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Despite the Blues: Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison's Blues Based Works

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Despite the Blues: Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison's Blues Based Works

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Abstract:

Despite the Blues: Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison's Blues Based Literature

*Ain't got no mother, ain't got no culture
Ain't got no friends, ain't got no schoolin'
Ain't got no love, ain't got no name
Ain't got no ticket, ain't got no token
Ain't got no god*

–Nina Simone, “Ain’t Got No-I Got Life,” from the album *Nuff Said* (1968).

In between human intention and reality lies a disproportionate space that Albert Camus labels “the absurd.” Modern man’s affliction is thus absurd, as orthodox systems turn obsolete, the traditional virtues of the past cease to be familiar. The epistemology of the absurd may not have developed from American soil; but I argue that a resonant form of the absurd does. Absurdity becomes manifest by the form of the blues– American and absurd in creation, the blues depends on a feeling that things are not right. More precisely, the awareness of disproportionality between the interior self and the exterior inform the essence of American blues music. In the process of writing his first novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison writes to a friend: “I told Langston Hughes in fact, that it’s the blues, but nobody seems to understand what I mean.” Taking Ellison’s observation seriously, this project looks at the qualities contingent to the blues and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

In contrast as well as accompaniment to Ellison’s contribution to blues-based literature, Richard Wright too employs the blues in his fiction, yet in a different fashion. Like any instrumentalist or musician, Ellison and Wright navigate their crafts with decisive, individual personality. In following the quests of two protagonists in pursuit of the same thing, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Wright’s *The Outsider* render profound parallels; but the ways in which freedom becomes exercised by their protagonists ultimately decipher divergence. Not only able to be read in the novels, but felt in the consciousness of their protagonists, Wright and Ellison express varying traditions of blues music that inspire questions of heroism. Protagonists *Invisible Man* and Cross Damon desire and facilitate their freedom, but when two characters, at first glance, bear recognition to each other: How seriously should we take these heroes or anti heroes,

men or characters? Through unfolding and seemingly endless events of rage, injustice, and misunderstanding, both novels saturate their environment with absurdity (*Invisible Man* begins *underground*, to say the least), and in some ways their absurd actions are justified. Cross and Invisible Man are right to be angry, but what about when Cross commits murder? How far can these characters go until we stop rooting for them and stop reading? Life is too messy, dirty, and bulging. Wright and Ellison achieve and propagate this tone in their narrative as the absurdity unfolds and builds with each experience. Their protagonists face a challenge: To be, or not to be blue?

*I've got life, I've got my freedom
I've got life
I've got the life
And I'm going to keep it
I've got the life*

—Last lines of Nina Simone's "Ain't Got No-I Got Life," from the album *Nuff Said* (1968).

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Introduction:

One encounter with the blues can be quite hard to forget. While waiting for a train to Moorhead, Mississippi in 1903, W.C. Handy was awakened by “the weirdest music I had ever heard,” and beheld a ragged man using a knife as a slide for his guitar.¹ It seems too perfect, too in tune with the blues to be true; the solution Handy had been searching low and high for had been with him the entire time, he just did not know it. For years, Handy had been performing minstrel shows and studying classical compositions of music, for he had always been surrounded by and acquainted with the blues, but it had never occurred to him that this music could attract listeners, let alone financial security. Handy would write of the blues in the *Chicago Defender* in 1919: “The Blues are ambiguous,”² a proclamation this project applies to the expression of the blues infused works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Like Handy, these authors too catch the blues; infused by their alternative upbringings and backgrounds, a formula is made to express distinct perspectives that decide the tones and timbres of their works.

Stanley Crouch aligns that: “One cannot speak of Negro culture in this country without speaking of the blues”³– I would also add that one cannot speak of America without speaking of African American culture. The blues is a music about human will; oscillating between frailty and strength, the possibilities of the human condition become expressed by the music’s tendency to the tragic side of life. In “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ralph Ellison argues against the criticism

¹ Robertson, David. *W. C. Handy : The Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues*, University of Alabama Press, 2011.

² “The Blues are ambiguous”: *Chicago Defender*, 6 September 1919.

³ Crouch, Stanley. “Blues to Be Constitutional: A Long Look at the Wild Wherefores of Our Democratic Lives as Symbolized in the Making of Rhythm and Tune.” *The All-American Skin Game, Or, the Decoy of Race: The Long and the Short of It*, 1990-1994, New York, Pantheon Books, 1995.

aimed at Richard Wright's autobiographical work, *Black Boy*. Charged with a failed attempt at explaining Wright, Ellison defends *Black Boy*:

Wright saw his destiny— that combination of forces before which man feels powerless—in terms of a quick and casual violence inflicted upon him by both family and community. His response was likewise violent, and it has been his need to give that violence significance which has shaped his writings (Ellison 83).

Undertoning Wright's works are features of fear and hostility, but not without justification: "Yet in it there was an all-important qualitative difference: it represented a groping for individual value" (Ellison 85). Ellison administers in "Richard Wright's Blues," a view of Wright that draws on the motivation of the blues. Like the music: "... the blues was a music that developed because of the Negro's adaption to, and adaption of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro's peculiar position in this country" (Jones 66), Ellison puts forth that the qualities resonant to *Black Boy* do not need to "explain" Wright but rather reveals parts of him that his work is able to transmit through a personal expression of the blues, specific to Wright as an individual.

Does the blues have to be a part of their works? Of course not, but they are; and are exercised for a reason. The ways in which they differ translate coded meanings that delineate varying conceptions of freedom, resulting in unique expressions of the blues that work at exposing their split: Should the blues be implemented in literature as a weapon or instrument? This project considers the movement of the blues impulse into a position of celebration from sorrow as expressed through the works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. At the core of their

writing, and their individuality, the attitude of the blues is inspired by means of oscillatory contradiction: *I laughs too, but I moans too*" (Ellison 9).

Chapter One: The Morphology of Richard Wright's Reconsidered Individualism

In Adams County, Mississippi, Richard Wright was born into a “veritable hell,”⁴ as fellow author Margaret Walker points out. The Mississippi governor in 1908, the year Wright was born, was James Kimble Vardaman, known as “The Great White Chief.” Gaining electoral support through white supremacy, The Great White Chief pledged allegiance to controlling the African American population. More accurately, the public declarations delivered by Vardaman distinguished him as a voice of control and violence, as he issued instructions and led by example: “The knowledge of books does not seem to produce any good substantial result with the Negro, but serves to sharpen his cunning, breeds hopes that cannot be fulfilled, creates an inclination to avoid labor, promotes indolence, and in turn leads to crime.”⁵

The Great White Chief stands as a singular example of the Southern spirit at the time of Wright's birth— How does the African American author write about such an overtly vicious and violent environment? How does one live it and write through it? Richard Wright confronts these questions with force as he utilizes his fiction as a weapon: “Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?”⁶ Out of the Southern darkness, Wright emerges exposed to and equipped by the language of his environment, inspiring a new sense of individualism determined by his resistance to resorting to the underground.

⁴ See Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius* (New York: Amistad-Warner, 1988), 13.

⁵ Governor James Vardaman of Mississippi quoted in Stuart Grayson Noble's *Forty years of the public schools in Mississippi: With Special Reference to the Education of the Negro* (Negro Universities Press, 1969), 114.

⁶ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 293.

The latter part of the nineteenth century lengthens the shadow of segregation and oppression intrinsic to American political, social, and cultural history into the modern landscape as the turn of the century is prefaced by the implementation of Jim Crow laws. Possibilities of freedom, such as leisure and movement⁷; became actualized during the Civil War and were further reinforced by the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, yet the veil of disproportionate freedom was shaded even darker and in even more insidious tones under the execution of Jim Crow laws following the empty hope delivered by the war. Lou Reed has a line from “Underneath the Bottle,” from the album *The Blue Mask*, in which I find a bitterly ironic reflection of the status of post-Civil war America: “things go from bad to weird,” as the nation’s population is further split and qualified under the ambiguous yet contemptuous influence of Jim Crow laws. An effect of whirling consciousness is created in the American people, particularly among the African American population. To be free or not to be at all was the attitude Richard Wright inherited, but the forces of the tumultuous environment he was born into identified him as disjuncture from preceding generations and definitions of identity. Born in 1908, Wright grew up in the wake of failed promise and seemingly idled hopefulness; but the morphology of his position as a major American/African American writer manifested through the limitations of the setting surrounding him as he pushes to transcend the beaten path.

In the summer of 1945, Ralph Ellison’s “Richard Wright’s Blues” was published in *The Antioch Review*, in which Ellison addresses the subject of Wright's autobiographical work as a transformatory, accurate, and profoundly complex piece of writing. As a concluding declaration, Ellison leaves a suspended and gilded image of Wright for his reader to sit with:

⁷ See Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York, W. Morrow, 1963; pp 63-64.

Freed here of fear and the threat of violence, their lives have at least been organized, scaled down to possessable proportions. And in this lies Wright's most important achievement: He has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and "going-under-ground" into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America" (Ellison 94).

Ellison understands Wright's ability to transform "self-annihilation" into productive confrontation by the example set in *Black Boy*. As Ellison sees it, Wright's overall achievement as a Black writer is aligned with the ability to organize and convert a prototypical identity into an active and possible individual destiny. This bisection between reality and resistance is the very spirit that characterizes Richard Wright, a quality that, Ellison points out, is particularly mirrored by the blues. His prose work is similar to the blues in both form and resonance, and for Ellison, is the unique feature that makes Wright a genuine artist. I intend to synthesize the creation and evolution of blues music in America with Richard Wright's works as a crucial feature of identity, culture, and fated literary acclaim. In the hope of responding to and dispelling the criticism leveled at *Black Boy*, he finds that the only way to read Wright's prose is through the experience of the blues, as he too feels the influences of the "immediate folk culture" (Ellison 78)⁸.

Arguably Ellison's most significant proposition in "Richard Wright's Blues," sparks a synthesization between music and literature:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form,

⁸ See "Richard Wright's Blues," *Antioch Review* (1945), rpt. in *Shadow and Act*. New York, Vintage International, 1995. P. 78

the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically (Ellison 78).

Ellison's evaluation sparks an almost immediate literary discourse. Earl Conrad, a writer for the *Chicago Defender*, in turn responded to Ellison, proposing a title to authors like Wright, working to evoke the blues by works of writing. Just a few months later in December of 1945, Conrad groups Wright, Ellison, and Chester Himes in conversation to apply a name and title for their craft:

Each of these writers is individually highly sensitized, nervous, jittery, ultra-critical, cynical. They have produced what I call "The Blues School of Literature." I take the term "blues" from an essay written recently by Ralph Ellison, called "Richard Wright's Blues." Ellison too thinks and works in this vein, and Himes in his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, also portrays one of those frustrated characters, Robert Jones, a man who has been hard hit and is pretty devoid of hope (Conrad 11).⁹

I intend to show the ways in which Ellison, initially drawn to Wright's ability to mimic the mood of the blues, as well as the utter fire and defiance he personified, eventually found his own blues to "play," and freedom to find. Starting with *Black Boy*, the subject of "Richard Wright's Blues," Wright crafts a narrative guided by the blues that is involved with the loss of identity and unfound freedom. Intrinsic to blues music is an underlying sense of darkness or loss—yet it is not this feature alone that defines having, getting, or feeling, "the blues." Rather, the possibility of transcendence experienced through blues music as its subject and tonality is coupled with grace and dread, with freedom and condemnation, is in fact what defines the blues from other genres. To see beyond the blues or perhaps, through the blues, is Wright's conviction as a writer as he is able to convert not just the medium, but the philosophy to the craft as well. In

⁹ Earl Conrad, "Blues School of Literature," *Chicago Defender*, 22 December 1945, 11

his autobiography, Wright confronts himself with the question: What was it that made me conscious of possibilities?¹⁰ From the Southern darkness, Wright undoubtedly caught a sense of freedom that would leave him an outsider to his home and constantly in search of one to replace it. *Black Boy* begins a morphology of Wright's impulse of the blues that initiates his indelible mark of "a distinct personality striving against others" (Wright 29).

