Buggy Jiving: Comic Strategies of the Black Avant-Garde

by Danielle Christine Heard

This thesis/dissertation document has been electronically approved by the following individuals:

Spillers,Hortense Jeanette (Chairperson)

Waligora-Davis,Nicole A. (Minor Member)

Mohanty,Satya P (Minor Member)

BUGGY JIVING:

COMIC STRATEGIES OF THE BLACK AVANT-GARDE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Danielle Christine Heard

August 2010

BUGGY JIVING:

COMIC STRATEGIES OF THE BLACK AVANT-GARDE

Danielle Christine Heard, Ph.D.

Cornell University 2010

Dissertation Abstract

Buggy Jiving: Comic Strategies of the Black Avant-Garde, examines the radical strategic impulse of African American comedy in literary and cultural texts of the second half of the twentieth century in light of their potential for cultural transformation. "Buggy jiving," a term that Ralph Ellison coins in *Invisible Man*, refers to a particular form of joking discourse that aims to enact social change by bringing into view the incongruity between appearance and reality, especially with regard to the idea of race in America. In other words, buggy jiving as a form of activism involves making an epistemic intervention into dominant culture that uniquely stems from the double-consciousness born of the experiences of African Americans. The trope of buggy jiving, which inflects much of Ellison's literary and cultural-critical work, provides the theoretical lens through which to interpret black expressive culture from the post-World War II era into the present.

In the introduction, Ellison is put retrospectively in conversation with W. E. B. Du Bois to consider how the "betweenness" of double-consciousness resembles the formal structure of a joke, and how to be black

is, in both degrading and subversive senses, to be "funny." Chapter One turns to the second half of the twentieth century to address the centrality of the comic to Ellison's concept-metaphor of "invisibility" and also to his radical vision of ideal democracy. As an alternative to physical violence, Ellison privileges comic activism as a "more effective strategy" of social action and cultural transformation. For Ellison, the comic is culturally conjoined to black music, specifically jazz, through the corresponding techniques of rhythm, improvisation, antiphony, and repetition. The influence of music on Ellison's understanding of the comic and its "poetics of invisibility" is further explored in Chapter Two, which examines the performances of the pianist, singer, and songwriter Nina Simone. These performances, which comprise a "theatre of invisibility," are considered in light of her engagement in various political and cultural movements of the 1960s and '70s. Through an "economy of laughter," Simone comically repackages the rightful fury and dismay of an "angry black woman" into a political critique, social vision, and call to action that speak across barriers of difference. Such an aesthetic and political countercurrent to dominant civil rights era black movements prefigures the nature of artistic political engagement during what has been called the "post-soul" era. Chapter Three thus concludes with a consideration of the possibilities and limitations of "buggy jiving" in two examples of black post-modernism, Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* and Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled*, in light of their Ellisonian themes and differing responses to the intersection of satire, representations of blackness, and the mass media.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Danielle Heard was born near Boston, Massachusetts in 1980. She graduated from Framingham High School before entering The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. as a freshman. After one year, she transferred to Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT where she received her B.A. in English with honors in 2002. She worked at a non-profit feminist activist organization in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania before beginning studies at Cornell University. In the fall of 2009, Heard joined the Andrew W. Fellowship of Scholars in the Humanities at Stanford University as well as the English Department faculty at the University of California at Davis where she will begin teaching in 2011.

To Daddy.

Because of this dissertation, I now have a name for what you have been up

to all these years.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

present, and future of African American studies. Even better, these sessions always gave me a glimpse into my role in it. I have always been inspired by my teacher's intellectual style in that her passion for ideas is driven by sincere concern over the consequences of these ideas, often the life-or-death implications of justice. I certainly would not have made it this far without Satya Mohanty, whose sage pedagogical style continuously coaxed me in fruitful directions while leaving discovery to myself. His courses on literary theory and theories of identity helped me see how I could drive my commitment to social justice, one that he shares and exemplifies, through a life of serious critical inquiry. Over the course of being his student, he has shared wise nuggets of advice that, upon remembering them, rein me back in to the principles that guide me as a thinker, teacher, and writer. One of the most memorable, which he revealed during a seminar in my first semester at Cornell, is to make sure that I can explain my ideas in a way that my (hypothetical) grandmother can understand; because if she can't, it means that even *I* don't know what I am trying to say. As a mentor, he has provided a level of moral support that truly sustained me during some of the most challenging moments of my education. As well, he has extended innumerable opportunities for professional growth and linking with other scholars, many of whom are connected to the Future of Minority Studies. This, in fact, is where I had the pleasure of being introduced to Michele Elam, one of the most generous and impressive scholars I have known. At an FMS event, I met many of her graduate students who raved about her radiant intellect, supportive personality, and giving mentorship. Never would I have guessed that, in a few years, I would be benefitting from these qualities as she joined my

McClane and Jonathan Culler for supporting my travel to the Future of Minority Studies Summer Seminar held at Stanford University in 2006.

Of all the colleagues, friends, and family who have supported me over the years, I must at least mention my "dissisters," Corinna Lee, Krupa Shandilya, and Tsitsi Jaji; members of my "decolonization" reading group, Anthony Reed, Marcus Braham, Armando Garcia, Belinda Rincon, Ariana Vigil, Kavita Singh and Michele Moyd; the FMS Summer Seminar instructors Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García and all of the seminar members with whom I bonded there; and faithful friends including Ogaga Ifowodo, Vernon Mitchell, and especially Natalie Legér-Palmer.

Not least of all, I must thank my generous and supportive family. Aunt Jean is probably the only one who knows what writing a dissertation is like, and I am indebted to her encouragement. But for all the rest in my immediate and extended family who really never knew what I was doing with myself these past several years, thank you for your unquestioning support and love. Thank you Nannie, Daddy, Mitch, and especially Ma.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

In 2003 Dave Chappelle walked off the set of his acclaimed sketch comedy show on cable's Comedy Central, breaking his multimillion dollar contract and causing chaos for the cable network as they scrambled to figure out how to produce the third season's remaining episodes for their hungry viewership without the show's namesake, creative producer, and star. Meanwhile, Chappelle absconded to South Africa, retreating like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* into his hole, in order to sort out what had gone wrong, recover emotionally and spiritually away from the public limelight, and plan his next move. What *had*, precisely, gone wrong? As Chappelle eventually revealed in a handful of candid interviews—to Oprah Winfrey, and most candidly to James Lipton on "Inside the Actor's Studio"—the driving vision of "Chappelle's Show" crumbled apocalyptically when a white member of the production crew laughed on set at Chappelle's and hip-hop artist Mos Def's blackface performance of a couple of "pixies," a performance torn out of the nineteenth-century minstrel show and implanted in the twenty-first. The sketch centers on the joke of the paranoia experienced by a black person on a plane when he is forced to choose between the chicken and the fish. Chappelle, who also plays himself in the sketch, prefers the fried chicken, but fears ordering it because of how he assumes the stewardess and other white passengers will stereotype him. Chappelle's crisis of double-consciousness is figured by the appearance of the blackface minstrel "pixies" on his shoulder who coax him to choose the fried chicken, all while shuffling, grinning, and playing the banjo. Revising the comic plot device

of the "shoulder angel" and "shoulder devil" of good and bad conscience originated in cartoons and comic strips, this sketch invents shoulder pixies of double-consciousness who harass Chappelle with the image of how he is likely to be viewed through the eyes of others. While a brilliant figuration of the racial paranoia produced by double-consciousness, the appearance of minstrel caricatures, blackface make-up and all, caused the sketch to teeter on the line between critiquing racial stereotypes by satirizing them and simply reinforcing those stereotypes.

I cite this episode as a primary example of the brand of African American humor that I call "buggy jiving." A brand which specifically re-deploys centuries-old stereotypes, questionable representations from more recent times, and gratuitous uses of the "N-word" as artistic material in order to turn their racist currency on its head. As a political strategy and aesthetic mode, it gravitates toward social attitudes, toward culture itself, as a venue of unfreedom for social minorities in need of liberation. It targets a "soft" racism, if you will, perceived not only by those, like Chappelle, born into a society bettered by organized struggles for freedom from "hard" racist acts, laws, and institutions, but also by members of earlier generations, artists and entertainers especially, who understood all too well the interrelation of the "soft" and "hard" and how the former is no less of a priority than the latter in the agenda of racial justice. Buggy jiving is a strategy that gets to the ethical core of racism by exposing the taken-for-granted absurdity of racial categories and ideas about human differentiation. And while it is, perhaps, the best tool for loosening our culture's ingrained attachment to racialist ways of knowing the world, buggy jiving is terribly unreliable, unreliable to the point where when it

fails, which it often will, it fails catastrophically, doing more harm than good. However, the additional paradox of "buggy jiving" is that one cannot easily measure its levels of success or failure, not in the way one can measure, for example, the advances of civil rights causes, whose goal it often is to change legislation in calculable ways. The fact that "buggy jiving" always has an audience allows us to consider reception; reception gives us a clue, but it is like air: hard to weigh. Instead, one must decide whether it is worth putting faith in such a strategy. The volatility of this form can harm as much as it can heal, but that it resides at the forward edge of cultural movement lends to the idea that it does bear some kind of progressive force. In this way, the ethical demand of "buggy jiving" calls upon its creators to take on the weight of risk in the hopes of at least making a dent in racist culture's thick skull. In the case of *Chappelle's Show*, we cannot know for certain how much denting or how much bolstering it accomplished, but the fact that the sketch comedy show has become an increasingly common tool in the college classroom says something about its progressive pedagogical capabilities.[1] The artist probably did perceive the stagehand's laughter at the blackface pixies in the infamous final sketch of the series as the "wrong" kind; appropriate laughter would have been prompted by a recognition of the predicament of double-consciousness, not by the ostentatious display of stereotypical

[1]Such uses were discussed, for example, at the California University of Pennsylvania's 2010 hip hop conference on the panel "The Alchemy of Hip-hop Aesthetics, Television and Pedagogy: Classroom Implementation of *The Boondocks* and *Chappelle's Show* to Explore Racial Discourse," with moderator Dr. Harrison Pinckney and panelists Dr. Derrick McKisick, Dr. William Boone, Brett Wilkinson and Cliff Coates; In my own teaching, I have utilized the show's "Blind Supremacy," "Racial Draft," and "Black Bush," sketches to help students understand the constructedness of racial identity and the problem with "colorblindness."

blackness taken at (black)face value. Such failure is devastating to an artist. Chappelle has since left his "hole" and resurfaced as a comedian. He appears to be relegating himself to stand-up comedy, itself a harsh arena, but one that does not compare to the hazardous terrain of a popular crossover television show. Conscious, perhaps, of the fateful consequences of his line of work embodied by the paragon of racial comedy, Richard Pryor, who enjoyed monumental success, yet suffered to the point of attempted suicide, Chappelle's unconventional snubbing of the broadcast industry might have been a sacrifice which ultimately saved him.

With the example of Chappelle in mind, the study to follow tries to find language to describe this risky, sacrificial brand of comedy. The reader will discover that "buggy jiving" finds itself in every imaginable place—music, novels, film, political oratory, and other areas of cultural expression not covered here. For those who are looking for the latest wave of the freedom struggle, the following pages illuminate a mode of revolutionary action that has been under our noses all along, yet appears to be gathering more steam as we move further into the new millennium. Despite the bleak image of potential risk and failure that opens this preface, the author ultimately has faith in the effectivity of "buggy jiving" for the positive transformation of culture. But will the reader?

INTRODUCTION

Buggy Jiving: Comic Strategies of the Black Avant-Garde

The end was in the beginning—RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man*, 571

1. Funny Negro

As a characteristic element of black culture, humor has played an important role in the lives and experiences of African Americans since slaves first encountered the New World. Historically, African American comic performances have appeared in slave shanties and on plantation fields, in vaudeville and on the minstrel stage, in films and literature, on the radio and television, in nightclubs, barbershops, salons, around kitchen tables, in living room parlors, and on the street corner. In short, comedy has always permeated every inch of African American culture, from the spectacular to the quotidian. In terms of the latter, humor has historically served the purposes of emotional and spiritual survival and of gaining recognition of black humanity. At the same time, in the realm of the spectacular it provided a source of the stereotypes of black people that would impede this process. Indeed, the blurred line between black humor and black people as a source of humor for white audiences generates a complex, double-edged relationship between African Americans and comedy.

This comic ambivalence is emblemized by the stereotype of the "funny Negro." From the beginning, the very presence of a black body as a spectacle produced for the white gazer an occasion for laughter. On the

slave plantation, the sight of the happy-go-lucky grinning and laughing slave became the source of endless enjoyment for the planter class, an enjoyment which metamorphosed into the blackface minstrel show, America's preeminent form of popular entertainment in the 1830s and through the Civil War.[1] With the help of the obfuscating lenses of photography and film, the ontological hilarity of the "funny Negro," the "darky entertainer," or the "Sambo," became indelibly marked in the American popular consciousness.

But what if from a critical angle we were to *also* discover, yet in a different sense, the inherent comedy of black being? And what if this ontologically comic blackness were to form the grounds for a freedom strategy, a politics of representation based on the goal of ethical recognition and the dismantling of stereotype? Saidiya Hartman discusses how the spectacle of slave performance served as a form of enjoyment for white spectators in its dramatic rendering of the exercise of power over the black body. However, she reveals how "goin' before the massa," or performing a feigned contentment for the pleasure of the slaveholding class, often also contained the subversive act of "puttin' on ole massa," an act which subtly converts the effects of subjugation within black performance into critiques of the peculiar institution. Hartman's thinking on the ambivalence of black performance is helpful for my consideration of stagings of the "funny Negro" and his/her ability to laugh back as form of comic activism.[2] This dissertation, *Buggy Jiving: Comic Strategies of the*

---

[1] Cf. Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy.* Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, 87.
[2] Cf. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York, Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Black Avant-Garde, takes the history of the African American comic performer and extrapolates from it a form of counter-modern resistance that finds particular relevance in modern and postmodern struggles for radical change. While the subversive element of black humor is well documented, the "sly civility," as Homi Bhabha would call it, or the "hidden transcript" as James C. Scott might describe it of the "funny Negro" usually gets framed in terms of discrete and quotidian acts of resistance isolated from one another.[3] However, this project finds a formal political strategy of cultural decolonization in the confluence of these singular acts of resistance, a strategy based on the mobilization of the dual ontology of the "funny Negro," or the tragicomic joke of race underpinning black experiences of double-consciousness. [4]

In other words, this project attempts to theorize the particular form of African American humor that I call "buggy jiving," a term and concept

---

[3] Cf. Chapter 5 of Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

[4] By cultural (or epistemic) decolonization I mean the decolonization of thought and being, the revolutionary project which comes after the decolonization of institutions and power have reached their limits. Cf. Walter Mignolo. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality." *Cultural Studies*. Vol. 21, Nos. 2-3 March/May 2007, 449 -514. In this case I take the idea of "epistemic decolonization" from Mignolo, who refers to it alternately as cultural decolonization—in short, the decolonization of thought and being. However, I am also thinking of bell hooks' formulation of decolonization in the form of a "pedagogy of liberation": "The process of decolonization requires participation in the kind of critical and analytical thinking that is at the root of all intellectual activity. Understanding this, it should be evident that insurgent black intellectuals, critical thinkers, cultural workers, and others can best serve diverse black communities by developing and practicing pedagogies of resistance that aim to share knowledge. That means talking with folks about what decolonization is and why it is important. It means teaching folks how to think critically and analytically. Given the widespread conservative thrust of contemporary black social and political thought and practice, we are in dire need of a pedagogy of liberation, a politics of conversion that would re-radicalize our collective critical consciousness." Bell hooks, "Dialectically Down with the Critical Program." Michele Wallace, et al. *Black Popular Culture: A Project*. Vol. 8. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992, 51.

lifted from the fiction and criticism of Ralph Ellison which I expand to account for a larger trend amongst certain black cultural texts. To be precise, the term "buggy jiving" which serves as the ur-trope of this project appears at the end of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and is used by the narrator-protagonist to describe the nearly 600-page tall tale he has just unfurled before his patient reader, what Ellison describes in an essay as "one long, loud rant, howl, and laugh."[5] Aesthetically, buggy jiving refers to what might be called the black comic absurd. It also resembles a form of postmodern parody that critically engages the politics of representation.[6] As well, it is a comic voice sounded in "black and white," as Ellison says, referring both to the printed word as well as the printed music note upon the page.[7] It is seen, sounded, and performed. It effects a "poetics of invisibility," or a poetics that addresses the ethical problem of the obfuscation of one's full humanity by the blinding force of stereotype, as well as the existential result of this problem. This comic voice picks up where the tragedy of black experience leaves off, at a grotesque junction, and forms a mode of social action appropriate in the wake of the failures of conventional forms of revolutionary struggle.

Often confused with a form of madness, yet more so a form of genius, buggy jiving tends to leave its creators in a state of isolation as

---

[5] Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library, 1995, 111.

[6] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London; New York: Routledge, 1989.Linda Hutcheon explains that "the parodic reprise of the past of art," or postmodern parody, "is not nostalgic; it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference," 89.

[7] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1995, 14.

they blaze a trail at the cultural front. In this way, buggy jiving possesses the aesthetic and political resonances of the *avant-garde*—experimentation and progressivism—a concept which Ellison relates to his childhood experiences in the frontier state of Oklahoma, as well as with the ingenuity, innovation, and experimentation required of black strivings for freedom. Above all, it is a form of comedy forged within the particular experiences of the long period of black modernity, yet shaped aesthetically by modernist and postmodernist sensibilities, aligning it with the second half of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet, it is a form which harkens back to the comic strategies created on the slave plantation, taking issue especially with the persistent and pervasive impact of racial stereotype and the history of injustice as it collides with the contemporaneous moment.

It is in this vein of looking backward that I focus in these introductory pages on the emblematic function of the "funny Negro" to the trope of buggy jiving. Putting Ralph Ellison and W. E. B. Du Bois, two of the founding theorists of black culture, American culture, and modernity, in conversation with one another, the myth of the "funny Negro" gets flipped on its head. Inspired by the notion that "Aesop and Uncle Remus have taught us that comedy is a disguised form of philosophical instruction," Ellison's likens the comic mode found in vernacular and popular culture to one of the most significant forms of expression in dealing with racial inequality.[8] Ellison's theory of the comic is greatly influenced by Constance Rourke's study of American humor and combines

---

[8] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library, 1995, 613.

incongruity theory, in particular Kenneth Burke's concept of "perspective by incongruity," with a notion of the grotesque akin to those of Charles Baudelaire and Mikhail Bakhtin such that comedy performs the dual function of turning the world on its head in order to gain a clarity of vision.[9] Ellison says, "by allowing us to laugh at that which is normally *un*laughable, comedy provides an otherwise unavailable clarification of vision that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition. During such moments the world of appearances is turned upside down."[10] Stressing their formal aspect, which can be described as the incongruity between appearance and reality, jokes thus have an epistemic and pedagogical function in that they guide the audience to a better view, a better knowledge of a given situation. Ellison is particularly interested in the grotesque comedy of racial difference, "the joke at the center of American identity," which brings into view the full humanity of black people against the myth of stereotype—it "illuminates the blackness…of one's invisibility," as he would say.[11] In this way, the joke of race, that which buggy jiving mobilizes, stresses in addition to epistemological, ontological, and political components, a manifestly ethical one.[12]

---

[9] Regarding "perspective by incongruity," see Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 308-314. I discuss this concept in more detail in Chapter 1: "Ralph Ellison's Comic Nonviolence;" On the "grotesque," see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 and Charles Baudelaire "On the Essence of Laughter" in *The Mirror of Art,* Jonathan Mayne, trans. London: Phaidon Press, 1955, pp. 144-53.
[10] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 613-14.
[11] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," p. 108; *Invisible Man*, p. 8.
[12] Cf. Glenda Carpio's application of this Ellisonian concept in chapter four, "The Comedy of the Grotesque: Robert Colescott, Kara Walker, and the Iconography of Slavery" in

To introduce the comic to a discussion of Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness might itself seem absurd, since the tone of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and specifically the chapter "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in which he elaborates the concept, is so ostensibly grave.   Double-consciousness, to clarify, is Du Bois' descriptive term for the ontological condition of the Afro-diasporic subject, which he casts in terms of sorrow and the tragic.   However, upon closer glance, it becomes apparent that the "betweenness" of double-consciousness resembles the formal structure of a joke, that which emerges from the juxtaposition of incongruous elements. "Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" thus figure a position of comic irony.   Bringing these two theorists of black culture together in tragicomic harmony, we might see how blackness is, in both degrading and subversive senses, "funny."   One the one hand, blackness is "funny" cast as a stereotype, "reduced to a sign," as Ellison puts it, to be "enjoyed" by white audiences in pursuit of a "comic catharsis."[13]   On the other hand, black identity, in its betweenness, embodies the absurd joke of race, and by extension, the absurdity of modern humanity writ large.   As Esther Merle Jackson observed, "Although many modern writers trace their version of the human dilemma to developments in European intellectual history, it is quite clear that one of the perceptions profoundly affecting the modern mind has been the image of the Negro.   Indeed, it may be said that he has served as a prototype of the contemporary philosophic species, 'the absurd'."[14]

Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
[13] Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," p.103.
[14] Esther Merle Jackson, "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd," *Phylon*, Vol. 23, No. 4 , 1962, 359.

However, while prototypical, the "funny Negro" engaged in buggy jiving goes beyond the image and deep into the consciousness of blackness' extreme modern condition.

Ellison's politics, articulated in his fiction and criticism, are based on a vision of a return to a state above suspicion captured in 1 Corinthians 13, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known," the same ethical point found in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and brought to life in *Darkwater*, Du Bois' sequel to *Souls*.[15] In other words, both Ellison's and Du Bois' political sensibilities are driven by a desire for an ethical encounter with the other, or the destruction of the barriers of "invisibility," Ellison's concept-metaphor for the absurd, grotesque, surreal obfuscation of one's full humanity. The dark glass of the biblical passage re-sampled for modern times can be interpreted as the representational apparatuses that reduce blackness to a stereotypical sign.

For Ellison, the revelatory power of the joke form provides a superior political medium for returning to that state above suspicion. It provides a strategy "more affirmative than anger," indeed a "more effective strategy," which reaches for the democratic ideal "by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives."[16] One of the basic definitions of humor is that which sets up

---

[15]Cf. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe 1920; *The Souls of Black Folk.* Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, eds. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999. In the Norton Critical Edition of *Souls*, the following phrase is footnoted with a reference to this Corinthians passage: "In those somber forests of his striving, his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself darkly, as through a veil." p. 14; For fictionalized explorations of this passage from 1 Corinthians in *Darkwater*, See especially the vignettes "The Immortal Child" and "The Comet."
[16] *Invisible Man,* xvi; xx.

expectations in order to disrupt them. Similarly jokes are defined as that which arises from the apparent incongruity between what is seen and what is known; the joke appears at the crossroads of appearance and reality. [17] In this sense, the very betweenness of black experience that W. E. B. Du Bois describes, the "two-ness," the absurd or "peculiar sensation" of double-consciousness, resembles the interstice of incongruity from which a joke arises.[18]

W. E. B. Du Bois' stylized account of the encounter with the other which he describes in "Our Spiritual Strivings" and his taciturn response— "I answer seldom a word"—unveils the unveiling, the forced recognition of the unasked question—"how does it feel to be a problem?"—the impelled conversation and confrontation with the "truth of American culture" that is the joke of race.[19] If Du Bois did not already understand it as such when he wrote about the "unreconciled strivings" of black identity, Ellison

---

[17] See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik of Judgement*, Part 1, Div. 1, #54: "In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (emphasis original), *Kritik of Judgment*, John Henry Bernard, trans. London and New York, Macmillan and Co., 1892, 223; Arthur Schopenhauer, Chapter VIII, "On the theory of the Ludicrous," *The World as Will and Idea*, Richard Burdon Haldane and John Kemp, trans., Third Edition, Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1888, 270-284. Schopenhauer states, "the source of the ludicrous is always paradoxical, and therefore unexpected, subsumption of an object under a conception which in other respects is different from it, and accordingly the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception. The greater and more unexpected, in the apprehension of the laughter, this incongruity is, the more violent will be his laughter…Indeed if we wish to understand this perfectly explicitly, it is possible to trace everything to ludicrous to a syllogism in the first figure, with an undisputed *major* and an unexpected *minor*, which to a certain extent is only sophistically valid, in consequence of which connection the conclusion partakes of the quality of the ludicrous," 271; Also, Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, James Strachey, trans. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989, 244-56.
[18] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 11.
[19] *Ibid.,* 10.

certainly seemed to understand double-consciousness as an inherently comic disposition, blackness as double-entendre, and the (American) joke that to be black *is* in fact to be funny.

2. An Extravagance of Laughter

To explore this idea, I turn now to two examples of early cinema situated at the heart of this problem of the comic ambivalence of the "funny Negro," the black comedy shorts *Laughing Ben* (1904) and *Laughing Gas* (1907), both of which also add the significance of laughter to my conceptualization of buggy jiving. Around the turn of the century, blackness as spectacle was foregrounded in a variety of visual media, from vaudeville acts, based on minstrel shows, to fairground attractions, World's Fair exhibits, postcard images, and theater, all of which provided representational models for the emerging media of film.[20] However, film as a form has a particularly material relationship with blackness, both for its role in fixing stereotypical images of blackness in the American "political unconscious" over time and also for blackness' centrality to the advancement of the form in its early years, especially its developments upon visual (rather than narrative) techniques.[21] As Jaqueline Stewart notes, in early American cinema "the looks of the camera and the viewer seem to be aligned in a way that replicates live theatrical modes of staging and viewing (e.g., distant framing, static camerawork, painted sets rather

---

[20] Jaqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2005, 41.

[21] Frederick Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982. Jameson's project of theorizing the political unconscious "conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today…but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretations," 17.

than location shooting)."[22]   Thus, in the way that classical cinema, according to Laura Mulvey, structures the voyeuristic look through cinematic methods, so does preclassical film employ the cinematic apparatus to structure the looks associated with the enjoyment of minstrel shows and other contemporaneous visual media that routinely presented blackness as a spectacle. Extending Eric Lott's schema of the love/theft dialectic which characterizes blackface minstrelsy, Stewart argues that by adding the third element of "framing and editing […] we can see how preclassical films organize cinematic looks to provide a distinct sense of mastery by emphasizing the visual construction of the scene or narrative as it unfolds."[23] The experiments with capturing blackness on film in the preclassical period led to techniques of film production evident in cinema to this day. This is especially true since representations of blackness in early cinema tended to focus on the image rather than the narrative. Close-up shots and the unique, sometimes non-teleological motions and rhythms of cinema, for example, can be attributed to these early attempts.[24] As Stephen Best notes, many of the one loop shorts featuring black characters appear identical if played forward or backward, a feature that would be impossible if narrative were a prominent criteria in these shorts.[25]

The few dozen black comedy shorts produced by the Edison Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company (AMBCO)

---

[22] Stewart, 41.

[23] See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford: OUP, 1995; Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, p. 41.

[24] Cf. Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004, 261; Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, esp. chapter 1.

[25] Best, 261.

in the first years of film and into the early twentieth century, what Jacqueline Stewart has termed the "preclassical" period of cinema, tended to feature gags based on mistaken identity which often put white gentlemen in uncompromising situations with black maids.[26] Alternatively, mistaken identity gags, usually involving a messy accident with grease, tar, coal, or paint, might have temporarily lowered the status of a planter or belle to that of a lowly slave. *Laughing Ben* stands out among these films in that it consists simply of a close-up shot of a black man laughing hysterically, lasting for about 30 seconds.

ILLUSTRATION 1: SCREEN SHOT FROM "LAUGHING BEN" (1903/4). IMAGE TAKEN BY AUTHOR AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS MOTION PICTURE READING ROOM ON FEBRUARY 7, 2008

---

[26] "Black comedy shorts" refer to any films of this period of early cinema that feature black characters, including those played by white actors in blackface makeup. Stewart coins the term "preclassical cinema" in *Migrating to the Movies,* 26.

The film was produced by AMBCO during the Pan American Exposition of 1901 in Buffalo, NY which featured an exhibit known as the "Old Plantation," advertised at the time as "a reproduction of the genuine southern plantation in ante-bellum days, showing the old roomy mansion, Negro cabins, cotton and corn fields, and in all requiring the services of 250 genuine southern cotton field Negroes in the portrayal of life on the plantation." The Old Plantation served as the stage for a variety of "slave" performances including "Laughing Ben," a 96 year-old former slave from Dublin, Georgia who "laughs at nothing, at everything, and at all times."[27]

In the film, the elderly black man resembles contemporaneous caricatures of "Uncle Tom," and is visibly haggard from a life of slavery and sharecropping. Several teeth are missing from his gaping, chortling grin. As simple as it may be, the image is extremely captivating and provocative. There is a marked absurdity in this short which exceeds others produced around the same time. The absurdity results in part from the lack of sound accompanying the visual spectacle of raucous laughter. As well, the proximity of the subject's face to the viewer's own works to break down the "fourth wall," or the theatrical concept that in addition to the three actual walls of a stage, there exists an imaginary fourth wall, much like a one-way mirror, which separates the world of the performance from the audience who gazes anonymously in.[28] Importantly, stagings

---

[27] "Africans, Darkies and Negroes: Black Faces at the Pan American Exposition of 1901, Buffalo, New York," Uncrowned Queens Institute for Research and Education on Women, Inc.

[28] Pericles Lewis explains: "The nineteenth century developed the box set, shaped like a room in a house; the 'fourth wall' of the box set was the proscenium arch, and audiences looked into the stage as if looking into a room missing a wall. The box set led to the development of more elaborate and realistic interiors, including furniture and carpets, while gaslight allowed new lighting effects such as limelight (an early form of spotlight)." During the era of modernism, "realists and naturalists generally supported the idea that

employing the fourth wall require that the performers do not acknowledge the presence of an audience. This voyeuristic separation would allow the viewer to enjoy the laughter in the short film as a spectacle, but such separation is punctured here. The lack of a boundary has the effect of creating a self-consciousness on the part of the (ideal white) viewer as he wonders with paranoia at the source of the old man's laughter. Although the subject is "enframed" by the trope of the "funny Negro" generated on the plantation and popularized through blackface minstrelsy and its offshoots, "Laughing Ben's" engrossed hilarity suggests a laughing back at the viewer in a way that disrupts the original, denigrating enframement.[29]

In his discussion of the photographic enframement of black males, Maurice Wallace poses the important question of the possibility of subversion within the frame. He suggests that as long as the frame overdetermines the representation, the object/subject has no agency in projecting an alternative image. He says, "the frame is as necessary to the fetish function of the racial gaze as to the painting or the photograph since framing the man of color (in both optic and juridical senses), like framing

---

the audience was looking at real action through the missing fourth wall of a room. They therefore avoided earlier techniques such as soliloquies or asides, which tended to acknowledge the presence of an audience. Instead, actors behaved as if they did not know they were being watched, sometimes turning their back to the audience. Naturalistic acting and production […]intended to give the illusion that the characters were real people and the stage a real slice of the world outside the theater […] The box set with missing fourth wall is still used today for situation comedies on television, with the proscenium arch replaced by a camera." See Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007, p. 194-5.

