

Summer 8-2015

## **Performativity and Jazz in the Fiction of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison**

Drako P. Wells  
*University of Southern Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/honors\\_theses](https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Wells, Drako P., "Performativity and Jazz in the Fiction of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison" (2015).  
*Honors Theses*. 336.  
[https://aquila.usm.edu/honors\\_theses/336](https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/336)

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

The University of Southern Mississippi

Performativity and Jazz in the Fiction of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison

by

Drako P. Wells

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English

August 2015



Approved by

---

Monika Gehlawat, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser  
Associate Professor of English

---

Luis Iglesias, Ph.D., Chair  
Department of English

---

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean  
Honors College

## Abstract

Since slavery in the seventeenth century, African Americans have been politically and economically oppressed in the United States. Even in recent times, it seems as if simply being black is enough to have a person criticized by society, convicted of crimes, or even killed. However, the frustration that oppression causes has, in many ways, catalyzed the evolution of African American culture and the African American identity. In this study, I examine how two postwar African American authors, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, portray the African American struggle with racial injustice and the means of overcoming its negative effects. In this study I discuss how Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, and James Baldwin's short stories "Sonny's Blues," "This Morning This Evening So Soon" and "Previous Condition" reflect W.E.B Du Bois' concept of double consciousness. The characters have to be aware of how white people perceive them. In order to remain free from racial oppression they take on servile behavior in the presence of the oppressor, white society. The behavior conflicts with the characters sense of self-worth and causes them to be frustrated. The limits placed on them by racism and oppression to the characters' frustration. The characters are not free to pursue the knowledge they want to pursue, live where they want to live, or be in relationships with the people they desire to be with because if white society does not approve of these desires the results could be fatal. The characters search for ways to express their feelings and desires. Eventually, they find that the most productive way to do so is through art and creation.

The authors use jazz as form of expression that might challenge the psychic effects of racial oppression. Jazz music stems from the blues, which is an evolution of the Negro spirituals that date back to slavery. Jazz music is central to the African-American identity as it allows African Americans to confront the dark past while at the same time enjoying the artistry and creativeness of the present culture. Jazz music plays a crucial role in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* as well as James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues."

Key Terms: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Double Consciousness, Racial Oppression, Jazz, Performativity

## Dedication

For my mother, father, brothers, and family

Thank you for always supporting me

Onward and Upward!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Monika Gehlawat, for her dedication and selflessness towards me! Even when I felt like giving up, you continued to guide me through a successful experience. Thank you for teaching me, I could not have asked for a better mentor!

A special thank you to the Dr. Ronald E. McNair Post- baccalaureate Achievement Program staff: Dr. Susan Bourland, Mrs. Kim Brown, Dr. Adina Green, and my graduate advisor Dr. Kent Quaney. Thank you to the 2014 Class of McNair Scholars. Thank you to the men of the Mu Xi Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. for always encouraging me throughout this process. Thank you, Ms. Katelyn Daniels for always believing in me. Thanks to the Department of English for providing me with a quality education in literature. Also, thank you to the Honors College for constant and consistent support!

Lastly, thank you to the University of Southern Mississippi. Being able to live and learn in such an encouraging environment was truly a pleasure. My time at Southern Miss will never be forgotten!

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Methodology .....	3
Chapter 3: Freedom and Performance in the Literature .....	4
Chapter 4: Jazz in the Literature .....	12
Chapter 5: Conclusion .....	27
Works Cited .....	28

## Performativity and Jazz in the Fiction of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin

Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin display the liberating power of expression through jazz music in their fiction. First, the authors demonstrate the constant pressure to perform that African Americans faced during the Jim Crow era. The authors illustrate how failing to act in a self-deprecating manner placed African Americans in danger and how acting in such a manner frustrated African Americans. Though slavery had been abolished well before Ellison and Baldwin were even born, the pressures of Jim Crow kept African Americans far from being free. African Americans may not have been in chains any longer, but their actions and aspirations were heavily influenced by the expectations of white society. Ellison and Baldwin reveal to readers that freedom requires the opportunity for creative self-expression. The authors use jazz music as a prime example of how artistic performance can lead to freedom for the individual.

Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* follows an unnamed, black narrator as he travels from Mississippi to New York, and depicts how oppression continues to affect him in the North. In Ellison's novel, each time the narrator acts contrary to the expectations set by white people, he is punished. Baldwin's short stories "Sonny's Blues," "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," and "Previous Condition," published in his 1965 collection, *Going to Meet the Man* also follow characters whose lives are affected by racial oppression.