One is welcomed with fire and matriarchal wrath in the opening passages of *Black Boy*. The chronicles of a tense upbringing are revealed by Wright; these explicit, particular elements provide foundational material to Wright's later work and development as a writer. Often falling to the description of a son born into hopelessness to an illiterate, sharecropping father and schoolteacher, the fact that might be overlooked is that Richard and Nathaniel Wright were part of the first generation of ex-slaves in America, born free after the Civil War. The social entry of the nuanced "ex-slave" stands precarious to traditional American society and it is my opinion that the experience of the first generation of ex-slaves across the nation is widely overlooked and far too unappreciated. LeRoi Jones explains that the new ex-slave population had to face challenges of an entirely different evil: "...the entrance of Negroes into the more complicated social situation of self-reliance proposed multitudes of social and cultural problems that they never had to deal with as slaves" (Jones 62). To function in society as a citizen concerned with holding a job, attending to land or a house, raising a family, etc., was a reality sealed off from the Black population until the signing of the Emancipation. Jones points to a subject of self-reliance to prompt a discourse about assimilation experienced by the African Americans during the transition from slave to ex-slave. In other words, Jones proposes: "A slave cannot be a man. A

¹⁰ *Black Boy* (New York Harper, Perennial Edition, 1966), p 282. All references to *Black Boy* come from this edition.

man does not, or is not supposed to, work all of his life without recourse to the other areas of human existence” (Jones 60). In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, LeRoi Jones renders the precarious entry of the ex-slave population into society as an instrumental transition in African American identity, lending service to the cultivation of “primitive blues,” leading to the “classic” or “standard” form of blues— as it has been historically and culturally identified. In consideration to this predicament, “a slave cannot be a man,” the blues takes shape under the pretense: What is a man?

Moving from one set of barriers and limitations to another, less constricted and more precarious social reality, the anxieties of Wright’s family assimilate to a similar dereliction of the blues; *Black Boy* indirectly presupposes the question: What is a family? *Black Boy* introduces Wright’s mother, immediately characterised as inflamed and delivering a warning to a young Richard Wright: “All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise” (Wright 3). After a morning of scolding, the heat is magnified by Wright’s own account when looking for something to do, he takes a broom to the fireplace: “One winter morning in the long-ago, four-year-old days of my life I found myself standing before a fireplace, warming my hands over a mound of glowing coals, listening to the wind whistle past the house outside” (Wright 3). By beginning his autobiography from a child’s perspective, Wright’s autonomy is reconsidered, showing the aspects of his life that were out of his control: “...I found myself standing before a fireplace...” (Wright 3). From this vantage point, the morphology of Richard Wright depends on an awakening in pursuit of autonomy. In antagonism to his mother’s nagging, Wright recounts the amplification of his act— moving from standing at the fireplace, to literally playing with fire: “Would I try it? Sure. I pulled several straws from the

broom and held them to the fire until they blazed; I rushed to the window and brought the flame in touch with the hems of the curtains” (Wright 4.) Is this an attitude of profound indifference to danger that emanated from a four-year-old Wright or is it simply that he was too young to know the dangers of fire? In either case, this act proved to be life-altering beyond the obvious reasons of destruction and danger: it stirred Wright’s consciousness. After the fire, his parents, particularly his mother, beat him so brutally he had to be bedridden for several weeks after the incident:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear (Wright 6).

Out of the flames, it seems Richard Wright’s consciousness was stirred, and the fire never extinguished. Again, Wright situates himself in a powerless position: “... later I found myself in bed...” Though he does not and can not contain the ability to overpower and control his parents, Wright does possess enough autonomy to entertain a desire to rebel. After fleeing the inflamed house, Wright retreats beneath the burning house. Hiding from his act and his mother’s inevitable wrath, he is split between a decision to escape, or stay hidden. “I yearned to become invisible, to stop living. The commotion above me increased and I began to cry. It seemed that I had been hiding for ages, and when the stomping and screaming died down I felt lonely, cast forever out of life” (Wright 4). This desire to escape from himself encountered beneath the house submerges him to premature dread and exposes him to a literal and metaphorical fire that would follow him into manhood.

How does a four-year-old contain the capacity to desire an escape from himself?

Wright’s precarious perspective from *underneath* the house evokes Ralph Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man*, as Invisible Man begins to chronicle invisibility from the underground, in his

hole. Below the very thing he is inextricable from, Wright's position to flee and stay hidden beneath the house orients a temporal escape, but when he is essentially exposed by his father, the decision at "going underground" proves futile: "Yes, the house was afire, but I was determined not to leave my place of safety (Wright 6). Though the premature desire to turn invisible, and to escape himself, renders Wright's budding consciousness, the resources necessary to execute prove impossible to a toddler. He can hide, but he cannot run; therefore, Wright's family and home are depicted in the introductory scenes of *Black Boy* as inseparable and instrumental to the cultivation of his blues based works. Coupled with a desire to belong to his "place of safety", fear is implanted inside of him by the wrath of his parents. As a result of physically being outside the house while the chaos inside ran its course, the consequence of being an outsider decides his fate: "I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear" (Wright 7). Distilled in a fog of fear, the days following recovery are consumed by Wright's state of exhaustive physical and emotional trauma, but the solitude, though forced upon him, left him with the space and arguably, the freedom; to think on his own and to be unequivocally alone.

As Wright improved physically, the effects of the event would not recede from his memory like the wounds on his body, but would stain his perspective: "Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings" (Wright 7). In being beaten Wright' discovers life as he knew it mandated a change of pace. Following Wright's observation, he rhapsodizes about the wonder encountered in mountain tops that

catalyze a monologue inspired by the impulse of the blues. Oscillating between wonder and cruelty, Wright imbues the blues:

There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads. There was the yearning for identification loosened in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey. There was the disdain that filled me as I tortured a delicate, blue-pink crawfish that huddled fearfully in the mudsill of a rusty tin can. There was the aching glory in masses of clouds burning gold and purple from an invisible sun (Wright 7).

I read this time after Wright's injury as an instrumental maturing period for him, because of an opportunity, though experienced out of bitterness, of premature reflection. As a concept, childhood is regarded as a period of innocence, naivete. It may seem obvious, but children are also not expected to be financially secure or responsible for making a living— instead, youth and leisure are more in tune with each other. In continuation with Leroi Jones' considerations from *Blues People*, a new dimension of leisure is vital to the formalization of blues music and to the development of the nuanced position of the ex-slaves' socio-political status. "In one's leisure one can begin to formalize a method of singing as well as find new things to sing about" (Jones 68). Like the experience of Wright's respite, the time for leisure opportuned a space and time devoted to the formalization of thinking, of memories, and of the future. After losing consciousness by the hands of his parents, Wright recuperates and could be considered resurrected when he encounters the effect of leisure in his freshly conscious perception. Able to distinguish between pleasure and pain and where they overlap, he awakens more conscious than he was before the beating and fire.

Leisure, though carrying a certain weight of pleasure and comfort, can be defined by "free time." Responsibility becomes relinquished when it is a time for leisure, and the utmost expression of individuality surfaces: "what is that *I* want to do with *my* free time?" But, along

with responsibility abandoned, comes a formulation of desire. The freedom intrinsic to periods and spaces of leisure signifies a transition in the music and limited social possibility. A slave cannot be a man, as pointed to previously, therefore the slave's projection of himself is confined to the universality of work songs: "The work songs and later blues forms differ very profoundly not only in their form but in their lyrics and intent (Jones 60). To work all of one's life without possibility of an alternative inspires music created by and through labor, and only labor. Intent, refers to a degree of personal freedom intrinsic to the possibility of leisure. As the momentum of time slows in wake of revived disability, awakes consciously aware of the blues:

There was the love I had for the mute regality of tall, moss-clad oaks. There was the hint of cosmic cruelty that I felt when I saw the curved timbers of a wooden shack that had been warped in the summer sun. There was the saliva that formed in my mouth whenever I smelt clay dust potted with fresh rain. There was the cloudy notion of hunger when I breathed the odor of new-cut, bleeding grass. And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights... (Wright 8).

The impulse of the blues takes shape by way of Wright's specific, southern and rural environment. Impressed on his senses, the material and aesthetic of the environment that surrounded him started speaking to him, mumbling secret messages, coded by contradiction. The "quiet terror" and "cosmic cruelty" of southern conditions during the Reconstruction period invoke nostalgia; A detail of the blues that adds the personality of the individual to the form.

Ralph Ellison takes note and admires the nostalgia resonant to *Black Boy*, in "Richard Wright's Blues", when he says "...the specific folk culture which helped shape the writer's attitude toward his life and which embodied the impulse that contributes much to the quality and tone of his autobiography was the Negro blues" (Ellison 78). Ellison considers "specific folk culture" in alignment with the artist's interaction with the blues impulse; the writer's attitude

toward the conditions of life become reflected in their work and attuned to the particulars of their life. In this way, *Black Boy*'s locus of meaning is transmitted from the autobiographical, individual stance of Richard Wright in which accumulates and correlates to an impulse of the blues, observed and defined by Ellison as Richard Wright's blues.

Black Boy's success is measured by Ellison not by a standard of wholeness, but by the conviction suggested "in the personal terms of one Negro childhood" (Ellison 80). Ellison gauges Wright's success through mediations of limitation and social possibility: "In the South the sensibilities of both blacks and whites are inhibited by the rigidly defined environment. For the Negro there is relative safety as long as the impulse toward individuality is suppressed" (Ellison 89). All of the spite and confusion Wright experienced by the constrictions of childhood become actualized through his tendency to fight, and dream, for possibility over probability. Intrinsic to this idea was an understanding in him that something was not right within his family circuit, though the source of this unease was a mystery. Following the fire in Natchez, Wright's family would move to Memphis. Natchez bluffs and dusty powdered-clay covered roads transitioned into concrete pavement and stoned buildings. It is in the small and bleak apartment in Memphis that Wright became nearer to his father in terms of distance, but never amounting to closeness. "It was in this tenement that the personality of my father first came fully into the orbit of my concern" (Wright 10). Initially, Wright is characterized with an innate fear of his mother; exemplified in the first scene, his mother is the foundational aspect of childhood and family functionality. The tight and "dead" (Wright 10) space of the city requires observation as it is new to not only Wright, but the whole family. The Wright family was tasked with preserving the structure of their past lifestyle; combining old and new values, a code of living is established in

the attempt of functioning as a structural family unit. It was a common occurrence, even an obligation for many black migrant workers throughout the South as the prospects for jobs were often seasonal and temporary.