[29] Cf. Wallace, Maurice O. *Constructing the Black Masculine*: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Drawing on the Derridean notion of the *parergon*, the various connotations of the German word *gestalt*, and the specific term Heidegger draws from it, *Ge-stell*, Maurice Wallace discusses the role of photographic and representational "enframement" in the "chronic foreclosure of realist representation in black male visual contexts." The way in which enframement "fixes" it subject compares to the invisibility of hypervisible blackness discussed by Ellison.

14

the artistic image, also formalizes a delimited two-dimensional vision of black men in (white) America."[30]   Subversion within the frame, then, becomes nearly impossible. Complicating this idea in her discussion of Jessie Tarbox Beals' photograph of Laughing Ben from the Buffalo exhibit, Laura Wexler suggests that Ben expresses agency through his self-presentation of the image that he knows that Beals aims to capture.[31]   In other words, he takes advantage of the double-consciousness which allows him to see himself through the eyes of another and provide what the photographer wants for his own gain. While this may be true, the image that Wexler discusses contains more framing elements than does the Biograph film. Beals' photograph shows Ben's whole body, his clothing, and the backdrop of "The Old Plantation." The film, on the other hand, presents only a close-up shot of Ben's head. The only framing element is the film title. We must ask, then, is *Laughing Ben* a mere translation of an interactive exhibition of black stereotype from panoramic stage to the screen? If not, how does the change in medium change the spectacle and the subject's agency? We might argue along with Wallace and Wexler that additional framing elements of the racialist gaze already fix Ben's image stereotypically. It is true that the viewer brings with her a host of discourses which inform her viewing experience. As Stewart explains, this is especially true of early cinema which "depended much more heavily on audience foreknowledge than classical narratives, presenting well-known stories and events derived from the theater, novels, newspapers, political

---

[30] *Ibid.* p. 29.

[31] Laura Wexler, "Laughing Ben on the Plantation." *English Language Notes*. Vol. 44, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 181-225; 164-6. I am indebted to Maurice Wallace for bringing my attention to Wexler's work on *Laughing Ben*.

cartoons, comic strips, folktales and fairy tales, and popular songs."[32] However, the "third term" added on to Lott's love/theft dynamic mentioned earlier, in this case the ostensible lack of additional framing, distinguishes the film *Laughing Ben* from his stage(d) performance at the exhibit in salient ways. The cinematic apparatus has the potential to drastically change how the viewer enjoys, identifies with, masters, or is mastered by the subject. Arguably, the disembodied head of "Laughing Ben" positioned close to the viewer's eye has the effect of laughing back and might also lead a white viewer to remember the threatening aspect of black laughter. Indeed, if we are to extend to film Fred Moten's idea that photographs "bear a phonic substance" then isn't Ben's laughter deafening?[33]

The probability of this element becomes salient when one considers the particularly politicized relationship black people have had with laughter, especially regarding their freedom and their ability to resist. The laughter of slaves was originally taken as a threat by whites who, perhaps rightly at times, assumed they were the source of amusement. Additionally, whites publicly expressed undue anxiety at the sound of black laughter, which they found to be unusually raucous and mysterious, so much so that on plantations, and later the public square, (so the legend goes) one might find a "laughing barrel" into which blacks were required to channel their amusement. Ralph Ellison humorously elaborates on this legend in his essay "An Extravagance of Laughter." Recounting an untimely and embarrassing laughing fit he experienced while in the

---

[32] Stewart, 39.
[33] Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition.* Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 197.

16

audience of a Broadway performance or Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, a "comedy of the grotesque" about working class Southern whites, Ellison explains,

> Suddenly, in addition to my soul-wracking agony of embarrassment, I was being devastated by an old in-group joke which played upon the themes of racial conflict, social freedom and the blackness of Negro laughter, a joke whose setting was some small Southern town in which Negro freedom of expression was so restricted that its public square was marked by a series of huge whitewashed barrels labeled FOR COLORED, and into which any Negro who felt a laugh coming on was forced, *pro bono publico*, to thrust his boisterous head.[34]

He continues later,

> When seen laughing with their heads stuck in a barrel and standing, as it were, upside down upon the turbulent air, Negroes appeared to be taken over by a form of schizophrenia which left them even more psychically frazzled than whites regarded them as being by nature [. . .] It appeared that in addition to reacting to whatever ignorant, harebrained notion had set him off in the first place, the Negro was apt to double up with a second gale of laughter, triggered, apparently, *by his own mental image of himself laughing at himself laughing upside down*. It was, all whites agreed, another of the many Negro mysteries with which it was their lot to contend,

---

[34] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 649.

but whatever its true cause, it was most disturbing to a white observer (my emphasis).[35]

Ellison's description of a Negro laughing at himself laughing echoes Wexler's observation that "Laughing Ben" is aware of his own image as he laughs for the camera. But Ellison adds,

Nor did it help that many of the town's whites suspected that when a Negro had his head thrust into a laughing barrel he became endowed with a strange form of extrasensory perception—a second sight—which allowed him to respond uproariously to their unwilling participation. It was clear that given a black laughter's own uncouth uproar, he could not possibly *hear* its infectious damage to them. When such reversals occurred, the whites assumed that in some mysterious fashion the Negro involved was not only laughing at *himself* laughing, but was also laughing at *them* laughing at his laughing against their own determined wills. If such was the truth, it suggested that somehow a Negro (and this meant *any* Negro) could become with a single hoot-and-cackle both the source and master of an outrageous and untenable situation. Hence it was viewed as a most aggravating problem, indeed the most vicious of vicious circles ever to be imposed upon the long-suffering South by the white man's burden. (emphasis original)[36]

Ellison's invocation of the theme of double-consciousness in these lines, especially conspicuous in the latter passage with citation of Du Bois' own phrase "second sight," resonates with the absurd synesthetic qualities of

---

[35] *Ibid.*, 652.
[36] *Ibid.*, 653.

the film and illuminates the possibilities for agency on the part of the comedy short's titular subject. The deafness that results from the extravagance of laughter experienced by the doubled-over Negro in the barrel signals an inversion of mastery. By exaggerating the "schizophrenic" or "buggy" nature of Du Bois's concept and extending to it a decidedly comic schema, Ellison shows how the doubled mode of black consciousness serves simultaneously as a joke and as a political tool of subversion. Although the soundlessness of Ben's laughter is attributable to an accident of history—the technical impossibility of producing image and sound simultaneously—at the discursive level of the film we observe this same irreverent and absurdly silent laughter produced by the "crazy-logical," intoxication of double-consciousness.

This form of laughter, I argue, is also at play in Edwin S. Porter's *Laughing Gas*, a comedy short which features Mandy Brown (played by Bertha Ragustus), a black domestic who laughs uncontrollably, high on nitrous oxide, for nearly all of the approximately seven-minute film. Her contagious laughter spreads to everyone she meets and as a result disrupts laws and conventions which would ordinarily restrict her freedom in public and private spaces. As others have pointed out, *Laughing Gas* is unique among preclassical films in that it features a black woman protagonist played by a black woman actor and seems to depart from conventional black stereotypes.[37] Like *Laughing Ben*, however, *Laughing Gas* contributes to what Stephen Best calls a "sea of representations of a

---

[37] See Eileen Bowser, *American Cinema 1890-1909*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009, 196-8; Lauren Rabinovitz, "Past Imperfect: Feminism and Social Histories of Silent Film," *Cinémas: revue d'études cinématographiques / Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2005): 21-34; and Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 44-49.

ILLUSTRATION 2: FINAL CLOSE-UP OF MANDY IN EDWIN S. PORTER'S *LAUGHING GAS* (1907)

temporally arrested blackness" in early cinema.[38] The narrative of the film is framed on one end by a close-up of Mandy's disembodied head wrapped in a white bandage, writhing in pain from an infected tooth which forms a large and ostensible lump on the side of her face, and on the other by a close-up of Mandy throwing her head back in hysterical laughter. The similarities between the two shorts beckon a comparison, even if one is conventionally understood as quintessential and the other as exceptional in their black representations. For my purposes, the similarities are remarkable in relation to both the temporally arrested blackness of the close-up shots and also Ellison's explanation of the power of black laughter.

---

[38] Best, 261.

For the rest of the film, which is structured by a series of "linked-vignettes," the camera is consistently positioned to recreate the structured looks of theater, fourth wall intact.[39] The scene following the initial close-up establishes the multiple levels of comedy which characterize the film. Mandy is noticeably tall and large, towering over everyone in the frame. Upon entering the dentist's office she appears gigantic in contrast to the dentist and his doorman, both of whom are white and of no particular ethnicity. The pair, who appear to be having a slow day, are eager to heal a reluctant Mandy who insists on being administered laughing gas before having her tooth pulled. The gas does the trick and knocks the patient out cold while the dentist and doorman struggle together to extract Mandy's gigantic molar. Their success wakes Mandy into a hysterical laughing fit, not unlike Laughing Ben's or Ellison's, which sends her flailing across the screen, bumping into the dentist and assistant, soon falling to the ground, rolling with what we might imagine to sound like a "cacophony of minor thirds and flatted-fifths voiced fortissimo by braying gut-bucket brasses," as Ellison describes black laughter.[40] Amazed by the size of the molar, the dentist and doorman burst out laughing to join Mandy. The Ellisonian joke for all three of them seems to be the irony that such a big white thing could come out of someone so big and black. Infected by now with Mandy's contagious laughter, a laughter which dismantles the notion of "whiteness," the dentist and doorman, each of whom is nearly half of

[39] Regarding the genre of "linked vignettes," see Charles Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907-1913.* University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, p. 57. Kiel explains that this was a comic form popular between 1905-07 and served as a way of structuring a narrative as narrative techniques in film were being developed.
[40] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 649.

Mandy's size, struggle to help her off the ground in movements reminiscent of vaudevillian slapstick.

Although the bodily difference, including skin color, between Mandy and the two other actors is emphasized visually through casting, staging, and makeup this scene nonetheless presents an almost democratic reversal of race, gender, and class relations evinced here.[41] The dentist and doorman are unflinchingly eager to address Mandy's ailment, regardless of her status as a domestic, a status that we come to find out later in the narrative yet one which could be predicted by the cultural discourses brought with the ideal viewer to the film. As well, Mandy's movement and behavior are markedly free and unrestrained in the presence of white men. She clearly masters the two men in this scene by hulking over them physically, by having them wait on her, help her into her coat and hat, and by conjuring them into a laughing spell through a contact high. This scenario is repeated from vignette to vignette. In several cases, Mandy laughs her way out of trouble for infringing upon law and social custom. After she leaves the dentist's office, she is seen entering a box car from off screen only to drunkenly bump the other passengers with her unsteady and looming frame and eventually plop herself between two unsuspecting riders. All on the car except for Mandy are white, most gentlemen and ladies but for one country bumpkin, and before she enters the scene we see the socially constrained exchanges among them as they humorously try to control who does and does not take a seat beside them. It is unclear whether the action takes place in the North or South, but the car could

---

[41] During this period, white actors had to wear white(face) makeup in order to appear white on screen, since redness registered as dark in monochrome.

very well be segregated by Jim Crow. In any case, Mandy's arrival on screen is conspicuous. Her laughter, which quickly spreads through the car, enables the passengers to ignore infringements upon their personal space, and even stops the conductor in his tracks from disciplining the unruly, laughing mob. In another scene, the contagious laughter causes a street vendor to send his whole tray of porcelain crashing to the ground. Blaming Mandy for the accident, he starts a fight with her, only to find himself being violently shaken nearly to death by the towering woman. Two white police officers come to the scene, contract the hysterical laughter, and in an absurd reversal of convention give preferential treatment to Mandy and even convince a judge to rule in her favor over the white vendor; Mandy thus avoids punishment by the law, if not worse. In a later scene, we see Mandy at work, waiting on a pair of genteel couples in an elegantly appointed parlor. She soon has them all laughing, and in the midst of the gaiety spills a bowl of soup on one gentleman's (perhaps her employer's) head. This only prompts more raucous laughter; again Mandy escapes unscathed. In the final two vignettes Mandy's laughter overturns first a dandy's attempt to court her and then a black church service. Jacqueline Stewart argues that with these final scenes the film achieves narrative closure by returning Mandy to the segregated black spaces where she belongs. Another way to interpret this, however, is that Mandy's laughter exposes absurd attempts of black people to imitate white culture.

Laughing Gas seems to present a fantasy of a world without laughing barrels where the spectacle of black laughter becomes, as Ellison

23

says, "contagious and irresistible."[42] With the laughing barrel myth as a subtext, what appears to be a display of innocent gaiety could be interpreted by viewers, consciously or unconsciously, as a threat to white dominance. Ellison explains, "when whites found themselves joining in with the coarse merriment issuing from the laughing barrels, they suffered the double embarrassment of laughing against their own God-given nature while being unsure of exactly why, or at what specifically, they were laughing. Which meant that somehow the Negro in the barrel had them *over* a barrel."[43] Indeed, the laughter in this film is senseless, arising simply from the sight and sound of a funny Negro in a barrel. That the white characters whom Mandy makes laugh are clueless to the source of the joke—that is, except for the dentist and doorman—means that they are unwittingly being mastered by someone on the lowest rung of the social order.

Mandy's laughter permits her entrance into spaces customarily foreclosed to black domestics like herself, and also permits her to invade the personal space of white people without punishment. Her constant laughter and the way it becomes contagious seems to function on two levels. One the one hand, it relates to basic slapstick humor of contagious laughter; but it also relates to the subtext of the plot which assumes that a black domestic cannot in actuality get away with the things that Mandy does in the film. In this way, the laugher responds to a two-part absurdity: the absurdity of Mandy's ability to navigate so freely in this context, and the absurdity of racial difference. The film repeatedly shows white people

---

[42] "An Extravagance of Laughter," 652.
[43] *Ibid.,* 649.

24

break out of their disciplined adherence to social propriety, including the adherence to Jim Crow policy (or its northern equivalent), and into full bodied enjoyment of interracial proximity. Of course, on a third register, the spectacle of Mandy's laughter rehashes the trope of the funny Negro whereby the black body, and especially the laughing and grinning Negro, is a source of enjoyment for white spectators in and of itself. On the "lower frequencies" of this stereotype, the register at which buggy jiving is articulated, however, Mandy is laughing back.[44]

The consequences of Mandy's laughter are not merely ontological in that they do not simply invert the master/slave dialectic. Rather, according to Ellison's take, this "blues-toned" laughter has the political effect of foiling the social order.

> […] a Negro laughing in a laughing barrel simply turned the world upside down and inside out. In so doing he *in-*verted (and thus *sub-*verted) tradition, and thus the preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder. Therefore, it was feared that if such unhappy instances of interracial laughter occurred with any frequency, it would create a crisis in which social order would be fatally undermined by something as unpolitical as a bunch of Negroes with their laughing heads stuck into the interiors of a batch of old white-washed whiskey barrels.[45]

The political act of inversion/subversion that the seemingly "unpolitical" laughter arising from the joke of race generates is central to my

---

[44] Here I reference the famous last line of *Invisible Man*, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" I interpret this line as an extension of the two preceding lines introducing the concept of "buggy jiving" as cited above.
[45] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 654.

conceptualization of "buggy jiving" as strategy of social change. In their interpretations of the film, Jaqueline Stewart and Lauren Rabinovitz both assume that Mandy's apparent subversion of the social order in *Laughing Gas* is thwarted by the fact that she has no control over her body while intoxicated on nitrous oxide. However, I would not like to make that assumption. In fact, returning to the primal scene upon which *Buggy Jiving* is based, the basement apartment of *Invisible Man*, invisibility is first perceived by the protagonist while on a reefer-induced trip into the "the fastidious refinement, the mastery of nuance, the tasteful domination of melody, rhythm, sounding brass and tinkling cymbal" of Louis Armstrong.[46] In a similar way, I argue, the drug allows Mandy this same sense of invisibility which enables her to see the world structured by racial difference as a grotesque joke. Her laughter, and likewise her off-beat view of the world, spreads its way through white crowds and the contact high brings with it the revelation of the absurdity of race. Intoxication, or more precisely, disorientation, the experience of "[plunging] through wacky mirrors," is an underlying theme in this project. I thus read Mandy's intoxication in relation to the "buggy" in "buggy jiving"—"buggy" meaning, silly, batty, insane and "jiving" meaning jesting, kidding, or joking, according to their slang definitions. The humor I examine in this project, likewise, is intoxicated, reefer-induced, paranoid, off-kilter, not quite on the beat, syncopated, between, "flatted," and on the "lower frequency."

---

[46] This description of Armstrong's music comes from "Study and Experience: An Interview with Ralph Ellison," *Massachusetts Review*, 1977, p. 426. Of note is Ellison's reference to the first line of 1 Corithians 13, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." This and similar reference throughout Ellison's oeuvre convince me that that the Corinthians passage is central of Ellison's concept of invisibility.

In a sense, Mandy and Ben perform a prototype of buggy jiving. Discussing *Laughing Gas i*n an interview, Michelle Wallace explains how in preclassical cinema the stock representations of black characters which define American cinema from, as she argues, *Gone with the Wind* and onward, had not yet been consolidated. In this way, preclassical cinema presents a wider range of black images, some of which are not necessarily racist; this she argues of *Laughing Gas*.[47] Jaqueline Stewart also explains that the "stereotype approach" to studying preclassical cinema is limited because it fails to get at the ambivalence of these representations of blackness, not to mention that this limited approach obscures the importance of black image-making in the development of cinema as an artistic form. The ambivalence of these two comedy shorts' relationship to modes of representation is an ambivalence of central concern to the artists and texts upon which I focus in this dissertation. They move beyond a critique of stereotype based on the concept of negative and positive images and fear not about conjuring up "Mammy" and "Sambo" in their contemporary comedies of the grotesque. Pushing further, they dare to consider how these ambivalent figures might somehow play a positive role in addressing the forms of racism that persist into the twenty-first century. By invoking these early images, I aim to foreground the cultural imaginary which most informs the subjects of this thesis. As well, I want the disembodied heads of Ben and Mandy to serve as iconic backdrops for this exploration of the "disembodied voice" of buggy jiving.

---

[47] Interview. *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*. Kino Video, 2005. DVD.

3. Comic Anagnorisis and the Ethical Encounter

In the introduction to his magnum opus composed thirty-odd years after its first appearance, Ellison, echoing Du Bois, describes the protagonist of his short story "Flying Home" as "a man of two worlds […] misperceived in both and thus […] at ease in neither."[48] "Clearly," he says, the protagonist of *Invisible Man* also "possessed some of [these] symptoms." Referring to both protagonists, "[spokesmen] for invisibility," Ellison explains that they "had been forged in the underground of American experience and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic. That [they] would be a blues-toned laughter-at-wounds who included [themselves] in [their] indictment of the human condition."[49] Ellison gets at the idea that "our" society is one which depends upon a "play" (in many senses of the term) of masks. These masks serve a dual function. On the one hand, when understood as stereotype (as in a minstrel mask) they interfere with perceiving one's full "humanity," and, in this way, the racial theatre becomes *more* oppressive than the whip and the lash.[50] On the other hand, Ellison encourages trying on different masks, being a chameleon of sorts, or a living work of art, in order to explore one's individual and human possibilities. Ellison's "humanity" refers to the fullness of being which the veil of culture adumbrates. In the American context, the stereotypes that constitute "comedies of the grotesque," the iconography and phonography of minstrelsy, present the primary roadblock to freedom of being and to ethical relations with others. "Archetypes," he says, "like taxes, seem doomed to be with us always, and

---

[48] Ellison*, Invisible Man*, xiv.
[49] *Ibid.*, xviii.
[50] Although, as Saidiya Hartman would argue, one leads to the other.

so with literature, one hopes; but between the two there must needs be the *living human being* in a *specific texture of time, place, and circumstance* who must respond, make choices, achieve eloquence and create specific works of art."[51] This excerpt speaks to the nuances of Ellison's understanding of humanity and identity. On the one hand, humanity describes that richness of character and being in the world that evades archetype, indeed, describes the opposite of archetype. Humanity, in a way, is prior to identity. At the same time, humanity achieves full expression when identity is not understood as mask or archetype, but as the articulation of "a specific texture of time, place, and circumstance." Most importantly, however, Ellison requires of the human some sort of *action*, perhaps creative in nature, in order to recover "the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal."[52] The negation of "comedies of the grotesque," and especially the iconography and phonography of blackface minstrelsy, makes space for comic *anagnorisis*, or the *recognition* of one's true identity—the recognition, as well, of the cultural configurations which obscure that identity.[53]

Given Ellison's grand metaphor for America as a stage and American identity as theatrical, Ellison's interest in "recognition" can be understood largely as an Aristotelian one. In *Poetics* Aristotle wrote of *peripeteia*, the unexpected "reversal" of situation in a dramatic plot, and of *anagnorisis*, or "recognition," which peripeteia often effects. "Recognition," Aristotle wrote,

---

[51] Ellison, "Shadow and Act," 101 (my emphasis).
[52] *Id.*, *Invisible Man*, xxii.
[53] *Id.*, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 103.

as the name itself signifies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge resulting in either friendship or enmity towards those who are marked for good fortune or misfortune; and the finest recognition is the one which occurs at the same time as the reversal, like the one in *Oedipus* [*Rex*]" […] Now since this recognition occurs between men, in some cases only one of them is recognized by the other, and this occurs whenever the identity of the latter is already known; in other cases each must recognize the other, e.g. Iphigenia was recognized by Orestes from the letter that was sent, but a second recognition, in which Orestes is made known to Iphigenia, was needed."[54]

This *peripeteia*, or flipping the script, if you will, followed by *anagnorisis*, is the revelatory moment of the punch line in comedy. It is precisely what occurs in the anecdote from Ellison's essay of 1958 "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" in which he writes: "Said a very dark Southern friend of mine in laughing reply to a white businessman who complained of his recalcitrance in a bargaining situation, 'I know, you thought I was colored, didn't you'."[55] Here, Ellison's friend's joke slips off what Ellison refers to elsewhere as "the yokelike anti-Negro stereotypes" through the "shock of recognition" which the joke of race accomplishes.[56] Regarding the protagonist of *Invisible Man* Ellison writes,

So my task was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but

---

[54] Aristotle, *Poetics*. London: Penguin, 1996, 12-13.
[55] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 108.
[56] *Id.*, "An Extravagance of Laughter," p. 648.

as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region—barriers which consist of the many strategies of division that were designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity. And to defeat this national tendency to deny the common humanity shared by my character and those who might happen to read of his experience.[57]

This comic *anagnorisis* is a public "pants-ing," a kind of undressing, which finds its humor in revelation of the naked truth.

4. Theoretical Blueprints

Comic recognition, the joke of race, (the poetics of) invisibility, visionary or prophetic disorientation, aesthetic experimentation, and the duality of the "funny Negro" converge in the concept of "buggy jiving." Through this tropological theoretical framework, I explore in the following chapters this particular comic sensibility as it appears in African American literature and culture as a political strategy of transforming the social order, located at the avant-garde of critiques of modernity. For this project, I have gravitated toward particular senses of the avant-garde. For one, I adopt Ellison's troubling of the notion of the political and artistic avant-garde as innovation and progress at the expense of the destruction of the past. In other words, the model of history upon which his understanding of the term depends is cyclical rather than linear, Afro-diasporic rather than Western. Ellison also wants to challenge the term's

---

[57]*Id.*, *Invisible Man*, xxii.

exclusion of everything but so-called high art experimentalism to include cutting-edge aesthetic expression found in even the most crude of cultural forms. For example, in "Extravagance of Laughter," he insinuates that it is not coincidental that *Tobacco Road* ran successfully on Broadway while The Museum of Modern Art enjoyed success with its famous feature of Dadaist art, "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism", at the same time.[58]   In other words, Ellison sees a connection between the experimentalism of the MOMA exhibit and the effect of the grotesque comedy of Caldwell's play, particularly in their "shock" value, a central goal of Dada—they both engage a shock of recognition.[59]   Ellison apparently perceives the spirit of Dadaist experimentalism in the subversive performances of darky entertainers—it is this transformed understanding of the concept I adopt. As well, I pick up on Fred Moten's cue that there has been a "(second or ongoing) coming (upon) of the avant-garde" and that there is an ingrained relation between blackness and this concept.[60]   This relation, in my view, has to do with double-consciousness's radical relation to modernity. Along

---

[58] "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" ran from December 7, 1936 to January 17, 1937. *Tobacco Road* ran from December 4, 1933 to May 31, 1944 (a notably long run); The press release for the exhibit describes that "More than 157 American and European artists will be represented, ranging from such extremes as Giovanni di Paolo and Leonardo da Vinci of the fifteenth century to Walt Disney, Rube Goldberg and Thurber of the twentieth century, and including such famous names both old and modern as Hieronymus Bosch, Duerer, Arcimboldo, Hogarth, William Blake, Cruickshank, Lewis Carrol, Dauiaier, Delacroix, Edward Lear, Redon, Chagall, de Chirico, Duchamp, Picasso, Arp, Dali, Ernst, Grosz, Magritte, Miro, Klee, Man Ray, Tanguy, Peter Blume, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Alexander Calder." MoMA Press Release, December 5/6, 1.

[59] Ralph Ellison. "An Extravagance of Laughter," 648; Dada was a reaction against modernism which was, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA's director at the time, explained as "a bitter gesture made by artists for whom the war, Versailles and inflation had made civilization and art, temporarily at least, a bad joke." It was interested in "the bizarre, the spontaneous, and the anti-rational" (Press Release 2-3). Dada evolved into surrealism, as expounded by André Breton in his "First Manifesto on Surrealism," which added an interest in the psychological, the unconscious, and especially dreams.

[60] Cf. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 33-5.

these lines, I am influenced by Zygmunt Bauman's claim that in the contemporary moment that has been referred to as "postmodernity," the Left could benefit from a shot of humor, which the avant-garde provides, and a shift in focus from capitalism to modernity as site of revolution.[61]

By anchoring this project in Ellison's comic theory, *Buggy Jiving* responds to the call articulated by contemporary critics of Afro-diasporic studies to acknowledge the theory produced from within the study of black identities and cultures, theories of identification, subjectivity, and consciousness particularly as they relate to modernity. From this call, I think about the invisibility, not only of black subjects, but of the theory which emanates from these subject positions. These theories produced from within the study of black culture tend to reside in the interstices— "the groove," "the break," the "cut," the "in-between," "the gutter"—at the same time that they sound the particularities of this spatial arrangement. [62] This space can be described as the interlocutory point between appearance and reality wherefrom emanates the aporetic, questioning resonance of things not seen, not heard.

In this vein, *Buggy Jiving* is framed in relation to Afro-modernity and the project of "alternative modernities" of postcolonial discourses more

---

[61] Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, "The Left as Counter-Culture of Modernity." *Telos*. No. 70 (Winter 1986-1987): 81-93.

[62] Cf. Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005; Chandler, Nahum D. "Between." *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*. 20 (1993): 26-7. Fred Moten, *In the Break*; Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*; and McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993. Weheliye speaks of the interstitial habitus of African American culture in terms of the "grooves" of a record; Fred Moten references "the break"; Nahum Chandler plays on the "between" of DuBois's double-consciousness and Mikhail Bakhtin discusses "betwixt and between"; finally, in terms of the comic strip, Scott McCloud describes the space between one frame and the next the gutter—the joke occurs in the moment of closure, the moment when what is left unsaid in the gutter becomes known.

broadly, as well as in relation to the project of modernity/coloniality arising out of studies of Latin America.[63]   Assuming that modernity, in its broadest sense, is an attitude toward and mode of questioning the present moment, alternative modernities engage discourses on modernity from the perspective of the subaltern, the racially other, and the non-West.[64]   Afro-modernity aims to complicate these discourses by adding the "fourth register" of race, as Hortense Spillers would term it specifically in regard to Lacan's three registers of human reality, based in black (or Afro-diasporic) experiences which detach the discourses of modernity (namely in respect to subjectivity) from a radical indeterminacy, situates black culture as an integral force in modernity, and suggests the possibility of simultaneous counter-modernities.[65]

On the other hand, the project of modernity/coloniality (MC) proposes alternatives *to* modernity, *un paradigma otro* altogether. The idea is that modernity and coloniality (both of knowledge and of power) are completely interrelated, an idea opposed to the dominant discourses on modernity which fail to acknowledge it as such. According to these dominant discourses, modernity is seen as something that eventually "makes it" to the non-West, as a situation that is now globalized but once was localized in the West. MC is interested in epistemic "delinking" from liberal and socialist discourses and tapping in to local, indigenous epistemologies, or "border epistemologies" for thinking about revolution. For example, Walter Mignolo discusses how the term "emancipation" is

---

[63] The project has also been described with a third term, "modernity/ coloniality/ decoloniality," referring to the eventual goal of the critical project.

[64] Dilip Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, 13.

[65] Hortense Spillers, "'All the Things You could be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race." *Critical Inquiry*. 22.4 (1996): 710-34; 396.

used in liberal and socialist discourses in a way that fails to offer a way out of modernity, which is an inherently colonizing force. Border epistemologies, on the other hand, offer the terms "decolonization" (of thought and being) and "liberation" (from political and economic structures) as a radically revolutionary way out of modernity/coloniality. "Decoloniality" is the ideal alternative paradigm to modernity/coloniality toward which political and epistemic decolonization strives.

In short, alternative modernities think *in and through* Western epistemology while alternatives *to* modernity (the "delinking" project) think *around and against* it. While I believe the latter project to be more radically revolutionary, my project does not benefit from framing itself in terms of one or the other. For one, the theoretical lattices of this thesis are steeped deeply in Afro-modernisms, inquiries by Ellison as well as Du Bois, Fanon, and others, which speak in and through modernity's discourses. At the same time, these very same lattices, along with much of the material at which I will arrive via these critical structures, I argue, can be characterized in terms of border epistemology, or thinking uniquely against and around. Both cases considered, I relocate the spatial metaphor from the margin/border/outside to the interstitial, a metaphor that best describes the ambivalent positioning of the comic interlocutor, s/he who enacts critical-comical labor both in and through as well as against and around, tripping along every space in culture's grooved terrain in order to reveal an alternative picture. This, bell hooks might call an "outlaw rebel vision," a "transgressive image" that "subvert[s], pose[s]

critical alternatives, and transform[s] our worldviews," a vision "essential to any effort to create a context for transformation."[66]

Chapter One, "Ralph Ellison's Comic Nonviolenece as a 'More Effective Strategy'," examines the function of buggy jiving specifically in relation to postcolonial debates about decolonization, revolution, and the use of violence in struggles for social justice and freedom. Through a reading of Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, I consider how strategies of the African American comic tradition provide an affirmative counter-modern radicalism at the intersection of art, vernacular culture, and politics. This chapter takes up the centrality of the comic to Ellison's radical vision of ideal democracy as well as the relation of pugilistic references in *Invisible Man* to the question of violence in counter-modern activism. As an alternative to destructive physical violence, Ellison privileges "comic activism," as I call it, as a "more effective strategy" of social action against modernity's ambivalent threat to human freedom through a confrontation with the cultural episteme. *Invisible Man* stages this comic activism both within as well as in the framing of the narrative by insisting in hindsight that "the novel could serve as a comic antidote to the ailments of politics."[67] Through a reading of the novel, Chapter One considers the radical force of the comic in the process of epistemic decolonization whose contrapuntal efficacy poses an ethical alternative and an enduring strategy against the lure of physical violence.