In their fiction, both Ellison and Baldwin show how African Americans are constantly required to perform for survival in a racist society. These performances occur because they need to behave passively and in a demeaning manner in the presence of

white people. This compulsory performance reflects W.E.B Du Bois' concept of double consciousness:

This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 2-3)

Because the African-American characters in these works are always looking at themselves "through the eyes of others," specifically white society, they have to monitor their own behavior. The characters have to laugh and smile when nothing is funny or amusing. They have to take insults and derision without showing contempt. They have to be polite when white people are rude. In the event that the characters fail to lower themselves in the presence of white people, they suffer consequences. Ellison's protagonist feels ostracized by those in charge each time he steps out of whatever role he has been assigned. Ironically, white society equips the characters with the tools that they need to achieve liberation by providing them with the frustration that fuels their creativity and expression. Though Ellison's and Baldwin's characters experience freedom in different ways, the characters find freedom through their use of performance and improvisation.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin describe freedom as a product of self-expression in their fiction. The authors demonstrate how channeling frustration into performance allows African-American characters to express themselves. The authors place a particular emphasis on jazz music as an example of self-expression through art. This research project used Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, and James Baldwin's short stories "Sonny's Blues," "Previous Condition," and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" to better understand African American literature. This study was conducted by using academic search engines such as Academic Search Premiere and MLA International Bibliography to obtain a group of scholarly sources. I have provided literary criticism based in a reader's response approach. Though the works may not be considered as modernist work, I looked for modernist influences in the work such as performativity, the crisis of communicability, stream of consciousness, and fragmented/ alienated characters. The research was mostly collected via online journals and databases. A fair amount of research material was also found in the Joseph Cook library on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi.

### Chapter 3: Freedom through Performance in the Literature

Ellison's and Baldwin's characters struggle to accept the type of performance necessary for them to get along with white society on a daily basis. For example, the narrator in *Invisible Man* struggles with his grandfather's advice from his deathbed. The grandfather says to the author, "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Ellison 16). The grandfather instructs the narrator about how to live alongside white people. The metaphor of keeping his head in the lion's mouth draws attention. Initially one would view such a thing as dangerous. However, in an instance where a trainer would put his head into a lion's mouth, the lion would be trained and the trainer would be in control. Despite the trainer-trainee relationship there is always the danger of things going wrong should there be an error on the part of the trainer. Words like "overcome" and "undermine" suggest victory and triumph. This is ironic because when one submits himself to this behavior, the victory belongs to the white people. The individual defeats himself as he offers no resistance to oppression. All the yeses, grinning, and agreeing, then, become part of a performance. The problem the narrator has with the performance lies in the fact that it requires him to lower himself and acknowledge a type of inferiority. Because he is aware of his own humanity, he does not feel comfortable playing the role that his grandfather suggests he play.

Although his grandfather is suggesting a performance, Ellison's narrator feels uneasy when he follows his grandfather's instructions. The narrator thinks to himself:

And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as treachery. When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. It made me afraid that some day they would look upon me as a traitor and I would be lost. Still I was more afraid to act any other way because they didn't like that at all. The old man's words were like a curse. (Ellison 16-17)

Here readers are able to see why Ellison's narrator struggles with trying to please white society. Early in the passage the narrator attributes his guilt and discomfort to his own dignity. He states that he acts as his grandfather suggests "in spite of" himself. The fact that he is praised for acting in a way that causes him to subject himself to others makes him feel even worse. The narrator believes that if whites knew why he behaved in such an obsequious manner that they would be upset. He suspects that white people would truly prefer him to be "sulky and mean." The reason he believes so stems from the fact that he knows the oppression he experiences stems from hatred and racism. To the narrator, white people do not want to make his life easier in any way. At least if he was sulky and mean the white people would be assured that he was miserable. Also, they

would be justified in mistreating him. Truthfully, the narrator wants to be sulky and mean towards white people, but circumstance does not allow him to do so safely. He believes that when his grandfather speaks of treachery that he means the betrayal is towards white people. However, his grandfather is speaking of one betraying himself. The type of behavior that the grandfather suggests causes one to forsake his integrity, and subsequently to be untrue to oneself. After all, how could the narrator betray white people who were never on his side to begin with? While behaving as the grandfather suggests may aid the narrator in having an easier life, it is still a life dictated by oppression. In many ways, the narrator is correct when he states that his grandfather's words "were like a curse." The curse that he describes is the plight of being African American in a racially oppressive society. The only way for one to survive and not be subject to violent oppression is to oppress oneself and act in a servile manner towards the primary oppressor.