In the 1870's, there were thousands of black migrant workers moving all through the South. There were also men who just moved around from place to place, not really migratory laborers, just footloose wanderers. There could come now to these ex-slaves a much fuller idea of what exactly America was (Jones 62).

America becomes a broadened landscape by the 1870's for migrant workers as the limitations of movement are expanded and it is through this widening scope, as Jones examines, that a growing experience of American life is reflected in the formation of blues music. Though Jones is speaking directly to male migrant workers, I understand both Wright's mother and father living migrant lifestyles as their home depended on the possibility of work.

I appeal to this state of movement because of the ways in which Wright's consciousness is informed by different environments. In conjunction with Wright's consciousness, the transitions of momentum is considered in the formalization of the blues by Jones: "The leisure and movement allowed to Negroes after the Civil War helped to standardize the new blues form as well as spread the best verses that were made" (Jones 64). A state of movement provides a counter-position to that of leisure, as previously discussed. Movement, synthesized with leisure, equates to the oscillatory qualities of the blues, moving from making an audience laugh or cry in awe. As Langston Hughes recognizes: "Sad as Blues may be there's almost always something humorous about them—even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying."¹¹ I read

¹¹ Hughes, Langston, and Arnold Rampersad. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* vol. 3: *The Poems, 1951-1967*. Columbia, U of Missouri P, 2001. 213.

each environment as a stepping stone towards Wright's full execution of individuality, and amplification of his own expression of the blues.

The prospect of entering a new scene to rid of the old excited Wright when he received the news of their moving to Memphis. To board the *Kate Adams* made him eager; "Each night I went to bed hoping that the next morning would be the day of departure" (Wright 9). As quickly as the excitement arose, it ceased for when it came time to board the *Kate Adams*, the dream was crushed in the face of a tiny, dirty boat, devoid of any and all romantic qualities.

Though opportuned with the travel and leisure, the conditions of their experience left a sour taste in Wright's mouth because they did not adhere to any tradition and were not done as a means of freedom. At age eleven, Wright considers the *Kate Adams* as a new and liberating chance for adventure:

"How big is the boat?" I asked my mother. "As big as a mountain," she said. "Has it got a whistle?" "Yes." "Does the whistle blow?" "Yes." "When?" "When the captain wants it to blow." "Why do they call it the Kate Adams?" "Because that's the boat's name." "What color is the boat?" "White." "How long will we be on the boat?" "All day and all night." "Will we sleep on the boat?" "Yes, when we get sleepy, we'll sleep. Now, hush." For days I had dreamed about a huge white boat floating on a vast body of water, but when my mother took me down to the levee on the day of leaving, I saw a tiny, dirty boat that was not at all like the boat I had imagined. I was disappointed and when time came to go on board I cried and my mother thought that I did not want to go with her to Memphis, and I could not tell her what the trouble was (Wright 9).

The boat, sitting robust and ornate in his mind, melts into an insidious image once the time comes for reality to replace imagination. Wright, as author and character, evokes an image of disillusionment and desperation. At this point in his autobiography, Wright's childhood, brandished by discipline and fear, offers transcendence by the boat's symbol of opportunity and escape. But, when Wright's imagination meets reality face to face, he is encountered with

nothing short of the blues. Perhaps the most resonant feature of “getting the blues” for Wright at this time relies on a lapse of understanding between Wright’s *real* reason for crying and his mother’s prescription of his reaction. Aware of his own sense of embarrassment, he is unable to clue his mother in to the source of his emotion. Intuition drives him to follow and believe in *Kate Adams*’ ability to actualize possibility but, the dream built around the answers supplied by his mother prove disillusionary.

Down at the levee, Wright’s realization properly attunes to the blues; a description of a distraught child in the wake of a dream materialized into a dingy, tattered boat, causes the narrative to pause and enter into a new space of transition. Though his immediate reaction to the boat is disappointment, the spirit of the blues continues to guide the route to Memphis. Entering the boat, Wright’s attitude oscillates from dismay, to solace upon recognition of the passengers and their activities: “Solace came when I wandered about the boat and gazed at Negroes throwing dice, drinking whisky, playing cards, lolling on boxes, eating, talking, and singing” (Wright 10). Though he had hoped to encounter the *Kate Adams* as something visually beautiful and metaphorically promising, the possibility of an experience arising from anything but the image he imagined, had not occurred to him. Unexpected comfort finds him once he has entered the boat as he is greeted with a blend of familiar existence and abstracted essence. The transition from the rural landscape of Natchez to Memphis’ urban environment would expose Wright to the inner workings of public and private life in ways unbeknownst to him as a child in Mississippi. Presaging the changes that await him at the Memphis docks, the scenes interest, attract and comfort him by the air and echoes of community.

Elucidated at the start of the second chapter, he admits in recollection of childhood:

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that blind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair (Wright 36).

Childhood awarded Wright with profound experiences, to say the least, but he emerges with a poignant sense of what he has missed along with the desires he craves; personal freedom was, in his eyes, never accomplished by his family and left untouched for him to depict and question in his works. But it is not until he outlives childhood that Wright attaches a title to the underlying tone of his youth: despair. Richard Wright's autobiography could have focused on a range of experiences, he could have even lied for that matter; but the prevailing mood of the blues is not transcendence by solution, but simply, by confrontation and consciousness. The attitude that compels Wright to write depends on an "undercurrent of fear and hostility"¹² (Ellison 85), and determined by a sense of democracy that appeals to the inexhaustible expressions of the blues. American country, and folk singer, Emmylou Harris says:

I think people have always, from the beginning of time, had a need for stories. If you go back to these old ballads, they seem to be telling your story. They seem to resonate with something in your experience. And to me, the best songs are universal in the message that they have¹³

It may seem like a stretch to apply an artist like Emmylou who is seemingly detached from Richard Wright in every regard, but this quote prompted me to see that in all its "personal catastrophe" the mystery of the author that is contrived and transmitted through Wright's own need to tell his story, reaches a potential of universality. Though *Black Boy* is Wright's personal

¹² See "Richard Wright's Blues," *Antioch Review* (1945), rpt. in *Shadow and Act*. New York, Vintage International, 1995. 85

¹³ Duncan, Dayton, et al. *Country Music*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 20.

experience, the decision to share it in turn shares an experience of existence able to touch readers of diverse and exponential backgrounds. *Black Boy* shows that the blues resonates with more than simple tone and technique, but aligns with particular memories, environment, material, and people. Wright's childhood move to Memphis aboard the *Kate Adams* appeals to one of the early and overt encounters to the blues as a way of life.

The diffusion of blues was met by the American public with open ears and closed eyes. It is my intention to contextualize the blues and trace the music's false and malicious impressions and imitations of African American identity, reinforced generation after generation by means of objectification and exploitation. Ralph Ellison conjoins Richard Wright with the blues tradition for a shared consideration to: "...keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness," (Ellison 78), proclaiming further: "and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Ellison 78). In this way, Ellison observes the Wright's blues as working to fuse the future and the past as a muddled and yearning experience probed by the present in formulation of an expression of reconsidered individualism.

Intrinsic to its ability of preservation; of elements of the past, pain and all— the blues as a form is autobiographical. To be blue is best explained by the dissatisfaction with oneself, and one's life, often relaying a tale of defeat, heartbreak, heartache, or injustice. If all is well, peaceful, and proportionate, the blues fuse past, present, and future— Rendering the sound of the blues timeless. Recognized by Ellison: "As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (Ellison 78), Wright's autobiographical work *Black Boy* echoes the blues by a perspective inspired by consciousness. In order to comment on a

situation, and the deformities and discontents of an environment, one must be aware of a feeling that something is missing— either from themselves, their surroundings, or both.

Chapter Two: The Chain Reaction of Criticism

In the previous chapter, I hope to have initiated a perspective of Richard Wright on the outside of his family by way of a distinguished and perpetual quality of reconsidered individualism. In this chapter, I am interested in delving deeper into Wright's position of resistance, focusing on his style of "protest fiction." Furthermore, I argue that a stance of resistance is intrinsic to the blues as it arises from the original and essential autobiographical form. In contrast to Ralph Ellison's perspective in "Richard Wright's Blues," previously regarded by praise and pride, takes a tone of conflict as both of their literary careers advance over the years; by 1964, Ellison definitively turns away from Wright's blues. Beginning with a review by Irving Howe, a critical, literary chain of reaction is demonstrated in this chapter to show Ellison's shifted perspective, and rather rejection of Richard Wright's blues.

Part of the morphology and legacy that has become inextricable from Richard Wright's works is directly attached to the 1940 publication of *Native Son* as it concurrently surged him into success and designated his style as "protest" literature. Critic Irving Howe declared, "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever," in a 1963 *Dissent* magazine publication:

"Black Boys and Native Sons." Gushingly proud of Wright's accomplishment, Howe acknowledges *Native Son* as a revealing display of the past when he says: "In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture" (Howe 354). Accepting Howe's judgment or not, *Native Son* certainly established Richard Wright as a major twentieth century Black novelist(footnote); and, perhaps with an intention to kill more birds with a single stone, "Black Boys and Native Sons" initiates a

discourse between authors. Supplying Wright as: "...the older Negro novelist who had served him [James Baldwin] as a model and had helped launch his career..." (Howe 353), Howe directs a large portion of his piece to criticism aimed at James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Working to dispel the criticism surrounding Wright, Howe goes above and beyond to defend the prescription of mere "protest literature" defined by Baldwin's 1949 publication: "Everybody's Protest Novel." Employing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son* as examples, Baldwin regards the term protest literature by its incapacities. "They [protest novels] emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" (Baldwin 19). Trapped behind the illusion of the American dream, Baldwin ultimately directs the most glaring fault of the protest novel: "lies in its insistence that it is categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin 19). From Baldwin's perspective of Wright, Ellison's substantiation of Wright's blues inspires a closer look, as a literary chain of reaction merits a discourse aimed at disentanglement.

"Black Boys and Native Sons" generated attention to Irving Howe, but more significantly it contributed to a wider literary debate between authors. "Everybody's Protest Novel" would catalyze a literary chain of reaction, inspiring responses from Howe (echoing the works of Richard Wright), and eventually Ralph Ellison¹⁴. I implement this chain of reaction to reveal the differentiating personal philosophies of writers working to distinguish themselves through conflicting conceptions of freedom as expressed through their works. Unreceptive to their diversity, Howe attempt to entangle Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin; admonishing the latter for

¹⁴ In reference to: "The World and the Jug" *The New Leader* (1964), rpt. in *Shadow and Act*. New York, Vintage International, 1995.

their “rebellion” (Howe 350), Wright, ironically enough, stands as the hero. Pointing to this, Ellison supplies an astute response to Howe’s “lively piece,” as he recognizes Howe’s recipe for criticism: And in addition to hero, Richard Wright, it has two villains, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who are seen as “black boys” masquerading as false, self-deceived “native sons” (Ellison 108). Howe measures Wright, Ellison and Baldwin through morality and classification, ostensibly adding a moral conflict to his criticism, Ellison and Baldwin emerge as anti-heroes residing in Wright’s shadow. Clearly, defined roles of power are necessary to Howe’s judgement of literature that is deemed worth preserving and propagating— therefore, a hero must be appointed as he has the ability to offer an archetype, standard, and direction to follow. In the case of “Black Boys and Native Sons,” Wright is designated as the pioneer of contemporary African American literature, whereas Baldwin and Ellison fall to denominations of incompetence in the wake of his proficiency. Though I do not find Irving Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons” particularly pertinent to the discourse between Wright and Ellison as it stands alone but the response it inspires from Ellison: “The World and the Jug.”