The sense of the comic which this chapter explores is culturally conjoined to black music, and specifically jazz, through the common

---

[66] bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 4.
[67] Ellison, *IM*, xvi.

practices of rhythm, improvisation, antiphony, repetition and the prominence of what James Snead refers to as the "cut". In this chapter I consider how a black temporality shaped by repetition and the cut structures the comic activism envisioned in *Invisible Man.* This temporality finds its way into the pacing of the joke, the epistemological locus of enunciation upon which the joke depends, and also structures a comic alternative to violent revolution and the starkly linear vision of progress it entails. I argue that the struggles for alternate futures which occur through comic strategies of cultural decolonization are dialectically informed by the memorial recesses of the tragic such that true progress only occurs through a re-sampling of the general with the particular.

Using an interdisciplinary approach which Ingrid Monson would call a "more musical approach to cultural theory," Chapter 2, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood: Nina Simone's Theater of Invisibility," seeks to explore the political and musical career of Nina Simone, a cultural figure who is curiously understudied.[68]   Beyond the ways in which she has been discussed, I am interested in considering Simone as a comic performer, a trickster and a conjurer, whose sense of humor enables a political, ethical, and critical efficacy of historical remark. In Simone's live work, which in its confluence of multiple performative elements can be called her "theater of invisibility," I locate the primary comic maneuvers of parody, ironic reversal, understatement, and the absurd, all versions of "perspective by incongruity" central to Ellison's sense of the comic in black culture. In this chapter, I focus on live audio and film recordings of Simone's songs in

---

[68] Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 3.

order to consider the full range of performative elements contained within her theater of invisibility, which include not only musical performance but also extemporaneous and dramatic interactions with her audience. I focus on recordings from the most political period of her life, 1964 to 1970, and a performance given in the wake of the long "sixties," just after Simone announced her first retirement. While "comedienne" is an unconventional label for this "protest singer," I argue that a Freudian economy is no doubt in play in transforming the fury and dismay of an "angry black woman," a figure threatening both to white liberalism and black masculinism associated with the Left political movements of the 60s and 70s, into a political critique, social vision, and call to action that reaches across barriers of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and language.

The figures (the comic interlocutors) and cultural artifacts (comic productions) I take up in this dissertation critically engage the subcategories of modernity, "Americaness" and "blackness," as well as the de-colonial notion of "freedom" (something different from "liberty" or "emancipation" employed in the mainstream discourse of civil rights). Each enacts the buggy jiving through a poetics of invisibility performed textually, musically, cinematically but above all comically. Understanding laughter here as an uneasy testimony to the joke of race being revealed, we find that the comic irrupts the lithosphere of dominant culture with alternative epistemologies indigenous to black culture and relating to lived experience which, even within the strictures of popular culture, can be called activist. Shifting the spatial metaphor from voices on the margins to those read between the lines, those tacitly there, silent, yet always resonant, hidden yet unconsciously invoked, this dissertation explores the

comic's play with silence (in the oral/aural register) and space (in the visual/textual), to disrupt the racial play of masks through which everyday encounters are "enframed". Reading between the lines, discovering innuendo, is a comic practice, a practice of signifyin(g) the unsaid and subliminal which evokes a response of laughter—laughter in this case signaling primarily a moment of revelation, not necessarily a pleasurable response. [69]

However, laughter is also a form of redress, of remedial testimony to the conditions of domination. Laughter affirms that humanity that lies between what Ellison calls "the discontinuity of social tradition and the sense of the past which clings to the mind."[70] By taking up the question of American culture and modernity more broadly, buggy jiving dismantles its own object so that it cannot be taken seriously. The space carved, critically, in its wake paves the way for transformation. This said, the project would be remiss to imagine the comic as constitutive of a complete revolution, as wholly reparative, or as unwaveringly critical. At every corner, the limits of comic performance will be raised in this thesis, and the possibility of decolonization will be questioned.

The "blues-toned" laughter of buggy jiving provides the terrain for, Chapter 3, "Incognegro: Dead Authors, Second Selves, and Comic Revenge in Post-Soul Satire." Ellison's *Invisible Man* charts a political tradition which ends in the future. Satirizing the various stages of resistance to oppression engaged in the black political tradition—from the overzealousness of uplift discourses, to the Old Left, to *négritude* (an

---

[69] Cf. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: OUP, 1988.
[70] Ellison, "Change the Joke," 108.

earlier form of black nationalism)—*Invisible Man*'s protagonist ultimately prefigures the face of revolution to come, the masked face of the comic interlocutor. Posing the possibilities and limits of buggy jiving—the possibilities in epistemic critique and the limits of social isolation (in being a creative genius) and misunderstanding (of one's joking eccentricity)—Ellison nonetheless suggests the new form that politics must eventually take. In order to foreground, as a final note, the possibilities and limitations of buggy jiving, that mad, ranting, revelatory laughter, in the face of comedies of the grotesque, I turn to two examples of black postmodernist satire, Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* and Percival Everett's novel *Erasure*, both of which were released in 2001 at the very start of the new millennium. I consider how each of these satires about satire exemplifies buggy jiving, engaging Ellisonian tropes and references, and also how each cultural text comments on the efficacy of comedy as a strategy for social change. Both Lee's film and Everett's novel take as a founding premise the question of what happens when one's joke is misunderstood in the public spotlight. Both the avant-garde author Thelonious "Monk" Ellison and television writer Pierre Delacroix, the novel's and the film's respective protagonists, attempt a form of buggy jiving in their satirical attacks on popular representations of African Americans which recycle centuries-old stereotypes. In both cases, the satires fail and ultimately contribute with great impact to the politics of representation they had aimed to disrupt. Everett's novel suggests an equivocal skepticism about this comic strategy. On the other hand, despite Delacroix's strategic failure, the film offers other examples of African American humor to suggest that comedy is a mode through which

40

discussions of race can and must continue. The parting instructions of Delacroix's father, a comedian, to "always keep 'em laughing," cryptically echoes throughout the film much in the same way as invisible man's grandfather's deathbed advice to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" does in Ellison's novel. As in *Invisible Man*, Lee and Everett redeem, to some degree, the failures of buggy jiving within the story in the meta-act of writing the story/producing the film, which are in themselves forms of buggy jiving, and arguably successful ones.

These two cultural texts raise the fact that at this post-Civil Rights moment, the gravity with which we are now trained to think about race prohibits us from even talking about it. The comic enables a disruption of this gravity so that a discussion of race in the contemporary moment can be broached. When we allow ourselves to laugh, in a sense, we allow ourselves to acknowledge the absurdity of what is ordinarily taken for granted. In hopes that by thinking deeply about the comic's revelatory force as a legitimate decolonial strategy, perhaps even a "more effective" one, this dissertation helps to counter claims that there is no longer a political tone in black culture.

CHAPTER 1

Ralph Ellison's Comic Nonviolence as a "More Effective Strategy"

The greater the stress within society the stronger the comic antidote required.
—RALPH ELLISON, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 647

At times of revolution, what use is there for the comedian? With decolonization, what role is there for her whose single strength is an awareness of the absurd joke that undergirds the notion of racial difference and that structures oppression? Along these lines, we invoke the question asked toward the very end of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, will the comic activist be found "in the rear or in the *avant-garde*" of the struggle?[1] The novel's "invisible" narrator-protagonist poses this last problem as he reflects upon his growth as a political agent in relation to his intimate involvement and secondhand experience with a series of radical movements and activities intent on revolutionary change. Finding these organized struggles and riotous activities inherently flawed and ineffective, he retreats from society in order contemplate the cultural absurdity which posits the fatal notion of black inhumanity—an absurdity central to injustice left unaddressed by these revolutionary endeavors— and to "put it down" in the form of a story. In so doing, however, he discovers that "I have disarmed myself in the process," and become just as ineffective as the strategies of resistance and change that he rejects. [2] From this realization he is led to inquire, "but what *is* the next phase" of

---

[1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 572.
[2] *Ibid.*, 580.

his political development? As a way out of this problem, invisible man decides that he must be "socially responsible," he must mobilize his knowledge of his invisibility and more broadly what Ellison terms elsewhere as the "joke of race" into a form of social *action*; he and his story "must come out."[3]

We can distill from the "Epilogue" the question that motivates the rest of this essay: If the social order remains colonized, despite the efforts of organized movements, can comedy (of all things) provide what Ellison calls a "more effective strategy" of progressive change? Specifically, is there a version of comic expression developed within black culture that stakes out a counter-cultural force capable of decolonizing the cultural episteme—a component of the anti-colonial struggle that, as Walter Mignolo argues, remains in the wake of short-sighted radical movements?[4] Can a particular experience of tragedy generate, out of the ashes, a redemptive comedy for the whole of society? If the "next step" sought by invisible man takes the form of a comic strategy, what *would* a comic activism look like? To begin to address these questions, it must first be asked what the comic can achieve that other forms of social action cannot.

In the first part of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon privileges economic and political decolonization over cultural decolonization, a prioritization which influenced revolutionary insurrections all over the colonized world during the years after WWII. He argues that during the urgent process of anti-colonial revolt, ideas are at best a luxury and at worst a waste of time. He writes, "For a colonized

---

[3] *Ibid.*, 581.
[4] Cf. Walter Mignolo. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality."

people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with the dignity of the [abstract concept of the] human individual: for that human individual has never heard tell of it."[5] Looking elsewhere in Fanon's writings (including in the subsequent sections of *Wretched*) reveals that this pragmatism is but part of his overall view of anti-colonialism; for now, however, this prioritization of the "concrete" over the "abstract" establishes the problem set forth in this chapter: While the project of economic and political decolonization (the decolonization of institutions and power) is a necessary first step toward freedom, it only goes so far in working toward this goal, insofar as it ignores the colonization of thought and being, or put differently, the colonization of culture. In this way, David Scott's claim toward the end of *Conscripts of Modernity* that the Haitian revolution, and by extension all revolutions, inevitably fail in their incompleteness can be interpreted in light of this problematic. While I do not want to discount the dire significance of anti-colonial struggles for institutional power, I do want to suggest, as Walter Mignolo does, that political decolonization is the first step toward freedom, but the second is "epistemic," or cultural, decolonization. In other words, while bread and land are essential, reaching what Ralph Ellison calls the "democratic ideal" is impossible if thought and being are left imprisoned. Indeed, the final battle of anti-colonialism is the fight over knowledge and ideas, or to translate into the

---

[5] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 44.

Ellisonian lexicon, what he and his foremost theoretical influence Kenneth Burke referred to as the symbolic field.[6]

It is at the locus of this problem that I situate a discussion of Ralph Ellison's humanist politics as expressed in his art and criticism within a much broader context of what might be named "revolutionary," the very element that is constitutive of most radical movements. To locate Ellison here is somewhat incongruous since during the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s he was widely understood to be a conservative "Negro" voice discordant with revolutionary "Black" political and artistic movements happening in the U.S. at the time. By extension, his cultural criticism responded to interrelated instances of Fanonian cultural nationalism and political overthrow occurring simultaneously all over the colonized world. However, as I argue in this chapter, Ellison's thought belongs in this debate over the nature of revolution since the "comic antidote" (cited in the epigraph) creatively envisioned by this novelist and cultural critic in both his 1952 novel *Invisible Man* and some of his essays offers a politics that Ellison proposes as a "more effective strategy" for combating racial violence, gaining access to legal protection, engaging in social action, and generating radical change. This strategy, grounded in the "Negro American sense of the comic," as Ellison puts it, is perhaps "more effective" at generating meaningful and lasting change because of the way in which it decolonizes knowledge and being, in effect the way it goes after culture

---

[6] Donald Pease writes, "Burke's theory of symbolic action would subequently become the framework for analyzing the social problems that Ellison would address in his fiction and essays." "Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: The Nonsymbolizable (Trans)Action," *Boundary 2*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2003, 66.

with culture.[7] Also, it avoids physical and lexical violence—refusing fists (Fanon) *and* words (Wright) as weapons—in its nonviolent focus on perception and knowledge toward its goal of a "human ideal."[8] According to Ellison, even words, when used as *weapons* against injustice as Richard Wright famously believed, can take part in a creative militancy which interferes with art's ability to imagine what justice might actually look like. Extending from here, this chapter aims to demonstrate, in part, how strategies of the African American comic tradition reformulated at the cultural avant-garde (in the sense intoned by *Invisible Man*) provide an affirmative Afro-modern radicalism at the intersection of art, vernacular culture, and politics.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison explicitly pairs the question of the comic with that of social action and the role of violence. In the framing "Prologue" the novel's protagonist recounts a tall tale while on retreat in his "hole," a basement apartment somewhere in Manhattan:

Once I saw a prizefighter boxing a yokel. The fighter was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action. He hit the yokel a hundred times while the yokel held up his arms in stunned surprise. But suddenly the yokel, rolling about in the gale of boxing gloves, struck one blow and knocked science, speed and footwork as cold as a well-digger's

---

[7] Ralph Ellison, *Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke*, 102. In this essay which informs much of my understanding of Ellison's ideas about comedy and the "joke of race" at the center of American identity, the critic discusses the "Negro American sense of the comic," I get this pivotal phrase, "more effective strategy," from Ellison's 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, pp. xvi.

[8] Ibid., xx.

posterior […] The Yokel had simply stepped inside of his opponent's sense of time.[9]

This parable allegorizes the social action of the comic interlocutor whose sense of timing combined with an awareness of his stronger opponent's weaknesses proves more devastating than brute force.[10] The yokel brings into confluence the trickster figure of African American folklore with the image of the black folk hero of twentieth-century boxing in order to ask what form the "fight" for freedom might take.[11]

We might compare this memorable image with a moment from an essay published a few years later wherein Ellison recounts the following tale: "Said a very dark Southern friend of mine in laughing reply to a white businessman who complained of his recalcitrance in a bargaining situation, 'I know, you thought I was colored, didn't you'." The rhetorical uppercut that this "dark" friend unleashes on the white businessman, a blow not unlike the yokel's, delivers the *punch line* of what Ellison names as "the joke at the center of American identity"—the joke of race. Structurally speaking, the joke form is defined by the space in between appearance and reality, in this case, the appearance of racial difference and the reality of common humanity and cultural intimacy. By disrupting the symbolic field in which the full humanity of Ellison's "dark" friend is

---

[9] *Invisible Man*, 9.

[10] As I use the phrase "comic interlocutor" I am aware of the its multiple references: to the notion of interruption, in this case of dominant racialist narratives; and also to the "interlocutor" of the blackface minstrel show, the straight man who directs the comic exchange between the "end men" "Mr. Bones" and "Mr. Tambo."

[11] In the African American cultural imaginary, heavyweight champions such as Jack Johnson (reign 1908-15), Joe Louis (1937-49), and Muhammad Ali (intermittently from 1967-79) have risen to folk-heroic status, especially in their ability to act out in a culturally acceptable way the "bad nigger" persona of the black vernacular tradition and overtake their white oppressors.

eclipsed by the racial differential (stereotype), by denuding the white man, to use Ellison's metaphor, of the masks on which his play depends, the black friend exposes the joke at the interstices of American culture: that both white and black culture is "'mammy made' right here at home."[12] Extending this political act to the postcolonial frame, a broader initiative of this chapter, both stories mythologize what Homi Bhabha would call the "interruption" of modernity critically enacted by the "ex-slave and the subaltern."[13] In both instances, dominant notions of "truth" and "reality" writ large are disrupted (or "interrupted") by minority perspectives which offer antidotes to oppressive fictions.

From the, perhaps, unwieldy series of questions that opened my frame of inquiry, I arrive at the juxtaposition of these anecdotes in order to map out the three main destinations of this chapter: In the following pages I argue for the centrality of the comic to Ellison's concept-metaphor of invisibility and his vision of the "democratic ideal;" I raise the importance of timing to the signifying practices (in the black vernacular sense) of comic activism and the question of time/history important to the concept of revolution; and I forge a relation between the pugilistic references in *Invisible Man* and the question of violence as means of radical change. To reiterate, as an alternative to physical violence, Ellison privileges comic activism as a more effective strategy of social action against Western modernity's hypocritical threat to human freedom precisely because it confronts what he (citing Kenneth Burke) would call

---

[12] "Change the Joke," 108. Near this part of the essay, Ellison muses, "Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical."
[13] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 335.

the social order, something which requires dealing with the abstract. In *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison stages this comic activism within the narrative and also references it in the publication's paratextual framing by insisting over three decades later in his 1981 preface that "the novel *could* serve as a comic antidote to the ailments of politics."[14] This retrospective observation is earlier taken up by the novel's protagonist who in his framing "Prologue" and "Epilogue" of the narrative reflects upon the political potential of what he calls "buggy jiving," what Ellison terms the "crazy-logical" utterances of the comic activist, or as Hortense Spillers puts it, invisible man's "oracular chore."[15] Through a reading of the novel and a contextualization of Ellison's ideas about comedy within broader critical observations about black culture, this chapter will consider the radical force of the comic in the process of cultural transformation whose contrapuntal efficacy poses an ethical alternative and an enduring strategy against the lure of physical violence. In short, this chapter takes seriously Ellison's claim that, "more affirmative than raw anger," the "blues-toned laughter" invoked by buggy jiving, the comic enactment of the "joke of race," signals singular moments of progress, "[approaching] that [democratic] ideal by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives."[16] Beyond revolution and toward the democratic ideal, "freedom," "the individual," "autonomy," and "justice" are recuperated from Western modernity's symbolic monopoly at the cultural frontier of "America's greatest joke."

---

[14] *IM*, xvi.

[15] *Ibid.*, 581; xviii; I take the apt phrase "oracular chore" from Hortense Spillers' musings on the novel in "Ellison's Usable Past," 70.

[16] *IM*, xvi; xx.

1. Improvisation, Repetition, and Comic Timing

"Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which I originally aspired.—INVISIBLE MAN, 573

The novel charts a political terrain which ends in the future, or rather one which returns to a native place—"the end was in the beginning" the narrator portends—the tragic-comic origins of black culture.[17] Satirizing the various stages of resistance to oppression engaged in the black political tradition—from the conflicted nature of uplift discourses, to the racialist hypocrisy of the Old Left, to what Ellison refers to as the "provincialism" of *négritude* and Garveyism, and finally the post-war race riot—*Invisible Man*'s protagonist ultimately prefigures the face of change to come, the masked face of the comic activist. Ellison poses the possibilities and limits of "buggy jiving"—the possibilities in epistemic critique and the limits of social isolation (in being a creative genius) and misunderstanding (of one's joking eccentricity). He nonetheless endorses a repetition of an original political gesture, black comic subversion, with a difference. This politics, which is dependent upon the act of telling stories, the author attempts in the very writing of his book. *Invisible Man*, Ellison explains, is a "lie," a tall tale, in the black vernacular sense, or in other words, an improvised story of humorous tenor. In this sense the writer saw his novel not simply as a work of art, but also as a "comic antidote." Ellison believed that as an American artist he had a social responsibility to repair his country's founding principles, more or less the same principles which also undergird Western modernity, and that the novel form contains

---

[17] *Ibid.,* 571.

within it a "raft of hope" on the rough waters toward "the democratic ideal."[18] In an interview he explains,

> The novel is a complex agency for the symbolic depiction of experience, and it demands that the writer be willing to look at both sides of characters and issues—at least while he's working. You might say that the form of the novel imposes its morality upon the novelist by demanding a complexity of vision and an openness to the variety and depth of experience.[19]

The novel, then, as an aesthetic form is, according to Ellison, particularly apt for visionary musing on ethical questions, a particularly apt form for "play upon possibility" which the visionary requires.[20]   Ellison's interpretation of the form of the novel enables him to stage a political scenario where the stakes of revolution are dramatized. In *Invisible Man*, the fiction of the visionary is made real, if for a moment, through the novel's comical-ethical imaginary.

As much faith as he has in the particularities of the novel form, however, by his own estimation Ellison's comic novel expands beyond its form to include the aesthetic vocabularies of black culture's varied, yet interrelated, dominant idioms. The author describes that in "the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis," he "would have to improvise upon [his] materials."[21] Indeed, Ellison's novel operates more broadly through a poetics of invisibility that exceeds the novel form. Just before the parable of the

---

[18] *Ibid.,* xx-xxi.
[19] Ellison, "Study and Experience," 428.
[20] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 108.
[21] *IM,* xxiii.

yokel mentioned above, invisible man muses on the concept-metaphor of invisibility as a distinct aesthetics as well as a poetics, or as both a style and a form, perfected by the jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong, whose recording of "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?," blasting simultaneously from five separate phonographs, inspires the protagonist's reefer-induced "trip" to the depths of sound, space, and time.

> Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible […] And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music […] 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 vaguely hear in Louis's music.

This poetics of invisibility—a poetics of nodal interruption, "caesura," "abeyance of closure," break[22]—is the formal structure through which the joke of race operates. Again, the formal structure of a joke can be described as the *space* of incongruity *between* appearance and reality. Invisibility, then, is a comic sensibility, if not a comic mode of being, driven by a conscious awareness of the incongruities of racialist cultural

---

[22] Cf. Homi Bhabha's discussion of "caesura" in reference to the "time lag" and "the cut" (discussed below), *The Location of Culture*; Hortense Spillers describes the "ambivalence" of a post-modernist imperative and strategy: "But if by ambivalence we might mean that abeyance of closure, or *break* in the passage of syntagmatic movement from one more or less stable property to another, as in the radical disjuncture between 'African' and 'American,' then ambivalence remains not only the privileged and arbitrary judgment of a postmodernist imperative, but also a strategy that names the new cultural situation as a wounding" ("Sermon" 262).

narratives—indeed, a double-consciousness.[23]   As the passage also demonstrates, the spatial dimensions of a poetics of invisibility are linked to temporal dimensions, and here the parable of the yokel comes back into play: Timing, in the two passages, refers both to comic timing—that careful pacing by which humor succeeds or fails—as well as to a sense of history, the driving concept behind Western modernity and, relatedly, a fatalistic notion of revolution based on (a vulgar) Marxism and behind many anti-colonial endeavors.   Both Western modernity and fatalistic versions of revolution depend upon a faith in linear progress wherein one class, ideology, or episteme naturally wins out due to the uncontrollable forces of history, a view critiqued in the novel and discussed in more detail below. The poetics of invisibility jokes by disrupting quotidian senses of rhythm upon which modernity (and the notion of linear progress) depends.

In order to probe further and extend the notion of a comic black temporality offered by the concept of invisibility, we might look to James Snead's formulation that one of the distinctive characteristics of black culture is its avowal and embrace of repetition. This embrace, he argues, differs from Western culture's views that the cultural achievement of difference (progress) occurs in the absence of repetition, as teleological and linear. The particular "spacing and regularity of the intervals" in which black culture reveals the illusion of linear continuity are black culture's defining characteristics. Hegel notoriously argued that Africa is "shut up" from "History," isolated in the "land of childhood" while the rest of the world progresses on the linear path toward maturity.[24] However, what for

---

[23] I discuss the relation of Du Bois' concept of "double-consciousness" to the comic at length in the previous chapter.
[24] Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 80.

Hegel led to the conclusion of the non-existence of black culture gains new import in light of what Snead calls "a revised metaphysics of rupture and opening."[25]   Black culture is the conscious embrace of repetition with a difference, a circular view of history.

For Snead, the temporality of repetition, which is relevant to a view of historical progress, is tantamount to that found in the aesthetic expressions of black culture. Whether a mark of history, the beat of a dance tune, a jazz standard, or the soul riff sampled on a hip-hop track, it is the "thing that is there to pick up."[26] Snead suggests that while Western culture's emphasis on the linearity of history can be compared to an emphasis on melody, or to the succession of tones from beginning to end, black culture might be understood in terms of its emphasis on rhythm, the recurrence of the beat and the moment of "the cut."   Here it is worth quoting Snead at length:

> In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is "there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it." If there is a goal (Zweck) in such a culture, it is always deferred; it continually "cuts" back to the start, in the musical meaning of "cut" as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental da capo) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series. […] A culture based on the idea of the "cut" will always suffer in a society *whose dominant idea is material progress*—but "cuts" possess their charm! […] Black culture, in the "cut," builds "accidents" into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind

---

[25] James Snead, "Repetition and Black Cutlure,"13; 16.
[26] *Ibid.*, 21.

of cultural coverage, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over, but by *making room for them inside the system itself*" (emphasis added).[27]

In addition Snead notes, "The 'cut' overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard."[28] While Snead's observations might oversimplify the distinction between "black" and Western culture, leaving little space for local variations of expressive cultures that easily fall outside of his inflexible schema, the "cut" nonetheless does much to explain the narrative structure of *Invisible Man,* a text whose epilogue confesses, "the end was in the beginning." Hortense Spillers notes about the novel "a principle of iteration that distinguishes both the Prologue and the Epilogue, encircling the structure. This principle of iteration [or repetition], if we look closely, ratifies a decisive ambiguity beneath the surface symmetry of the text."[29] In an interview with David L. Carson in 1971, Ellison explains that the iterative temporality of his novel has much to do with the process of writing fiction, whereby material is gathered and repeatedly revisited, not in a linear fashion but in an asymmetrical one. As well, his interest in exploring the workings of time in his novel is informed both by reading Bergson on "*durée*" and by a need to tackle "CPT," or "Colored Peoples' Time" "which is a great comic thing in Negro institutions."[30] Both the high

---

[27] *Ibid.*, 20; 16.
[28] *Ibid.*, 22.
[29] Spillers, "Ellison's Usable Past," 70.
[30] Cf. David L. Carson, "Ralph Ellison: 20 Years After" (Interview) in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison.* Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995, 192-214. For "*durée*," or "duration," cf. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness.* F. L. Pogson, trans. London: G. Allen & company, ltd., 1921. "What is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity;

philosophical concept and the folk notion critique conventional Western notions of time keeping. We might, then, understand Ellison's claim to improvisation as more than a casual one. Improvisation (and call and response) is dependent upon repetition, which constantly cuts back to a refrain. The iterative beat, that which is there to pick up, must be "social" in that it serves as the point of intersubjective interaction.[31]

This chapter intervenes at the curious absence of an explicit foregrounding of comedy in the various forms of black culture, all of which are ultimately indiscrete.[32] The sense of the comic, which this chapter explores, is one culturally conjoined to black music, and specifically jazz, through the common practices of rhythm, improvisation, antiphony, repetition and the prominence of the "cut." Comedy, after all, is the syncopation of ideas. On this register Snead riffs, "Black music sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals: that it will do this, however, is itself an expectation."[33] Comedy disturbs our expectations just as syncopation (a defining characteristic of black music, and especially jazz) disturbs the regular metrical accent of a musical composition.

---

a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another. What duration is there existing outside us? The present only, or, if we prefer the expression, simultaneity. No doubt external things change, but their moments do not *succeed* one another, if we retain the ordinary meaning of the word, except for a consciousness which keeps them in mind. We observe outside us at a given moment a whole system of simultaneous positions; of the simultaneities which have preceded them, nothing remains. To put duration in space is really to contradict oneself and place succession within simultaneity" 226-7.

[31] Jennifer Brody's discussion of the Ellison's use of ellipses in *Invisible Man* could also be usefully applied here. See Brody, *Punctuation*.

[32] Glenda Carpio has noted this absence and has begun to address it in her markedly important and innovative book, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. There she too acknowledges, "African American humor has been an underestimated realm of analysis" and that there currently exists in the academy a "lack of deep explorations into African American humor," 27.

[33] *Ibid.*, 23.

Syncopation stresses the unaccented or *weak* beat, which returns us again to the image of the yokel stepping outside of time and finding the prizefighter's weakness. This Ellison knew, as he recognized the inherent jazz of comedy, the inherent comedy of jazz, and the "blackness" (of "blackness") of both.[34] This is the formal and aesthetic principle behind what he calls a poetics of invisibility, and the comic element cannot be overstressed.

Bhabha also speaks of the "cut" or "time lag" as the "disjunctive present of modernity," the locus of which serves as the basis for a postcolonial critique of modernity: "The 'subalterns and ex-slaves' who now seize the spectacular event of modernity do so in a catachrestic gesture of reinscribing modernity's 'caesura' and using it to transform the locus of thought and writing in their postcolonial critique."[35] The catachresis, a postcolonial "translation," consists of discursive locutions on modernity sounded from "inappropriate" loci, the Third World, the tenement project, the colony, or the black church. The paradox which Bhabha locates at the center of postcolonial critique is also the paradox at the center of Ellison's joke of race—that the Manicheisms mean nothing in light of both being "mammy made."

In the following section, I would like to think about how a black temporality shaped by circularity and syncopated asymmetry, in which the aforementioned observations about history, modernity, and the movement of time coalesce, structures the comic activism envisioned in *Invisible Man*.

---

[34] Here, I riff on the famous sermon in the "Prologue" of *Invisible Man*, "The blackness of blackness." The blackness of blackness, in a sense, describes the concept-metaphor of invisibility as Ellison conceived it—the so-called "hypervisibility" of black people rendered them (or their full humanity) "invisible," blacked-out.
[35] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 353.

It finds its way into the pacing of the joke, the epistemological locus of enunciation upon which the joke depends, and finally structures a comic alternative to violent revolution and the starkly linear vision of progress that "revolution" writ large entails.

2. Offensive Humor: Comic Strategies and Revolution

It's time to stop singin' and start swingin'.—MALCOLM X, "The Ballet or the Bullet" 9

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the soaring bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists.—FRANZ FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37

Let the race politicians, if they will, create political, economic or organizational forms of leadership; but it is the artists and the creative minds who will, and must, furnish the all important content…It is the Negro creative intellectual who must take seriously the idea that culture and art belong to the people—with all the revolutionary implications of that idea.—HAROLD CRUSE, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, 96

What do you call a black man with a Ph.D.? [What?] A Nigger.—MALCOLM X, speech given at Harvard University Law School Forum, 1964[36]

Invisible Man was composed just as the fever which ushered in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement broke, creating a sense of hope and anxiety for its author—hope, of course, for the values of social responsibility and action upon which his vision of democracy relied, and anxiety about the potential obsolescence of his by then unfinished work. Despite his faith in civil rights struggles, especially at the time, the political movement imagined in *Invisible Man* was radical in a way that might have, if

---

[36] This series of epigraphs, bookended by X's call to arms and X's joke is meant to suggest the simultaneity of violent and comic forms of confrontation with the dominant culture endemic to African American culture, particularly at the historical moment in question in this chapter.

anything, rendered the mainstream Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and early sixties obsolete just as it was getting off the ground. Over a decade later, Harold Cruse would write of the need for a "creative cultural philosophy" conceived of the black "cultural front," the "new guard" of black "creative intellectuals," which would be revolutionary. Cruse argued that while the "civil writism," defined by "old guard" styles of racial uplift and protests for equality within the language of the law, concomitant with *Invisible Man*'s creation, mobilized a huge step forward toward achieving social justice, its limited discourse was incapable of getting at the question of *culture* upon which racial democracy ultimately depended. Likewise, he suggested that the vital role of art in politics had up until that point largely been grossly underestimated.