Like Ellison's protagonist, Baldwin's narrator in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" struggles when it is time for him to perform the roles that white society has set for him. He struggles because he has become accustomed to a standard of living in Europe unavailable to blacks in America at the time. He has married a white woman and interacts normally with white people in Europe. The narrator states, "I had once known how to pitch my voice precisely between curtness and servility, and known what razor's edge of a pickaninny's smile would turn away wrath. But I had forgotten all the tricks on which my life once depended" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 163). Readers see that the narrator's life "once" depended on such acts of false submission, but no longer does. Outside of the United States the narrator does not have to act submissively. After

experiencing a different way of life and recognizing his own humanity, he no longer wants to accept the role society wishes to assign him. As a result, the narrator is apprehensive about returning to the United States and he does not want his son, Paul, to experience discrimination. He says, "I would throw my life and my work between Paul and the nightmare of the world I would make it impossible for the world to treat Paul as it had treated my father and me" (172). The narrator feels most of his apprehension for Paul because Paul is an interracial child. He states "Paul has never been called any names, so far. Only once he asked us what the word *métis* meant and Harriet explained to him that it meant mixed blood adding that the blood of just about everybody in the world was mixed by now" (149). The words "so far" and the mention of mixed race identities reveal the narrator's underlying fear that Paul will be a specific target in the United States because of his heritage. Furthermore, Paul has grown up outside of the United States and has not yet been subject to prejudice or racism. Paul has not learned the type of behavior that his father had learned as a child growing up in the American South.

In contrast to the narrators in *Invisible Man* and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," Baldwin chooses a narrator who refuses to conform in "Previous Condition." When Peter, the narrator of "Previous Condition," is confronted by the white landlady of an apartment complex he has been secretly living in he refuses to take on a servile disposition. When she commands him to leave he tells her "You can't put me out . . . I live here, see, this is my room, you can't put me out" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 91). Peter's rebellious tone serves as a stark contrast to the ways that the narrators in *Invisible Man* and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" are forced to act in direct confrontation with whites. When the landlady tells Paul "I got the right to know who's in

my house! This is a white neighborhood, I don't rent to colored people. Why don't you go on uptown, like you belong" (91), he surprisingly responds "I can't stand niggers" (91). Here Paul negates the very identity that white society would like to place on him. Whereas the other characters seem to fully take on the idea of being a "nigger" or someone who allows himself to be dominated by whites, Peter does not accept this persona. Not only does he reject it, he even despises the idea. Peter does not despise African Americans; rather he cannot stand the idea of "niggers." At one point, Peter even turns down the role of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* as he feels he is being typecast and that, "It's so difficult to find a decent part" (95). The other characters seem to despise the idea of lowering themselves, but they see it as a necessity in order to survive. They decide to channel their frustration through other avenues of performance. When Peter fails to channel his frustration in a constructive way he ends up being evicted from the apartment. Though Baldwin contests the idea of humiliating oneself in order to please oppressive forces, he also shows how Peter is an example of the failure that occurs when the frustration caused by oppression is not channeled correctly.

A common element of Ellison's novel and Baldwin's short stories is that the authors use characters who gain agency through their occupation. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist is a motivational public speaker. When delivering a speech to a frenzied crowd, the protagonist exclaims, "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. I feel strong" (Ellison 346). The empowerment that the narrator begins to feel is his first true taste of freedom. The narrator feels more human because he is more in touch with his own identity. For the majority of his life he has only expressed what he has been allowed to express. Through the narrator's improvisation of the speech and subsequent expression

of his own inner thoughts, he achieves empowerment and liberation that he has not experienced before. A similar liberation through expression occurs in James Baldwin's celebrated short story, "Sonny's Blues."

Ellison and Baldwin define their characters as a speaker, a musician and a singer/actor(s) in order to emphasize the importance of creative expression in the African American experience. Each of these characters responds to social oppression by finding an outlet in creative expression. Thus they are able to survive whereas a character like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, who fails to find a constructive avenue for expression, does not. When readers view the characters operating in public, we see them struggle to fit into the strict roles that society assigns them. When these characters are performing, or engaging in activities where they can use creative energy, we see them thrive and feel liberated. Though these characters find a type of freedom in performing publicly, they are frustrated by the submissive performance they carry out when they are in the presence of white people. Though they hate to surrender their dignity, they see it as a necessary survival tool. At times they find themselves wanting to rebel, but ultimately choose not to in order to survive.

When one takes into account the emphasis that the two authors place on performativity for African Americans, it should be noted that they are not suggesting that African Americans are by nature entertaining or should be viewed as entertainers. They are only pointing out that performativity has become a necessary resource for gaining power in social life. The two writers look for a way to harness this acquired skill and gain access to freedom rather than to repeat stereotypes. One may then view the ability to perform as a type of evolution. In order to survive in hostile environments, African

Americans have learned to adapt. The fact that the authors represent this ability to perform as a gateway to individual freedom reinforces the idea that it is a positive ability. The protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Sonny, and the narrator in “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” make a living or even figuratively “live” by way of their performance. The two authors suggest that African Americans take what has been forced on them by society and use it to their benefit.

Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness can be seen at work in both Ellison’s and Baldwin’s fiction. The authors create characters that are deeply reflective of their own thoughts and desires. At the same time, they are aware of white society expects from them and how white society perceives them. Eventually these characters are able to channel the frustration that stems from having to bow down to white audiences and use it to fuel their expression in other, more creative, areas of performance. For both authors, creative enterprise is necessary for their characters to be able to overcome the despair caused by their submission to oppression. Ellison uses a public speaker while Baldwin uses a musician, actors, and a singer. Individuals with occupations such as these are in the unique position to create art. In creating art, they are able to reflect on what they feel inside and incorporate these feelings into their performance. They obtain freedom through this expression. Paradoxically, their oppression turns into their liberation.

Though Ellison and Baldwin use characters that happen to make a living through creative enterprises, their message carries universal possibilities. With the exception of Peter in “Previous Condition”, both authors use unnamed narrators in all of the fiction in this study. The narrators in *Invisible Man*, “Sonny’s Blues,” and “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” all remain nameless. This anonymous narration is calculated in order

to display the liberating effects of art. These narrators could be any young black man, any brother, or any person who is oppressed at all. They all have one thing in common. They achieve individual freedom through the expression made possible by creative enterprise. Even for the narrator in “Sonny’s Blues,” who does not produce the music himself, simply experiencing art can help an individual achieve freedom. He says, “Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did” (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 140). The narrator knows that Sonny’s music can help those who experience it to come to terms with the feelings they have. At the same time, Sonny has to create the music and have people listen to it in order to have expressed himself. In a sense the music allows the music allows the listener and the musician to have a conversation and express themselves without there being a back and forth dialogue. The narrator in *Invisible Man* both experiences art, as he listens to Louis Armstrong at the beginning of the novel, and creates it, as he gives his speeches, on his way to discovering his individuality.

## Chapter 4: Jazz in the Literature

Specifically, the authors decide to use jazz music to exemplify the freedom that expression allows African Americans to experience. For the authors, jazz epitomizes this liberating power that expression yields. Both Ellison and Baldwin incorporate jazz music into their writing in order to provide characters with a means of performing with power and freedom. During the introduction to *Invisible Man*, the narrator listens to a recording of Louis Armstrong performing “What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue.” As he listens to Armstrong, he drifts into a dreamlike state in which he contemplates the true meaning of freedom. In “Sonny’s Blues” the jazz performance occurs as the story’s finale when the narrator listens to his brother, Sonny, play the piano for the first time. The performance enables reconciliation between the brothers in which the narrator gains a deeper understanding of Sonny. For both authors, jazz music provides listeners with a liberating experience.

During the introduction to *Invisible Man*, the narrator listens to a recording of Louis Armstrong’s rendition of “What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue.” Though the novel does not display the lyrics of the song, the song goes as follows:

Out in the street, shuffling feet,  
Couple passing two by two,  
While here am I, left high and dry,  
Black, and ‘cause I’m black I’m blue  
Browns and yellors all have fellers,  
Gentlemen prefer them light,  
Wish I could fade, can’t make the grade,

Nothin' but dark days in sight.  
Cold, empty bed, springs hard as lead,  
Pains in my head, feel like old Ned,  
What did I do to be so black and blue?  
No joys for me, no company,  
Even the mouse ran from my house,  
All my life through, I've been so black and blue,  
I'm white inside, but that don't help my case,  
'Cause I can't hide what is on my face.  
I'm so forlorn, life's just a thorn,  
My heart is torn, Why was I born?  
What did I do to be so black and blue?  
Just 'cause you're black, folks think you lack,  
They laugh at you and scorn you too,  
What did I do to be so black and blue?  
When you are near, they laugh and sneer  
Set you aside and you're denied,  
What did I do to be so black and blue?  
How sad I am, each day I feel worse,  
My mark of Ham seems to be a curse.  
How will it end? Ain't got a friend/  
My only sin is in my skin/  
What did I do to be so black and blue? (Sundquist 116)

The lyrics, written by Harry Brooks and Andy Razaf epitomize the African American experience. Immediately, the song highlights a feeling of loneliness and isolation. As couples pass by the singer is left alone because of his blackness and in turn he feels “blues.” Next, the song addresses the issue of skin tone. Often, African Americans would

be played against each other in terms of those who have light skin or dark skin. The lyrics mention that “Gentlemen prefer them light” which affirms the idea that African Americans with lighter skin were preferred by whites and in turn received better treatment. As a result, many dark skinned African Americans would experience self-loathing which is reflected in the words “wish I could fade, can’t make the grade.” The song then describes some of the physical struggles and hardships that accompany being black. The hard bed and house that even mice leave represent the low quality of housing that many African Americans occupy. In most adequate housing areas, whites refused to rent to African Americans. An example of this discriminatory housing occurs in James Baldwin’s short story, “Sonny’s Blues.” The narrator describes the area in which he lives: “We live in a housing project . . . it’s already rundown. It looks like a parody of the good, clean faceless life . . . The beat-looking grass lying around isn’t enough to make their lives green, the hedges will never hold out the streets, and they know it . . . We moved in partly because it’s not too far from where I teach, and partly for the kids: but it’s really just like the houses in which Sonny and I grew up” (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 113). The fact that houses are just like the ones Sonny and the narrator grew up in highlight the idea that postwar economic progress did not extend to African-Americans. The lyrics go on to express an internal struggle. The phrase “I’m white inside” should not be taken as the author literally feeling like a white person, but an assertion that everyone is the same inside as we are all human. However, the fact that this will never be acknowledged simply because the author is black causes the individual to feel crushed inside. “Previous Condition” offers an example of this inner turmoil when Peter responds to the landlord, “I can’t stand niggers” (91). Here Paul negates the very identity that