In two parts, Ellison deftly dismantles Howe’s didactic, authoritative perspective. “The World and the Jug” was written in two pieces; the first was written by the suggestion of Myron Kolatch of *The New Leader*. She was interested in Ellison’s reaction to Howe and urged him to craft a reply which would appear in *The New Leader* in December 1964. This chapter is primarily focused on the first piece from the two as it is in direct response to Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons.” Confidently, Ellison does not necessarily disassociate with Wright, but poses a split between them. Neither mentor nor influencer, Ellison recognizes Wright as an artist and a man with different qualities than himself:

I started with the primary assumption that men with black skins, having retained their humanity before all of the conscious efforts made to dehumanize them, especially following the Reconstruction, are unquestionably human. Thus, they have the obligation of freeing themselves—whatever their allies might be— by depending upon the validity of their own experience for an accurate picture of the reality which they seek to change, and for a gauge of the values they would see made manifest. Crucial to this view is the belief that their resistance to provocation, their coolness under pressure, their sense of timing and their tenacious hold on the ideal of their ultimate freedom are indispensable values in the struggle, and are at least as characteristic of American Negroes as the hatred, fear and vindictiveness which Wright chose to emphasize (Ellison 114).

Wright and Ellison decisively influenced and impacted each other's work; and though they are different kinds of writers, the fact of the matter lies: Ellison would not have written without Wright Manifest in the ways in which they chose to exercise freedom in their works of fiction, Wright and Ellison differ the most when it comes to the conception of freedom. As Ellison matures and emerges from a position of Wright's mentee, he grows critical to the resistance and ideologies they once possessed. Despite the fact of their difference the fact of the matter lies: Ellison would not have written without Wright. I argue this not only because of the fact of Wright's mentorship, but that Ellison, aware of the lapses of understanding, was determined to craft his own novel, and his own blues.

In contrast to Wright, Ellison carried a touch of aesthetic to his literature that went amiss for Wright and disregarded by Howe: "What astonishes one most about *Invisible Man* is the apparent freedom it displays from the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country—..."(Howe 359). Ellison in turn asks in "The World and the Jug:" "I can only ask that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight some ideological battle" (Ellison 137). Furthermore, Ellison aligns the goal of *Invisible Man*, setting the record straight for Howe: "

My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I put it there (Ellison 137).

Ellison makes a distinction between fiction working to escape or transcend the conditions of identity through aesthetic decisions. Seeing through the blues, he divulges modes of protest to represent art in celebration and control of those conditions.

Though the blues grew into a genre coined for its sorrowful resonance: “The blues, as it came into its own strict form, was the most plaintive and melancholy music imaginable” (Jones 78), *Invisible Man* is not an expression of blues in its strict form, but insisted expansion. Beyond and through the blues lies jazz, and after Richard Wright’s mark of mentorship, Ralph Ellison reflects in which their works along with their tones deviate:

Wright believed in the much abused idea that novels are “weapons”— the counterpart of the dreary notion common among most minority groups, that novels are instruments of good public relations. But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject (Ellison 114).

In reflection of Richard Wright’s blues, Ellison rejects the novel as a weapon and adopts it as an instrument. Amplifying comic conditions of African American identity in America arms Ellison with a different source of power than Wright. Perhaps Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is not an optimistic book per se, but *Invisible Man* is not only a hopeful protagonist, but renders Ellison’s conception of a hero, imbuing the jazzmen he grew up idolizing.

In objection to the perspective of “Richard Wright’s Blues,” “The World and the Jug,” establishes a disjuncture between Wright’s “dreary” utilization of the novel as a weapon, rather than an instrument. Ellison, appealing to the novel in celebration of life and its inevitable strictures, attempts to preserve itself by aestheticism rather than bitterness. In contrast, Howe

regards Wright's "clenched militancy" (Howe 360) as the feature that necessitates recognition: "The mood is apocalyptic, the tone superbly aggressive. Wright was an existentialist long before he heard the name, for he was committed to the literature of extreme situations both through the pressures of his rage and the gasping hope of an ultimate catharsis" (Howe 356). Perhaps turning away from an appreciation of Wright's expression of his blues, Ellison sets forth a change of protest and philosophy with his first novel *Invisible Man*. As aforementioned, responding to Howe's analysis of a novel ostensibly free from the "ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country..." (Howe 360), Ellison asserts that the aesthetic choices and qualities of protest are inserted by his own decision and discretion: "The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I put it there (Ellison 137). Similarly, Ellison describes his relationship with Richard Wright: "'I respected Wright's work and I knew him, but this is not to say that he "influenced" me as significantly as you assume. Consult the text! I sought out Wright because I had read Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway..." (Ellison 138). Though I do not find Irving Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons" particularly pertinent to the discourse between Wright and Ellison as it stands alone but the response it inspires from Ellison in "The World and the Jug," reveals conflicting conceptions of freedom that are exercised through works of fiction and nonfiction. For Ellison, African American identity: "involves a willed affirmation of self against all outside pressures..." (Ellison 132). In the next chapters, I intended to evaluate the ways in which Richard Wright's blues fail with Ellison's consideration of identity; Does the same rule of "willed affirmation" resonate with *Invisible Man's* character?

Chapter Three: The Jokers of Jazz

Before discovering the advantages of a life spent underground, Invisible Man meditates on the time and money of his old life, drained into monopolized services; now, he benefits from light and power without paying anything at all. This, along with the rest of his sea-level life, has been abandoned in the light of invisible existence:

I gave up all that, along with my apartment, and my old way of life: That way based upon the fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century... (Ellison 6).

Proclaiming his invisibility, Invisible Man shows that his situation, though ambiguous, reaps potential freedoms. Though alone as far as physical bodies go, he is accompanied underground by a voice— Louis Armstrong, as a character and soundtrack, joins Invisible Man’s underground. He asks “What did I do to be so black and blue”, a question that guides Invisible Man’s quest for freedom.

Affected by music at a young age, Ellison’s youth in Oklahoma City exposed him to many of the “masters” of jazz: Charlie Christian; the singer Jimmy Rushing was Ellison's father's employee and a family acquaintance; he saw Lester Young live in 1929, along with other great musicians of the time like Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, King Oliver, etc.¹⁵ Ellison’s upbringing and exposure to Oklahoma jazzmen prepared him for the “chaos of sound” he would be riddled with in New York. In “Living With Music”, Ellison recollects his upbringing to jazz and music; all of that “chaos of sound” produced by the jazzmen in Oklahoma City posed him and his peers with a decision to “live with music or die with noise,” he chose life. The music sunk its teeth right into his soul and from the noise, he has always “lived for and with

¹⁵ Brody, Richard; “Ralph Ellison’s Record Collection,” *The New Yorker*, March 12, 2014.

music intensely” (Ellison 189). Living for and with music supplies Ellison with a learned desire to express an authentic experience of life rendered by the jazz music and its masters:

The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame (Ellison 189).

He goes on to say that though life, in broad strokes, tends to be erroneous, uncomfortable, and noisy; but the jazzmen were able to live their lives fully by creating and performing music that “reduced the chaos of living to form” (Ellison 190). It is through this possibility at transforming chaos and noise into experiences of eloquence and intimacy that jazz acts something like magic for Ellison. Richard Wright inspires a similar reaction in Ellison— I argue that the personal democracy transmitted by Wright through works like *Black Boy* that are perceived by Ellison as expressions of the tradition of blues and jazz music he finds so valuable. By identifying with these musical traditions and moods, Wright’s role as a writer for Ellison was similar to the “masters” and makers of early blues and jazz music, for Ellison was influenced greatly and for synthesized reasons. A rather delicate discourse between discipline and tradition is stimulated in Wright’s work, making his creative action and attitude initially attractive to Ellison.

Upon reading *12 Million Black Voices*, Ellison writes to Wright in 1941:

After reading your history—I knew it all already, all in my blood, bones, flesh, deepest memories, and thoughts; those which are sacred and those which bring the bitterest agonies and most poignant memories and regrets. Part of my life, Dick, has been a lacerating experience and I have my share of bitterness. But I have learned to keep the bitterness submerged so that my vision might be kept clear; so that those passions which would so easily be criminal might be socially useful. I know those emotions which tear

the insides to be free and memories which must be kept underground, caged by rigid discipline lest they destroy...¹⁶

Language of the underground correlates with both Ellison and Wright well before *Invisible Man*'s publication in 1953. Evidenced and observed in "Richard Wright's Blues" as well, Ellison admires Wright's confrontational ability— to go below, would mean to surrender. But, by beginning his novel from below, does Ellison reverse his original perspective? Ellison's early correspondence with Wright presages a literary chain of reaction that would emphasize divergence and initiate discourse between crafts. It is clear from the early letters as well as in "Richard Wright's Blues", that Ellison initially revels in Wright's expression, finding resonance in the bitterness and passion by the regret— over time, this attitude changes. "It is not for me to judge Wright's courage, but I must ask just why it was possible for me to write as I write 'only' because Wright released his anger. Can't I be allowed to release my own?" (Ellison 115)

In the process of writing *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison writes to a friend: "I told Langston Hughes in fact, that it's the blues, but nobody seems to understand what I mean." Taking Ellison's observation seriously, this chapter looks at the qualities in *Invisible Man* contingent to the blues. Finding a home in his hole, Invisible Man makes it clear that this hole is not damp nor dark, "My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light" (Ellison 6), as he is neither dead nor in a state of "suspended animation;" what makes his hole home and his invisibility secure, lies in the illumination of his form exposed by light:

Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form (Ellison 6).

¹⁶ Ellison, Ralph, *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*. New York, Random House, 2019.

Adorned with exactly 1,369 light– Invisible Man’s form is not only confirmed but illuminated in his hole of a home. “The truth is the light and the light is the truth” (Ellison 7). Light allows Invisible Man to feel his form and truly be invisible, without shame and with a sly smile.

Though the light is strong in Invisible Man’s hole, a certain degree of “acoustical deadness” Ralph Ellison and music have always been an inseparable pair; in the title essay of his collection of writing on jazz and music: *Living With Music*: he speaks to the experience that catalyzed his passion for records. In an attempt to combat the overwhelming noise of the city: “In those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live” (Ellison, 187). Ellison fights fire with fire, noise with noise, while writing *Invisible Man* in his apartment, discovering that “between the hi-fi record and the ear, I learned, there was a new electronic world.” He decided to build an amplifier:

And still our system was lacking. Fortunately my wife shared my passion for music, so we went on to buy, piece by piece, a fine speaker system, a first-rate AM-FM tuner, a transcription turntable and a speaker cabinet. I built half a dozen or more preamplifiers and record compensators before finding a commercial one that satisfied my ear, and finally we acquired an arm, a magnetic cartridge and—glory of the house—a tape recorder. All this plunge into electronics, mind you, had as its simple end the enjoyment of recorded music as it was intended to be heard. I was obsessed with the idea of reproducing sound with such fidelity that even when using music as a defense behind which I could write, it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion. But it didn’t come easily. There were wires and pieces of equipment all over the apartment (Ellison 187).