Also in the decade or so leading up to the turbulent "sixites," the seeds of Third World liberation movements brought the question of revolution and "bloodstained," "murderous" protest into the backdrop. In the U.S. the question of violence was already circulating around the topic of the post-War race riot. About a decade before the War of Independence in India, the Harlem race riot of 1935 followed by race riots in this neighborhood of Manhattan and the city of Detroit in 1943 signaled a turning-point in the character of race riots in the U.S. For the first time, minority (primarily African American) communities unleashed their anger over police brutality, urban apartheid, and racial injustice on property within their own neighborhoods. While the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the War of Algiers, which ushered in a flood of political decolonization movements worldwide, would not occur for a couple years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, and while black cultural nationalism in the

U.S. mobilized by calls to "stop singin' and start swingin'" would not emerge for a good decade, the specter of violent revolution haunted the historical moment in which the novel was written. Of even more relevance, perhaps, was the legacy of Old Left and early nationalist discourses which reached their height in the thirties and which Ellison parodies in the novel.

Critical of militancy, especially in the arts, Ellison would take issue with the notion made famous by Richard Wright that "words can be weapons against injustice" insofar as a violent posture in literature does not necessarily allow for an exploration of what justice might actually look like.[37] In other words, it interferes with the visionary nature of the novel which Ellison steadfastly upheld. But even beyond the question of violence in art, he explains that while African Americans might suffer defeat "in their bouts with circumstance" the comic enables those defeated in everyday experience of invisibility to savor "the victory of conscious perception."[38] Although Ellison acquired much of his skill as a writer and gained entrance into leftist political movements through his mentorship and close friendship with Wright, the theories of Kenneth Burke, whom Ellison discovered in 1935, proved ultimately more alluring and influential.   The central Burkean theory of "symbolic action" or "the interrelation and transformation of active and passive principles," as Donald Pease notes,

> [was] not, for Ellison, merely an alternative to describe the social
> order; his theory also produced the technology Ellison required for

---

[37] Richard Wright, *Black Boy*
[38] *IM*, xxi.

imagining its transformation. Symbolic actions animated discourse in general with socially transformative resources that Ellison's Marxist orientation had previously restricted to historical processes. As symbolic "equipment for living," verbal and visual art posed symbolic solutions for recurring human problems."[39]

It is also from Burke that Ellison samples the idea of "perspective by incongruity," a key component of what I am calling Ellison's formulation of comic activism. Perspective by incongruity refers to the "syncopation of ideas" central to the comic apparatus, as discussed earlier. In other words, it shakes up, to repeat Ellison's phrasing, "the world of things as given" (appearances) in order to make way for radical alternatives and/or conscious perception (reality)—it is what Burke calls "verbal 'atom-cracking'."[40] Comedy happens at the space between the two, at the interstices of incongruity.

The gift of humor granted originally through the circumstance of surviving the peculiar institution of slavery provides what W. E. B. Du Bois would call a "second sight," or a doubly-conscious view of the world of appearances and the world of reality marked by the "grooves of history."[41] The fight, then, for Ellison is primarily an epistemic one; it is a battle for

---

[39] Donald Pease, 4.

[40] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 308-314.

[41] Alexander Wehelieye draws out this idea of the "grooves" of history in relation to the sonic elements of Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the presence of the phonograph in the novel. Ellison, he says, "imagines history in the form of a groove inscribed on the surface of a phonograph record, offering a model of temporal change that 'spins around' a linear and progressive version of history. Ellison's description of the 'groove of history' I argue, locates black culture in the technologized sounds of the phonograph." Wehelieye's conception of black temporality based on the circularity of time is not far from my own. His focus, however, is directed toward the technologies of sound and sound production, whereas mine points toward black temporality's reworking of Western modernity's (and also Revolution's) notion of progress through a comic mode. See *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, 7.

better knowing/seeing driven by an ethical imperative. At the very end of the novel, we are confronted with a prescription for social responsibility and with a portrait of an unconventional activist whose activism resides in speech and writing, not in bland protest or mere destruction, for which the Brotherhood and Ras the Destroyer respectively stand. Controversially, perhaps, political activism at the end/beginning of the novel no longer *appears* as it conventionally does when defined by the mobilization of the masses. The invisible man, a "disembodied voice" who simultaneously blends and splits character, narrator, and author, represents the lone comic revolutionary who struggles with the question of how to put his "buggy jiving" to political use, indeed of how to *act*. Indeed, Ellison's action as a novelist mirrors the narrator's buggy jiving, which in turn mirrors the successful strategies of social action honed by the character of invisible man. Ultimately, the act which the narrator describes as "[giving] pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties" (joking) is not enough; the comic revolutionary "must come out."[42] Abiding by the ruptured, or circular, flow of time that structures the narrative, the answer to the question of what it means to "come out" appears discretely in the novel's core.

This chapter began with a reference to the relationship between pugilism and comedy in *Invisible Man*. I return to this theme here in order to consider Ellison's philosophy on violence particularly as it relates to the "fight" for freedom. The penultimate chapter of the novel presents a dreamlike representation of a race riot (based loosely on the actual 1943 event) which, though accurate to the contemporaneous history of the post-

---

[42] *IM*, 581.

war period, eerily prophesies the tone of violence to be embraced by black radicals in the subsequent decades.[43] The northern race riot of the post-war period both served the particular response of blacks to the unfulfilled dream of the Promised Land "up North" and also prefigured the dissatisfaction with "civil writism" that eventually took over the entire black freedom struggle (at least at the level of public discourse). Prophetically, *Invisible Man* presents the riot, "the fight," and violence in general, as the political tactic most enticing in the face of repeated failures to attain an elusive freedom. Indeed, as the artist himself describes and as his biographers Lawrence Jackson and Arnold Rampersad reveal, Ellison was constantly furious and potentially violent in reaction to the racial injustice and dehumanization which defined his world and the world of countless others. However, for Ellison, the violent solution is ultimately as grotesque and onerous as are the stereotypes which fetter the process of ethical recognition.

At first, invisible man mistakes the hazy riot of which he is both a witness and a participant with the elusive social action for which he quests over the course of his radical *bildung*. After participating in the immolation of a decrepit tenement house, the protagonist "was seized with a fierce sense of exaltation. They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried through alone; the decision their own and their own action. Capable of their own action…"[44] However, after the appearance of armed riot police officially transform Harlem into a battlefield, the invisible man

---

[43]Ellison reported on the 1943 race riot for the *New York Post*; Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement, its aesthetic counterpart, both adopted a philosophy of armament and aggression (both physical and rhetorical) in frustrated response to the inefficiency of "civil writism;" Cf. Cruse xxx.
[44] *IM*, 538.

is struck with the reality of the situation: "I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I thought myself free."[45] As it turns out, the riot was less an act of resistance on the part of radical Harlemites as it was a plot connived by Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, to destroy the black community just as it began to question the representational potential of the white-led revolution.[46]

The surreal, apocalyptic scene of the novel's Harlem riot is punctuated by the uncannily dramatic appearance of Ras the Destroyer (formerly Ras the Exhorter), the black nationalist leader of the revolt and champion of physical violence. Leading the mob and riding a "great black horse […] A new Ras of vulgar dignity" appears "dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem, than out of even this Harlem night, yet real, alive, alarming." Spear-wielding, Ras, "the madman in a foreign costume,' is the grotesque god of violence, Ellison's caricature of *négritude* whose obsession with race treachery leads him on a crusade against the protagonist and ironically aligns himself with the white forces who would also have invisible man's hide. [47]

---

[45] *Ibid.*, 553.

[46] The Brotherhood is Ellison's loose caricature of the CPUSA and the Old Left more broadly. However, as John S. Wright has pointed out, a direct connection cannot be fairly drawn—the Brotherhood exhibits a variety of traits belonging to different intersecting and parallel movements.

[47] *Ibid.*, 556, 558; On many occasions in his writing, Ellison has distanced himself from, if not criticized, what he called in *Shadow and Act*, the "quaint and questionable notion of *négritude*" (54) which he interpreted as promoting a politics based on the notion of biological determinism and separatism, and which he deemed generally provincial in

Considering invisible man's abrupt pacifism, how then do we understand his responsibility for the most gruesome moment of the riot?[48] Repeating with a difference the yokel parable from the Prologue, the protagonist, a "short and dark" "little black man" miraculously defeats the brawn of Ras, "the big black man:" "When Ras yelled, 'Hang him!' I let fly the spear and it was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again, watching it catch him as he turned his head to shout, ripping through both cheeks, and saw the surprised pause of the crowd as Ras wrestled with the spear that locked his jaws."[49] This surreal maiming occurs just moments after an epiphanic moment in which the protagonist becomes "now, just now, a leader, though leading them, running ahead of them, only in the stripping away of my illusionment."[50] So, on the one hand, this transformation grants the invisible man the comic timing of the yokel, that which enables the "little man" to find the strong man's weak spot. On the other, however, he must resort to physical violence only when he fails as a comedian: "But even as I spoke I knew it was no good. I had no words and no *eloquence*" (emphasis added).[51] "Eloquence," another term of Ellison's lexicon, refers to that rhetorical persuasiveness of the comic, that which privileges the goal of perspective by incongruity. Violence is the

---

nature. For example, in "The World and the Jug" he states, "It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament, a sharing of that 'concord of sensibilities' which the group expresses through historical circumstance and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture," 177.

[48] While perhaps the most gruesome of the riot, this gruesome scene is second in the chapter, the castration scene of the protagonists dream sequence perhaps being paramount.

[49] *IM,* 558-60.

[50] "Illusionment" comprising yet another recurrence of the Ellisonian lexicon—Ellison suggests that illusion is a dangerous obstacle in the way of reality.

[51] *Ibid.*, 558.

easy way out, and Revolution is the "shortcut." Revolution in this form is what Zygmunt Bauman would call "an act of violence on history and on its assumed agent."[52]

Returning for a moment to an earlier point in the novel we see in contrast the protagonist's success at comic nonviolence. Invisible man's entry into a career as a political activist in the second half of the novel is marked by an encounter with the epitome of northern racism, an eviction of an elderly black couple from a tenement apartment. In the urban landscape, hooded Klansmen are replaced with the blue-clad officers of the Law. Aghast at first at the notion that "they can do that up *here*" and second at the utter tragedy of the scene, the invisible man managed to, almost miraculously, improvise through his feelings of anguish followed by anger a cerebral response of comic nonviolence enacted collectively.[53]

This scene carefully stages the interrelation of the tragic and the comic in a distinctly black radical tradition whereby one dramatic element cannot exist without the other. Beginning in the Prologue, the narrator seems to link the comic with sight and the tragic with sound so that "to *see* around corners is enough (that is not unusual when you are invisible). But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action."[54] Tragedy alone, that sublime and terrible sound, paralyses. As the invisible man scans the couple's personal belongings piling up on the curbside, he catalogues a litany of items that metonymically invoke a tragic black cultural memory—a nineteenth century portrait of the young couple, a pair of "knocking bones," a straightening iron, "nuggets of High John the

---

[52] Bauman, 93.
[53] *IM* 269.
[54] *Ibid.*, 13.

66

Conqueror, the lucky stone," a breast pump, an Ethiopian Flag, "a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln," "a commemorative plate celebrating the St. Louis World's Fair," "three lapsed insurance policies with perforated seals stamped 'Void'; a yellowing newspaper portrait of a huge black man with the caption: MARCUS GARVEY DEPORTED."[55]   Finally, the sight of the old man's free papers causes a visceral reaction: "My hands were trembling, my breath rasping as if I had run a long distance or come upon a coiled snake in a busy street. *It has been longer than that, further removed in time*, I told myself, and yet I knew that it hadn't been." Vomiting on the couple's possessions, the invisible man becomes afflicted with a sense of what Paul Gilroy would call the "slave sublime."[56]

> I turned and stared again at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, *around a corner* into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home. And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose; something confounding, like a rotted tooth that one would rather suffer indefinitely then endure the short, violent eruption of pain that would mark its removal. (emphasis added)[57]

---

[55]*Ibid.*, 271-2. Knocking bones, usually made out of the flat ribs of a cow or sheep, were played by "Mr. Bones" (thusly named), one of the two end men of the traditional blackface minstrel show. The other end man, "Mr. Tambo," who played the tambourine, along with Mr. Bones provided comic relief during the minstrel show's first act, supported by the "Interlocutor," who usually played the role of the straight man.

[56] The "slave sublime:" the unspeakable experience of racial terror and the moral power that it occasions. In the slave sublime, the collective memory of the black Atlantic blurs the line between past and present in a "utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialised being" (Gilroy 198).

[57] *Ibid.*, 273.

The protagonist associates this painful breach with his mother—"why did I, standing in the crowd, see like a vision my mother hanging wash on a cold windy day;" the objects on the sidewalk possess "more meaning than there should have been."

Nostalgia for the sound of his mother's voice, for the breach of the middle passage and the multiple ruptures of slavery, only impedes action. To cross this sound—the ineffable representation of the past—with sight—the medium of the visionary future—catalyzes the radical potential of black vernacular culture. In the following series of events, we find an answer to Fred Moten's question of "whether aurality ever actually exerts an improvisational force in, against, and through the occularcentric structuration of recognition [invisibility]."[58] Invisible man demands of the gathering, seething crowd, "Look at his old blues records and her pots of plants, they're down home folks, and everything tossed out like junk...". In the process of improvising his way to an effective response, however, a "heavyweight," a heckler, instigates the beginnings of a riot. The narrator recounts,

> There was a rush against me and I fell, hearing a single explosion, backward into a whirl of milling legs, overshoes, the trampled snow cold on my hands. Another shot sounded above like a bursting bag. Managing to stand, I saw atop the steps the fist with the gun being forced into the air above the crowd's bobbing heads and the next instant they were dragging him down into the snow; punching him left and right [...] I saw a woman striking with the pointed heel of her shoe, her face a blank mask with hollow black eyes as she aimed

---

[58] Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 68.

and struck, aimed and struck, bringing spurts of blood, running along beside the man who was dragged to his feet now as they punched him gauntlet-wise between them."[59]

The scene begins to resemble Fanon's "bloodstained" revolt. A West Indian woman shouts, "Give it back to him, black men. Repay the brute a thousandfold! Give it back to him unto the third and fourth generations. Strike him, our fine black men. Protect your black women! Repay the arrogant creature to the third and fourth generations!" During this chaos, invisible man manages to call back the attention of his people as he improvises out of the aural/tragic an alternative comic strategy for resisting the colonizing forces of the state. Employing the classic strategy of "puttin' on ole massa," invisible man asserts to the crowd, while letting the police overhear, that "We're a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people."[60] As such, it is the duty of honest black citizens to obey the law and clear the "junk" off the street. "Men, women, and children seized articles and dashed inside shouting, laughing."[61] By interpellating the "crowd" as a black collective, by collapsing "them, we," the protagonist calls the would-be violent mob into the comic mode of social responsibility, one based on cultural critique, not retributive violence. As tragedy's intellectual cousin, comedy picks up where memory and emotion leave off.

"It's a clean-up campaign," I called [to the police], wanting to laugh. "These old folks had their stuff cluttering up the sidewalk and we cleared the street…" "You mean interfering with an eviction" […]

---

[59] *IM*, 280.
[60] *Ibid*., 275; the subversive act of "puttin' on ole massa" refers traditionally to that which subtly converts the effects of subjugation within black performance into critiques of the peculiar institution.
[61] *Ibid*., 281.

"He ain't doing nothing," a woman called from behind me […] I looked around, the steps behind were filled with those who had been inside. […] "We're all together," someone called, as the crowd closed in […] "Clear the streets" […] "That's what we're doing," someone called back.[62]

The social agent here, the collective, performs an iterative critique of the law. Repeating the law with a difference, they perform an "interruption" or "time-lagging" of the self-invention of modernity, specifically modernity's faith in the law.[63] Invisible Man and the community forged by crisis participate in a classic example of what Bhabha calls "sly civility," or the signifyin(g) of black culture which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores, or what Houston Baker calls "mastery of form"—in other words, a form of subaltern agency based on subversion and a sense of irony toward the law.[64]

The call to violence associated with the West Indian woman, echoing the divine justice of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and that of the heavyweight also figures a form of action that is predicated upon a masculinism that operates in defense of a proprietary gendered relationship. The protagonist, now turned comic activist, enables "men, women, and children" to participate equally as activists and in a way that is more effective and, in its ability to "feel good," more redressive than retributive violence. "We ought to done this long ago" a man said. "We damn sho should." "I feel so good," a woman said, "I feel so *good*."[65] While

---

[62] *Ibid.*, 283.

[63] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 335.

[64] *Ibid.*; also, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* and Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

[65] *IM*, 281.

the crowd's success at stifling police action against the couple is of pragmatic significance, the comic function of cultural critique and spiritual redress are what appear the most miraculous in this scene.

In the wake of this success, the protagonist achieves conscious perception for the first time of the notion of effective social action. The spectacle of comic nonviolent protest eventually attracts onlookers, one of which includes a white woman from the Brotherhood:

> "Brother, that was quite a speech you made. I heard just the end of it, but you certainly moved them to action…"
>
> "Action," I said, "action—"
>
> "The longer you remain unknown to the police, the longer you'll be effective." "Effective? I thought. What did she mean?"[66]

Significantly, the white woman from the Brotherhood only caught the end of the speech, missing the part which tapped into the recesses of a collective black cultural memory, that "aurality" exerting "an improvisational force."

The fact that the social action to be upheld occurs earlier in the narrative does less to disturb the teleology of the plot than to confirm it. The repetition of the enigmatic phrase "the end is in the beginning" throughout the novel establishes that the best form of social action is that which has been around all along; it establishes the circularity of history embraced by black culture, a circularity antithetical to the linearity embedded in eschatological understandings of "revolution." The word revolution (from "revolve") etymologically connotes circularity, and the novel's contribution to the concept returns "the revolutionary" to its origins

---

[66]*Ibid.*, 284.

of meaning. The specter of invisible man's grandfather and his advice to "undermine 'em with yes's" and "agree 'em to death and destruction," refers to the comic act of subversion that arose with the first encounter of African slaves with the peculiar institution. In fact, the narrator reveals that his grandfather was born a slave. That trickster aesthetic, that yokel aesthetic, that "buggy jiving" also occurs in the middle of the culminating riot scene, to which I now return, and reframes the absurd through the act of telling "lies."

Comic apparitions in the face of apocalyptic violence signal to the protagonist the solution to the problem of social action. While prostrate on the cold, wet ground, hiding from Ras's mob and recovering from the explosion of a water main, the invisible man overhears the jiving of a group of men who transform the story of Ras's exploits into a "bad nigger tale." To add joke upon joke, in the midst of the telling appears another comedian, a trickster who eloquently disarms the hero:

> "And 'bout that time some joker with a big ole Georgia voice sticks his head out the window and yells, 'Ride 'em, cowboy. Give 'em hell and bananas.' And man, that crazy sonofabitch up there on that hoss looking like death eating a sandwich, he reached down and comes up with a forty-five and starts blazing up at that window— And man, talk about cutting out! In a second, wasn't nobody left but ole Ras up there on that hoss with that lion skin stretched straight out behind him"[67]

Their exchange—"Man, where'd *you* come from?" "It's the truth, man, here's my right hand"—signals the comic tradition of tellin' lies, tall tales,

---

[67] *Ibid.*, 562.

layers of which can be found in this novel. The protagonist ponders their collective act: "They were laughing outside the hedge and leaving and I lay in a cramp, wanting to laugh and yet knowing that Ras was not funny, or not only not funny, but dangerous as well, wrong but justified, crazy and yet coldly sane…Why did they make it seem funny, *only* funny? I thought. And yet knowing that it was. It was funny and dangerous and sad."[68]   To help us sift through the protagonist's confusion and his *desire* to laugh, we might consider Ellison's thoughts published in "An Extravagance of Laughter:" "My point is not violence, but the contradiction between its ineffectiveness as intimidation while serving as a theme for a tall-tale improvisation. Thus was violence transcended with cruel but homeopathic laughter, and racial cruelty transformed by a traditional form of folk art."[69] For Ellison, a desire to react violently runs up against a commitment to nonviolence. The comic, then, has a truly ethical function in avoiding bloody confrontation, as it also boasts a more effective political tactic. The end, thus, was in the beginning insofar as what is required can ultimately be found in tradition, although repeated with a difference grounded in the visionary and the experimental, the avant-garde. Comedy and that "blues-toned laughter" in the face of "circumstance," to repeat from Ellison's lexicon, is a source of counter-modern resistance that was there all along.

To return once more to the beginning, the answer we find in the end is already present in the first few pages of the novel as the invisible man trades his physical violence for comic nonviolence. Upon being called "an insulting name" by a "tall blond man" one night, the invisible man recalls

---

[68] *Ibid.*, 564.
[69] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 635.

beating the man to a bloody pulp, "And in my outrage, I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually […] a man almost killed by a phantom […] I was amused […] I began to laugh at this crazy discovery." Why the protagonist would decide to use this bizarre and shocking anecdote to introduce himself to the reader makes sense in light of the novel's message that, "alas, [violence is] seldom sucessful." The protagonist eventually explains of himself, "Most of the time […] I am not so overtly violent." He contrasts this overt violence with another mode of reacting against his oppressors which depends upon a form of "sly civility." By draining free power from a line unbeknown to the Monopolated Light & Power Company, "I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it […] the joke, of course, is that I don't live in Harlem but in a border area."[70] In other words, the protagonist uses stereotype/invisibility to his advantage. The re-sampling of these clues in the "Prologue" throughout the novel allows for both a lesson and a let down for the patient listener. While the problem and the answer were there from the start, it took the comic "disembodied voice" to bring into view that which one may not be able to see.

---

[70] *IM*, 4-5.

3. Stepping Outside of History

The Left is characterized by its lack of humor. This has set it apart from other forms of opposition to capitalism, e.g., avant-garde art. The latter's irony, self-mockery, and playfulness was lèse-majesté to the Left as much as it was to the priests of the establishment. Épater-le-bourgeois has never been a Left strategy, because the Left has neared le bourgeois seriously as the author of a project the Left thought worth fulfilling and as the hindrance to its fulfillment at the same time.—ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, "The Left as Counter-Culture of Modernity," 84

Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples—if they keep their identity.—HANNAH ARENDT, "We Refugees," 274

Can comedy be given such political importance? If we are to think of the theatricality of everyday life, and certainly the theatricality of black life, then a navigation of that cultural life requires dramatic maneuvering. Ellison suggests that the particular sense of the comic created through the unique experiences of black slaves in the colonies provides a critical position for surviving the dominant culture and perhaps even decolonizing the cultural episteme. This mode of radicalism takes into consideration the proximity of human life and the ultimate necessity of ethical relations. That American culture is "mammy made," that the "enemy" in revolution is not over there but right next to me requires ethical strategies of overturning the present order. It requires a vision not simply based on the substitution of one class with another, but based rather on a reduction in animosity. "Freedom" of thought, being, and action is the goal. For Ellison this takes place in an ideal form of democracy defined by the freedom of its citizens. However, for all his faith in the principles of the Enlightenment and the concept of "America," his notion of freedom is not equivalent to "liberté."

I would like to conclude by returning to a question raised in the first few sentences of this chapter, a question raised also in the last pages of *Invisible Man*, of whether the comic stance of invisibility places one "in the rear or in the *avant-garde*."[71] This chapter up to now has surely suggested that such a performative gesture as comedy, and one particularly defined by the "cut" of black culture, participates in the cultural vangaurdism which Cruse and others privilege as a site of political radicalism—a more effective form of revolutionary action. Distilling the various definitions of the term, James Harding and John Rouse explain that by definition, the avant-garde is a "break with history," "a site of experimentation, contestation, and indeed a mark of hybridity" which interjects into "quotidian experience where it can become an effective agent of change."[72] Such a definition, when paired with the figure of repetition discussed above, suggests that black culture is necessarily avant-garde. This avant-garde blackness is misinterpreted by the "illusioned" invisible man who, under the spell of the Brotherhood's revolutionary program, feels he must rescue his people from their own ostentatious blackness. Invisible man muses,

> "What about those three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking stiffly with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their hard conked hair?...Everyone must have seen them…for they were men

---

[71] *Ibid.*, 572.
[72] Harding and Rouse, 3-6.

outside of historical time, they were untouched…men on transition whose faces were immobile" […] "*men out of time*"… "who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, *living outside of the realm of history*, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile *and these boys his agents*, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) *running and dodging the forces of history* instead of making a dominating stand" (my emphasis).[73]

Like the zoot-suited hipsters, "the girls in dark exotic-colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles […] were *outside the groove of history*, and it was my job to get them in, all of them" (my emphasis).[74] Here, what Hortense Spillers refers to as the fourth level of circularity in the narrative, that of irony, cuts back to re-mix invisible man's memorial account of those outside the "grooves of history" so that the sly stance of the rebel couture—itself a repetition of white formal attire with a difference—overlays the comic stance of the narrator.

---

[73] *IM*, 441.
[74] *Ibid.*, 443.

Turning to the contemporary postmodern moment, Zygmunt Bauman would suggest that the failure of revolution, and specifically the failure to locate a historical agent in the present moment, has sent the Left into crisis. It has settled on two equally inadequate options: On the one hand, the "contemporary crisis of the Left" can be defined by its lack of "a historical agent to complete the capitalist project."[75] Putting stock in industrial labor is now an outmoded practice. Labor's numbers are waning, their revolutionary energy diminished, and their interests in any case are too particular to critique capitalism *tout court*. The poor are also not a viable agent since they fail to see the capitalist elite as their enemy— on the contrary as their role models. The intellectual Left cannot relate with either class of people. If the Left were to translate its faith to organized labor, it likely would "reinforce the divisive 'policy of closure' pursued by a class in retreat," a posture resembling the divisive actions of the Brotherhood.[76] On the other hand, the second reaction is to abandon the old project and declare the age of postmodernism. The "philosophies of surrender," "resignation," and "futility" which characterize postmodernism, according to Bauman, abandon the "search for universal standards of truth, justice and taste and modestly claim that there is nothing but our own conviction to justify our decision to pursue values we claim worth pursuing." Both, however, are "either backward-looking or unpromising." [77] Considering the contemporary threat of the colonization of everyday life and civil society by the bureaucracies of the state, the Left must be redefined as the counter-culture of *modernity*, no longer the counter-

---

[75] Bauman, 83.

[76] *Ibid.*, 84.

[77] *Ibid.*, 85.

culture of capitalism. The counter-culture of modernity has no identifiable historical agent. To link Bauman with Ellison, "Stepping outside of history" means stepping outside of the role of the revolutionary and into the "well-pressed" and "high-collared" uniform of the avant-garde. This new project of the Left, moreover, does not require a class of agents but a convergence of autonomous acts in the direction of ideal democracy. The avant-garde hinges upon the notion of stepping outside of history, a notion of time which prioritizes the political over the social.

Although my discussion of comic activism has been couched largely in terms of a strategy arising out of black culture, it is important to recognize that Ellison understood the intimate proximity of different cultures within the U.S. as equating to a shared, hybrid "American" culture. Black culture is American as American culture is black. In this way, the comic strategies of black/American culture in question in this chapter can be observed in the "style warfare" of the "zoot suit riots" among *pachucos* (young Chicanos) in L.A. in 1943—the same year as the Harlem and Detroit riots. The "Zoot Suit Riots" were not like those in black urban neighborhoods in the (post-)war period in that, like with earlier race riots, the *pachucos* were the *target* of mob violence by white servicemen. Indeed, notwithstanding that physical violence did ensue between the *pachucos* and servicemen, the "warfare" engaged by the *pachucos* took place primarily at the level of style and constituted the avant-garde brand of anti-colonial, anti-racist warfare described by Ellison in the passages above. Before the physical violence broke out, the *pachucos*, who Stuart Cosgrove calls "sinister *clowns*," partook in a comic

nonviolence as a means of challenging the dominant order.[78] Of course, the "effectivity" of this method could be questioned in this instance, since the zoot suiters' protest resulted in more injustice for the Chicano community—zoot suits were outlawed and several of the *pachucos* involved in the violence were imprisoned while the white servicemen were let free. Though this happened, the avant-guard ingenuity of hybrid minority American cultures like blacks and Latinos continues to respond to injustice with counter-cultural gestures, always staying one step outside, one step ahead of the dominant culture.

---

[78] Stuart Cosgrove, "The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare," 157.

