. She felt like she was climbing through the branches of an old spreading tree. She was fighting her way to the light. Webs and leaves were blocking her views. She could only sense which way to turn . . . . From deep within her being she could hear someone wailing. The pain of it was near unbearable. It

stifled her breath, made her choke and stumble while her fingers worked on their own accord. Her eyes were closed but she saw colours. The insides of her eyelids were streaked with green and scarlet until suddenly everything blazed into a radiance of white. She was there. She had made it (354).

There is a strong physical quality to this space and it can only be negotiated through a synesthesia of the senses in sound, movement, and a sort of inner vision. Bruce Johnson argues, in his article “Jazz as Cultural Practice,” that the music offers an alternative to traditional so-called western aesthetics as “an improvised music which comes into being in a moment of relatively unscripted performance and in response to social practice.”<sup>42</sup> He particularly points to the breaking down of the mind/body hierarchy in the “meshing of kinesthetic and cognitive representation” that improvisation requires (106). As when Valaida’s fingers are working along independently of her thoughts, improvisation requires the ability to let the body take over and relinquish cognitive control. Thus, jazz exists in opposition to a traditional episteme that privileges vision and control. However, to dismiss vision entirely as a factor seems biased on the side of sound and gesture. As Kun points out, African American tradition eschews the usual sound/vision hierarchies and dichotomies in an expressive culture “where sound and vision, the aural and the scriptural, have always been interlinked.”<sup>43</sup> Jazz performance is as much spectacle as it is sound and movement, and I would suggest that it is in the contact zone between the senses that the music offers its greatest potential for imagining a different self. We see this when Valaida restores herself at the hospital, not just through cleaning herself up, but through listening for a beat and by reclaiming the space around her through dancing. We see it again in the quote above, where musical (and personal) progress comes through sound, gesture, and sight.

What allows the narrative to posit a formulation of alternative space is a revision and reversal of the classical western epistemological paradigm of vision, knowledge, and power. First, it reverses the power relations of the gaze. Once Valaida sees herself and takes control of her representation, she empowers herself. But it is not just through use of the gaze that this growth is made possible. Only through the juxtaposition of several senses – sight, hearing, and movement – can the hegemony of vision be overturned for a dialogic relationship between the ocular, the acoustic, and the kinesthetic. Music is time, a flexible and dynamic time at that. Thus, these relationships are not stable or static; their meanings slip and shift, from signifying a private safe space for Valaida to a collective exchange between her and others.<sup>44</sup>

Jazz is dialogic, both in its repetition and revision of material and in the practice of improvisation. Musicians must constantly listen and shift the “conversation” according to what is being “said”: to let the musical statement be a

response to the ones that went before. Therefore, it is noteworthy how absent communication is from a number of heterotopic sites in the novel. Once Valaida travels outside of the US, the language barrier is a significant factor, adding to the sense of disconnectedness that is so prevalent. Juxtaposed with this is the communicative aspect of music. It is in musical situations that Valaida closes the gap between linguistic and cultural misapprehension, and engages in the collective aspect of the music, what scholar Christopher Small refers to as *musicking*. With this term, Small shifts the focus from music as object to music as activity, insisting that “music’s primary meanings are not individual at all but social.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, meanings are not separate from, but part and parcel of the sounds and “a musical performance, while it lasts, brings into existence relationships that model in metaphoric form those which [we] would like to see in the wider society of [our] everyday lives” (46). It is the shared flow, the sense of *communitas*, which creates a space that Valaida can enter. Again, movement and gesture become central in a kinesthetic and bodily knowing of that space as Small points to *musicking* as a means of closing gaps we cannot close with words (59). Music – as a verb rather than a noun – provides Valaida with a means of escape, but also with a space where she is the agent of her own life and story.

It is in the crucial twin aspects of *musicking* and the importance of sound and gesture that the utopian spaces of the narrative can be understood in terms of diasporic practice. Edwards focuses his readings in diasporic practice around the concepts of translation/articulation and *décalage*. The first of these concepts can be seen in conjunction with Small’s *musicking*, as the ritual of music on a different level is engaged in the same articulation and translation of human relationships. It is when the music performs this act of interpersonal translation that its space opens up for Valaida, creating momentary audiotopias. The second of these concepts, the *décalage*, is a way of thinking about articulation and translation in terms of the body and gesture, a simultaneous *disarticulation* that allows movement.<sup>46</sup> When Valaida pieces herself together again, through touch, song and rhythm, she does so in a dialectic movement between the fragmented and the whole, the ghosted and the voiced. Here the synesthetic articulation – a jointedness that simultaneously signifies separateness – becomes a metaphor for relationships in diasporic practice and in the always deferred utopian potential of heterotopia. Thus, while Valaida engages in music making in an act of articulation, she is also constantly limited and circumscribed by gender, race, and dystopic heterotopias partly of her own construction, pushing her towards a perpetually improvised, but also imprecise self. There is no arrival at a utopia that leaves us trapped in a frozen moment of impossible perfection, but rather a heterotopian space that offers a progressive sense of place despite and because of its indeterminacy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include Ben Webster, Sidney Bechet, Dexter Gordon, and Johnny Griffin; see for example Bill Moody, *The Jazz Exiles: American Musicians Abroad* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Harold Flender, *Paris Blues* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957); Richard Yates, "A Really Good Jazz Piano," in *Hot and Cool: Jazz Short Stories*, Marcela Breton ed. (New York: Plume, 1990); and Julio Cortázar, "The Pursuer," in *Blow-up, and Other Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Candace Allen, *Valaida* (London: Virago Press, 2005). Over the last decade there has been a renewed interest in Valaida Snow (1904-56). Mark Miller's biography, *High Hat, Trumpet, and Rhythm: The Life and Music of Valaida Snow* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2007), is a thorough resource for the historical context and facts of Valaida's life and career. The main concern of this article, however, is the way Allen's narrative *in the novel*, through the trope of jazz, illuminates aspects of heterotopia. As Allen states in the afterword to the novel, it is "first and foremost a work of fiction" (502). Thus, when I refer to "Valaida," I am not referring to the historical person but to the fictional character and the novelistic voice Allen has created for this character.