Ellison’s obsession for fidelity translates into the opening underground scene of *Invisible Man*; with this acoustical consideration in mind, Invisible Man’s electric cave bears similar resonance to Ellison’s real environment to which his blues based book becomes attuned by.

Under the influence of the copious amount of noise, the attempt to write his novel was constantly surrounded by and combated with noise¹⁷. Echoes of noise come together as one comprehensive sound in the end, as Ellison proved determined to make music from chaos. Invisible Man too, as he becomes established underground, desires an amplification of sound in order to feel its presence in his whole body. Sound, like light, offers a form, but, lacking in the dimensions of sound, Invisible Man holds a dream to compensate for the acoustical deadness in the hole. “Now I gave one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five” (Ellison 7). Making this fact clear, the Invisible Man dedicates a large portion of his hole to the attention and accompanying voice of Louis Armstrong. As a former jazz musician, it may seem like an obvious choice to credit Armstrong for a role in *Invisible Man*’s prologue; but Ellison’s choice bears profound suggestions to Invisible Man’s form.

Jazz, unlike blues, appeals to the group more than it does the individual. Stemming from the blues, jazz builds on the tradition of three-line, twelve-bar standardized song¹⁸. There is a dream attached to the world of jazz that embraces a vision of freedom; free from cultural articulations of blues based expression as resistance and protest– Jazz musicians are not rebels-without-a-cause. “What those young jazz musicians symbolize is a freedom from that tastemaking of mass media and an embracing of a vision that has much more to do with aesthetic

¹⁷ Brody, Richard; “Ralph Ellison’s Record Collection,” *The New Yorker*, March 12, 2014.

¹⁸ Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York, W. Morrow, 1963: ““The point is that the primitive blues was at once a more formal music since the three-line, twelve-bar song became rapidly standardized, and was also a more liberated music since there was literally more to sing about (Jones, 68). / “The twelve bar blues—the more or less final form of the blues– is constructed so that each verse is of three lines, each line about one-half of each line, leaving a space of two bars for either a sung or an instrumental response” (Jones, 65).

satisfaction than the gold rush culture of popular entertainment... “ (Crouch 160)¹⁹ Blues musicians generated images of disgruntled rebels– hardly every depicted with smiles, blues musicians project legends of romanticized dissatisfaction. As Ellison points out, the jazzman's he had known growing up lived with and for music intensely, but;

Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments (which, incidentally, some of them wore as a priest wears the cross) and the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation (Ellison 189).

The incentive to pursue and play jazz was not financial, but experiential and improvisatory. Binded by individual ideas of the group, members of jazz bands had to work together to formulate music in collaboration and coordination with each other. A significant idea to consider is that the development of jazz was predominantly a blues based music– “The blues timbre and spirit had come to jazz virtually unchanged,...” (Jones 79). But, the introduction of brass instruments by the utilization of European instruments, particularly horns, was noticeably *not* the blues. When the brass sound came into the blues, rough, raw noise contributed to a new, expansive genre that emanated into the sound of jazz.

In order to understand *Invisible Man*, this project considers jazz as a critical element to Ellison’s process of authorship and *Invisible Man*’s query: “Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?” (Ellison 14). In black and white, it is as if Ellison is speaking to us, admitting a motivation to write as a

¹⁹ Crouch, Stanley. "Blues to Be Constitutional: A Long Look at the Wild Wherefores of Our Democratic Lives as Symbolized in the Making of Rhythm and Tune." *The All-American Skin Game, Or, the Decoy of Race: The Long and the Short of It, 1990-1994*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1995.

compulsion dedicated to the condition of invisibility. Why does the possibility of creating music through writing offer something beyond just simply writing? Actualizing Invisible Man's goal lies the singing hero at the start of *Invisible Man*; our protagonist meditates on Louis' music: "

Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music (Ellison 8).

Perhaps like Louis Armstrong, Ralph Ellison desires to attune to the comic side of the blues. Invisible Man follows this musing with an anecdote about a bad reefer spell: "Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph" (Ellison 8).

As Invisible Man alludes to Armstrong, he begins lightheartedly to tell a story about listening to Louis after accidentally smoking, what he assumed was a cigarette. The tale falls into a nightmarish and metaphysical terrain when Invisible Man enters the music, but descends like Dante "into its depths" (Ellison 9). Beginning with "a couple of jokers," Armstrong's music underlines the soundtrack to Invisible Man's descent like a blue and silver lining; in the background, one can see his "semi-circular smiling face"²⁰ laughing in the background of Invisible Man's den.

In his chapter: "Checking Our Balances: Louis Armstrong, Ralph Ellison, and Betty Boop", O'Meally asks: What do we make of Armstrong's semicircular, shining smile?" (O'Meally 279) A comic mask was in place as early as the 1930s, Robert O'Meally points out, allowing for a public reception of Armstrong as comedian, just as much as he was a masterful

²⁰ O'Meally, Robert G. "Checking Our Balances: Louis Armstrong, Ralph Ellison, and Betty Boop." *Jazz Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004.

musician. Ellison recalls seeing Amrstrong in 1929 in Oklahoma city at black dance hall:

”Suddenly the place was filled with white women²¹” The performance instructed a lesson to Ellison; by Armstrong’s display of the comic, a medium able to diffuse across the color line affects him:

Nothing like that had ever happened in our town before. His music was our music but they saw it theirs too, and were willing to break the law to get it. So you could see that Armstrong’s music was affecting attitudes and values (Ellison 28).

Armstrong’s advantages as a musician are aligned by Ellison by the broad and visibly diverse crowd drawn to the performance. As Ellison witnesses Armstrong’s semi-circular, smiling power, he witnesses the makings of a hero as Armstrong acts as a comic companion to the blues.

To compensate for the acoustical deadness in his hole, Invisible Man desires to have five recordings of Amrstrong’s “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue,” amplified by five phonographs.²² What would the effect of five echoing Armstrongs be? For one, the music would most likely be able to trick him, making him slip out of rhythm and lose sense of time:

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

²¹ See “Ralph Ellison’s Territorial Vantage,” an interview by Ron Welburn, reprinted in *Living With Music* p 28.

²²

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York, Random House US, 2010. All references to *Invisible Man* come from this edition. “Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five” (7)

Louis' music contains a level of distortion, coupled with clarity. There is a contingent quality to the ability of music and the state of invisibility; five echoing Armstrongs would defend against the acoustical "deadness" of his hole, propagating life, and producing light through the invisible and temporal experience of sound. In this way, Louis represents the object that sounds; while he plays the trumpet and sings, he blends and bends the effect of the blues into experiences of universal transmission.

Witnessing Armstrong's performance revealed a feature of irony for Ellison; The comic character of Armstrong, though enticing and attractive, promoted a kind of segregated democracy.²³ What does Louis' smiling face conceal? Ellison acknowledges Armstrong's comic character by means of the "trickster" in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." America, being, "a land of masking jokers."(Ellison 55), thrives on the exploitation and continuous debasement of African American identity and inseparable from a national iconography of masking abilities. Because "these things are bound up with their notion of chaos," Black identity, Ellison explains, falls to implicit classification that inevitably becomes amplified, distilled, and diffused in the American entertainment industry: "The Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable" (Ellison 48). This continuous form of debasement calls to mind the exploitation of minstrel shows, performances which depended on the use of masks and paint to conceal the face behind the material. How does the effect of Armstrong's masking abilities differ and transcend minstrelsy? According to Karl Kerényi, Ellison cites, the trickster manifests a personification of the physical²⁴: "never wholly subdued,

²³ This phrase is used in Ellison's essay called "On Being the Target of Discrimination," *New York Times Magazine*, April 1989, reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library), 821.

²⁴ Radin, Paul, et al. *The Trickster: a Study in American Indian Mythology*. Schocken Books, 1988.

ruled by lust and hunger, forever running into pain and injury, cunning and stupid in action” (Kerenyi 28).

The trickster’s function in society is driven by the tales told about him , rendering his position within it as fixed and dysfunctional. Ellison offers Armstrong as an example of the black trickster figure: “Armstrong’s clownish license and intoxicating powers are almost Elizabethan; he takes liberties with kings, queens and presidents; emphasizes the physicality of his music with sweat, spittle, and facial contortions; he performs the magical feat of making romantic melody issue from a throat of gravel;...” (Ellison 52). The question arises: Who is tricking whom?

To mask oneself is to play with one’s identity. The mask also expands a means for possibility and in America: “...ours is a society in which possibilities are many” (Ellison 54). One of the possibilities involved in American society is the prospect of comedy. An example of Ellison’s humor establishes a mode of humor that carries a latent power of the trickster:

... as the dancing of those slaves who, looking through the windows of a plantation manor house from the yard, imitated the steps so gravely performed by the masters within and then added to them their own special flair, burlesquing the white folks and then going on to force the steps into a choreography uniquely their own. The whites, looking out at the activity in the yard, thought they were being flattered by imitation, and were amused by the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps, while missing completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was being Americanized, undergoing a metamorphosis through the mocking activity of a people partially sprung from Africa.

So, blissfully unaware, the whites laughed while the blacks danced out their mocking reply (Ellison).²⁵

This calls to mind the qualities of Armstrong's performance as evidenced by Ellison. In the situation of the slaves expressing their own performance, the color line is crossed by the whites in observation, and the slaves are transformed into symbols of humanity based on imitation. From inside, the whites look outside to find themselves ostensibly mimed— but unbeknownst to them, the incongruities, rather originality and improvisation of the “imitations” of their slaves were not expressed for their honor but in spite of their masters' unawareness.

Expressions of Blackness through folk culture, namely the blues, have been historically silenced in America; Ellison highlights this when he says in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke:”

When the white man steps behind the mask of the trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell (for there is a mystery in the whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil and the evil of innocence, though, being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the blues) and thus lose that freedom which, in the fluid, “traditionless,” “classless” and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone (Ellison 53).

Because the ramifications of a joke relies on the awareness and control of the one laughing, the one laughing is the one in possession of power. A joke's power is essentially

²⁵ From “Homage to Duke Ellington,” *Washington Star*, 1969, reprinted in, *Living With Music*, p 69.

measured and exercised by one party's advantage over the other, as every joke posits a butt of the joke. The trickster then contains a threat of becoming trapped if he is not in control of the man behind the mask. Armstrong's jazz performances cloud and contradict the man behind the mask: is he the one in power, or is it in the comic mask? For Ellison, Armstrong's ability to blend and even contradict the impulse of the blues is resonant to an attitude of the "joy of the joke" (Ellison 55) that arises out of a cultural and historical motivation to mask African American identity: "Very often, however, the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity" (Ellison 55). To reverse the effects of being laughed at or laughed with, it would prove an easy fix to simply alter one's identity into one that is in on the joke, rather than out. The power of the joke then falls to the ones laughing— but what does a joke gesture to if everyone is laughing? In consideration to this, I appeal to the development and function of the blues on plantations as an environment of reinforced misunderstanding as the blues expanded the exclusivity of humor and translated a comic identity into a source of power in African American culture.