CHAPTER 2

"Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood":

Nina Simone's Theater of Invisibility

Recently, in a night club, I heard—or rather watched—a Negro entertainer do a song about racial discrimination. During the rendition he twisted his neck into the grotesque posture of a hanged man, and bit off his words in a melodramatic imitation of strangling. When he had concluded the song, and the elaborate pantomime that accompanied it, the audience, which had come to hear bebop, applauded. I didn't applaud. The performance was outrageously false—even falser than most night club performances. There was something insidiously glib and confident about it—something that went beyond mere insincerity—and the audience too was curiously complacent, almost as though they had been rehearsed. They applauded this accusing dirge exactly as they would a routine piece. Could they have failed to understand it? I studied the singer for an answer, and, at that moment, he bowed in a mannered way and smiled—a smile of complicity—*and then I realized that it was I who had failed to understand the song. It was obviously a parody! His smile and their applause gave it away. It wasn't a song about discrimination as I had so naively supposed—its actual theme was the* double entendre *between singer and audience, a kind of cultish collusion by which both denied the words. The real social significance of the piece lay in its very lack of significance.*

I looked around—apparently I was the only one who refused the easy offering. The audience was still grinning, and the singer was already beginning his encore, a typical crooner ballad. A moment ago a lynching, and now a supplication to his "baby"—all in the same universe of discourse, all in a day's work. A real American juxtaposition—the kind that conditions us to digest, day after day, the most poisonous kind of diet. I had an impulse to boo, but I knew better. I would be denounced as anti-Negro. Even the Negro singer would denounce me, because he sang, and they applauded, the agreement between them, an agreement not to go beyond this point, to let well enough alone. He had his act, they had their indifference....What more did I want? What was I anyway—a troublemaker?—ANATOLE BROYARD, "Portrait of an Inauthentic Negro," 56

Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical.
—RALPH ELLISON, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 108

I laughs too, but I moans too.—OLD EX-SLAVE WOMAN, *Invisible Man*, 9

Let's face it, Nina Simone is a marked woman. But of those "confounded identities" by which she is marked as she stands before her audience, of the "bizarre axiological ground" which would inhume her, she loosened the clay and fashioned masks to make herself a work of art, playing upon possibility in the drama that is American life—at home and abroad—and in so doing unburied herself as a tricky agent.[1]   On the wall of her dressing room you will find hanging several costumes—that of "Peaches," "Pirate Jenny," "Little Girl Blue," "Sephronia," "Sweet Thing," "See Line Woman," "The Other Woman," "Sister Sadie," and "Aunt Sarah." You will notice a sequined evening gown, a black turtleneck and slacks, a batik-print bou bou, a fishnet tube top, a kente cloth wrap, and a black cocktail dress. On the dresser will rest a row of mannequin heads with mod bob wigs—graduated, cropped, and flipped—and in the drawer a pile of head wraps from Senegal and Barbados, a beret from Paris, a wide-brimmed straw hat, a bottle of Sta So Fro and a pick. In the other drawer hides several pairs of false eyelashes, a bottle of kohl, a tube of Maybelline in fire engine red, and a bottle of French perfume. A carved teak box from

---

[1] Cf. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented." Here, I signify upon the opening paragraphs of Spillers' essay in order to foreground the excessive attenuated meanings that accrue to the spectacle of the black woman in the public spotlight and the problem of how to "speak a truer word concerning [oneself]" despite the heavy layers of coding, a problem which nourishes Nina Simone's artistry; I am also drawing upon Ralph Ellison's musings on "the mask" and his concept of invisibility, that taking on the mask of invisibility and putting it to work in a performative context is a trickster strategy of liberation; the last epigraph represents the sentiments of the mourning mother whom Invisible Man encounters during his reefer-induced "trip" into the "the lower frequencies" of Louis Armstrong's music, a surreal and haunting articulation of the concept of "tragicomedy" that is central to invisibility and to Simone's theater.

Liberia overflows with brass, gold, copper, silver, cloth, and beaded necklaces, bangles and earrings, new and antique, from four or five continents. With these props, she plays out "productive ambivalence" in phantasmagorically intoxicating and unpredictable spectacles of race and gender that coalesce into the globalized iconicity and polyphonic performance artist who is Dr. Nina Simone.[2]

As we consider the place of buggy jiving, that particular comic mode of political critique and action achieved by Ellison's invisible man and the poetics of invisibility through which it functions, the musical performances of Nina Simone beckon an inclusion in this conversation. Called by Stokely Carmichael the "true singer of the civil rights movement," Simone engaged global, racially mixed audiences in processes of cultural decolonization and provoked ethical recognition across various lines of otherness through eccentric musical and dramatic expressions which demanded and coaxed refined understandings of freedom, of peace and justice, and of the full humanity of her and others like her.[3] Using an

---

[2] Cf. "The Black Performer and the Performance of Blackness *The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom* by William Wells Brown and *No Place To Be Somebody* by Charles Gordone," Harry Elam, Jr.; Elam's term "productive ambivalence," or the performative shape-shifting akin to Ellison's (via Yeats') ideas on "masking," provides another useful conceptual framework for thinking about the aesthetics and politics of Simone's "performance art" (as I am calling it); Nina Simone received honorary doctorates in music and the humanities from the University of Massachusetts and Malcolm X College at a tribute to the artist at the Washington, DC Human Kindness Day Celebration in 1974.

[3] Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 99; As discussed in previous chapters, by cultural (or epistemic) decolonization I mean the decolonization of thought and being, the revolutionary project which comes after the decolonization of institutions and power have reached their limits. Cf. Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality." In this case I take the idea of "epistemic decolonization" from Mignolo, who refers to it alternately as cultural decolonization—in short, the decolonization of thought and being. However, I am also thinking of bell hooks' formulation of decolonization in the form of a "pedagogy of liberation": "The process of decolonization requires participation in the kind of critical and analytical thinking that is at the root of all intellectual activity. Understanding this, it should be evident that insurgent black intellectuals, critical thinkers, cultural workers,

interdisciplinary approach that Ingrid Monson would call a "more musical approach to cultural theory," I seek to explore the politicized musical career of the eccentric performer and diva *par excellence* Nina Simone, a cultural figure who is colloquially appreciated by many yet curiously understudied.[4] In so doing I locate Simone in a discussion of theater and as a contributor to performance theory by interpreting some of her recorded and filmed live concerts as examples of musical theater which revise, through parody, popular theorizations of political theater. Most radically, perhaps, I aim to recast Simone as a comic performer, a trickster and a conjurer, whose sense of humor enables a political, ethical, and critical efficacy of historical remark. In Simone's live work, which in its confluence of multiple performative elements I call her "theater of invisibility," I trace the improvisational and strategic comic maneuvers of parody, ironic reversal, understatement, and the absurd, all versions of "perspective by incongruity" central to Ralph Ellison's optic concept-metaphor for the tragicomic irony that is race, the "joke at the center of American culture." Practically speaking, Simone's performance art relies upon what Ellison describes as "illuminating the blackness of [...]

---

and others can best serve diverse black communities by developing and practicing pedagogies of resistance that aim to share knowledge. That means talking with folks about what decolonization is and why it is important. It means teaching folks how to think critically and analytically. Given the widespread conservative thrust of contemporary black social and political thought and practice, we are in dire need of a pedagogy of liberation, a politics of conversion that would re-radicalize our collective critical consciousness." "Dialectically Down with the Critical Program."

[4] Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, 3; critical responses to this artist's life and work are sparse: most of the work published on Nina Simone is biography, including a recent publication, *Princess Noir*, by Nadine Cohodas. While Simone has, for a long time, been a favorite for tangential reference points in criticism relating to black culture and music, she has rarely been taken up as a primary subject of study. As of the writing of this chapter, the author is aware of two important critical studies of Simone in the works, one forthcoming article by Daphne Brooks, and one critical biographical project being undertaken by Salamishah Tillet.

invisibility" and "[making] poetry out of being invisible"—invisibility referring here to the obfuscation of one's full humanity by the blinding force of stereotype at the heart of buggy jiving.[5] While commonly understood for her embodiment of anger and pathos, I would like to read Simone's performances as comic expressions occurring at the site of the black avant-garde and as prime examples of buggy jiving.

In this chapter, I focus on live audio and film recordings of Simone's concerts in order to consider the full range of performative elements contained within her theater of invisibility, a "lyrical surplus" that spills over the musical performance into extemporaneous and dramatic corporealized gestures, dances, and interactions with her audience.[6] With a prolific career from which to draw, I choose to look at recordings from what Simone would characterize as the most political period of her life, 1964 to 1970, as well as a performance given in the wake of the long "sixties," just after Simone announced her first retirement. While "comedienne" is an unconventional label for this "protest singer," I want to highlight how her performances are in fact highly comic in nature, and how much of the political iconicity and force for which she is so widely recognized is largely mobilized by such comic modalities. Interpreting her iconic anger and pathos in relation to the comic, I argue that an economy of laughter—as Freud once schematized it—is no doubt in play in transforming the fury and dismay of an "angry black woman," a figure threatening both to white liberalism and black masculinism associated with the Left political movements of the 60s and 70s, into a political

---

[5] *Ibid.*, 8-13.
[6] Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 39.

critique, social vision, and call to action that reaches across barriers of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and language.[7] The comic mode, it turns out, allows Simone to approach, and oftentimes transgress the limits of cross-cultural knowing in the name of the ethical project that buggy jiving mobilizes. Indeed, Simone effectively engages in the decolonization, the radical transformation, of culture one stage at a time.

1. Becoming "Nina"

While often labeled as a jazz singer, Simone's music was defined by its inability to be categorized. Born Eunice Waymon, one of eight children to a Methodist minister and a struggling small business owner, Simone was raised in the small southern town of Tryon in western North Carolina where she was exposed to the gospel music that would in many ways form the foundations of her musical and performative sensibilities. Playing the piano in her mother's church by the age of four, young Eunice was considered a prodigy and soon began studying classical piano, supported by her mother's second job as a house maid. Her perfectionist dedication to her training was spurred by dreams of becoming an acclaimed concert pianist. Her manifest talent was a source of pride for Tryon residents, who formed a fund in order to support her continued study at Juilliard. A couple years later at the age of 19, Eunice auditioned at the prestigious Curtis Institute, but was rejected. This unexpected blow altered the path of the pianist's musical career in two major ways. For one, she began for

---

[7] Freud's principle of economy states that humor is driven by aggression condensed into the verbal shorthand entailed in joking. In *Jokes and Their Relations* he explains, "tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure," p. 125.

the first time to consider how her identity as a black woman would interfere with her ability to achieve her dream. This epiphany was prompted by a friend's suggestion that racism played a part in the rejection. Simone admitted to a minimal consciousness of racism and sexism in her youth. However, as of this moment onward, Simone recalls, "The first thing I saw in the morning when I woke up was my black face in the bathroom mirror and that fixed what I felt about myself for the rest of the day."[8]

Second, the shattered dream consolidated around the rejection from the Curtis Institute led the classically trained pianist to a career as a lounge singer. While she considered this change of plans indicative of hitting rock bottom at the time, it proved to be the misfortune that initiated the birth of the unique, internationally known sensation "Nina Simone." It was at this time during the mid-1950s that Simone forged her stage name as a way to keep secret her involvement with "the devil's music" from her pious mother. She converted Eunice Waymon into "Nina Simone," taking her first name from a boyfriend's nickname for her and Simone from the name of the French actress Simone Signoret. It was also at this time that Simone began performing out of necessity with her untrained voice. Her discovery of her singing voice added a new depth to her understanding of music.[9] She describes, "Singing disturbed me in a way I had never experienced with classical music; the tunes stayed in my head for hours—sometimes days—at a time, and I couldn't sleep or even

---

[8] Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 104.

[9] In order to maintain marketability as a lounge performer, Simone was forced to learn how to sing jazz standards and popular songs. She would have preferred, however, to showcase her piano playing.

simply calm down."[10] While not yet the fully formed political subject that she would become in the early sixties, this formative moment of coming into identity and coming into voice shaped the core that held together Simone's unique blending of gospel, classical, jazz, popular music, soul, and folk song, a blend which by the end of her life she called "black classical music."[11]

2. Simone and the Black Avant-Garde

Simone's political coming into being was mobilized by a cultural scene defined by the counter-cultural interplay of music, comedy, and politics. Greenwich Village in the early 1960s, and in particular Art D'Lugoff's Village Gate nightclub at the corner of Thompson and Bleecker Streets, formed a matrix of different cultural forms unified by a political undercurrent. The Village formed the locus of interracial avant-garde cultural exploration, as well as a nascent black avant-garde defined by bebop in the late '40s and '50s, free jazz in the '60s, and also theatrical and poetic experimentation throughout this time. The Village witnessed the birth of the avant-garde modernist phenomenon of "happenings," or interactive, improvisational performance events, formalized by artists such as Allan Kaprow and Robert Whitman and eventually popularized within "hippie" counter-culture.[12] At the same time, it supported an intelligentsia working at the vanguard of intersecting radical movements.

Simone interacted intimately with Village artists Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Miriam Makeba and others

---

[10] *Ibid.* 83.
[11] "Interview with Nina Simone," *Details*, 1997.
[12] Cf. Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963,* p. 27-9.

who slowly delivered Simone into political consciousness. This group of intelligentsia would often meet and mingle at the Gate. Simone recalls, "The Village Gate was the jazz centre. Politics was mixed in with so much of what went on at the Gate that I remember it now as two sides of the same coin, politics and jazz. Comedians like Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby and Woody Allen opened for the players and it was all part of the same thing— the music and the comedy, the jazz and the politics, it all went together."[13] In fact, during the late '50s and early '60s, The Gate hosted regular variety show concerts featuring these local musicians, poets, comedians, dancers, and other performers to benefit civil rights organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coodinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Simone was a regular performer at these benefit concerts, yet before 1964 she saw herself as a supporter of, and not a participant in, the movements for civil rights embodied by these organizations.[14] Simone confesses in her autobiography that she was motivated by the political movements happening around her, yet she remained uninvolved politically and even became disillusioned by the movements over time. Outside of the Village, too, Simone took part in major progressive events without claiming involvement. For example, she recalls that performing at Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda's FTA or "Free the Army" tour, "an anti-Vietnam review which mixed music, comedy, and protest," "I just sang, keeping away from the politics."[15]

---

[13] Simone, *I Put a Spell on you*, 67.
[14] Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, p. 165.
[15] Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 125.

However, the fact that she became understood as a protest singer, dubbed the voice of the civil rights movement, and made conscious decisions to use her status to respond to instances of injustice suggests that she was politically engaged, and strongly so, albeit in a way which may not have been understood as such within conventional paradigms of social action and revolution. Simone's creative mode of political engagement and her ability to move as a radical figure beyond the limits of the various movements of the 60s and 70s speaks to the sweeping alterity of her (at times off-the-cuff) political project.

The idea of the black avant-garde that this dissertation works to define brings together the notion of the political vanguard and the cultural avant-garde insofar as the forefront of social action occurs in this constellation through cultural expression. In this way it also refers to the notion of epistemic decolonization and likewise prioritizes the radical transformation of cultural knowledge and social being in the pursuit of freedom. As mentioned above, during the historical moment in question, the notion of the black musical avant-garde was confined to experimental jazz responding to the discourse of aesthetic modernism, namely bebop followed by free jazz. As Ingrid Monson explains, "Bebop musicians extended the embrace of modernism by adding their disdain of the popular, as well as their interest in the same hallmarks of avant-garde modernism that interested 'high art' experimental composers: formal experimentation and theoretical exploration; a politically vanguardist stance and rhetoric of progress; and an alternation between the celebration of intuition and rationalism as the basis of art."[16]   While bebop was framed by the

---

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

90

structural conditions of the mainstream civil rights movement, free jazz was framed by black cultural nationalism. As Monson notes, "Free jazz has been championed as the embodiment of revolutionary black nationalism, as well as a path toward deeper spiritual truth, universality, and internationalism."[17] While it is not quite accurate to equate Simone's art with free jazz, its aesthetic ambitions, spiritual and political vision, and experimentalism align it in significant ways with the latter.

Simone is a performer who found herself at home in a variety of musical aesthetics, genres, and traditions, black and white—she creates not only folk or pop music, but art music (or art theatre, as we shall see) too. Like free jazz musicians, who tended to resist the label "jazz"—or any label—on their music, Simone also refused to categorize her music by any particular generic description. She describes this refusal to be pigeonholed early in her career:

> "After [the Town Hall concert in 1959] critics started to talk about what sort of music I was playing and tried to find a neat slot to file it away in. It was difficult for them because I was playing popular songs in a classical style with a classical piano technique influenced by cocktail jazz. On top of that I included spirituals and children's songs in my performances, and those sorts of songs were automatically identified with the folk movement. So saying what sort of music I played gave the critics problems because there was something from everything in there, but it also meant I was appreciated across the board—by jazz, folk, pop and blues fans as well as admirers of classical music […] They finally ended up

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

describing me as a 'jazz-and-something-else singer'. To me 'jazz' meant a way of thinking, a way of being, and the black man in America was jazz in everything he did—in the way he walked, talked, thought and acted. Jazz music was another aspect of the whole thing, so in that sense because I was black I was a jazz singer, but in every other way I most definitely wasn't."[18]

Both Simone and the free jazz artists recoiled at the way that the label "jazz" stifles, or "noun-izes," to borrow from Nathaniel Mackey, the possibility inherent in the form, yet understood it as a convenient term for black art.[19] By making this comparison, I aim to stress my interpretation of Simone as a black avant-garde musician and performer. Although she was known primarily as a popular musician, a closer consideration of her music and how she describes her approach to music suggests an experimental sensibility expressed around issues of race, culture, and identity yet with a universal reach. While this approach compares to that of the male-dominated avant-garde jazz scene extant in Simone's Village neighborhood, her unique theatre of invisibility distinguishes itself from any one artistic movement, perhaps placing her even more "far out" than the free jazz cats.

The content of Simone's art, which must be understood in terms of its musicality, lyrics, improvisations, dramatic stagings, and antiphonies with the audience also compares to the predominantly white avant-garde concept of the "happening." In an interview, Simone in fact uses this term to refer to her most successful performances.[20] Her art also reveals deeply

---

[18] Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, p. 68-69.
[19] Cf. Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 101.
[20] Cf. *Nina: A Historical Perspective* directed by Joe Gold.

comic structures, indeed a poetics of invisibility, which in terms of its politics aims not simply to render experiences of everyday life more vivid for her audiences (which poetry does) but also to bring them to a better understanding of what they see in the world. To be misunderstood was one of Simone's constant fears and sources of struggle.[21] The distinction between comedy and tragedy are important here. Simone may be conventionally associated with the tragic, yet to those who know her work, her wit is apparent. I see the humor in Simone's performances to be deeply comic when the structure and function of comedy is considered. While tragedy tends to deal in the affective register, comedy is a primarily cerebral, critical genre that deals in cognition and knowledge. Simone blends the tragic and the comic in her work in order to bring her audiences to better knowledge regarding issues of social justice and enable them to see her "face to face."[22] She manages to do this by carving a space for ethical recognition with performances that are structurally comic in nature and break apart the racial and gendered expectations which prevent Simone's full humanity from being seen.

---

[21] Her song "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" which titles this chapter is one of Simone's personal anthems. She remained bitter over the fact that the cover recorded by the British band The Animals went on to become a billboard hit.

[22] Much of my thinking on coming to a better view of the world is linked to the concept of "epistemic privilege" theorized by Satya Mohanty, Paula Moya, Linda Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia and others in *Reclaiming Identity*; they argue that better knowledge is attainable via social locations, or identies, that may provide a more accurate view of the world. For example, minorities who experience oppression might have better understanding of concepts such as "justice," and "freedom" due to the experiences their identities provide. This "post-positivist realist" take on epistemology allows for the possibility of accurate knowing and common understanding; The "face-to-face" encounter embedded in Simone's performances I link to Levinas' theorizations of the ethical encounter, and also to the way it had been theorized before Levinas, with references to 1 Corinthians 13 by W.E.B. DuBois (especially in the penultimate chapter of *Darkwater*) and Ellison in his concept of invisibility.

3. An Economy of Laughter

On the morning of September 15, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan set the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama ablaze with 19 sticks of dynamite planted near the church basement. Four little black girls, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair were murdered in the blast. This tragic act of racial terrorism sent off waves of grief and sparked violent tensions across the country. For Nina Simone, a performer who up until that moment felt a mere observer of civil rights struggles, the murder of the four girls signaled the event which initiated her activist career. With the recent murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers weighing freshly on her mind, Nina Simone moved from utter despair and disbelief to the desire for violent retribution. She describes,

> I went down to the garage and got a load of tools and junk together and took them up to my apartment. Andy [Stroud, Simone's husband at the time] came in an hour later, saw the mess and asked me what I was doing. My explanation didn't make sense because the words tumbled out in a rush—I couldn't speak quickly enough to release the torrents inside my head. He understood, though, and was still enough of a cop to see I was trying to make a zip gun, a home-made pistol. I had it in mind to kill someone, I didn't know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years.[23]

---

[23] Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 89.

Taking Stroud's advice that "Nina, you don't know anything about killing. The only thing you've got is music," Simone turned to the medium with which she was most familiar to stage her public reaction. "I sat down at my piano. An hour later I came out of my apartment with sheet music for 'Mississippi Goddam' in my hand. It was my first Civil Rights song, and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down. I knew then that I would dedicate myself to the struggle for black justice, freedom and equality under the law for as long as it took, until all our battles were won."[24] Later in an interview Simone explains further,

> That song…did more for me to get me out of myself than any song that I've ever done. I was so outraged when the four colored girls were killed in…that Baptist church. I tell you I was so outraged that I didn't—I only walked the floor for hours at a time and that's how it came out. It just came out as a complete outraged protest against the injustices of this country against my people….It just completely covers, I think, the whole terrible outrage that I feel about the Negro…being regarded as a human being, and most of all it touched me off about those four children, and how little attention was given to them. It was so abominable! And the fact that they were colored, it didn't make the papers too long. It's—you know? Huh.[25]

Without question, "Mississippi Goddam" is teeming with a rage and sadness so deep that it causes a breakdown in language for Simone years after the church bombing. With most of black America in mourning, the

---

[24] *Ibid.,* 90.
[25] Interview on *Protest Anthology*, 2008.

political anthem can be seen on the one hand as what Daphne Brooks (borrowing from Joseph Roach) calls "black female surrogation," or the inadequate effigieic response to communal loss commissioned to black songstresses by the nation at times of national crisis.[26] Notwithstanding this emotional impulse, however, the actual poetics of the tune reveals deeply comic structures which play with understatement, parody, and the sharp incongruities of quotidian experiences of American life.   In considering Simone's response to the bombing as a comic one, Glenda Carpio's observations about the role of comedy in African American cultural expressions of grief are useful. She says that grief appears in "the most piercing tragicomedy, one in which laughter is disassociated from gaiety and is, instead, a form of mourning."[27] Additionally she explains, "In African American expressive culture, grief often assumes a tragicomic mode, best known through the blues. But this tragicomic mode also finds stunning expression in black humor."[28] In his poem titled "Nina Simone," Black Arts poet Lance Jeffers captures this alternative, comic expression of grief in Simone's voice:

>   this brownwoman's voice
>
>   this blackwheat voice
>
>   this blackthigh voice
>
>   this blackbreast voice:
>
>   far far in the dim of me I hear her in the dark field

---

[26] Cf. Daphne A. Brooks, "All That You Can't Leave Behind": *Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe.*
[27] Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 7.
[28] *Ibid.* 11.

of the slavery South:

gowned in burlap, barefoot,

head down, a musing smile on her lips:

out into the fields before the dawn she goes alone:

she gazes into the trees swaying into the slowly-draining

night:

sudden grief pierces her torso and she laughs scornfully:

Now she stands before a microphone and

      feels the echoes of her slavery past:

an ache across her torso and a desolating laugh:

she throws back her head to sing and her teeth whiten

      the bloodsea of her mouth

Jeffers' poem draws out the uncannily comic nature of the singer which I aim to convey. The voice of this poem is corporeally rendered as a voice tied to "brownwoman," "blackthigh," "blackbreast," to "torso," "lips," and to the "bloodsea of a mouth"—a corporeality overdetermined by slavery and by the blue spotlight of a stage. At the same time, the voice is a disembodied voice of buggy jiving, a voice that boomerangs through history, takes possession of and visits the dim of different bodies. Accordingly, this voice is hers and not hers. It is a voice that eventually finds its way out of Simone's mouth, but it is a voice forged during slavery. Disembodied in this way, it sings a sorrow song passing through the souls of generations of black folk, who, like Jeffers hold "far far in the dim of [them]… the dark field" of the past in the present.

What haunts this poem most of all is the musing smile and bitter laugh amidst the imagery of pain and tragedy. The repetition of laughter emerging from a pained torso stages the strange tension of the tragic and the comic found in Simone's work. It brings to light a question at the heart of this piece and my project, essentially: what happens when laugher emerges from a wound? The gaping, chortling grin of the slave, of the darky entertainer and its desolating potential discovered in Jeffers' poem is in fact the emblem for the radically transformative nature of this form of comedy. Jeffers' and Carpio's observations about the relationship between grief, mourning, and humor in African American culture become especially helpful for this discussion of Simone, whose grief and anger weave drastically in and out of the tragic both as a form of redress, but also as a method of converting emotion into cultural critique. Such is the case, I argue, with her composition and live performances of "Mississippi Goddam."

Simone's first "protest song" is likely a parodic reference to the "Mandalay Song," the opening number to Act III of Brecht and Weill's musical comedy *Happy End: A Melodrama with Songs* (1929).[29] The composition, first recorded at Simone's 1964 Carnegie Hall concert, features a similar manic, jaunty polka beat, held down by Simone on the piano and her ensemble—Bobby Hamilton on drums, Lisle Atkinson on bass, and Rudy Stevenson on guitar—and apparently references the exclamation "Mother Goddam!" shouted by Sam, who plays "Mother Goddam" in drag and repeats the exclamation a few times during the show

---

[29] From what I can tell, no one else has written on the linkage between "Mississippi Goddam" and "Mandalay Song." See below for more discussion of the song and the musical.

tune.   Simone's composition reveals a seething irony in the contrast between the upbeat show tune quality of the accompaniment and tongue-in-cheek understatement of African American experiences of Jim Crow and civil rights struggles found in the lyrics of the AABA chorus. What Ingrid Monson argues about music, and especially African American music's ability to communicate meaning and "speak" to different musical and sonic elements of the performance is important in seeing how the comic irony and incongruity rife in this tune are generated not solely by the textuality of the lyric, but largely through the relation between text and sound.

This said, some of the song's lyrics contain humor independent of the accompaniment at the level of the text. The title itself provokes laughter from her Carnegie Hall audience, a predominantly white crowd, by the joke contained within the understatement "Mississippi Goddam!" Overall, the comedic effect of the choruses generates from the ironic contrast between the manic joviality of the band and the gravity of the subject of racial injustice and terror, as well as by the understated lyrics. The lyrics of the first A section in the song exemplify how Simone employs meiosis to describe racial terror and Jim Crow as a mere nuisance: "Alabama's gotten me so upset/Tennessee made me lose my rest/And everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam!"

Understatement (or meiosis), irony ("verbal" not situational), and overstatement (or hyperbole, which is not predominant in this tune) are comic figures of speech, all of which express the surprise of the speaker, represented by the contrast or inconsistency between the actual situation and the utterance. In other words, the speaker (who may be speaking in words or in music/sound) does not aim to accurately describe the situation

99

in a literal way, but rather to communicate her reaction of surprise to the situation.[30]   Simone uses comic irony not so much to express her own surprise, but more so to generate a reaction of surprise in her audience. This technique of using irony to surprise can also be understood as generating a shock of recognition in her audience, recognition of the absurd situation of stereotype and the caricature of difference which obscures the full humanity of the racialized other.[31]   Moreover, with comic figures of speech, the degree to which something is "funny" depends upon the contrast presented between statement and experience. What is funny by no means need be a positive realization, nor does laughter necessarily equate to pleasure. If disturbing incongruities, such as those between the pervasiveness of racial stereotype and reality of common humanity, can be understood as positive and pleasurable, perhaps they might be so in relation to the satisfaction which comes with gaining more accurate knowledge about a given situation. They might also produce pleasure through the sense of superiority experienced in the overturning of dominant notions of Western modernity and culture. Moreover, in these verbal figures of the comic, the degree to which they are funny corresponds to the degree in which they are critical.

A subcategory of irony which comes into play here is that of parody. "Mississippi Goddam" overtly parodies the show tune genre, and not in a merely nostalgic or decontextualized way.   "Mississippi Goddam" exemplifies postmodernist parody in the sense described by Linda

---

[30] Cf. Herbert L. Colston, "'I've Never Seen Anything Like It:'   Overstatement, Understatement, and Irony." 43-58.
[31]Again, compare to the discussion of comic anagnorisis in relation to the shock of recognition in the Introduction.

Hutcheon, where "through a double process of installing and ironizing," "postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations."[32] In this light, Simone's decision to reply to the church bombings with a parody of the show tune results in an ingenious critical move for the way it addresses the multiple incongruities of black experience in America. Mississippi is a synechdoche not just for the South, but as Malcolm X noted, for everything south of the Canadian border.[33] First and foremost, it foregrounds the trope of the "funny Negro" discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, or the ambivalent relationship blacks have had with "going before massa," show business, and especially comic performance—the way in which blackness has been a constant source of humor and perpetual performance, on the one hand, and deeply realized experience of a political and epistemological locus often discussed in comic terms within black cultural circles. However, perhaps the most remarkable effect of the rhetorical structure of "Mississippi Goddam" is the way in which its comic opening carves a space for ethical listening and face to face confrontation with the raw emotion of the singer.

At different times, Simone described her intended audience in varied terms. In one moment she emphasized that her music was intended for "her people." However, at other times, it was clear that she intended to speak across cultures. For example, Sylvia Hampton recalls Simone's explanation to the young white girl, "you know these white folk don't want to hear the truth! You must know the struggles we go through. I'm gonna

---

[32] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 93-4.
[33] Cf. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 454.

keep on telling them. They can't hide from *me!*"[34]   It is evident how "Mississippi Goddam" was composed with both audiences in mind, but the comic strategy of the song works particularly well to bring strangers into the mind and experiences of an angry black woman.

William Sonnega explains how progressive black theater faces a predicament of liberal white spectatorship insofar as the attendance of white liberals at black theater does not necessarily equate to a progressive understanding of black culture or an interest in becoming involved in the politics of the performance. Instead, liberal "colorblindness," or a buck-passing cultural relativism, combined with the "rigged paternalism" of liberal policies that pretend to address issues of racial and socio-economic injustice both ignore or excuse one's participation and implication in institutional and cultural structures of racism and allow the liberal viewer to enjoy black performance guilt-free. Moreover, white guilt is alleviated by the patronage of black theater, as if attendance is a show of one's progressive stance on race matters. For the black playwright who is interested in successful cross-cultural sharing of knowledge through performance, coming up with an effective aesthetic strategy is tricky, slippery, and risky. I would like to suggest that in the classic mode of a trickster or conjurer, Simone seduced her diverse audiences with her outrageous and eccentric displays of diva style and intoxicating humor. Once she got them, she forced them to confront what they had not necessarily paid to see. Simone describes her new found gift:

It was this time, in the mid-sixties, that I first began to feel the power and spirituality I could connect with when I played in front of

---

[34] Sylvia Hampton, *Break It Down and Let It All Out*. 39.

102

an audience […] something deep, something very deep. That's what I learned about performing—that it was real, and I had the ability to make people *feel* on a deep level. It's difficult to describe because it's not something you can analyse; to get near what it's about you have to play it […] And when you've caught it, when you've got the audience hooked, you always know because it's like an electricity hanging in the air. I began to feel it happening and it seemed to me like a mass hypnosis—like I was hypnotizing an entire audience to feel a certain way […] I had a technique, and I used it. To cast a spell over an audience I would start with a song to create a certain mood which I carried into the next song and on through the third, until I created a certain climax of feeling and by then they would be hypnotized.[35]

Simone's hypnotizing effect can be compared to the African American practice of conjure, also called "hoodoo," or a form of folk magic which derives from Haitian Vodun spiritual rituals that summon the dead souls, or *loa*, and also Native American spiritual practices. In Vodun, the *loa* take possession of the parties involved in the ritual. Conjure, which morphed and traveled from Africa to the Caribbean and the U.S. through Louisiana and spread throughout the South, however, is seen more as a form of magic which transforms people into other objects. Unlike Vodun, which is a widespread religion, Conjure is not widely practiced, yet knowledge of "hoodoo" persists in the form of cultural folklore and myth among African Americans. Simone, who grew up in rural North Carolina and lived in the Caribbean and Africa for extended periods of time,

---

[35] Simone, *I Put A Spell on You*, 93.