white society would like to place on him. He has no chance of being recognized, and he knows it. The focus of the lyrics then shift to outside perceptions of blackness. The author states that people already assume one is poor because he or she is black. The lyrics also describe how blacks were often the subject of ridicule. After that the author discusses the way that blacks were often overlooked as valid members of society by whites when the author writes, "Set you aside and you're denied." The end of the song drives home the point of everything it had previously stated. To be black in America during the Jim Crow Era was to be cursed. For the author, the "only sin" was in the individuals "skin." Simply being born black had destined the author to a life of punishment. In "Previous Condition," the narrator recalls asking his mother what the word "nigger" meant because a little white girl had called him one earlier. She responds by saying, "Go wash your face, you dirty as sin" (Baldwin Going to Meet the Man: 86). The experience conditions Peter to equate being a "nigger" or being black with filth and sin. Though the overall message of the lyrics seems very bleak, Armstrong's rendition of the song allows the narrator to come to some important conclusions.

As the narrator listens to Louis Armstrong, he begins to drift into a dream-like state as he says, "beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it . . ." (Ellison 9). After entering the cave, the protagonist begins to listen to what seems to be a sermon on "The blackness of blackness" (Ellison 9). The sermon has a call and response theme and it covers different issues concerning identity for African Americans. The preacher that the narrator hears exclaims "Now black is . . . Bloody . . . I said black is . . . an' black ain't . . . black will git you . . . an' it won't . . . it do . . . an' it don't . . . Black will make you . . . or black will unmake you" (Ellison 9-10).

The quote is punctuated in a manner that causes readers to read with rhythm. The pacing of the words puts readers into the mind of a jazz beat. Ellis purposely inserts this punctuation in order to provide readers with some of what the narrator is experiencing as he sorts out his own thoughts. A striking element of the sermon is its ambivalence towards blackness. On one hand, blackness gives an individual identity as “it will make you.” The history and experiences of black ancestors creates the identity of the current black generations. Even today, blackness represents a subculture in America. It is one thing to be American and another thing to be an African American. At the same time, blackness works against those who are black because of oppression. Simply being black will “unmake you.” During the Jim Crow Era, to be black often seemed to convict one of crimes he did not even commit. The idea that black is “Bloody” also refers to the way that many African-Americans have been wrongfully slaughtered in America through the means of slavery, lynching, and even police brutality. The sermon’s ambivalence towards blackness is a result of one being proud to be black while at the same time knowing that his life will be more difficult because of his blackness. Readers are reminded of what Du Bois describes as “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 3). While the “Negro” part of a person relishes being black and accepts the self, the “American” perception of blackness is negative. The preacher, who is merely a stand in for the narrator’s consciousness, recognizes the two sides of being black.

When the narrator enters the next part of the sequence he has a conversation with a female slave in which they discuss the true meaning of freedom. When he says to the female “Old Lady what is this freedom you love so well” she replies, I done forgot, son.

It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning, I guess it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head" (Ellison 11). The initial confusion in the slave woman's words is symbolic of how the concept of freedom had truly been a struggle for African Americans. Even when slavery was abolished, one would be hard pressed to say that African Americans were truly free. One should take note of the fact that the old woman equates freedom with self-expression. Ellison shows how freedom stems from the ability to recognize one's situation, reflect on how circumstances affect the individual, and then express one's inner thoughts and feelings. One should also note that Ellison's narrator is brought to this realization through jazz music, which is a form of expression itself. The lyrics of songs such as "What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue" put the many struggles that African-Americans faced into words.