Growing from the indirect articulation of work songs, the twentieth century incorporates the blues and jazz as a modern mood to American life. Original work songs established themes through the environment in which they were created out of. Always directed at an inquiry of life, the blues moves through cycles synthesized with time, place and history. *Oh! my massa told me, there's no grass in Georgia*, was heard by Miss Kemble on her husband's plantation in Georgia; in the crossroads between hearing and understanding, she believes the source of sound to be nonsense (Jones 77). Looking at Ralph Ellison's background in jazz in conversation with the roots of the blues, I intend to facilitate the history and evolution of the music as a form in

combination; Blues combines opacity and transparency— making it a valuable weapon, as a means of disguise. A feature of the blues lies in the opportunity of deception.

In conversation with Ralph Ellison’s observation of the misunderstanding between slaves and their masters—Fanny Kemble provides a first hand experience of an English woman's first exposure to early blues expression when she reports the sonic experiences encountered on her husband’s plantation in Georgia. *Journal of Residence on a Georgia Plantation 1838-1839*, does not altogether invoke an inquiry into the music itself, but through her experience, “While they labored”, she is struck by both familiar and foreign sounds. The preface of Fanny Kemble’s journal reads:

The following diary was kept in the winter and spring of 1838-1839, on an estate consisting of rice and cotton plantations, in the islands at the entrance of the Altamaha, on the coast of Georgia. The slaves in whom I then had an unfortunate interest were sold some years ago. The islands themselves are at present in the power of the Northern troops. The record contained in the following pages is a picture of conditions of human existence which I hope and believe have passed away (Kemble 3).

Jones utilizes Kemble’s in *Blues People* as a lense into plantation life as it was surveilled and reported. While living on the plantation, Miss Kemble takes notice of the sonic encounters overheard: “Except the extemporaneous chants in our honor... I have never heard the Negroes... sing any words that could be said to have any sense. To one, an extremely pretty, plaintive, and original air, there was but one line, which was repeated with a sort of wailing chorus— Oh! my massa told me, there’s no grass in Georgia. (Jones 77).

Miss Kemble definitively encounters the blues— pretty, plaintive, and original, even without understanding these sonic experiences impress Kemble with an understanding that though the content intelligible, a form in the making requires attention. Searching for the meaning to these work songs in vain, the inevitable “nonsense” of the form would leave Kemble confused, while proving evident in the music’s evolution. I find Miss Kemble’s sonic experience significant to a feature of the blues that relies on a form of invisibility. Before arriving in Georgia, Kemble voices an intention to observe her experiences accurately:

Assuredly, I am going [to Georgia] prejudiced against slavery, for I am an Englishwoman in whom the absence of such a prejudice would be disgraceful. Nevertheless, I go prepared to find many mitigations in the practice... much kindness on the part of the masters, much content on that of the slaves; and I feel very sure that you may rely upon the carefulness of my observation, and the accuracy of my report, of every detail... that comes under my notice; and certainly, on the plantation to which I am going, it will be more likely that I should some things extenuate, than set down aught in malice (Kemble 7).

Miss Kemble’s accounts from the plantation inspire layers of contradiction within the system; intimacy and exploitation are mixed, humans are treated like animals, and chants of honor delivered in indiscernible fashion, for a few examples. Her perspective, however misconstrued, depicts the environment in which blues was sung and heard. Some aspects heard by Miss Kemble struck her as familiar, but others were just plain chaos and mere noise. The contradictory state of slavery as acknowledged by her, correlates with the encounters and inquiry into the blues in Georgia; the effect of disguise, resonant in the cheerful music or intelligible

words, dismantles the control of the master and offers a comic mask to the one in disguise.

Ralph Ellison's testimony to "living for and with music intensely" can be applied to the blues sung on plantations. The phenomenon of such work songs carry associations of time passing and pleasure seeking, but first and foremost, blues was a functional music. Whether the plantation was large or small, there always contained an element of surveillance, along with intimacy, as the property was shared by both slave and master. With that being said, sound relies on the attention of the listener; falling into temporal space, speech administers a connection. In appeal back to Miss Kemble, the lyrics are heard, but the meaning is missed. Coupled with the physical act of work and surveillance of one's master— the blues arises as a mask of communication. Delivered in sweet and melancholic tones, the content has the chance at being covered with a blue mask; in between the spaces of transparent and opaque, heard and seen— the blues requires an amount of deception.

Ralph Ellison and Miss Kemble observe the activity of dancing and singing of slaves; one in on the joke, the other, in on her own, illusory joke. Miss Kemble extrapolates chants of honor through her manor window, whereas Ellison sees icons of choreography. Both Ellison and Miss Kemble would laugh on the account of witnessing these acts, but of course, for different reasons, yet sharing the same source— Imitation. Miss Kemble regards the songs she hears through means of imitation, inspiring her to see the humor by way of its failure, as it does not amount to direct mimicry. For Ellison, the humor too lies in the imitation, but because of its success, as it does not pertain to white imitation and limitation, but creates its own humor and art.

By the mediation of instruments and technology, humanity is extended to consider the low objectification modern society has been built on. In this way, Louis Armstrong manifests the

object that sounds, as he transmits his sound and character through various mechanisms of masking; he has his comic mask, as well as his trumpet which provides another mask of transmission and additional, disembodied voice. In effect, Armstrong's comic heroism is evoked in Invisible Man's concluding query: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison 581). Invisible Man's disembodied voice delivers a question; in summation he asks "What could I do, if not speak for you?" The depth of the underground attunes to lower frequencies—perceptible only from and to those below, requiring consciousness and attention. Invisible Man's deliberate decision at going underground makes him audible to those invisible and visible. I understand Armstrong as a comic hero because of the ways in which I read his character as an inverse expression of minstrelsy. Minstrel shows were driven by irony and contradiction as a white actor, colored in black face sings: "*I jumps jis' so / And ev'y time I turn about, I jump Jim Crow!*"²⁶ Challenging minstrelsy expression of exploitation, I appeal to Armstrong's song: "When You're Smilin,'" with simple and direct lyrics, the instrumental accompaniment rings languidly but drunkenly as it slips and slides between low and high frequencies. Louis sings:

When you're smilin', keep on smilin'

The whole world smiles with you

And when you're laughin', keep on laughin'

The sun comes shinin' through

The words are simple and direct enough, but the dueling effect of the trumpet and voice incite a convoluted effect of sorrow and joy. Looking at these lyrics alone do not inspire a

²⁶ See Robertson, David. "W.C. Handy: the Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues." W.C. Handy: the Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues, by David Robertson, Univ.y of Alabama Press, 2011, pp. 53–74.

meaning that necessarily touches; the song even seems to me, rather corny. But, when hearing Armstrong's full effect— the medium of the song is transformed and goes beyond the content of the lyrics, but inspires a feeling, even life, made manifest by the song. Perhaps this is what Invisible Man means when he asks: "Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (Ellison, 14).

Chapter Four: Richard Wright Season of Blues

*I'm doing all right well, good morning how are you.
I couldn't sleep last night, I was turning from side to side
Oh Lord, I was turning from side to side
I wasn't sad, I was just dissatisfied*

– Huddie “Lead Belly” Leadbetter, “Good Morning Blues” (1941).

In contrast to his childhood, Wright participates in various modes of community upon moving to Chicago. Stemming from a past absent from ideas of “community” and “tradition” as Wright points out in *Black Boy*, his maturity supplies him with the confidence to seek out a form of membership. Experiences and influences from his time in Chicago exposed him to “dazzling challenges and growth²⁷” (McClusky 96), as he began to associate with a creative and literary circuit. As a result of the Federal Writers’ Project, he started to compose poetry and blues haikus; intense in their nature, Wright’s earliest prose emit tones of urgency. “His early poems and essays certainly acknowledged the vitality of a past folk tradition and its possibilities for literature” (McClusky 97). A willingness to expand the traditions of folklore into a political, modern context becomes intrinsic to Wright’s writing. In addition to the Federal Writers’ Project, he joined the John Reed Club and eventually, the Communist Party; he aided in the launch of South Side’s Writers’ Group where he would write his first short stories. Compiling all of these experiences in his first manifesto: “Blueprints for Negro Writing” catalyzes a nuanced definition of Black literature dependent on the “racial wisdom” derived by music and folklore. The ten years spent in Chicago acts as Wright’s introduction into the literary sphere, but more importantly acquaints him the freedom to experiment with blues and literature, finding his own tone and timbre.

²⁷ McCluskey, John, “Richard Wright and the Season of Manifestoes.” *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago; Springfield, 2012, pp. 96–109.

In correspondence to his active literary and political life in Chicago, Wright arrives in New York City as editor of the *Daily Worker*. Providing a new venue for Wright's publications during a turning time in Party politics in Chicago— the *Daily Worker*, along with New York would offer Wright a new and even more urban environment. In theory, the paper seemed as if Wright would enjoy his time there, but he quickly realized a bombardment of news coverage and a reintegration into the Communist Party, though he was seriously questioning the party line. On occasion, he would report on cultural events; one article written in August of 1937, just two months after Wright's move to New York, foreshadows a growing interest in writing about and for the blues. Attending to the defense of Louisiana born blues musician Huddie "Lead Belly" Leadbetter, "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People" enacts Wright's "foray into music writing". Richard Wright may not have been the first major American writer to incorporate Black folklore into fiction; "one of the markers of the Harlem Renaissance writers was the acceptance of Black folklore on the part of its major writers, such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and James Weldon Johnson..." (McCluskey 98). The folkloric qualities exhibited in Wright's fiction is undeniably different and personal to his own interpretation of tradition; imbued with deeply personal qualities, the blues merits reflection and spirituality.

Wright's contemporaries were in consideration to folklore as much as he was; Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* consistently alludes to the church, particularly spirituals and the music's effect:

Even at a tender age, in playing I helped to express what I felt by some of the mannerisms which I afterwards observed in great performers; I had not copied them. I have often heard people speak of the mannerisms of musicians as affectations adopted for mere effect; in some cases they may be so; but a true artist can no more play upon the

piano or violin without putting his whole body in accord with the emotions he is striving to express than a swallow can fly without being graceful (Johnson 17).

Johnson becomes exposed to a community through a personal production and exposition of music, along with spirit, that inevitably rubbed off on the young narrator. Yet, in the spirit of the blues, “I had not copied them”, instead, he exercises emotion through music and mannerism specific to his culture. Culture, here, can refer to the simplicity of one’s environment; for Johnson, it was the church and the resonance of spirituals. For Wright, the childhood experiences in Memphis offered his first encounters with the culture of community. At age dix, Wright becomes obsessed with the local happenings of the saloon– his first entry exposes him to more social activity he had probably seen in his whole, young life:

The entire crowd in the saloon gathered about me now, urging me to drink. I took another sip. Then another. My head spun and I laughed. I was put on the floor and I ran giggling and shouting among the yelling crowd. As I would pass each man, I would take a sip from an offered glass. Soon I was drunk. A man called me to him and whispered some words into my ear and told me that he would give me a nickel if I went to a woman and repeated them to her. I told him that I would say them; he gave me the nickel and I ran to the woman and shouted the words (Wright 21).