103

describes her hypnosis in terms similar to these varied diasporic versions of spiritual possession and transformation. In fact, Simone's cover of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' 1956 recording of "I Put a Spell on You" became not only a hit for Simone, maintaining a spot at the top of the billboard charts in the U.S. and the UK between 1965 and 1968, but also an anthem for Simone's hypnotic performances. Hawkins became well known for playing up a stereotypical portrayal of a Haitian *ougan*, or vodun priest. Using props identifiable by U.S. audiences as belonging to "voodoo" practices—a smoking skull, a pair of tusks through his nasal septum, snakes and fire displays—he spoke wildly in tongues, bugged his eyes, and generally performed as a charlatan *ougan*. Simone's cover of the song, the title of which she used for her autobiography, suggests a revision of Hawkins' original references to African-derived versions of spirit possession rituals and conjure, as demeaning as they were, in the context of her relations with her audience during a performance. In fact, during live performances of the song, she often stares down the audience as if they are the lover in the song upon whom she puts a spell, and occasionally improvises licks and riffs reminiscent of African music, and extemporaneously adds lyrics which reference "hoodoo." A good example of this would be during Simone's 1968 televised concert in Britain where in her performance of this song she adds the lyrics "I went to Alabama and got some mojo dust and I put a spell on you!"—"mojo" being an element of conjure.[36] (Incidentally, Simone also had the ability to hypnotize herself, and catch the spirit, like in church, in the middle of a performance, a tendency which will be discussed in more detail later). Hypnosis, or

---

[36] Cf. *Nina Simone live in '65 & '68.*

Simone's version of conjuring, moreover, bears a relation to comedy. Again, we might cite Carpio's argument that black comedy which critically and subversively transforms stereotypes into critiques of slavery and racial injustice can be compared to the transformative function of conjuring.[37]

"To check," and make sure the audience was "hypnotized," Simone continues in her description of her performative powers, "I'd stop and do nothing for a moment and I'd hear absolute silence: I'd got them. It was always an uncanny moment."[38] You can hear this happening on the Carnegie Hall recording: Simone introduces the tune to her audience, "This next tune is called Mississippi Goddam." The audience laughs and applauds. And in a slightly ominous tone she adds, "And I mean every word of it." The audience laughs again, but with a tinge of uneasy anticipation. With debonair energy Simone jumps into the swinging first A section: "Alabama got me so upset/Tennessee made me lose my rest/ and everybody knows about Mississippi, Goddam!" While the lyric calls upon the audience's knowledge of racial injustice and violence in the U.S. South to fill in the logical gaps left in the wake of these understatements, a knowledge presumably shared by her liberal audience, the tone of the song maintains an almost saccharine mirth sustained by Simone's lilting contralto. After one AABA chorus, the band's vamping changes to a minor key as they enter a short interlude during which Simone explains to her audience, "This is a show tune, but the show hasn't been written for it yet," inspiring another round of blithe laughter.

---

[37] This is a major current of Carpio's path-breaking book on black humor, *Laughing Fit to Kill*; I'm indebted to Natalie Leger-Palmer for helping me to compare African American versions of Afro-diasporic religion with Vodun of Haiti.
[38] Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, p. 93.

A prepped, or "hypnotized" audience is then caught off guard when brought to the first verse. The dip into the minor key for the two verses (divided by one chorus) in the middle of the tune creates a spatial dimension that resembles the gap that resides between appearance and reality, or the space of a joke; the gap that Simone traverses with her audience contains within it the tragic recesses of racial injustice and terror. The space of this song is also not unlike the layered tragicomic nodes spelunked by invisible man in the prologue of Ellison's novel, the "lower frequencies." The change to a minor key signifies not only the appearance of a new unit within the composition but a switch into the tragic, the blues. While the general structure of the song remains the same—the tempo, rhythm, and chord structure do not change—the modal change to the dominant minor transforms the tone of the song from manic and jocular to tragic, anxious, and menacing. The accompanying lyrics, while similar in meaning to those in the first section of the song, are no longer understated, but rather terrifyingly literal descriptions of what's to be damned about "Mississippi." On the sonic level, Simone's change of vocal timbre and intonation during the verse signify trepidation and horror augmenting the textual meaning of the lyrics: "Hound dogs on my trail/School children sittin' in jail/Black cat cross my path/I think everday's gonna be my last." The lyrics, along with Simone's voice, escalate to a tone of desperation, foreboding, and ominous doom in the second A section of the first verse: "Lord have mercy on this land of mine!/We're all gonna get it in due time./I don't belong here, I don't belong there/I've even stopped believing in prayer." The next line turns toward a direct confrontation between Simone speaking on behalf of her people and her white listeners,

particularly those satisfied with blacks' non-violent approach to freedom struggles: "Don't tell me, I'll tell you!/Me and my people just about through/ I've been there so I know/keep on sayin' go slow." This verse leads into an interlude, the lyrics of which turn towards a critique of non-violence: "But that's just the trouble (Chorus: too slow!)/Washin' the windows (too slow!)/Pickin' the cotton (too slow)/You're just plain rotten (too slow!)/Too damn lazy (too slow!)/You're thinkin's crazy." The turnaround brings the song back out of the verse and into the dominant major for one verse and a chorus, and then changes back into the dominant minor.

Before taking her listeners down into what I like to think of as the tragic bottom of the song, the second verse, She confronts her consternated audience with a question: "I bet you thought I was kidding, didn't you?" provoking a low mumbling—no more laughter. Simone is not kidding, yet she does perform a joke. Like Ellison's "dark friend," mentioned earlier in this dissertation, who interrupted the white business owner with "you thought I was black, didn't you?", Simone also she generates a shock of recognition, slipping the yoke, through the joke form.[39] In the next section, the singer's anger and frustration builds and the angry black woman emerges in full fury. Like a dragon shooting fire, Simone sings her fury with ventricular and pressed phonations. "Yes, you lied to me all these years, you told me to wash and clean my ears. Talk real fine, just like a lady/if you'd stop callin' me Sister Sadie!" "Oh but this whole country is full of lies, you're all gonna die and die like flies, I don't trust you anymore, ya keep on sayin' go slow."

---

[39] Cf. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke."

"Mississippi Goddam" surrogates the pain of black Americans terrorized by racial violence and injustice, critiques the civil rights movement's strategy of non-violent protest for moving tragically slow, and advocates for racial separatism and violent revolt. On top of all that, it indicts white America for its history of deceit and terror and foretells white listeners with the personal interpellation "you" of their imminent demise. It expresses all this with the socially unacceptable anger of a black woman, one who refuses the name "Sister Sadie," a name which, like "Auntie" works to reduce Simone and those like her to inhuman caricature. All this, yet her buggy jiving is received with roaring applause, an indication that she got through to her listeners. In "Mississippi Goddam" and elsewhere, Simone anticipates the project of black arts articulated by Amiri Baraka and others involved in the sixties black avant-garde whereby the urge for physical violence as a revolutionary tactic was transferred into cultural productions determined by an aesthetics of violence. We might recall, for example, the lines from Baraka's tone-setting poem "Black Dada Nihilismus":

>...come up, black dada
>
>nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape
>
>their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats.
>Black dada nihilismus, choke my friends
>
>in their bedrooms with their drinks spilling
>and restless for tilting hips or dark liver
>lips sucking splinters from the master's thigh...

However, unlike the Dadaist impulse in these lines to demolish white culture to carve a tabula rasa for black culture, Simone's violent urges are transferred into comic expressions which do not aim to destroy but rather to call on the power-holding class to take responsibility for their actions. While, as Phllip Brian Harper argues, black arts poets probably intended for poems such as "Black Dada Nihilismus" to be overheard by white listeners, Simone, as her conversation with Sylvia Hampton suggests, directly confronted white listeners, some of whom became her adoring fans in the process. Her performances made it extremely difficult for her white liberal audiences to ignore or excuse Simone's ostensible pain and rage with claims to colorblindness or a cultural relativism which equates to a "rigged paternalism."[40]

4. Theater of Invisibility

"Mississippi Goddam" was originally performed at the Village Gate to a standing ovation. Notably, every published recording of "Mississippi Goddam" is a live recording and features audience reaction. Without question, this song, composed initially as an expression of political activism, is intended to intervene with the social and to perform some kind of decolonial work. At the historical moment of its writing, Simone's political anthem described an increasing urge for violent retribution and racial separatism arising on the street and within radical factions of the civil rights movement. It did this while engaging at the same time in a radical pedagogy aimed at whites. Of course, the ability of Simone's humor to carve that space for ethical understanding ran up against its

---

[40] William Sonnega, "Beyond a Liberal Audience," 87.

limits, particularly in the South where the recording was boycotted. Simone recalls, "The excuse was profanity—Goddam!—but the real reason was obvious enough. A dealer in South Carolina sent a whole crate of copies back to our office with each one snapped in half. I laughed, because it meant we were getting through."[41]

As mentioned above, "Mississippi Goddam" is likely a reference to the "Mandelay Song" from Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's musical comedy *Happy End* (1929), an anti-capitalist satire which provoked controversy amongst its bourgeois audience.[42]   Her first musical idols being the Germans and Austrians "Mozart and Beethoven, Czerny and Liszt, and my beloved Bach," Simone's exposure to German culture began early and continued into her adult life as she listened to Brecht and Weill compositions and even incorporated a few interpretations into her oeuvre.[43] In fact, at the Carnegie Hall performances and recorded on the *In Concert* album are the duo's "Pirate Jenny" and "Moon over Alabama" from *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, respectively. While "Mississippi Goddam" is by no means a rendition of "The Mandelay Song," her reference to it seems obvious upon comparison. The references to Brecht/Weill songs on *In Concert* become significant as we consider Simone's own theories of political theater, which I argue are articulated through the performances themselves. That Brecht's notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) as a strategy for turning the

---

[41] Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 90.
[42] *Happy End* is much like a surreal version of *Guys and Dolls*, and showcases a mix of American and German style cabaret theater, the latter which boasts a more political and comic edge. "Mandelay Song" is a cabaret song performed "Sam," one of the gang members, as a surrealist comic interlude.
[43] *Ibid.*, 34.

audience into objective critics of the performance runs up against its limits seems to be suggested by Simone's appreciative but critical interpretations. Simone interpellates her audience into a critical role which, unlike the ideal audience in Brecht's epic theater, depends upon their *affective* investment in the performance. Distinct from Aristotelean poetics, which allows the audience to be relieved of their ethical obligations to the political through the process of catharsis, the critique of which inspired Brecht's political theater, Simone engages her audience both at the intellectual and the affective levels in order to foster an ethical relationship that forms the basis of political allegiance.

Simone's specific references to context and her direct address to the white "you" constantly interpellated in the song (in contrast to the race— and gender—specific "me" and "my people") in relation to the affective confrontation with tragedy rendered as much by lyrics as by the emotive qualities of her voice forces a recognition of the audience's own role in the ongoing drama of what Ralph Ellison called the "American racial theater." Remarkably, however, despite emphasis on racial distinction, the song unites an "everybody" commonly incensed by the problem of "Mississippi." From the beginning of the song to the end, what "everybody knows about Mississippi" has changed to include the perspective of an increasingly radicalized civil rights movement on the cusp of black power and 60s counterculture. The poetics of invisibility which structures this coming into better knowledge, indeed this epistemic decolonization facilitated by the song, is a tragicomic poetics and occasions a blues-toned laughter.[44]

---

[44] In the introduction to the 1980 edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison explains that his spokesmen for invisibility "had been forged in the underground of American experience and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic. That [they] would be a blues-toned

This is quite different from epic theater and the method of defamiliarizing the actor from the spectator by exaggerating the split between performer and performance, singer and song, called for by Brecht. While Simone's theater of invisibility, like epic theater, "arouses [the spectator's] capacity for action," "forces him to take decisions," and makes him "face something" whereby he is "brought to the point of recognition," it does not turn "the spectator into an observer" where he "stands outside, studies" the spectacle with a critical distance. Nor does it oppose "reason" to "feeling" as antithetical and counterproductive to political incitation.[45] In this way, I would argue, the theater of invisibility is not what Daphne Brooks calls "Afro-alienation," the term she gives to the performative mobilization of double-consciousness, the sense of alienation that comes from the transatlantic black experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of others, into a "critical form of dissonantly enlightened performance" which cleverly translates the racialized alienation of social experience into "literal and figurative acts of self-affirmation." What Brooks (drawing on Brecht) describes comes closer than mere epic theater to what I am attributing to Simone, insofar as in both cases we are talking about the shocking performance of double-consciousness in front of white audiences for political and historical awakening.[46] As useful as this theorization is, especially for the subversive black performances that she attributes to "Afro-alienation" acts, in Simone's case a better comparison is made with Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty. Quite unlike Brecht, Artaud calls for

---

laughter-at-wounds who included [themselves] in [their] indictment of the human condition."

[45] Cf. *Brecht on Theater*, 37.

[46] Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 3-6.

a theater that "can fascinate and ensnare the organs," that "flows into the sensibility." Unlike Brecht's interest in a singer's intentional splitting of himself from the song by bringing attention to the artifice of singing text for an audience, "speaking-against-the-music" and thereby awakening a "stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which is independent of music and rhythm," Artaud's theater: "turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility. It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which, by its precipitation or its amplitude in the air, ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by conveying the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms."[47] This theater, Artaud says, should be "spellbinding," as are Simone's hypnotic performances.

In a sense, Simone's ability to "put a spell" on her audience is not entirely new. Farah Jasmine Griffin summates the black woman's singing voice, as it has been observed by the West, as "a voice capable of casting spells. It is certainly a voice concerned with its connection to the world of the spirit, its ability to invoke the presence of the divine. So the sound heard as 'other,' as in 'foreign,' is also a sound that is 'other' like the mystery that is God." As well, the black woman's singing voice serves to "nurture" and heal the nation in times of crisis, as would a mammy who "is like one of the family" yet not, losing out on the privileges and protections

---

[47] *Brecht on Theater*, 44-5; Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 90-1.

that the family for which she cares provides. [48] At the same time, the black female singer's impassioned incantations of injustice have also been responsible for the incitement of dissent and political action. But Simone's voice hypnotizes, intoxicates, through its flaws, its rough edges, its inconsistencies and incongruities, a comic absurdity vocalized.

5. "My Name is PEACHES!"

Together the lips, jaw, tongue and larynx constrict and control the vocal organ. Lungs, mouth, the sinuses, pharynx, vocal folds, and epiglottis open and close, contract, expand, and vibrate in combinations to create seemingly infinite phonic possibilities. One of the most complex and intricate of instruments, the voice arguably possesses the greatest range of emotive expression and as such is frequently imitated by musicians on other instruments. However, the so-called trained singer, at least by Western standards, aims to achieve the control of manmade instruments and is valued by the degree to which she can maintain a smooth and steady tone, volume, and timbre, entering appropriately in and out of vibrato and staying perfectly on pitch, disembodying her voice from that which produces it.

Not Simone. Our experimental vocalist regularly makes full use of her vocal organ, consciously distorting her singing voice and partaking in what Houston Baker, Jr. calls the "deformation of mastery" in order to invoke social memory and communicate semantic meaning, as Frederick Douglass describes of the song sung by slaves on the way to the Great

---

[48] Farah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings," 107.

House Farm, "if not in the word, in the sound."[49] Markedly, Simone creates a phonic vocabulary through the "grain of the voice," as Barthes would put it, in order to communicate repeating sentiments from song to song and lyric to lyric. Here, I fixate for a moment on what I am calling the "voice of Peaches," the voice of the character in Simone's song "Four Women" that phonically, as much as lyrically, announces a militant black feminist stance absent from racialist and masculinist variations of '60s radicalism, a stance that would not materialize in the form of a movement until the early 1970s.[50] As discussed above, while Simone's affiliations with organized movements were loose at best, her music often expressed the tenor of political activity at a given moment so emblematically that organized movements sometimes claimed her as a representative. Likewise, without naming it as such, "Four Women" became a black feminist anthem and was, in fact, prescient in its militant sentiments. Moreover, the phonation of the "Peaches" character as it irrupts in Simone's performances signals the voice of the "angry black woman" divorced from stereotype and made three dimensional, a character whom Simone continues to phonically cite throughout her oeuvre.

The voice of Peaches is identifiable by its ventricular phonations and hoarse contralto, also known, appropriately, as "the growl" in music, as well as its shouting nasal quality. This voice can be interpreted both in

---

[49] In his 1845 narrative Douglass writes, "The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were particularly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wildsongs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;--and as frequently in the one as in the other," 349.

[50] The National Black Feminist Organization and Black Women Organized for Action were founded in 1973, and the Combahee River Collective was founded in Boston in 1974.

terms of its frequent and characteristic use by women blues singers, and also in terms of avant-garde jazz's experimentations with "ugly" sounds, or instrumental distortion, which could be misinterpreted as the mistakes of an untrained musician. The former invokes the black feminist impulse of the blues to publicly state one's pain and anger, while the latter resonates with the shock factor of free jazz's sonic experimentation and its sounding of black nationalist rage.

With poetic brevity, the lyrics of "Four Women" tell the distinct stories of "Aunt Sarah," "Sephronia," "Sweet Thing," and "Peaches," whose lives are shaped by skin shade, hair texture, generational relation to slavery, sexuality, and differing responses to adversity and oppression. Simone, perhaps, transmigrates the spirit of the four little girls murdered in Birmingham into these four fictional characters, invoking the specter of silenced black girls and women. Showing the diversity of black women's lives, "Four Women" breaks apart assumptions of monolithic black womanhood and complicates racialist and masculinist understandings of black femininity with its reinterpretation of the worn slave, tragic mulatta, jezebel, and angry black woman stereotypes. The latter, "Peaches," describes herself thusly:

My skin is brown

my manner is tough

I'll kill the first mother I see

my life has been rough

I'm awfully bitter these days

because my parents were slaves

What do they call me?

My name is PEACHES!

A generation removed from slavery, "Peaches" might be the contemporary of classic blues legends Gertrude "Ma" Rainey or Bessie Smith. However, with a looser interpretation of "parents," the character's blackness applies across several generations, and her militancy aligns her with the growing nationalist sentiment concurrent with the period—the year 1966, to be precise—during which this piece was composed.

During a televised concert in Holland in 1968, as in all of Simone's performances of this song, the last two lines of the lyrics are sung over a crescendoing cadenza, and the name "Peaches" is shouted at the top of the singer's lungs and held over the last measure and a half of the piece, elongated with a fermata and marked by five resolving chords punctuated triumphantly by piano, base, drums, and flute in unison. There is so much strain behind the sung note "Peaches" that it forces a vein to protrude from Simone's neck. For this performance, Simone is seen donning a short- to mid-length natural, or "afro," a hairstyle that just started gaining popularity in urban communities in the U.S. as a statement of black nationalist pride. She seems to be highly conscious of the politicized choice of hairstyle, as she points out her "wooly" coif, as she calls it, to her predominantly white audience.

Peaches' self-assertion is angry and threatening, but it also possesses a tinge of comic irony. The "ugly" sound of the last section contrasts surprisingly with the relatively subdued groove of the prior three, and seems absurdly out of place. The character's namesake, a sweet and tender fruit, contrasts humorously with her caustic and uncouth

delivery. And the untrained sound of a woman shouting at the top of her lungs contrasts ironically with the sound of the accompanying piano's elaborate flourish. However, this comic irony does not interfere with the seriousness with which we take "Peaches," but rather produces the climactic moment of hypnosis which allows Simone to connect with her audience the most viscerally. The voice of "Peaches," in its ugliness, forces one's hairs to stand on end and goose bumps to raise from the skin. It parodies the stereotypical voice of the angry black woman and recasts the anger in the context of the complex texture of black woman's lives.

6. Hypnotizing the masses

By the mid-seventies, the U.S. and most of the world found itself in a post-apocalyptic state, a position from which to observe the successes and failures of the many revolutionary, decolonial, and countercultural movements which defined the long sixties.[51] With the end of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in 1975, much of the hope of "the sixties" matured into a nihilistic cynicism. The cynicism and hopelessness of this post-traumatic moment comes across in Simone's 1976 concert at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. Eight years earlier during her first performance there in tumultuous '68 she writes, "I sang only protest songs. I did that to make a point, to show the most prestigious music festival in Europe where I came from, what I was about, and what was happening in my country."[52] But this time around in '76 Simone felt free to tell her audience that she did not want to be there, to chide them for

[51] Cf. James Berger, *After the End: Representations of the Post-Apocalypse*, esp. Part III, "American Post-Apocalypses," 133-216.
[52] Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 105.

being poor listeners, and did not fail to express her low expectations of them. It was around this time that Simone announced the production of her last album *It's Finished* (1974). Along with it, Simone had planned for Montreux to be her last public performance.[53] Despite these public declarations of throwing in towel, the '76 Montreux appearance, which was filmed and released recently on DVD, presents Simone's "theater of invisibility" and her mass "hypnosis" in full effect. Here she shows deep investment in creating an empathetic and ethical relation with her audience in order to get them to see and feel things in a certain way which would effect the radical change on a global scale that Simone was constantly working toward. While in many ways a self-indulgent catharsis over being without the lover, Imojah, whom she left behind in Liberia, the performance is marked with political critiques about the United States and Europe, constant references to "Africa," and Liberia more specifically, and structured by songs with explicitly political content.

One of the most overtly political is "Backlash Blues" which adds music to the poem written by Simone's good friend from the Village, Langston Hughes, and published posthumously in *Crisis* magazine in 1967. Like "Mississippi Goddam," Hughes' poem directly confronts "Mr. Backlash" or the power-holding white "you" with the socio-economic, racial, and political problems facing "folks like me/who are Black, Yellow, Beige, and Brown." The first stanza reads,

Mister Backlash, Mister Backlash,

Just who do you think I am?

---

[53] In fact, both of these plans changed with the prodding and convincing of loyal fans and admiring producers.

119

You raise my taxes, freeze my wages,

Send my son to Vietnam

You give me second class houses,

Second class schools.

Do you think that colored folks

Are just second class fools?

The final stanza, "You're the one/Will have the blues./Not me--/Wait and see!", also poses the threat of violent retribution.[54] Before entering into her incredibly funky rendition of the poem, Simone seems to decide on the spot that, "Yeah, I'm 'onna tell you the truth tonight!" This promise to "testify" in the classic African-American sense is augmented by Langston Hughes' deathbed order which she recounts for the audience, "Nina, keep working till they open up the door." Hughes, along with many black artists, intellectuals, and activists, saw what Simone was doing as important political work. No mere pop artist, and up to something much bigger, Simone rejected being labeled as an "entertainer."

Simone explains as much during one of the many memorably odd moments of the show. After being encored back onto the stage, Simone postpones playing another tune in order to chat with her audience about her daughter who had just started attending a boarding school in Switzerland, about black artists who come to Europe for "ten or fifteen years and don't speak one word" of the native language, and other tangential sentiments. She then interrupts herself to ask whether her friend, David Bowie, is in the audience. Getting up to look around she calls out "Is David Bowie *here*?" Most of the audience finds it amusing,

---

[54] Langston Hughes, "Backlash Blues."

perhaps understanding that it was part of the whole theater of her performance, but a lone heckler demands Simone to "sing a song already!" Simone takes her time making her way back to the piano and comments about her "dear" friend's absence before finally answering the heckler: "What you're talking about ain't got nothin' to do about nothin' but show business and I'm not about show business."

Indeed, Simone constantly disrupts her audience's expectation of what a show should be in order to resist being identified as and reduced to a mere "darky entertainer." Playing with this mask, her initial entrance onto Casino Stage dramatizes the ambivalence of the "funny Negro," that complex, double-edged relationship between African Americans and comedy generated by the blurred line between black humor and black people as a source of humor for white audiences. Upon being introduced, Simone enters the stage and curtsies deeply for her applauding audience. She holds the curtsey, eyes cast downward, for a good quarter-minute before she slowly looks up, as if awaking from a dream and realizing suddenly where she is. Taking a step backward, she begins to size-up her audience with an unamused, deadpan expression, by now her posture upright. Subtle changes in Simone's expression suggest that her innocuous observance turns to a look of judgment, perturbance, even disdain. The increasingly baffled audience eventually falls silent. She turns her head to the side, rests one hand upon the Yamaha, which fills the stage next to her, and holds the elegant pose without cracking a smile, again for a long pause. A few enthusiastic audience members try to drum up another round of applause, but fail, nd soon again Casino Stage falls

ILLUSTRATION 3: SIMONE CURTSIES FOR HER AUDIENCE AT CASINO STAGE

ILLUSTRATION 4: SIMONE STRIKES A CONTRASTING POSE

quiet enough to hear a pin drop. As if suddenly remembering an urgent matter that she needs attend, Simone shakes herself out of the pose and abruptly takes a seat at the grand piano.

This dramatic introduction presents a fascinating look at the way in which Simone enacts a poetics of invisibility in order to "hypnotize" her audience. Another way to think of this bodily joke is the way that she challenges any subjugating "enframements" and any objectifying gazes that might reduce her to archetype or spectacle. Simone wants control of what happens that evening. She does not intend to be mere entertainment bought and paid for by casual festival goers. She accomplishes this with the two poses. The first humble, supplicating gesture resembles the posture of the faithful slave bowing before her master (going before massa). The second pose presents a stately woman, dressed elegantly in a short black gown, stunning antique necklace, and wearing her hair in a short "natural"—the image of the respected concert pianist and revered black queen she wanted to project. In her presentation of the vast incongruity between the two identities that her one body can connote, she plays with invisibility in her enactment of the joke of race (and gender). This buggy jiving provokes not laughter, but silence, which Simone takes to be a sign of her successful "hypnosis."

Hypnosis for Simone can be understood in terms of getting her audience to see, hear, and feel in a certain way, a manner in which they are made aware of incongruities and absurdities and coaxed into a form of ethical seeing. Unlike the conventional definition of hypnosis, which suggests that the hypnotized turn into uncritical automatons lacking

control of their own consciousness, Simone does intend to "put a spell" on her audience, but only as an antidote to the ways in which colonialist and sexist cultural narratives may have already brainwashed them. Simone does not want to force a point of view through manipulation. Rather she wants to create engaged political agents sensitive enough to see through obfuscating lenses to the actual common, albeit diverse, humanity which should lead people to struggle together.

In fact Simone's hypnosis can be understood in terms of a poetics of invisibility, and for this reason her disruptions are part of the act and contribute toward the overall comic effect of her performance. The poetics of invisibility, which depends on the structure of the joke and which effects a critical response from the audience, Simone stages with extreme contrasts. Everything from the contrasts of her speech, mixing black vernacular idiom with an ambiguously European accent and bourgeois colloquialisms, to the range of conflicting emotions through which she abruptly takes her audience, all contribute to this hypnotic effect.

Psychological studies of the cognitive process of irony, meiosis, and hyperbole claim that the rhetorical use of contrast inherent in all three comic figures of speech is more effective than literal speech at critique and persuasion. Psychologists Colston and O'Brien argue that speakers who employ comedic rhetoric "invoke a powerful mechanism to achieve many pragmatic goals." The audience may experience and recognize a contrast between her expectations and the actual situation, but she may not be fully aware of the expectation that creates this contrast. They argue, "the speakers create a contrast with the encountered event by referring to some different event, and thus change the perception or judgment of the

encountered event by the interpreter of the remark." Moreover, "The speaker is somehow making the expected or desired state of affairs more salient when things have not turned out as expected" and as a result makes the inherent contrast more apparent.[55] The pragmatic efficiency of comedy thus comes from the way in which comic contrast challenges a given reality and grants agency to the interpreter to arrive at the better knowledge on her own terms. Of course, in this way, the outcomes of comic figures of speech cannot be predicted, but the psychologists' argument is that critique and persuasion are unleashed more efficiently and effectively in a comic rather than a literal mode.

The sequence of events after "Backlash Blues" provides a snapshot of Simone's improvised contrasts during the Montreux performance. In response to her audience's applause which morphs into a steady clapping beat Simone launches into 'Be My Husband" which she performs at the microphone without the piano. Just the clapping and the beat from the drummer accompany the flirtatious lyrics and the singer's sultry dancing.[56] About a minute into the song, Simone interrupts herself to talk to the audience, a common occurrence. She complains about how bootlegging has robbed her of her albums' profits, a major source of consternation to the recently divorced songstress avoiding the IRS with her international travel. She continues to muse upon having seen the festival's screening of a documentary on the life of recently deceased blues heroine Janice Joplin. Suddenly displaying her low opinion of the audience, she tells them, "I started to write a song about it, but I decided

---

[55] Herbert Colston and Jennifer O'Brien. "Contrast and pragmatics in figurative language: Anything understatement can do, irony can do better," 1599-60.
[56] The drummer who accompanies Simone on this album is uncredited.

that you aren't worthy." In Simone's opinion what killed the blues heroine was not the drugs, but that "she played to corpses." This, she tells them with a wicked smile, clicks her tongue to shame them, and winks, "You know what I mean?" She starts to giggle and then goes into a spell of mad laughter. She exclaims, "For true!", and returns to where she left off with her solo and dance. Strangely enough, her audience does not seem to mind the shaming and even applauds in response to Simone's "you know what I mean" and laughs with her, acknowledging the importance of being a sensitive listener—indeed, they've been conjured.

The set is then marked by an abrupt transition from Simone's extremely sultry grooving out on "Be My Husband." After replacing the mic to the stand, with the passion now drained from her face she makes a B-line for the keyboard and starts her upbeat stride piano into Billy Taylor's "I Wish I Knew How It Feels to Be Free." Not only does the audience experience the extreme contrast of mood from voluptuous and funky to playful and lighthearted, but they also experience, like in "Mississippi Goddam," the incongruous juxtaposition between the lyrics of the song and the accompaniment. The original recording of "I Wish I Knew How" on Simone's 1967 *Silk and Soul* album sounds true to Taylor's instrumental original, which appeared as the theme song to BBC's *The Film Programme* first aired in 1971. It features a prominent gospel feel mixed with a bit of R & B and pop, the funky horn section on the track granting it a dash of the trademark Motown Sound. The gospel or soul feel of the original recording suits the lyrics of the tune which express longings for freedom in a classic African American idiom.

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free

I wish I could break all the chains holding me

I wish I could say all the things that I should say

Say 'em loud, say 'em clear for the whole round world to hear.