<sup>4</sup> A prison located west of central Copenhagen. Contrary to the popular story, perpetuated until recently, that Valaida Snow was sent to a Nazi concentration camp in Denmark, she was first interned at this low grade security prison and then later transferred to the psychiatric ward of the University Hospital in Copenhagen to treat her drug addiction and possibly also to protect her from the German occupational forces. In addition to Miller, see also Howard Rye, "Snow, Valaida," *Grove Music Online*, accessed April 30, 2011, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/J418900>; and Jayna Brown. *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, Kindle ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), Ch. 7. Brown in particular offers thoughtful speculation as to the reasons Snow put this story in circulation in the first place.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999); and Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 16, no. 1 (1986): 23.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London: Routledge, 1997), 51-53. Margaret Kohn, "The Power of Place: The House of the People as Counterpublic," *Polity* 33, no. 4 (2001): 508.

<sup>8</sup> The mirror is, in Foucault's interpretation, both utopian and heterotopic. As I shall demonstrate later, this double nature is highly significant.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'Different Spaces'," *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2006): 84-87.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24, 27. Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin?": *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Jayna Brown. "Buzz and Rumble: Global Pop Music and Utopian Impulse." *Social Text* 102 (Spring 2010): 129.

<sup>13</sup> Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin?" 56.

<sup>14</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 66. In Edwards's formulation the movement between continents and, more importantly, linguistic and cultural differences, signifies the strongest moment in diasporic practices where an articulation and simultaneous translation of black internationalism takes place (4-7). However, translation (and thus articulation) is not confined to the interlinguistic realm, but occurs whenever a shift takes place between one (cultural) code to another.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 68 (my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> This dissemination through sound technology offers a parallel to Benedict Anderson's theories of the importance of print culture in the formation of national identities, but in this case it is the transnational that is imagined into being. As Taylor Atkins points out, jazz "represented nothing more profoundly than the coevalness of modern time: as they listened and danced to jazz, people imagined they were experiencing modernity simultaneously with their counterparts in distant lands." E. Taylor Atkins, ed., *Jazz Planet* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), xiv. Benedict R. O. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Kun, *Audiotopia*, 93.

- <sup>19</sup> Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cauter, *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society* (London: Routledge, 2008), 96.
- <sup>20</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.
- <sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 75-77.
- <sup>22</sup> Allen, *Valaida*, 75-76.
- <sup>23</sup> Just as Foucault points to different types of heterotopias, he also suggests different types of heterochronies, e.g., that of the fleeting or that of the accumulating. He defines the current epoch as one of a network of interconnected times and places rather than a singular, evolutionary time line, hereby emphasizing the simultaneity of both heterotopias and heterochrony. Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 22, 26. Stemming from theories of evolution, where heterochrony indicates a moment of speeding up or slowing down of one evolutionary stage in relation to others, one may, in the context of music and performance, think of heterochrony as the difference in time that resides in the space between time as progression and time as momentaneous. Allen's novel itself can be said to constitute such a heterochrony, in its late-twentieth century reconfiguration of early- and mid-twentieth century moments of transnationalism.
- <sup>24</sup> Allen, *Valaida*, 77.
- <sup>25</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 6, 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Allen is here making an allusion to Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's hugely successful African American musical, *Shuffle Along* (1921), the plot of which centers on the mayoral race of (the fictive) Jimtown. See "Shuffle Along," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, accessed April 30, 2011, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/51141>.
- <sup>27</sup> Bernard L. Peterson, *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816-1960: A Comprehensive Guide to Early Black Theatre Organizations, Companies, Theatres, and Performing Groups* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997), 194-95.
- <sup>28</sup> Allen, *Valaida*, 134.
- <sup>29</sup> Allen uses different spellings for Valaida's name as the novel progresses chronologically, just as Valaida Snow herself changed her name over the course of her career.
- <sup>30</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 26.
- <sup>31</sup> Allen, *Valaida*, 318.
- <sup>32</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.
- <sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 201-2.

<sup>34</sup> Allen, *Valaida*, 253-54.

<sup>35</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.

<sup>36</sup> Allen, *Valaida*, 315-16.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

<sup>38</sup> For the ways vision has dominated thought and representation in modernity see also David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, "Buzz and Rumble," 129.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Johnson, "Jazz as a Cultural Practice," *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103.

<sup>43</sup> Kun, *Audiotopia*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> Here, one may also draw on George Lewis's definition of Afrological jazz improvisation as "epistemological other," precisely through the "temporally multilaminar aspect of improvisation" – that is, the continued connection of the music to its pasts and presents in a personal narrative; in opposition to the Eurological insistence on indeterminacy and ephemerality, which upholds classical epistemological divisions between object and subject. George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 143, 148.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 14-15.

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