In the first chapter, I suggested that the *Kate Adams* initiated a transition from Wright’s rural nature to urban reality. As he gets more accustomed to the city, Wright exhibits a wider facilitation of freedom; he walks the streets alone and can evidently take care of himself in the middle of a smoke filled bar. With his new sense of freedom, new sights are visible to him, and slowly but surely, humanity becomes illuminated by his awareness. Intrinsic to Memphis’ new environment is the presence of groups in the city. Unlike Johnson’s reflection, Wright’s observations may not be directed at “performers” of the common connotation, a performance of character is undeniably comparable.

For both Johnson and Wright, the mannerisms of the performer are absorbed and imitated, but Wright, rather than romanticizing every aspect of the community, shows that consequences can take effect. Wright contained a feeling that the majority of artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance did not go far enough with. Interacting with folklore on a different, politicized scale, Wright utilizes the blues as a personal and cultural philosophy. Wright's folk tradition differed than that of Johnson, supplying an entirely new body of literature that could only be delivered by his voice; In application to the blues tradition, LeRoi Jones explicates the expansive form of the blues: Given the deeply personal quality of blues-singing, there could be no particular method for learning the blues. As a verse form, it was the lyrics which were most important, and they issued from life" (Jones 82). Beginning as a casual expression and functional means of conversation, the blues undergoes a deliberate transformation once in standardized form—" But classic blues took on a certain degree of professionalism. It was no longer strictly the group singing to ease their labors of the casual expression of personal deliberations on the world. It became a music that could be used to entertain others formally" (Jones 82). From here, what was once deemed "folk" casualness turns conditioned to the public, attaining a more sophisticated stature. By becoming more public, the music moves past, or through the personal boundaries, extending into political voice. As stated by Jones, above all; the blues is personal in content and style. Informed by nothing other than self stylization, the blues grows out of the standardized, twelve-bar song, into infinite possibilities and expressions of life. I argue that the ways in which Richard Wright interacts and installs the blues depends on a defiant strategy to the publications of the Harlem Renaissance because of Wright's motivation to politicize oral literature through writing; for Wright, writing activates action.

But, as blues become more modern, the music also becomes more commodified in its formalization. In consideration to the economic state that the blues arose out of, money, in a most general sense, never truly released its grasp on blues music and musicians. In an article written in August, 1937, Wright directs attention to the exploitative acts experienced by Huddie Ledbetter during a career that always seemed eventual, yet slow in succession. “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People” exposes the Lead Belly–Lomax power dynamic; attacking the folklorists’ exploitation and commodification of Lead Belly’s character; Wright admires and shares particular qualities he sees in the blues musician. The “inability to take injustice and like it,” informs the later songs of Lead Belly that excited Wright and influenced his own artistic voice²⁸. New Lead Belly lyrics addressed contemporary racial politics such as the Scottsboro Boys, and it was within the politicized songs of the late 1930’s that discouraged Lomax and inspired Wright:

Blues, spirituals, animal songs, ballads and work songs pour forth in such profusion that it seems he knows every song his race has ever sung...
He makes his songs out of the day-to-day life of his people. He sings of death, of work, of balked love, of Southern jails no better than hell-holes, of chain gangs, of segregation, and of his hopes for a better life (Wright 7)²⁹.

In celebration of the blues impulse, Wright highlights Lead Belly's lyrics; though ornamented with personal catastrophe, the future proposes promise. As the blues becomes more modern, pleasure and politics become synthesized. To clarify; the sound of the blues can be either recognized or invisible to an individual, simply dependent on the fact of who they are– a

²⁸“A Voice to Match All That’: Lead Belly, Richard Wright, and Lynching’s Soundtrack.” *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, NYU Press, New York, 2016, pp. 180–228.: “New Lead Belly compositions addressing contemporary racial politics such as ‘Bourgeois’ Blues” and ‘Scottsboro Boys’– actively discouraged by Lomax– especially excited Wright, who quoted the latter prominently in the *Worker* and encouraged readers to attend Ledbetter’s benefit concert for the Scottsboro boys” (182).

²⁹ See Richard Wright, “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist,” *Daily Worker*, August 12, 1937, p. 7.

message can be received or missed. Music, not isolated to the blues, holds the power of being enjoyable to wide ranges of individuals, notwithstanding the question “why?”

Though the musical form supports Wright’s intention to “speak”, and transmit a message, I argue that Wright, aware of the restrictions of the musical form, exercised his own blues impulse elsewhere; through the medium of fiction, his characters emerge as folk heroes or anti heroes. In contrast to the tradition made manifest by Lead Belly or James Weldon Johnson, Wright employs folk tradition to emphasize his outsidership, not as an example of community. When protagonist Cross Damon encounters Mrs. Turner’s jazz echoes in his freshly rented room, he falls into a philosophical spiral that reveals a matured form of Richard Wright’s blues:

Most of the time he could hear her playing blues or jazz records whose wild rhythms wailed up to him through the thin flooring. His morbid mood was susceptible to the lonely melodies and, as he tapped his feet to the beat of the tunes, his sense of estrangement became accentuated and he felt more inclined than ever to avoid contact with reality (Wright 178).

Cross Damon carries the weight of the blues through his narrative; inextricable in conversation to *Black Boy*, Wright illustrates identity convoluted by estrangement. By a grappling with folk tradition Wright combats the terms of modern society through Cross Damon; a protagonist properly trapped.

Wright’s own blues impulse leads him to create protagonists like Cross Damon; dynamic, destructive and contradictory, his display of outsidership renders him impenetrable to the people and world surrounding him, not part of him. From a similar perspective Wright views the Harlem Renaissance; understanding the period as an exacerbation of the “white-hot iron of exclusion”, for he demands to prevail above white society and benefit. Undertoned by his stance of security and confidence, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” calls for collection, culture, and membership—

It goes without saying that these things cannot be gained by Negro writers if their present mode of isolated writing and living continues. This isolation exists among Negroes as well as between Negro and white writers. The Negro writers' lack of thorough integration with the American scene, their lack of a clear realization among themselves of their possible role, have bred generation after generation of embittered and defeated literati (Wright 102).

What he started in "Blueprint" becomes exercised by Cross's consciousness as he renders the trappings of ideology, ritual, and religion as trappings in concealment to African American identity and virtuosity. For Wright, isolation and commodification immobilized the Harlem Renaissance's possibility for Black artists to produce diverse expressions of art and literature. The attitude revealed in these first articles exhibit Wright's intention to reconsider African American identity, and the experiment with new forms of transmission.

What better voice to match Wright's blues than Lead Belly? Around the time the final edits were made to "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter's visible and sonic performance had not yet made the transition to "leftist folk crowd" that would propagate his image and legacy in the 1940's³⁰. While the Lomax-Ledbetter power dynamic worked to aestheticize black suffering, "Blueprint" argued for connection across the sonic color line. In continuation of "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People", "Blueprint" accentuates Wright's position of outsidership because one can only be aware of the lapse— if one remains outside, looking in. Instead of remaining outside the "American scene", Wright sees the utmost possibility in sound:

In the absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture, the Negro has a folkore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom. Not yet caught in paint or stone, and as yet but feebly depicted in the poem and novel, the Negroes' most powerful images of hope and despair still remains in the fluid state of daily speech (Wright 99).

³⁰ A Voice to Match All That': Lead Belly, Richard Wright, and Lynching's Soundtrack." *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, NYU Press, New York, 2016, pp. 183.

The sonic value evaluated by Wright in these folk traditions proves important when considering the blues: “Each man had his own voice and his own way of shouting— his own life to sing about” (Jones 62). Individuals could be identified by their individual shouts on large (and small) plantations, and personality becomes integrated with voice and speech—their own blues. Wright associates the individual voice with freedom, for being surrounded by folk tradition simultaneously adheres him to culture and isolates him from the “American scene” and validation of the individual.

I am interested in the various layers of intimacy involved with the voice; temporal and invisible, the qualities that become identifiable are perhaps the most authentic expression of personality and individuality. In his youth, it was Wright’s words, rather and his manipulation of their message that cast him out in *Black Boy*; ”...society had cast millions of others with me. But how could I be with them?” (Wright 301). Miss Simon’s orphan home exposes Wright to his antagonistic personality, working in defiance to others:

Miss Simon tried to win my confidence; she asked me if I would like to be adopted by her if my mother consented and I said no. She would take me into her apartment and talk to me, but her words had no effect. Dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being and my memory grew sharp, my senses more impressionable; I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others. I held myself in, afraid to act or speak until I was sure of my surroundings, feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a void (Wright 29).

Miss Simon’s attempts at connection are not didged by Wright, but simply not received.

Miss Simon’s words could bear no effect as long as she represented the exile of his homelife.

Distrust and dread accumulates into Wright’s perspective.

One particular experience with Simon renders Wright inaccessible, impenetrable to the voice delivering instruction. As stated by Wright, her words simply had no effect on Wright in

most circumstances; I take the blotting episode as a presaging experience that is carried over to Wright's future book, *The Outsider*, as it slips and seeps into his consciousness:

“Blot it,” she said. I could not lift my hand. I knew what she had said; I knew what she wanted me to do; and I had heard her correctly. I wanted to look at her and say something, tell her why I could not move; but my eyes were fixed upon the floor. I could not summon enough courage while she sat there looking at me to reach over the yawning space of twelve inches and blot the wet ink on the envelope. “Blot it!” she spoke sharply. Still I could not move or answer. “Look at me!” I could not lift my eyes. She reached her hand to my face and I twisted away (Wright 31).

Wright's reaction or, lack thereof action at all, promotes a message of misunderstanding and Miss Simon automatically deems him futile: ““What's wrong with you?’ she demanded” (Wright 31). The orphan home incites Wright's instincts to take over, facilitating the only way he views safety and security: by skepticism and deception. By this experience, Wright affords a perspective of himself on the peripheries of community; for even in an orphan home, he becomes destitute of alliance while surrounded by outsiders. Still, Miss Sisom activates a conscious power of disguise in Wright. Yes, he understood and could understand; but he could also relay a message, or sign of misunderstanding that carries an ability to alter his perceived identity, offering a mask.

In Wright's second installment of a narrative sizing up to epic proportions, *The Outsider* attempts to bridge the gap between existence and essence. Protagonist Cross Damon, stimulates Wright's attention to the plight of protagonists. Cross Damon's quest for freedom has been contemporarily understood as a matured expression and continuation of Bigger Thomas from *Native Son*; but for the basis of my project, I see Cross Damon as a resemblance of a threatening existence being fought against as early as *Black Boy*. Wright's personal philosophy becomes translated, exercised, and challenged in *The Outsider* as Cross pushes against the conditions of

his life by confronting the “under-ground³¹”. In “Richard Wright’s Blues” Ellison resonates with his self-inscribed definition of Wright’s blues because of the way in which Wright challenges the undemocratic South, attempting to fulfill himself through a qualitative difference he possessed in antagonism from his environment and family; *Black Boy* represents a refusal:

Let us close with one final word about the blues: Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self. Nowhere in America today is there social or political action based upon the solid realities of Negro life depicted in *Black Boy*; perhaps that is why, with its refusal to offer solutions, it is like the blues (Ellison 94).