Simone's choice to perform the tune at Montreux, with the ragtime feel of her stride piano and the drummer's swing beat accompaniment, dramatically alters the original tune by augmenting the contrast between the feel of the accompaniment and the lyrics of the song. While the spirituality of the composition remains intact, this alteration moves the genre of the tune from the tragic to the comic register, evading a cathartic response in favor of a more critically engaged one. In this live performance, Simone's vocal interpretation of and improvisation upon the lyrics redirects the subjective focus of the song on her and not some abstract speaker with whom it is more difficult to empathize. Toward the end of the second verse Simone takes on the voice of "Peaches," her playing takes on a severe *agitato*, and looking the audience in the eye she sings, "I Wish you would KNOW what it means to be ME!/ Then you'd see, you'd agree/ everybody should be free," and adds the aside "cause if we ain't we're murderers." Showing incredible vocal dynamic changes within and among verses, Simone sings the next verse in a soft falsetto as if rising "like a bird in the sky," as the lyrics announce, to find that space of freedom. Incredibly, it seems that for a moment Simone discovers that freedom and exclaims "the spirit's movin now"—at this moment she has hypnotized *herself*. In this spiritual, emotional place—indeed this tragic place—where words break down, she hums an improvised melody in the falsetto range through her joyous countenance, singing the ineffable

feeling of freedom. Simone seems to catch the spirit without warning and this highly personal moment becomes accessible to the audience.

This improvised expression of freedom is comparable to the attempts of free jazz of the 1950s and 1960s to escalate to new horizons while simultaneously returning to a more "primitive" spiritual place. With the free jazz movement being predominantly occupied by men—some of the notable innovators include Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, and Sun Ra—we see again how Simone's musical and performative experimental improvisations toward freedom might earn her a place with the boys in the official black avant-garde of the 60s and 70s. On the other hand, following the cues of Fred Moten, we might expand what we identify as avant-garde expression within black culture. One consequence of such an interpretation leads us to view how the unpredictable, eccentric, and uncontainable improvisational nature of Simone's art can be understood as an "alternative" form of the avant-garde. Reveling in this moment of freedom, Simone enters back into a completely improvised verse of "I Wish I Knew How" singing in a conversational tone, "I got news for ya, I already know." Simone takes the audience out of the tune with elated expressions of her own personal freedom. She ends the staggering spectacle of "I Wish I Knew" with an improvised coda, a dramatic classical flourish on the piano, an extended dominant chord which moves up and down the keyboard, accompanied by the new refrain, "I already know what it feels to be free!"[57]

---

[57] My readings of the music in this section are indebted to conversations I had with Tsitsi Jaji about this performance.

In Simone's 1976 Montreux performance of "I Wish I Knew How" she engages the strategy of ironic reversal, transforming the original groove of Billy Taylor's composition, and her own original recording of it, from a prominent gospel feel to the more playful groove of stride piano. Ironic reversal is both a basic element of humor, and also a common strategy within black music, and especially jazz. In this case, Simone participates in what Monson calls "intermusical" irony, or an irony which references prior moments in sound and music. "Quotations" in jazz often provoke laughter and amusement among listeners who pick up on the intermusical reference. Likewise, Simone's intermusical references are comic in nature. Furthermore, Simone participates in "intracultural" irony because the tune which she parodies is not one adopted cross-culturally, but intraculturally. Simone's reference is even more intimate than "intracultural," however, since not only does she parody Taylor's version, but also her own recorded version. The studio produced LP *Silk & Soul* (1968) on the RCA Victor label, featuring Eric Gale on guitar, Bernard Purdie on drums, Clyde Taylor on bass, Ernest Hayes on organ, and a horn section, appears constricted by the standards of the commercial music industry, especially in comparison to this live version at Montreux. Simone's self-parody of her *Silk & Soul* version of 1968 relates a commentary about recorded music versus live performance, the latter which the artist preferred. By poking fun, through parody, at her unalterable studio performance with an unpredictably live one, she jokes about the problems of trying to capture the dynamics of artistic performance, ossifying them into a commodifiable form, changing them from verb to noun. The repetition of the 1968 recording with a signal

difference contained in this parody, a difference that critically mocks the popular music industry, of which Simone is a major player, enacts a transformation of genre, which Monson describes as a hallmark of African American "creativity and ingenuity."[58]

In addition to ironic reversal, the change in groove enacts another layer of comedy in its evocation of absurd contrasts. Associated with the revelry and freedom of the Prohibition Era speakeasy, "stride" is a style of piano which evolved from ragtime and developed in New York City, and especially at Harlem "rent parties," between 1910 and 1930. It was popularized by jazz pianists, such as Fatz Waller, James P. Johnson, and Willie "The Lion" Smith. One of the most distinctive qualities of stride piano is the left-hand pattern of the baseline which jumps from the bass note on the first and third notes up a tenth, or even greater interval, to the chord on the second and forth. The name "stride" comes from the way in which the left hand strides up and down the keyboard, while the right hand produces virtuosic contrapuntal melodies together creating "spontaneous and inventive cross-rhythms, polymetres and surprising harmonic effects."[59] The upbeat feelings produced by Simone's stride piano contrast greatly with the tragic meaning embedded in the lyrics, a longing for freedom and a better world. The doubled contrasts—of genre, style, mood, and mode of performance—found in this live version invokes the absurdity of race and other constructs that obstruct this "freedom" in a way that makes mere enjoyment of the tune difficult. In this case, the

---

[58] Monson, *Saying Something*, 104; Monson usefully puts Henry Louis Gates' concept of "signifyin'" together with Linda Hutcheon's explanation of postmodern parody, both of which rely on repetition with a difference to create irony, an irony which has the potential to be critical in nature.

[59] J. Bradford Robinson, "Stride." *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*.

revision of "I Wish I Knew How" allows for a form of comic improvisation that better communicates the urgency of the original message. It also enlivens the instrumentality of the song so that what originally had a more tertiary function of accompaniment, now participates in an antiphonal conversation with the lyrics. Unlike Western music, which does not understand itself to have semantic meaning, black music, and especially forms like gospel and jazz, always has a syntactical element.[60] In this way, we can see how comedy can arise from the sound of music.

Simone experienced a sense of freedom first during her stay on the island of Barbados and then more intensely during her time living in Liberia. Appropriately, then, upon being called back for a second encore, Simone ends her concert with a nod to Africa. By confession physically tired and "half high" Simone asks the audience, "Hey! How many a ya been to Africa? Come on, come on. How many a ya stayed for more than five days? Did you like it? Did it blow your mind?" Calling a Senegalese conga player on stage, Simone and the two drummers proceed on command to "give them some rhythm of what it feels like to be in the bush." After establishing the feel with her rhythmic vamping over two chords on the piano, a sound similar to that found on her composition "See Line Woman," she leaves it to the drummers so she can show the audience the traditional dance moves she learned in Liberia.[61] Calling upon her audience to "move

---

[60] Cf. Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something*, especially Chapter 5, "Interaction, Feeling, and Musical Analysis." The underlying premise of Monson's manuscript is that improvisatory jazz has something to teach musicology about the semantic qualities of music. The dominant Western cultural notions about the ineffability of music, which thus structure musicology's undertakings, run up against the fact that jazz musicians clearly "speak" with music to each other in an antiphonal conversation.

[61] This is what she tells her audience. However, these dance "moves" appear to be the same as those Simone spontaneously performed at a number of her live shows, even before she lived in Liberia.

to Africa," Simone makes it clear in her final gesture that her European, vastly white audience, as "peaceful" as Simone keeps saying they are, still must acknowledge their colonial history and their relationship to the Third World. As well, she wants them to fall in love with Africa in the way that she has and to become more free through cross cultural experience. In this way, Simone's cultural interventions claim an international, intercultural reach.

Simone's Montreux appearance is strung through with the deeply and overtly personal starting with the opening tune "Little Girl Blue" and moving later in the first encore to Janis Ian's "Stars," and Morris Albert's "Feelings." As the line in "Stars" goes, Simone has a "soul [she's] not afraid to bear." The laying bare of her "soul" for the audience to see throughout this concert provides less an entertaining spectacle than an example of the diversity of human personality. By playing with the discontinuity between the realm of appearances and reality, Simone makes it impossible for others to reduce her to an archetype. How can she be "the angry black woman" when she also sings the vulnerability of a little girl? How can she be the entreating servant when she stands tall as a queen to be revered? How can she be a gun-toting black nationalist when she also preaches love? And is "Sister Sadie" capable of the deep passion and longing Simone feels for Imojah? The weaving of the political with the deeply personal makes possible an ethical recognition, a face to face encounter with the other, a requisite component of buggy jiving as a political strategy. The project for Nina, then, is not a need to be *understood*, to be fully known in the name of some narcissistic hunger for fame. Rather it is a project to *not be misunderstood*.

CHAPTER 3

Incognegro: Dead Authors, Second Selves,
and Comic Revenge in Post-Soul Satire

Thus a Negro is rendered invisible—and to an extent invincible when he, as our hero comes to do, attempts to take advantage of the white man's psychological blind spot. And even this involves a sacrifice of personality and manhood on the Negro's part, and many of his actions are motivated by spite and an effort to revenge himself against this scheme of things.—RALPH ELLISON, "Working Notes for Invisible Man," 344

I identified my enemies and I made a scene. A Grand Slam. Now one would be able to laugh.—FRANZ FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114

Always keep 'em laughing.—JUNEBUG, *Bamboozled*

Laugh laugh—THELONIUS "MONK" ELLISON, *Erasure*, 158

    Thus far this dissertation's interest in exploring the comic rests on the notion that within black struggles for social transformation there exists a fuzzy and permeable boundary between politics and aesthetics and likewise between formal and informal politics. During the struggle for civil rights focused around equality under the law and the state, formal political engagement resulted in part from a lack of recognition for the political nature of popular culture, the realm where blacks in America always found abundant representation. The preceding chapters have shown how during this era of formal political struggle, avant-garde political activity characterized by a high degree of informality and aesthetic emphasis brewed beneath the surface of the dominant movements. In particular, I have gestured toward those cultural expressions that are comic in nature

and rely on the poetics of the joke form and the politics of representation—
what I call a poetics of invisibility based on Ralph Ellison's theoretical and
fictional musings on humor, politics, and the experience of being black in a
white world. These comic expressions of the black avant-garde as they are
concerned with the politics of representation, dredge up the imagery of
American popular culture from the minstrel show to the decades that
preceded the civil rights movement. Images like the happy-go-lucky grin
of Billy Kersands, the shuffling oblivion of Bill Bojangles Robinson, and
the self-deprecating comic exchanges of Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo, pushed
deep into the closet by the mainstream civil rights and black cultural
nationalist movements, get mobilized in this alternative strategy of black
freedom fighting as the primary target in the struggle toward decolonizing
culture, thought, and being. Brewing beneath the surface of the politics of
"positive" image-making and respectability, I argue, the comic strategies I
trace to Ellison's concept of invisibility have re-emerged as the dominant
form of black political engagement in the wake of the Civil Rights and
Black Power movements and characterize the black political aesthetics of
the dawn of the new millennium. These postmodern strategies move
beyond the politics of negative/positive images and towards a politics of
representation that engages and employs the very iconography and
phonography of minstrelsy in order to get at the problem of cultural
attitudes, the last frontier of struggles for racial justice. Certainly, these
avant-garde comic strategies find prominence in what has been called the
post-soul or post-black aesthetic (amongst other names) an aesthetic which
is all about grappling over what blackness *is* for the generation born
between the March on Washington and the Bakke case on affirmative

action, using history and culture as artistic resources—what Bertram Ashe calls "the signal artistic and literary school that has gained currency since the Civil Rights movement."[1]   If in the civil rights era it took getting "buggy," or high, to step "outside of history" and engage in a comic-critical aesthetic, in the post-soul era, even the most sober and straight-edged of "buppies" feel the effects of a culture-wide intoxication.

In this chapter, I turn to two quintessentially post-soul texts produced at the turn of the twenty-first century, Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* and Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled*. Lee's more than forty films remain on the fringe, the vast majority of which have never been honored by the mainstream film industry yet frequently awarded on the independent film circuit. Lee's work is not as overtly experimental as is Everett's, straddling the line between mainstream and independent cinema. However, both deal in an 'experimental blackness' that can be best summed up as part of the post-soul aesthetic. Both artists have produced work that does not ostensibly have anything to do with blackness. And both show in these examples the layered struggles facing the postblack artist. Both engage self-reflexive and multi-layered satire to address the politics of representation and the epistemological and ontological problem of postmodern blackness, as well as the political efficacy of humor. Moreover, both demonstrate the guerilla strategy of invisibility, invisibility being a concept-metaphor which both texts invoke, explicitly and implicitly, in narrative and diegetic references which quote

---

[1] See Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies*. Neal uses the March on Washington and the Bakke case as temporal markers for the post-soul generation. See Bertram Ashe's "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review*, Vol 41, No 4 (2007), p. 620.

and sample (in the jazz and hip-hop senses, respectively) Ralph Ellison as an intellectual figure and also his novel *Invisible Man*. What these works also do is to create an (anti) aesthetic in their metacritique of attempts to aestheticize blackness authentically, probing playfully at the interconnections of authenticity, authority, and authorship in relation to representing blackness.

I put these two particular texts together because of the uncanny resemblance of their plots, a fact which gestures to the notion that the post-soul aesthetic enjoys some form of coherence. Both are energized by the ambivalence produced by this particular mode of political resistance, a political action which takes the form of aesthetic production. Both novel and film feature trickster protagonists whose jokes fail miserably and with detrimental consequences. *Erasure's* protagonist, Thelonius "Monk" Ellison, and *Bamboozled*'s Pierre Delacroix are both writers (of fiction and television shows, respectively) struggling for success against the expectations put upon them as black artists. Unabashedly "bougie," or to some "uppity," both Monk and Pierre are accused by friends and colleagues of not being "black enough." Fed up with the personal and professional pressure to be "authentically" black, each takes on heroic invisibility and "revenge[s] himself against this scheme of things," as Ralph Ellison describes it in his working notes for *Invisible Man*, devising plans to expose the racism of the book publishing industry (for Monk) and the television industry (for Pierre) by producing satirical parodies of racist popular genres. In both cases, the comic revenge goes horribly awry and the satires are taken as literal. Even worse, each parody becomes wildly popular and lucrative, and the creators soon become bedazzled by their

unintentional success as they lose sight of their original mission and forget the distance between their quotidian identities and the performative aspects of the trickster masks they don.

But these diegetical satires are contained within the larger satire of the texts themselves. In this chapter, I am most interested in the interplay between the diegetic and meta-narratives in each the film and the novel, or in other words, the failed jokes of the trickster figures within the narratives juxtaposed with the trickster aesthetic, or buggy jiving, of the work as a whole. These layers of reference are intentionally confused by Everett and Lee. Both film and novel are structured in ways that break down the fourth wall, disallowing a pleasurable distancing of viewer/reader from text, staging a *Simonian* (in the sense of the previous chapter) engagement with the audience.[2] This move, I argue, is a political one and gestures toward a political impulse, as incoherent as it may be, in this artistic satirical approach. Another way of putting this is that I am interested in the diegetic audience's reaction to buggy jiving as well as the possible effect of the meta-narrative on the audiences outside the novel and film. The similar narrative structure of these two texts, notwithstanding the differences in form particular to cinema and the novel, allows for a pointed exploration into the mechanics of the political-aesthetic gesture of buggy jiving.

Of relevance to this discussion as well is the idea of being televised and specifically the relation between television/television sets and the tragic reversals of the protagonists. Monk and Pierre become what they initially set out to destroy, both deluded by the camera like Norma

---

[2] See discussion of fourth wall in the Introduction and chapter 2.

Desmond at the end of *Sunset Boulevard*. Circling back to the image of Laughing Ben enframed by the camera discussed in the introductory chapter to this dissertation, we are reminded that the television is an apparatus of double consciousness, a postmodern veil, in that it literalizes the phenomenon of seeing oneself through the eyes of others. Thus, both novel and film ostend multiple framing elements and layers of representation in order to bring attention to the function of the frame—in *Erasure*, the novel contains a journal which comprises a novel and contains another novel, as well as other writings with ambivalent and at times tenuous relation to the narrative. Moreover, these layers depict the televising of characters within the multiple levels of written text. *Bamboozled* presents a television show within a film, which the viewer sees framed by a studio stage set, television screen, and by the diegetic frame of the film. Juxtaposed with archival images of blackface minstrelsy presented via the same framing elements, the viewer is constantly made conscious of practices of looking which inform representations of black images and how these practices of looking cohere in past and present forms.

Of particular interest to this chapter is the observation that Lee and Everett use art to represent the differences between the "art world" and "real world" in relation to "postblack" impulses. In both cases there is a dissonance between the artistic drive and vision *away* from authentic blackness and the lived reality of *inescapable* blackness. Thelonious Ellison *the writer*'s attempts to write as a raceless author (or at least a bougie author unconcerned with his so-called "community") butt up against the effects of Monk *the son, brother, and friend*'s physiognomy on

publishing practices and reader response. The first page into his journal Monk writes, "I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona, and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me that I am black; that is my race" (1). A page later Monk writes, "I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is."[3] Monk has an understanding of what Elizabeth Alexander would call a "bottomline blackness," a racial identity that persists outside of anti-essentialist critiques, a version of black identity that I find common in post-soul black art. In his journal, which is Everett's novel, Monk plays with the question of an author's relevance to the text. He is eternally frustrated with how his biographical information determines how his work is classified in bookstores, whereby his racial identity overdetermines the content.

> "I went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph…That fucking store was taking food from my table"[4]

---

[3] Percival Everett, *Erasure*. New York: Hyperion, 2001, 2.
[4] *Ibid.*, 28.

Indeed, it's Monk's eternal frustration with the inescapability of his black identity that draws him back to addressing it in writing, albeit in the form of a failed parody of the realist literature and "ghetto fiction;" specifically the parody mocks Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Sapphire's *PUSH*, the novel which has recently been transformed by Lee Daniels into the film *Precious*, lauded by the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry. Although *Erasure* was published nine years ago, the novel predicted its Hollywood appeal, as both Jaunita Mae Jenkins' *We's Lives in da Ghetto* and his parody *My Pafology* renamed *Fuck* are offered movie contracts. In a similar way, Spike Lee challenges the notion of a postracial world whereby black identity is free currency by tragicomically insisting upon the reality of embodied blackness in the new millennium. Against the free trafficking of blackness in the public sphere portrayed in the film, namely with "Mantan, the New Millenium Minstrel Show," Pierre's failed attempt at satire, the biopolitical consequences of lived black identity stand out as several black characters end up dead at the end of the film as a result of the free play. Of some of the dead, the NYPD guns down all members of the Mau Maus, a pseudo-revolutionary hip hop group—all, that is, but for the one white-looking member, a detail that reminds *Bamboozled*'s viewers of the connection between the seeming frivolity of comic stereotype and the real hazard of blackness in the contemporary moment. The posthumous narration of *Bamboozled* and *Erasure* by the respective trickster-protagonists Pierre and Monk complicate and put into conversation different discussions about the relevance of an artist to his art, from social realist agendas circulating around a figure like Richard Wright, to claims that the author is dead, to cultural nationalist searches for a black

aesthetic, suggesting that if the author is dead, something about his art is likely responsible for the murder.

1. A Word about the Post-Soul

Before turning to an extended discussion of the texts, a word about the difficulty of the post-soul concept is warranted here: One of the best advantages of turning to *Erasure* and *Bamboozled* at the end of this dissertation involves being able to focus on the in-group critique of black authenticity that so often provides fodder for the post-soul mill. This is not to say that the notion of black authenticity was not challenged from "within" earlier. As addressed in chapter two, Ellison was already engaged in that project in the late forties and early fifties as he drafted caricatures of the *négritude* movement in *Invisible Man* and critiqued the notion directly in many of his essays. So, while in-group critique of black authenticity is part of buggy jiving, there seems to be an emphasis on this part of the comic strategy in post-soul artistic expression. Ellison predicted this metalogical focus on essential blackness with the elliptical "Blackness of Blackness" sermon in the prologue of *Invisible Man*. On the "lower frequencies" of a recording of Louis Armstrong singing "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?" blasting from five different phonographs at the same time, invisible man hears:

> *"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness."*

> *And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black…"*

> *"In the beginning…"*

"At the very start," they cried.

"...there was blackness..."

"Preach it..."

"...and the sun..."

"The sun, Lawd..."

"...was bloody red..."

"Red..."

"Now black is..." the preacher shouted.

"Bloody..."

"I said black is..."

"Preach it, brother..."

"...an' black ain't..."[5]

As I have thus far stressed in terms of the poetics of invisibility, jokes emerge in the ellipses, and the ironic absence of signifiers in this formulation—"black is...black ain't"—makes a joke about in-group attempts to define and rally around blackness despite the inherent emptiness of the term. As if filling in the ellipses years later in "An Extravagance of Laughter" Ellison explains that such "abysmal levels of conflict and folly" produce "our famous [black] American humor," yet, "Brother, the blackness of *Afro-American* 'black humor' is not black; it is tragically human and finds its source and object in the notion of 'whiteness'."[6]

In the introduction to an important issue of *African American Review* dedicated to the subject of the post-soul aesthetic, Bertram Ashe

---

[5] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 9.
[6] *Id.*, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 642.

explains, "my conception of the…post-soul matrix, then, ultimately suggests that to be identified as 'post-soul' an artist who was born or came of age after the post-Civil Rights movement will have produced a text or body of work that grapples with the cultural mulatto archetype, and/or executed "blaxploration," and/or employed allusion-disruption strategies to achieve a "troubling" of blackness."[7] Earlier Ashe describes the practice of "blaxploration:" "These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination is ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity…this troubling…is ultimately done in service to black people" (614). He explains that part of blaxploration is the trope of the "allusion-disruption" strategy. Ashe does not describe the precise mechanics of allusion-disruption, but this trope that he finds in the post-soul compares to the comic strategies behind the trope that I call buggy jiving.

In light of the evidence that Ellison and others were involved in 'blaxploration' earlier, the idea of post-soul blackness resists conceptual coherence, especially by teleological schemas. The use of the term post-soul, even, seems to defy my point that buggy jiving, a form of humor which now pervades the post-soul aesthetic, was extant during soul, modernism, the Civil rights and Black Nationalist aesthetic and political periods. This tension I invoke purposely. Like my use of the term "*avant-garde,*" I destabilize the term as I simultaneously try to build upon it—a

---

[7] Bertram Ashe. "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review*, Vol 41, No 4 (2007): 609-623.

treacherous method but a necessary one. I choose to employ the term "post-soul" in this chapter mainly to acknowledge the historicity of what it implies. The post-soul aesthetic expresses a blasphemous critical stance *vis à vis* the Civil Rights movement, a blasphemy (as Chapter 1 has shown) emergent at least with Ellison's skepticism of the nationalist and group-think tendencies that can be found in organized efforts for black freedom.

Ashe does admit that African American writers of earlier generations such as "Ellison, [Jean] Toomer, and James Weldon Johnson, *et al*, do, appropriately enough, have aspects of their fictions that explore blackness. But one must be mindful of the historical and socio-cultural moments in which these texts were produced. While such authors might well have demonstrated an expansive view of blackness in their work, American culture was still quite brutally segregated, and that reality is also a part of their work. The post-soul aesthetic artist's work is produced and exists in a time that reflects the complicated post-civil rights (un)reality in which we live."[8] The essays from which I draw my ideas are an extended conversation Ellison has been having since *Invisible Man* through the time of his death (in the PSA era). This extended conversation is no doubt informed by the socio-cultural moments in which they were produced, however the core questions at the heart of Ellisons prosaic theoretic probings over the years remained the same. For me, then, writers like Ellison cannot so easily be excised from the post-soul, nor can the post-soul be defined by linear demarcations of cultural history. The trope of a circular black temporality that is "out of step" with linear history explored especially in Chapter 1, moreover, allows for us to think about

---

[8] *Ibid*., 621.

how this political-aesthetic impulse that I am tracing has a chaotic relation with tradition, period, or convention. This is to say that you cannot divorce certain artists by their generational relation to the Civil Rights movement so easily.

As Paul C. Taylor notes in the same issue of *AAR*, the attempts to "posterize," as he calls it, or to describe movements in "post" terms—be it postcolonial, postmodern, or postblack—signals a point of departure, rather than one of arrival.[9] The post-soul aesthetic has departed from a shared experience of "soul," "black" and civil rights/black power, yet it does not specify a unified direction for future movement. This spatiotemporal ambiguity has something to do with the attempt to "posterize" itself, since with it comes the project of skepticism.

On the one hand, I want to acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of "PSA" as a descriptor and to suggest that it is indebted to the comic aesthetic I have been tracing. On the other hand, I want to argue that that, given the incoherence of this artistic period, the line I am drawing is of more importance. Most importantly I want to decipher what is the political agenda, if any, of the PSA? What is its relation to the concept of "freedom"? In my examples, representational imprisonment, one which, perhaps, includes expectations generated in mainstream American popular culture inasmuch as in previous black cultural campaigns, recurs as a target of social justice. I thus take issue with Bertram Ashe's claim that while "the struggle for freedom was the constant" during the Black Arts Movement, "that constant, it seems to me, is no longer (the) constant."[10]

---

[9] Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old-Black," *African American Review*, Vol 41, No 4 (2007): 629.
[10] Bertram Ashe, 620.

The lead up to a discussion of the PSA is appropriate here since what I am describing as an out-of-step, avant-garde black comic aesthetic has found cache in the post-soul era. It is appropriate because what some, like Ashe, see as an abandonment of freedom and a coherent politics to bolster this literary movement, I see as a politics concerned with aesthetics, specifically the aesthetic representation of authentic blackness. As well, addressing the denial of the relevance of history to the present culture, post-soul artists use history as a medium for the creation of their art. The images and sounds of minstrelsy, slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, are all sampled in ways which challenge us to think about how this cultural imagery is still extant and how it is refigured. I thus see both texts as making a similar assessment of the complex and diffuse, yet inescapably salient, blackness which blackfolk living under the conditions of the "global postmodern," as Stuart Hall would put it, experience.[11] Furthermore, I see both texts recontextualizing the new frontier of freedom fighting and actively working through new strategies of political engagement at the different layers of narrative. The ambivalence that tragicomically punctuates each novel and film addressed in the subsequent pages, I argue, requires a stress on Paul Taylor's point about the processual nature of the post-soul, or even Ashe's emphasis on exploration. The difficulty in naming (the movement) has to do with the approach itself. It is "clearing space" for a new identity, but that identity *is in process*.[12] By linking what Lee, Everett, and by extension those who are understood to be post-soul artists are grappling for with the broader trope of buggy

[11] Cf. Stuart Hall. "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" Michele Wallace, et al. *Black Popular Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992, 21-36.
[12] Cf. Paul Taylor, "Post-Black, Old-Black," 629-30.

jiving, and likewise the alternative contributions to the freedom struggle made *during* the Civil Rights Era and discussed in the prior chapters, I want to say that the freedom concept has not dropped out of the picture. Rather, art is more relevant to the question of freedom than ever and the comic outlook of our contemporary black artists does not equate to apathetic skepticism but rather a new strategy.

2. It's Hard out Here for a ~~Struggling Writer~~ Pimp

Taking up this question Ashe poses about the waning constant of freedom in post-Civil Rights black art, I turn to Percival Everett's novel *Erasure*, which explicitly stages the interrelation of the project of exploring blackness, the political role and efficacy of the experimental artist, and the relevance of the freedom concept to bourgeois members of the post-soul generation. Everett does this by mobilizing Ralph Ellison's concept-metaphor of invisibility in the narrator-protagonist's performance of a second self who engages parody for the purpose of exposing the joke at the center of mass culture's obsession with and fetishization of authentic blackness. As a novel which takes writing as its primary topic, *Erasure* utilizes a heavy-handed intertextuality to launch major critical debates about writing and literature in order to work through the relation of avant-garde writing and performance to radical social action.

Erasure contains two overt parodies: "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel," the first one to appear in the text, parodies Roland Barthes' *S/Z* which, as Monk explains to his sister, treats the essay "exactly as it treats its so-called subject text which is Balzac's *Sarrasine*."[13] Monk presents this

---

[13] *Erasure,* 6.

experimental piece, an excerpt from his latest novel, to the "*Nouveau Roman* Society"—itself a satire of national literary associations. The second parody, *My Pafology* renamed *FUCK* by the end of the novel, mocks the ghetto fiction genre while making overt intertextual reference to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the contemporary writer, Sapphire's novel *PUSH*. Fed up with his own lack of success as an experimental fiction writer, Monk becomes enraged to discover the extreme popularity of *We's Lives in da Ghetto* written by Juanita Mae Jenkins. The character of Jenkins, a college educated black woman, raised in the suburbs, who teaches poor black youth in Harlem for a few years, makes overt reference to Sapphire, whose biography is similar. While the style and intention of Monk's two parodies are drastically different, as part of the larger novel they foreground debates about authorship (the relation of author to text), authority (the relation of the author's biography to the right to tell a particular story and its perceived legitimacy), and authenticity (of stories and also of black identity).

By invoking Barthes, Everett summons the parodied text's (*S/Z*) discussion of the "readerly" versus "writerly" text and also Barthes' assertion of the "death of the author." The readerly text, in brief summary, is that which has a hermeneutic horizon, that which achieves narrative closure and therefore can be interpreted. The writerly, on the other hand, is unfinished and in the constant *process* of being written. In this way interpretation is infinite and therefore impossible. Along these lines, Barthes' famous claim in another essay that "the author is dead" refers to the idea that the biographical details of the author and her intent have no bearing on the meaning of the text she produces. Everett plays with

Barthes assertions and eventually challenges them, putting them in conversation with other debates about writing, meaning, and authorship. Notably, the style of *Erasure* is unconventional, written in the form of a writers' journal. It is presented to us as a journal we might have access to when the author is deceased. Monk writes, "My journal is a private affair, but as I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious consideration of self-termination, I am afraid others will see these pages. Since however I will be dead, it should not much matter to me who sees what or when."[14] Thus, on the one hand, the reader is presented at the very beginning of the story with the death of the author, for only if Thelonious "Monk" Ellison is dead would we have access to the story we read. As Kimberly Eaton points out, the original edition is printed on jagged-edged paper, which adds to the reader's feeling that she is reading someone's personal journal.[15] On the other hand, the biographical details of the protagonist are notably similar to those of the actual author of the novel. Not only is Monk's phenotypic description of himself applicable to Percival Everett as well, but perhaps most importantly, Monk's parody "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel" appeared in print two years before the publication of *Erasure* in an issue of *Callaloo, authored by Percival Everett himself.* Between this and the fact that novel's object and subject, both, are a writer, the reader is constantly reminded of the presence of an author and convinced, I argue, of the relevance of the writer to the text, even posthumously. Indeed, Everett inserts himself into his novel in a manner that makes it difficult to kill him

---

[14] *Ibid.*,1.
[15] Cf. Kimberly Eaton, "Deconstructing the Narrative: Language, Genre, and Experience in *Erasure.*" *Nebula* (September 2006) Vol 3, No. 2-3, p. 223.

off. The question of the readerly and the writerly and the relevance of the author to the text, then, extends beyond the parody to become a primary source of thematic exploration in *Erasure*. Elsewhere in the narrative, Monk muses in his journal overtly about the question of the dead author:

> We are told that the subject of the statement should not be taken as synonymous with the author of the formulation—*either in substance, or in function*. This is, my theoretical friends have told me, a characteristic of the ennunciative function. The statement with which I was concerning myself was the box containing the letters of my father.[16]

Here, Monk is pondering the significance of authorial intent, for not only did his father leave a box of letters documenting his illicit affair with a white woman for his wife to find after his death, but Monk's mother also led a trail to the letters so that Monk would find them as she dies from Alzheimer's disease. At this moment, the theory of writing that Monk recites does not add up to his perception of the inseparable presence of his parents in the text of the letters—his father having written the originals and his mother having revised them, in a sense, by re-presenting them to Monk. On top of this, Monk is able to track down a half-sister he never knew he had with the information in the letters, further cementing the relevance of author to text at that moment.