Armstrong's music is essential to the narrator's realization because it causes him to reflect on what it is to be black. The song puts into words what so many African Americans, including the narrator, had felt. Thus, the narrator is offered a form of collective identity that empowers him. As he reflects on these feelings, he thinks of the sermon and the slave woman thus offering a form of collective identity that might empower him. Although Armstrong's music helps the narrator come to his realization of what freedom means, the narrator remarks that Louis Armstrong is invisible. Ellison's protagonist states, "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 invisibility aids me to understand his music" (Ellison 9). For one, Armstrong remains invisible because music is an aural tradition. A person does not have to be present at a

musical performance in order to experience it; one just needs to hear it. In this respect, Armstrong is truly invisible, or not visible, to the people who experience his music. Also, the narrator speaks of is the obscurity African Americans slipped into due to oppression from white society during the Jim Crow Era. The narrator's assertion that Armstrong is unaware of his own invisibility stems from Armstrong's status and prominence as a performer. Armstrong was one of the most popular musicians of his age and he undoubtedly had both black and white listeners. Regardless of his popularity though, Armstrong was still a black man in the United States. Throughout his career, Armstrong faced different instances of discrimination. He often decided not to play at certain hotels because they would not allow him to stay overnight (Borkowski et al. 3.1). Another time, someone exploded dynamite outside of one of Armstrong's concerts (3.1). Despite Armstrong's ignorance of his invisibility, his music still expresses the anguish and isolation that many African Americans felt. Unlike Armstrong, the narrator is aware of his invisibility. His awareness enables him to recognize the message in the music.

Various scholars have analyzed the presence of jazz music in *Invisible Man*. In "Embracing Chaos in the Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" Timothy Spaulding discusses how Ellison's novel can be linked to jazz and in particular bebop. Spaulding begins by discussing Ellison's love for jazz. Ellison was an aspiring musician in his youth and he grew up adoring artists such as Louis Armstrong. Ellison is one of the first African American writers to "extensively study and analyze jazz music as both a cultural and an aesthetic phenomenon" (Spaulding 482). Ellison was even privileged to hear early forms of bebop before the first official bebop records were released in 1945. With Ellison's passion for and familiarity with the jazz

phenomenon, it is easy for its readers to see how and why his writing involved music he loved. For a jazz musician, a unique identity was a sound that belonged purely to the artist, for Ellison the unique identity was his recognition as an artist and not just an African American writer. In the novel, the narrator's search for identity is representative of the way in which jazz musicians sought to create their own identity through their music. Spaulding writes, "Perhaps no one embodied the conflicted position of the bebop virtuoso or serves as a corollary to the nameless narrator of Ellison's novel more than Charlie Parker" (Spaulding 488). Spaulding goes on to mention how Parker often struggled to break out of the entertainer's role set by white culture. Likewise, in the novel the narrator continues to struggle with expressing himself as an individual. The Brotherhood gives him propaganda for his speeches, and when he decides to speak on his own accord they turn on him. He is stifled by the forces surrounding him and he longs to break free. Interestingly, both Parker and the narrator seem to fall deeper into their assigned roles as they struggle to break out of them (Spaulding 488). Though the narrator is comparable to Parker, Ellison chose to use a Louis Armstrong song early in the novel. For Ellison, Armstrong is the starting point of bebop jazz.

Jazz music also links directly to specific themes in James Baldwin's writing. In Richard N. Albert's article "The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues'", Albert analyzes the ways in which jazz and blues music relate to themes in "Sonny's Blues." Albert points out that the blues represents the themes of alienation and hardship while jazz represents individualism. The blues symbolizes alienation and hardship as it is often linked to the sadness and desperation felt by African Americans. With slow melodies and simple lyrics, blues music such as B.B. King's "The Thrill is Gone" can

cause listeners to reflect on a dark past. Jazz music relies heavily on improvisation and requires a musician to keep harmony with a tune he is playing while improvising. Along with keeping harmony with the original tune, the musician must play alongside other musicians. Still, a jazz musician's sound is supposed to be unique. Part of what made various jazz musicians, like Louis Armstrong great was that his music did not sound like anyone else's. In accordance with the idea of individuality, Albert discusses the Baldwin's choice for Charlie Parker to be the musician Sonny admires as opposed to Louis Armstrong. Albert writes, "For the narrator, jazz means Louis Armstrong. Armstrong certainly was a highly regarded, popular jazz musician—probably the best known in the world . . . but among bop musicians he represented the older, more traditional form of jazz" (Albert 180). On the other hand, Parker represents the bebop movement and the refusal of tradition that Sonny longs for.

Albert compares Sonny to Charlie Parker and narrator to Louis Armstrong. Albert analyzes the fact that Sonny calls Louis Armstrong "down home" and "old school" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 120) which suggests that Armstrong may have been perceived as outdated by bebop musicians. Likewise, Sonny's brother seems to be more of what Albert refers to as a "White man's nigger," (Albert 180) or an "Uncle Tom", as he tries his best to seem respectable and avoid falling into stereotypes. Albert criticizes the narrator for rejecting his black self through becoming a math teacher and "disassociating himself from black culture as much as possible" (Albert 181). Albert is only partially correct though. The narrator does not distance himself from African American culture completely. He resides in Harlem. However, the narrator does distance himself from the urban culture that Sonny embraces. This is why when the narrator

discovers Sonny's desire to play jazz music he automatically thinks of a classical figure like Louis Armstrong instead of the more contemporary and controversial Charlie Parker. Armstrong is more closely associated with New Orleans style jazz and swing music whereas Parker represents bebop.