I argue that Ellison was attracted to this; he saw glimpses of recognition and reflection in Wright’s prose but, before Ellison exercises his own confrontation with destiny and freedom in his first novel *Invisible Man*, Wright’s influence is traceable, almost tangible prior to its publication in 1952. Just a year after, Wright’s *The Outsider* is released in succession to Ellison, and the two stand as individual odysseys yet their protagonists act in divergence toward each other; Cross Damon and Invisible Man possess contradictory desires and definitions of freedom that eventually fall under clashing expressions of blues tradition that Ellison initially found in Wright’s *Black Boy*.

The Outsider opens: “From an invisible February sky” (Wright 1), emerges the first depiction of Cross Damon, laughing and shouting with three coworkers and companions.

Trudging toward the tavern “The Salty Dog”, after a nightly Post Office shift, the boys are in

³¹ Here I am referring to “Richard Wright’s Blues,” *Antioch Review* (1945), rpt. in *Shadow and Act*. New York, Vintage International, 1995. P. 78: “And in this lies Wright’s most important achievement: He has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and “going-under-ground” into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America” (94).

need of a round of whiskey; Cross displayed more desperate than the others, as Joe characterizes him as living on alcohol. Known around town “for his four A’s: Alcohol. Abortions. Automobiles. And alimony”(Wright 4), Cross was identified by his dangerous desires along with the will to seek them out, regardless of consequences. Straining in laughter, Cross’s companion, Joe, struggles to say: “Said that the best thing for Cross w-was to plow himself under...”(Wright 4). Though they are accustomed to Cross’s strange characteristics, Cross’s group of friends (Joe, Pink, and Booker), are aware that something in him has changed. Accompanying a conversation on Cross’s alcohol consumption, Pink breaks into song to accompany them:

*If the ocean was whiskey
And I was a duck
I’d dive right in
And never come up (Wright 3).*

Echoing the blues, Pink’s song gestures to the fate awaiting Cross; As boundless as the ocean, Cross’s desires push him to rid himself of himself. More than willing to dive in, Cross wishes to construct a new life, but does contain the strength to never come back? As the saying goes: when one door closes, another opens. In Cross’s case, when a subway car crashes, a new life becomes offered– but should it be received? *The Outsider* exercises the possibilities of freedom and identity to subvert the role of the protagonist Cross Damon, resulting in a formative characterization of anti-heroism. Richard Wright cultivates a narrative imploring the blues of a paradoxical protagonist; “We all have blue days”, as Pink points out to Cross– But Cross’s days are the blues.

Book one of Cross’s epic, entitled *Dread*, situates him as a man properly trapped. Bound by the constraints of finances and family; he has responsibilities to attend to, to say the least. *Dread* compiles the pressures from Cross’s mother, wife, and girlfriend– as they are all described

as wanting, rather taking something from Cross. He rhapsodizes after receiving Gladys's ultimatum:

“His seeing Gladys had compounded his problems. If he obeyed her, he was lost; and if he did not obey her, he was lost. Yet, because he could not make up his mind to ditch it all, he had to follow her demands (Wright 88).

It is at this point, and from this perspective of dread that Cross begins to align his philosophy to a nihilistic attitude, but does not commit fully as the decision to execute evades him. It begins to dawn on him that his control has been seized and he saw himself doomed with no way out of the predicament that was his life. What could Cross do, and what did his actions or words amount to? As long as Cross Damon was still Cross Damon, he would follow the instruction of the forces around him; for as much anguish he possessed for the people in his life, they were inextricably attached to him as a reminder of himself.

Gladys's ultimatum left Cross with a to-do list, starting with the collection of an \$800 loan to compensate for emotional as well as financial damage owed to her. On his way out, Cross dives underground, into a subway en route to his girlfriend, Dot's place. Cross's dread takes an abrupt turn as the underground scene opportunes a change of fate. The crash leaves Cross suspended and trapped in the subway car; it is up to him to make the decision to free himself, or continue dangling. The face of a man resembling the countenance of Cross's was wedged between the car's seat and Wright's leg; blocking an escape out of the window— “Could he get that head out of this way?” (Wright 95). In order to escape and save his life, Cross has to metaphorically kill himself, as his doppelganger stands, rather sits, as an obstacle to overcome. “He looked; the mangled face was on the floor; most of the flesh had been ripped away and it already appeared skeletonlike. He had done it; he could move his leg” (Wright 96). Gaining his autonomy, Cross is free to move and becomes aware of the skeleton produced on the floor. It is

at these moments within Wright's fiction where violence reads intentionally anti-aesthetic, and Cross renders anti-heroic, though a critical moment in Cross's narrative. The action that Cross takes to free himself may not produce the most heroic, probable, or readable solutions; but it is action, nevertheless. Cross's blues, driven by possibility of action, transition from one trap to the next.

Escaping the crash in one piece, Cross makes his way to a restaurant on the South Side to recover from the accident. Interrupted at the bar, "in spite of himself" (Wright 103), listens to the echoes of an emergency news program:

Ladies and gentlemen, the police have just informed me of the identity of the last victim taken from the subway crash at Roosevelt Road. His name is Cross Damon, a 26-year-old postal clerk who lived at 244 East 57th Street on the South Side. Mr. Damon's body was crushed and mangled beyond recognition or hope of direct identification" (Wright 103). An impulse of laughter escapes him as he hears the news of his death— Dead? But he was sitting right there! It all seemed too perfect; the doppelganger, the crash, even the intentional move of his seat while on the subway, that resulted in the preservation of his life. Doubly ironic at this report, is the fact of misidentification caused both by the crash and Cross. Ambiguously between life and death, Cross witnesses his possible fate; he could either take death with stride, or come clean and continue living his life as Cross Damon. Though he is dead, he is not invisible, so the choice has to be one or the other, and ultimate. Impulsively, his initial reaction inspires him to run back toward a life in pause: "This was rich! He was dead! He had to tell this to the gang at The Salty Dog, right now!" (Wright 104). As a dead man, Cross is energetic, comic, teeming to spill the news.

Following his impulse toward the direction of the bar, a force suddenly stops Cross from going any further with his plan: "He was dead... All right... Okay... Why the hell not? Why

should he refute it? Why should he deny it?" (Wright, 105). The opportunity of freedom crosses Cross's mind as death offers him a new identity; or more in his interest, a burial of the old. At this point, Cross encounters a new philosophical quest: "Why the hell not?" Death awards abandonment of the responsibilities applied to the living Cross Damon; released from their restriction, Cross could be free. With that being said, the transition from one established reality to starting one from scratch, would have to be ultimate and precise.

In consideration to the Kirkegaardian epigraph that starts the first book of Damon's epic: "Dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears what one desires(footnote). Wright employs Kirkegaard to aid Cross's decision in the first book, to enact a new life; coupled with fear and desire, Cross is faced with the metaphysical object of his desire: A way out. While Cross still remains in the grips of "the nightmare that was his life" (Wright 88), he would remain unable to take action against his current situation— there were too many barriers for him to overcome and no real control over an identity out of his hands. The desire to create a new one surfaces and excites him initially, but attuned to Kirkegaard's classifications of dread, fear inevitably follows. The endless oscillation from fear to desire cradles Cross's impulsive identity quest, adhering Wright to the philosophy of existentialism.

Conclusion:

Perhaps the most notable (and exhausting), lesson I have discovered throughout the process of writing and thinking becomes manifest, ironically, by the ways in which I have gone wrong. I admit, I have shifted perspectives at many points during this project– each time arriving at a new “aha!” moment. Louis Armstrong serves as a figure I found especially fascinating as well as misleading. Initially, I came to the conclusion that Ellison’s allusions were merely made to be a piece of irony and symbol of jazz. Didn’t I fall into the trap, warned against by Ellison in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke?”–

The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the “thing” in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask (Ellison 49)

The “thing” in both Armstrong as a performer and the function of minstrel shows require the veiling abilities of the mask. Armstrong, though, performing in spite and in succession to minstrelsy, inverses the role of the mask. I intended to argue a perspective of Ralph Ellison, writing that stimulates the effect of jazz music as it conjures a mode of veiling in concealment of authenticity or truth. Behind Armstrong’s mask stands not a performer, but a musician. Performing inevitably conjures a mask as the distance between the audience and the one on stage requires distance and a level of depersonalization.

I find that Louis Armstrong interacts and utilizes his comic mask not as a form of costume or disguise, but as a preservation of identity. Veiling oneself can be used as a mechanism of defense and power just as it can be employed to mock and symbolize. By taking

possession of his mask, Armstrong, I have come to conclude, had to accompany Invisible Man in his hole. Armstrong, reconsiders the possible power propagated by a mask as he celebrates life, its conditions and discontents.

Though the abstract I have applied does not completely become palpable, but, if the future holds a chance for a second installation of this project, I would attempt a deeper and more precise comparison of protagonists Cross Damon and Invisible Man and their narratives. Particularly, the ways in which they do or do not render existential heroes motivated my initial entry of inquiry and I have left this project with a feeling of unfinished business. The feedback I experienced from my own excitement, doubt and passion, skewed my perspective at some points but I end hoping to have achieved my own blues too. This project continues to inspire me as the universally particular qualities of the blues provide boundless possibility and inquiry.

In retrospect I wonder if a subconscious effort was taken to assess the source of feeling I personally feel through the music and the literature imbuing the blues. In writing this project, I found myself divided between a philosophical and musical discussion. Both Invisible Man and The Outsider initially struck me as existential works, and I intended to evaluate their philosophical qualities above all. Yet, I seemed to keep coming back to the topic of music, asking the question: How does the music-entangled narratives express the blues? Sartre subjects Antoine Roquentin to a jazz song that beckons him to feel “something I didn’t know any more: a sort of joy” (Sartre 176), causing me to ask: What does the philosophy of existentialism and the blues have in common? From a first person perspective, both interact and establish a voice concentrated on the human condition. In more resolute and rather enjoyable ways, the music like

philosophy, observes what it means to be human in society. Similar to Roquentin, in all of the loneliness and suffering, Hattie's blues delivers Cross with a rare state of bliss:

Blue-jazz was the scornful gesture of men turned ecstatic in their state of rejection; it was the musical language of the satisfiedly amoral, the boastings of the contentedly lawless, the recreations of the innocently criminal... Cross smiled to himself with depressed joy as he paces about his room, his ears full of the woeful happiness of the blues and the orgiastic culpability of jazz (Wright 178).

Terror and hope are mended in the blues because of its call to community and devotion to membership. It is the resolution of companionship and community igniting the light at the end of the tunnel for without anyone to listen, to pay witness to the blues— a way out of the blues is unachievable.

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Cross is articulate and assertive as he engages not just action, but violent action. Cross, while explosive, becomes more dominant over the course of Wright's novel whereas *Invisible Man*, I intend on arguing, becomes less dominant; yet, both novels leave protagonists Cross and *Invisible Man* in suspension.

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