In the 1950s bebop emerged as a contrast to swing music and New Orleans style jazz. Whereas jazz had previously intended to get listeners dancing, bebop intended for audiences to sit and listen. Even the demeanor of performers began to change. Previously, jazz performers were expected to smile and laugh while they were on stage. Bebop musicians often wore dark shades and kept stoic facial expressions. Bebop relied heavily on taking familiar melodies and making them new through improvisation. When bebop was emerging as a new style it was considered as "out jazz." Out jazz describes "the startling moments when the musicians strive to extend the normal boundaries that characterize most forms of Western music and most styles of jazz" (Such 2). Out jazz refers to any new movement in jazz music, as long as the movement goes beyond whatever is considered to be standard jazz at the time. The musician Charlie Parker best represents the bebop culture and movement as he and Dizzy Gillespie invented the style in 1945 (A&E Television Networks).

Sonny's admiration for Charlie Parker is controversial because bebop was frequently portrayed in the media as a negative movement due in large part to society's failure to understand the movement as it was happening. Albert quotes Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, "The pathetic attempts of Moslem identification . . . the use of narcotics—everything was blamed on bop. It was the subject of vicious attacks in the press . . ." (Albert 181). The controversial status of bebop and bebop musicians is

important to the literature because it makes the literature more political. Instead of playing it safe and using a less controversial jazz figure, Baldwin decided to use Charlie Parker. Baldwin's choice to use Parker as his example represents a conscious decision by Baldwin to identify with bebop as it was a deliberate cultural expression.

While Albert is accurate in comparing the mood of blues to alienation and hardship, one should note that the blues is not really a part of the story. While the story is titled "Sonny's Blues", Sonny is actually a jazz musician. Though jazz comes from the blues, the two forms of music are different. When Sonny is asked about his desire to be a musician he says that he wishes to play like Charlie Parker, a jazz musician. The blues then, is a metaphor that Baldwin uses to represent the hardships of not only Sonny, but for the many African-Americans who struggle to have an individual identity.

Aside from the specific people and music Baldwin chose to represent in his short story, scholars have also analyzed the effects of music in Baldwin's writing. John M. Reilly's article "Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community" discusses how music creates a communal effect in "Sonny's Blues." An interesting idea that Reilly discusses in his article is the way that jazz music represents black identity in the story. Initially when the narrator learns that Sonny wants to play jazz instead of classical music, he thinks to himself, "I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around on a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him somehow. . . I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "good-time people" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 120). For the narrator, being a jazz musician is not a real. He does not see what they do as art, and he does not respect the craft. His negative perception of

musicians reflects how these musicians had been portrayed to the public. However, Sonny does not share his brother's attitude, Sonny's identification with bebop is important because bebop musicians embraced the black identity and intentionally refused to be what society would deem as acceptable. Reilly says of bebop, "In its hip style of dress, its repudiation of middle-brow norms and its celebration of esoteric manner made overtly evident in underlying significance as an assertion of the black identity . . . bebop became an expression of a new self-awareness in the ghettos by a strategy of elaborate non-conformity" (Reilly 57).

Reilly also discusses how music allows characters to communicate with each other when words fail because of the alienation they feel from each other. The narrator in "Sonny's Blues" witnesses a revival from Sonny's room in his apartment while Sonny witnesses the revival from "the edge of the crowd" (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 129) in the street. The narrator's position of looking down at the revival from the window is important because it represents his ability to take in the whole experience objectively. Baldwin addresses an inauthenticity that he finds in religion. The song he hears states, "Tis the old ship of Zion, it has rescued many a thousand." However, he thinks to himself, "Not one of them had been rescued. . . Neither did they believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about them, knew where they lived and how" (129). Readers see that the people hosting the revival are not really holy and that the religion subsequently is just a show. The fact that the onlookers do not buy into it reveals that religion is ineffective. The narrator mentions that the music seems to "Soothe a poison out" (129) of the people taking part in the revival, however the effects do not last and the people go their separate ways, unchanged, afterwards. After Sonny enters the

apartment, the two brothers talk and the narrator begins to understand more about Sonny's drug problem. Shortly after, Sonny invites his brother to hear him play the piano. Listening to Sonny play helps the narrator to understand his brother better. The narrator says, "I heard what he had gone through and continue to go through until he came to rest in the earth" (140) as he listens to Sonny's music. Readers see that the narrator "Heard" or understood Sonny's struggle just by listening to his music. In contrast to the failure of religious songs to truly bring people together, jazz in its free, improvisational manner creates an experience that was authentic for Sonny and his brother.

Much like the analysis given by Reilly, Suzy Bernstein Goldman's article "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': A Message in Music" takes a look at how Baldwin uses music to improve communication between the two brothers. According to Goldman, music allows one person to hear and experience another's suffering. She notes that in the story, the two brothers initially struggle to express their suffering to each other. However, jazz creates an avenue for expression which is illustrated by the way that Sonny turns to the piano because he has no one to communicate with in the story. In the story, Sonny tells his brother "You walk these streets . . . and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way to get it out—that storm inside" (133). Because Sonny feels that he has no one to communicate with he plays his music. Just moments before, the narrator explains to readers how hard it is for him to talk to Sonny as he thinks to himself, "I wanted to say more, but I couldn't . . . it would have all sounded—empty words and lies." The last sentence of the quotation shows the narrator's disconnected ideas as it is comprised of two sentence fragments. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the sentences shows how words can lack substance while music

maintains integrity. In the final scene of the story, the narrator finally hears Sonny and interprets his music in a way that enables him to understand what Sonny has been trying to express (Goldman 232).

The two authors highlight jazz music's ability to cause listeners to face the past, whether it is a collective or personal past. In "Sonny's Blues", the narrator begins to reflect on his own life, including his parents and the death of his daughter, while listening to Sonny play the piano. The authors incorporate the idea of past history with jazz music because the music itself is important to the history and heritage of African Americans. Not only did blues and jazz develop from the old Negro spirituals that slaves sang hundreds of years ago; like those spirituals, jazz represented the struggle and the journey of African-Americans. For both the protagonist in *Invisible Man* and the narrator in "Sonny's Blues", the memories or moments they are taken to represent hard and dark times. Even the way jazz is played, relying on improvisation, mirrors the way that African Americans have had to be resourceful and make a way out of no way. However, the recollection of past struggles is not a sad event. For the authors, facing the past also brings about freedom. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist realizes that freedom lies in one's ability to express oneself. In "Sonny's Blues", the narrator recognizes Sonny's expression of his struggle through acknowledgment of his own. For both authors, jazz music and other art forms serve as the perfect medium for expression. Jazz allows one to insert his feelings into the music as he plays.

In "Sonny's Blues", the narrator begins to understand Sonny more by reflecting on past struggles as he hears his brother play. Baldwin writes, "I heard what he (Sonny) had gone through . . . And it brought something else back to me . . . I saw my little girl

again and felt Isabel's tears again . . ." (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*: 140). As he hears Sonny's past struggles, or "what he had gone through," he begins to reflect on hardships of his own. The shared past suffering causes the narrator to empathize with his brother and understand him better. Thus we see that facing the past may be one of the only ways to move forward and jazz music offers a means of self-reflection. For both characters in their respective stories, the transition into the past is very subtle. One minute they are listening to music, the next minute they are in a moment that happened in the past or reflecting on events that have occurred. The journey into the past is so natural because the music itself is already a product of the African American past.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion of the Thesis

Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin both illustrate the power of jazz music and performance to represent the African American identity. The authors show that through experiencing and creating art, African American individuals attempt to cope with the pressures put on them by oppressive and racist society. The origin of jazz music as an art form allows it to create a collective identity that envelopes audiences as well as performers. The room that the music leaves for improvisation allows musicians to express themselves through what they create. Listening to the music in turn offers audiences a way to experience their own emotional expressions because the music speaks to what the audience has been through.

## Works Cited

- Albert, Richard N. "The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"" *College Literature* 11.2 (1984): 178-85. *JSTOR*. Web 15 July 2014.  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111592>>
- Baldwin, James. *Going to Meet the Man*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Dial, 1963. Print.
- Borkowski, Michal, WojciechKujawa, Dawid Lipinski, and Michal Malchrzycki.  
"Discrimination of African Americans from the Perspective of Black Jazz Musicians at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century." 3.1 Louis Armstrong. Adam Mickiewicz University, 18 June 2012. Web. 5 June 2015.  
<<https://sites.google.com/site/discriminationofjazzmusicians/3-1-louis-armstrong>>
- "Charlie Parker." *Bio*. A&E Television Networks, 2015. Web. 25 June 2015.  
<<http://www.biography.com/people/charlie-parker-9433413>>
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1961. Print
- DeVeaux, Scott Knowles. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkeley: U of California, 1997. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- Goldman, Suzy Bernstein. "James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues": A Message in Music." *Negro American Literature Forum* 8.3 (1974): 231-33. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 July 2014.  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041461>>

Reilly, John M. "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community." *Negro American Literature Forum* 4.2 (1970): 56-60. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 July 2014.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041352>>

Spaulding, A. Timothy. "Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *Callaloo* 27.2 (2004): 481-501. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 24 Feb. 2014.

<<http://lynx.lib.usm.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=13364867&site=ehost-live>>

Such, David G. *Avant-garde Jazz Musicians: Performing "out There"* Iowa City: U of Iowa, 1993. Print.

Sundquist, Eric J. *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's 1995. Print.