This first parody links up with the second insofar as the failed parody of *FUCK* demonstrates that giving over the text's meaning completely to the reader can bear negative consequences, often based on racialist assumptions. However, this second parody also challenges the

---

[16] *Erasure*, 191.

overinvestment of interest in the author which tends to occur with popular writing, especially popular "black" writing. *FUCK*, then, not only points to the absurd way in which a black face signifies the authority to write authentic ghetto fiction, but it also conjures another major literary question through a restaging of the debate set forth between Ralph Ellison and Irving Howe in "The World and the Jug" over the "authentic Negro writer."

Written in two parts, the first half of the essay is Ralph Ellison's initial response to Howe's essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" which appeared in his magazine *Dissent* in Autumn of 1963. The second part is a rejoinder to Howe's response to Ellison's first "attack" (as he calls it in the preface) in *The New Leader* in 1964. Irving Howe, employing the castration metaphor of Ham betraying his father Noah, accuses Ellison and James Baldwin of turning against their literary father, Richard Wright, in their critiques of his "narrow naturalism." Howe asserts that not only are Ellison and Baldwin able to enjoy the "more modulated tones" in which they write because of how Wright cleared that space for them, but even more that their literature is lacking because of its refusal to directly confront what Howe understands to be the true pain of Negro experience.[17] Ellison's task in his essay, then, is to explain how Howe's prescriptions for Negro literature enforce a version of segregation, a "social order" that that Ellison fears "more than I do Mississippi."[18] Indeed, Ellison sees in Howe and in white liberals like him a type of obsession with Negro pain and representations of the black underclass that are insulting, limiting, and

[17] Irving Howe qtd. in Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library, 1995, 165.
[18] *Ibid*. 167.

point to an utter ignorance of the diversity of black life. For Ellison, *Native Son* is propaganda written for a white leftist audience in order to gain sympathy from them and support for socio-economic struggles facing the poor black masses. It is not written in the service of a more universal or profound struggle for human freedom based on an exploration of values, diversity of black experiences, and philosophical questions that arise from both within and without black culture. Privileging this latter motive, Ellison finds that he and Baldwin thus take better advantage and accomplish more with literary form.

Thelonious Monk Ellison's professional struggles as an experimental writer are defined by this problem described decades earlier by *Ralph Waldo* Ellison. The slap in the face that prompts Ralph Ellison's two part "attack" of Howe parallels the slap in the face Monk experiences when confronting the wide acclaim for Juanita Mae Jenkins' "runaway success" *We's Lives in da Ghetto*. After reading the first few sentences of the book—an appalling contemporary, and perhaps more debased, version of "Negro dialect"—Monk writes, "It was like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars. 3 million dollars"—the price Hollywood offered Jenkins for the rights to her book. In response to this outrage, Monk plots a comic revenge on the book publishing industry by writing a parody of *We's Lives in da Ghetto* under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. Monk's second parody, which appears as a full 68-page novel in the middle of *Erasure*, brings the critical debate staged in "The World and the Jug" into the new Millennium with intertextual references to *Native Son* and *PUSH*.

FUCK's protagonist, Van Go Jenkins, is a twenty-first century Bigger Thomas and its plot parallels that of *Native Son* in ostensible ways. Like Bigger, Van Go feels trapped and powerless in his environment, has a tenuous relationship with his mother, works for the wealthy Dalton family, and is exploited by Mr. Dalton's daughter and her boyfriend (in this parody named Penelope and Roger) who want to "slum it" with Van Go during a joyride into the "ghetto." An interesting twist to this parody, Penelope and Roger are black, not white, recasting *Native Son*'s original scenario in terms of intraracial class conflict rather than race conflict—likely a critical jibe at what Monk (and perhaps Everett) see as Juanita Mae Jenkins and Sapphire's attempts to "slum it" as teachers of illiterate urban youth in Harlem. As well, *FUCK* mimics the plot details, and perhaps more importantly, the writing style and irreverent language of *PUSH*. *PUSH opens:*

> I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahvre. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder she's retarded. I had got left back in the second grade too, when I was seven, 'cause I couldn't read (and I still peed on myself). I should be in the eleventh grade, getting ready to go into the twelf' grade so I can gone 'n graduate. But I'm not. I'm in the ninfe grade.[19]

The voice of Claireece Precious Jones, the protagonist of Sapphire's novel, is meant to represent her illiteracy and cloistered and pathological urban upbringing. The misfortune and pathology that besets Precious is so abundant that it appears hyperbolic. Likewise, Van Go's experience is

---

[19] Sapphire, *PUSH*. New York: Random House, 1996. 1.

hyperbolic nearly to the same degree, but perhaps exceeding Precious's just enough to create humor in its mockery. For example he is the "fahvre" of four babies, "Aspireene," "Tylenola," "Dexatrina," and "Rexall," all by separate babymamas. Like Precious's first child, Rexall has "Down Sinder." Adopting a similar orthography, the chapters are labeled "Won," "Too," "Free," "Fo," "Fibe," "Sex," "Seben," "Ate," Nine, and "Tin."

Although Monk consciously employs different styles in the two parodies we are presented in the novel, I argue that Monk's adoption of a second self, Stagg R. Leigh, is behind all of his satirical moves, and can be seen as an experimental comic strategy intended as a form of social action in the mode of buggy jiving. In "An Extravagance of Laughter," Ralph Ellison speaks of his own attempts to perform invisibility as a young writer newly implanted in Harlem, NY. Paraphrasing W.B. Yeats's ideas about "masking," He explains:

> I was attempting to act out a self-selected role and to improvise into being a 'second self' that I strongly felt but vaguely visualized….In Yeats's sense, 'masking' is more than the adoption of a disguise. Rather it is a playing upon possibility, a strategy through which the individual projects a self-selected identity and makes of himself a 'work of art'… And with its upward—yes, and *downward*—mobility and its great geographical space, masking (which includes speech and costume as well as pose and posture) serves the individual as a means of projecting that aspect of his social self which seems useful in a given situation…Such a state of affairs encourages hope and

confidence in those who are not assigned and restricted to predesignated roles in the hierarchical drama of American society.[20] Monk names his second self after the African American folk hero known by the variants stagolee, stackolee, and Stagger Lee, a figure based on the real life murderer and pimp Lee Shelton. Shelton, who notoriously murdered Willie Lyons in plain view in a St. Louis bar in 1895, has been immortalized as stackolee in the popular ballad passed down in toasts over several generations. Stackolee is the quintessential "badman," one of the "hard, merciless toughs and killers, confronting and generally vanquishing their adversaries without hesitation and without remorse."[21] The folk archetype of stackolee, while linked to an event that took place around the turn of the 19th century, can also be traced back to the orisha Shango, warrior god of lightening and thunder, of the Yorùbá pantheon. He also finds form in other folk heroes, legendary and real, like John Henry, John de Conqueror, the boxer Jack Johnson, and certainly the literary character Bigger Thomas—before, that is, Bigger gets caught. In the ballad, stackolee never gets caught for any of the crimes he commits, and even beats out the devil himself to rule over hell! Monk's version of stackolee, Stagg R. Leigh, is not unlike his character Van Go Jenkins in his irreverent hostility toward law and order, his cavalier inclination toward violence, and his womanizing prowess. Stagg R. Leigh has been out of the "joint" for only two years by the time he writes *My Pafology*. By remaining threateningly taciturn in his rare encounters with others—his publisher, a critic and his girlfriend, and Kenya Dunston, who is meant to caricature

---

[20] Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," 630.
[21]Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*: *African-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: OUP, 1997, 407-8.

Oprah Winfrey—he leads the public to believe that he must naturally carry a host of "authentic" black experiences that are to vile to talk about publicly, experiences which grant a titillating authority to his novel.

However, despite the overt reference to stackolee and the badman figure, Stagg Leigh also possesses the qualities of the trickster figure in Afro-diasporic cultures linked back to the orisha Eshu. Eshu is a divine trickster who mediates between humans and the gods and creates chaos with his trickery in order to bring enlightenment to the misinformed and ignorant. He wields a pedagogy of comic irony, and is a master of language—the "divine linguist" as the Fon call him. While he does not possess the hypermasculinity of Shango, Eshu is well known for his unusually large and constantly erect penis. Early on in *Erasure*, a young Monk is subtly linked to Eshu as he recalls in his journal about an embarrassing situation he had while slow dancing with pretty a girl at a school dance:

> Her breasts were alarmingly noticeable. Her thighs brushed my thighs and as it was summer I was wearing shorts and could feel her skin against mine and it was just slightly too much for my hormonal balancing act. My penis grew steadily larger through the song until I knew that it was peeking out the bottom edge of the left leg of my pants…Then someone switched on the lights and I heard the voices of Chevon and Reggie saying, "Look at Monkey's monkey.[22]

Monk's superhuman endowment as a mere adolescent, in addition to his precocious love of language, hermeneutics, and writing, tell us that he is

---

[22] *Erasure*, 24.

yet another incarnation of the trickster linked to Eshu. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says of the orisha,

> Frequently characterized as an inverterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis, linguistically [Eshu] is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, the word (as in the form of the verb *to be*) that links a subject to its predicate. He connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures…he is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world.[23]

Eshu's pimp's limp is a perfect figure for how Shango and Eshu, stackolee and the signifyin' monkey, badman and trickster are combined in Monk's performance of his second self. While many cultural critics describe badman and trickster as disctinct archetypes of an heroic dichotomy, with stackolee being a badman and badman only, Bruce Jackson argues that, "If anyone is a model of success in the toasts, it is the Pimp, for he combines the cleverness of the Trickster with the power over others demanded by the Badman—and he is loved and paid for it."[1] Thinking about Monk's second self as a vigorous hybrid in this way makes sense in the narrative when we recognize the multiple associations of Stagg Leigh with the character Rinehart the pimp from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Rine is the embodiment of the invisibility strategy which the invisible man does

---

[23] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: OUP, 1988, 6.

not come to understand completely until he retreats underground at the end of his political evolution. Monk writes in his journal:

> I wondered how far I should take my Stagg Leigh performance. I might in fact become a Rhinehart [sic], walking down the street and finding myself in store windows. I yam what I yam. I could throw on a fake beard and a wig and do the talk shows, play the game, walk the walk, shoot the jive. No, I couldn't.
>
> I would let Mr. Leigh continue his reclusive, just-out-of-the-big-house ways. He would talk to the editor a few more times, then disappear, like down a hole.[24]

Here, he makes overt reference to plot details from *Invisible Man*, specifically the scene when invisible man puts on a hat and a pair of sunglasses to disguise himself, only to be repeatedly mistaken for Rinehart. But Monk does not disappear Stagg Leigh down a hole, like the hole out of which Ralph Ellison's protagonist finally decides to "come out" at the end of his novel. Monk becomes better and better at performing Stagg, and more willing, once his own 3 million dollar Hollywood contract comes down the pike. Monk tries to convince his increasingly skeptical agent, Yul, the only other person besides Yul's secretary who knows anything about Monk's performance: "This thing is in fact a work of art for me. It has to do the work I want it to do."[25]

By now we realize that Monk's understanding of himself as an artist extends beyond experimental writing to include performance art, using the world as his stage. Earlier in his journal, Monk makes a brief reference to

---

[24] *Erasure*, 162.
[25] *Ibid.*, 221.

meeting a black performance artist and novelist who "had recently posed for seventeen straight hours in front of the governor's mansion as a lawn jockey."[26] This mention is left without comment; instead the (hilariously, in this author's view) absurd image is left to do its own work for the reader. This disruptive comic performance represents pure buggy jiving and is summoned in the narrative as Monk indulges more obviously in his own performance art. But just as the reader is presented the artist posing as a lawn jockey without any clue as to the artist's intent, the works' reception, or its political effect, the results of Monk's own political-artistic maneuvers are not fully explained. We do know that Monk's Stagg R. Lee performance meant to expose the racialist assumptions, if not outright racism, of the book publishing and marketing industry has spiraled out of his control. Monk is made all too aware of the impending failure of his performance piece when the panel of judges for the National Book Association's "Book Award," upon which he serves, nominates and eventually awards *FUCK* the esteemed prize.

So I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere. I had caught myself standing naked in front of the mirror and discovered that I had nothing to hide and that lack was exactly what forced me to turn away. Somehow I had whacked off my own

willy

stick

dick

---

[26] *Ibid.*, 2.

159

> *doink*
>
> *rod*
>
> *pecker*
>
> *poker*
>
> *member*
>
> *prick*
>
> *putz*
>
> *schmuck*
>
> *tallywhacker*
>
> *johnson*
>
> *thing*
>
> *little friend*
>
> and now had to pay the price. I had to rescue myself, find myself and that meant, it was ever so clear for a brief moment, losing myself.[27]

This Lacanian peripeteia in the narrative ultimately shatters Monk's narcissistic illusions about his second self who, through performance, he was becoming. Unlike Rinehart's libratory play upon possibility, Monk's attempts at masking limit him, cut into him. Having whacked it off, Monk's overindulgence in his phallic powers as Stagg Leigh leads to self-castration. Deprived of Eshu's grand member, Monk realizes that he has failed as a trickster, an artist. As the invisible man of this novel, Monk suffered a sacrifice of "personality and manhood," but did not manage to attain invincibility, as Ellison says the hero enacting comic revenge often does. In the remaining entries in his journal, Monk's castration is drawn

---

[27] *Ibid.,* 258.

out in his self-destructive attempt to kill off Stagg Leigh by exposing the man behind the mask at the book awards. Not only does Monk fantasize about finding Stagg on the street and killing him, but he also fantasizes about suicide, the consideration of which, Monk tells us at the beginning of the novel, he is not disposed. Meanwhile, non-diegetic entries and recollections of dreams which all reference famous Nazis and Nazi military aggression in the final pages of the novel cast a morbid tone which foregrounds the topic of violence.

The surreal final scene of the novel, the ceremony at which Stagg, appearing naked as Monk, accepts the book award in front of a puzzled crowd, invokes the hallucinatory castration scene in *Invisible Man* in which representatives of the different "incorporations of history and ideology" that he encounters over the course of his political maturation "take the two bloody blobs and cast them over the bridge."[28] As Douglas Stewart interprets of this epiphanic scene, invisible man discovers by this surreal symbolic castration that "his agency, such as it is, derives not from the phallus but from his interventions in discourse, his symbolic action." While liberating as epiphany, freeing invisible man of "illusions," it nonetheless leaves invisible man feeling "painful and empty." Minus an epilogue to work through the post-traumatic stress of (symbolic) castration/epiphany, Monk's political project is left unfinished; the reader is left wondering if Monk's final action was not a failure.

However, the novel does present a model of social protest in Monk's sister, a doctor who works in a free clinic which offers abortions to women who need them. Daily, she risks being the victim of reactionary violence.

---

28 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 569.

Lisa openly compares herself to the eldest Ellison brother, Bill, who uses his profession solely for monetary gain as a plastic surgeon. Lisa's choice to obey her principle and take the less lucrative route of her profession parallel's Monk's choice to produce avant-garde literature that very few can discern. Both are political, and both run the risk of violence. Monk, after all, is accosted by a disapproving audience member and nearly struck by his set of keys after reading "F/V" (the *S/Z* parody). The novel is in fact haunted by an unnamed act of violence which leaves the author dead. At the very least Everett makes the artistic decision to kill off the author of the journal that is the novel in order to play with the idea of posthumous intent.

The stage at which Monk exhibits the most integrity as an artist, at least according to the narrative, is the stage at which his actions parallel those of his sister. His sister, unlike the brother Bill who decides to use his training to make money as a plastic surgeon, sister uses her medical training to provide low- to no-cost medical care and abortions to low-income women at a D.C. clinic, constantly risking her own bodily health and life, and in fact gets killed for it. The fact that Monk too gets killed suggests that his final act may have been more in line with his original artistic integrity than the deluded sense of self that he creates. If martyred for this integrity, however, there is no way to erase the possibility of Monk's ultimate failure.

So where, then, in this narrative to we find evidence of successful comic revenge? I argue that the ambiguous distinction between Thelonious Monk Ellison and Percival Everett is not unlike the space between the symbolic death of Monk at the end of his journal and the

alleged death of the author of *Erasure*. Like a zombie, dead yet living, Everett comes back to haunt the reader in his undead state, both to challenge the founding problematic of the novel—Barthes' claims about the ennunciative function in relation to dead authors—but also to perform the comic revenge that we are not quite sure Monk ever did accomplish. The novel ends with the latin phrase *hypotheses non fingo*, meaning "I hold no hypotheses," the famous phrase used by Isaac Newton in response to a demand to explain the causes of gravity. Just as Newton refused to give an explanation of something about which he had no firm knowledge, the ambiguous narrative voice at the end of *Erasure* refuses to grant us a definite view of what comes of Monk's final gesture. We are led to believe that he is caught, arrested by the TV camera, just as Van Go had been arrested by both the television camera *and* the police after his failed robbery attempt. In this case, Monk's political effectivity is diminished by the enframements sure to color the representation of a mad black man to viewers at home. But then, *hypothesis non fingo*.

Although an homage to and adaptation of *Invisible Man*, *Erasure* is missing the important "epilogue" and "Prologue" of the former, structures which frame and explain the culminating events of the novel. So, while invisible man announces himself as the author of the story we have just read, he provides some closure to the text, a closure that could keep Ellison's name out of it. Everett, on the other hand, constantly puts his own presence under erasure, allowing for the simultaneous gesture of comic revenge inside and outside the text. The puzzling unwillingness to conclude the storyline declared at the end of the narrative, moreover,

163

prompts the reader shift focus from "what happened?" to "what is this book trying to do?"—from "did Monk succeed?" to "did Everett succeed?"

3. Making a Scene: Laughing at the "Inauthentic Negro"

In place of useful action, he has worked up an act. This act is his tradition, for he has no other. –ANATOLE BROYARD, "The Inauthentic Negro," 63

"Where the fuck did you get that accent?!" This is what Junebug, the "chittlin circuit" stand-up comedian asks of his son Pierre Delacroix, née Peerless Dothan. *Bamboozled*'s Pierre has created a second self, a "bougie" black self with an ambiguously aristocratic, and perhaps European, accent forged during his undergraduate years at Harvard, in order to gain acceptance in (or perhaps to infiltrate?) the white- owned and dominated television industry and culture at large. Pierre's strange accent, created by comedian and actor Damon Wayans, consternates not only his own father and other characters in the film—his white boss Dunwitty, his discovered talent Manray, stage name "Mantan,"—but seemingly many causal viewers of the film as well.[29] Instead of brushing off Pierre's ambiguously fancy accent as incidental, poor acting on Wayans' part, or poor directing on Lee's, I would like to consider it, and the character of Pierre it ostentatiously synechdochizes, in light of the personality performance we have observed not only in this chapter but also in the last—of Nina Simone's adoption of a similarly ambiguous

---

[29] This observation comes in large part from the myriad conversations I have had with colleagues, students, and friends about the film. Many viewers cannot seem to get past Pierre's blaringly eccentric—and annoying—accent. In the director's commentary on the DVD, Spike Lee explains that Damon Wayans apparently met someone on the subway who spoke in such an eccentric manner and later channeled his voice into the character of Pierre.

accent discussed in the previous chapter and of Monk's performance art and adoption of a second self in *Erasure*. The artifice of Pierre's overdone accent strongly signals a conscious performance, one that evolves into a comic performance (gone bad), but it also offers another angle from which to consider the relation between second-self performance and authenticity. *Bamboozled*, I argue, stages a discussion of "authentic blackness" that resonates with that found in *Erasure* and the post-soul "blaxploration" project more broadly, yet simultaneously allows for the salient co-existence of practiced masking and authenticity in the form of an artist. The linkage is a moral one at the root of a comic revenge strategy that would ever be successful.

In large part, the film apparently claims, an understanding of history moors the version of authentic black (artistic) identity that it lauds. The central drama of the film springs from the idea that it is only when an artist should lose touch with history that his second-self performance spins perilously out of control. Losing touch with history is linked in this film with the delusion that comes with fame and fortune, tropologically figured with the hip-hop vernacular instantiation of the "keeping it real" vs. "selling out" debate which echoes throughout the film's dialogue. Those who lose sight of the past, or who never knew the past to begin with, get caught up in the repetition-compulsion of America's amnesic love/theft of "blackness," pouring old wine into new bottles and satisfying the national thirst for comforting narratives of cultural and biological difference. With his curatorial splicing of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural artifacts and practices into the new millennium setting of the film, Lee lays bare how modern American

regimes of representation, cultural idioms, and social phenomena resurface without missing a beat in this postmodern world. Unfortunately for the new millennials, this includes nineteenth-century America's favorite form of popular culture, the blackface minstrel show, and its twentieth-century offshoots.

The film opens on this idea as Pierre Delacroix addresses his audience from the dead, a nod to William Holden's character Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*—Pierre's limbo, the Dumbo Clocktower penthouse his success as a screenwriter bought him. The arms of the clock face before which he stands are immobile, connoting time frozen still. The urban palate of indigos, azures, and cobalts mixed with wrought irons and grays coloring this opening scene and much of the film casts a tragicomic mood like that set by Louis Armstrong's haunting "voice of invisibility" singing "Black and Blue," the often surreal quality of the film echoing invisible man's "blue dream."[30] Over Pierre's opening monologue plays an original composition by Stevie Wonder with lyrics linking the originary displacement of the Middle Passage with the problem of misrepresentation that continues into the present. At once a "talented tenth" Negro of the early twentieth-century and at the same time a quintessential "buppie" who seems to jump off the pages of Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic," this tragicomic cultural mulatto mediates bizarrely between two moments in African American cultural history, both which are fervently motivated by the psychological drama inevitably found at the intersection of race, class, and the weight of representation.[31]

---

[30] *Invisible Man*, xviii; 536.
[31] Cf. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic." *Callaloo*. No. 38 (Winter, 1989): 233-243. Ellis explains that the "New Black Aesthetic," a result of the increasing cultural diversity

Like the "race men" (and we should add "gender" to the aforementioned matrix) of the teens and twenties, Pierre (who anachronistically uses the term "Negro" rather than "black" or "African American") bristles at the systematic misrepresentation of his people by a white-owned media institution, the fictional broadcast network CNS. Whereas the New Negroes might have responded by founding their own black-owned institutions, Pierre develops a scheme to get fired from his job as a television writer (and avoid breaking his contract) while exposing the inherent racist attitudes that pervade the corporate management and creative climate at CNS—a comic revenge that attempts to subvert the system rather than sidestep it. "Dunwitty wants a coon show," he explains to his highly skeptical yet dedicated assistant, Sloan (Jada Pinkett-Smith), "And that's what I'm going to give him. It's going to be so racist, so negative, he won't have the balls to put it on the air. Hence, I'll prove

---

within the African American community, "shamelessly borrows and reassembles along both race and class lines." It adamantly resists the essential black subject and other romantic notions championed by the Black Power movement. Instead, it celebrates the hybridity of black culture and the freedom to be black and different simultaneously. "Stripping themselves of both white envy and self-hate [NBA artists] produced supersophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be," 234-7. In many ways, Ellis's piece presages what would come to be called the post-soul aesthetic.

The black intelligentsia of the early twentieth century and into the New Negro Renaissance argued that freedom of expression in black arts would require independently owned and operated presses or otherwise alternative means of producing one's art. While the black artistic and intellectual community generally agreed on this point, the nature of black art was a highly contested topic. In 1926, *The Crisis* magazine published a special issue on "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed" in which "New Negroes" like Langston Hughes and Jessie Faucet came up against W.E.B. DuBois and the "Old Guard" of the "talented-tenth" philosophy. The former school believed art to be propaganda, existing for the plight of racial uplift, or not at all. The latter wanted free reign into all topics black, including the previously forbidden territory of black folk culture, the representation of which the Old Guard saw as synonymous with minstrelsy's stereotyping. *FIRE!* Magazine, for example, was founded by Wallace Thurman for the New Negro movement in response to this ideological schism.

my point…the networks don't want black people on television unless they are buffoons." Thus, with Sloan's help Pierre develops *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, a premise for a film that Lee proudly recycles from Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1968).[32]

As the film introduces us to our minstrels, tap genius Manray (Savion Glover) and his "manager" Womack (Tommy Davidson), close attention paid to the details of scene, costume, and story show us that their fate is similar to that of America's very first black entertainers. One of the opening scenes captures Manray tap dancing on a shingle "for pennies" to the accompaniment of his hype-man Womack's rhythmic solicitation of cash from the appreciative corporate crowd—entertaining in its own right—harkening back to scenes like this one from the first half of the nineteenth-century of black slaves entertaining a northern white crowd in a display that presages blackface minstrelsy:

> [The slave entertainers] would be hired by some joking butcher or individual to engage in a jig or break-down, as that was one of their pastimes at home on the barn-floor, or in a frolic, and those that could and would dance soon raised a collection; but some of them did more in 'turning around and shying off' from the designated spot than keeping to the regular 'shakedown' which caused them all to be confined to a 'board,' (or shingle, as they called it,) and not allowed off it; on this they must show their skill […]the board was about five to six feet long, of large width, with its particular spring in it, and to keep it in its place while dancing on it, it was held down by one on

---

[32] In *The Producers*, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom produce *Springtime for Hitler*, an anti-Nazi satire construed specifically to fail. However, the satirical element of the musical gets lost on its audiences and becomes a hit for all the wrong reasons.

each end. The music or time was usually given by one of their party, which was done by beating their hands on the sides and legs and the noise of the heel. The favorite dancing-place was a cleared spot on the east side of the fish market in front of Burnel Brown's Ship Chandlery.[33]

In an establishing shot, the tonal contrast rendered by the drab and threadbare appearance of the street performers as they hotfoot through the cool blue tones of the streets plastered with brightly colored billboards and crowded with sharply dressed urbanites creates the illusion that these characters were drawn from the pages of history. In the story of how these two impoverished black entertainers become the "ignorant, dull-witted, lazy, and unlucky" comic duo at the center of *The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, "Mantan" and "Sleep-n-Eat," as with the character of Pierre, history is repeated with a difference.[34]

Bringing attention to the historical through details of plot, character, and scene intersect with the film's argument about the relation of history to black authenticity and social morality. In contrast to some of Lee's earlier films that tap into a nationalist aesthetics that implicitly accepts conventions and traditions which instantiate a relatively unified blackness through the rehashing of cultural styles coded as "authentically black," *Bamboozled* takes as a founding problem the fissures of black identities, especially along lines of class and education, but also along lines of gender, skin shade, and nuanced political interests (including

---

[33] Thomas F. DeVoe, *Market Book Containing a Historical Account of the Public Markets in the Cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Brooklyn Etc.* Ayer Publishing, 1969, 344.

[34] The characters' names reference the comic duo Mantan Moreland and Willie Best.

apathy). Thus, according to the logic of this most "blaxploratory" of Lee joints, Peerless Dothan's second self, Pierre, is not inauthentic because he is not "black enough," as his Irish boss Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport) would accuse, not because he talks with an ambiguously foreign accent, nor because he has changed his name. Rather, Pierre becomes woefully inauthentic only when he lets loose his moorings in history and in ethical social relations. At the point where Pierre recognizes how miserably his comic revenge has failed, he is seen staring at an archival image of a slave hold on his computer, paralyzed with dismay. While staring at the image, receiving the "good news" about the show's success from Dunwitty on one line, Pierre receives a call from his mother on the other, wishing him support and urging him to visit his father. Pierre's subsequent visit to Junebug in the following scene marks the last one they will ever have together. It is at this moment in the film that we see a Pierre Delacroix/Peerless Dothan who has a keen sense of his relation to the past and a genuine value of the most basic of social relations—family—morph into a cold and fame-hungry "sell out" who destroys his personal relationships and purposely forgets the details of the past. At the height of his fame (or infamy), Pierre gives a radio interview with Gary Byrd on WLIB and, in defense of his show, claims that slavery ended 400 years ago. In contrast to the aforementioned scene, Pierre's self-deception and willful ignorance is painstakingly obvious.

Following philosopher Cynthia Willet, I am arguing that a revised, postmodern version of Sartre' notion of inauthenticity as "bad faith" aids us in making sense of Pierre's unethical and antisocial play of identity. In her discussion of *Bamboozled*, Willet explains how the concept of

170

authenticity can be recuperated in light of such revisions: "That existential formula for authenticity, to choose the self, easily reduces to a formula for bad faith. One does not choose the self any more than one can give birth to oneself. The self is tied to a larger racialized world; authenticity emerges from acknowledging and working through a troubled sense of belonging."[35] In other words, while we know that there is no such thing as an unmediated individual wherein rests some kind of essential self, we do not necessarily have to cast out the concept of authenticity, a concept which, central to the film, we must confront. If we think about authenticity in this case as identity that is morally grounded in a sense of history and a sense of ethical obligation within social contexts, intimate and public, we can give earnest and fruitful attention to the concept. Moreover, authenticity need not oppose the practice of identity play and masking if that masking is performed in the service of the pedagogical and ethical at its heart.

In both *Bamboozled* and *Erasure*, the arbiters of authenticity as I define it here are the female characters closest to the comic heroes, Pierre's assistant Sloan and Monk's sister Lisa. As mentioned above, the novel presents a model of authenticity in Lisa for her righteous willingness to make less money and face violence on a daily basis in her choice of career. At all points during the film, Sloan continues to value her social relations, loving her brother although his is "ignant," standing by her boss although he becomes corrupted, and supporting her love interest, Mantan, although he can't stop questioning whether her career success is due to merit

---

[35]Cynthia Willet, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008, 81. See especially chapter three, "Authenticity in an Age of Satire: Ellison, Sartre, Bergson, and Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*."

alone—all while standing up for herself and her principles first and foremost. As well, Sloan literally becomes the bearer of history in the film, distributing reading material, video documentaries, collectible figurines along with lessons about the origins of blackface. Locating morality in women can on the one hand be interpreted as part of an anachronistically nineteenth-century logic, whereby women embody heart and men, the mind. As distracting as this logic may be, it behooves us to look at these two characters' symbolic functions more holistically in light of each the film's and the novel's commentary on authenticity and artistry. While Lisa and Sloan may boast a righteous, postmodern authenticity, neither is able to employ it to its fullest effectivity; Lisa is shot dead early in her career, and Sloan is incapable of being heard as her multiple warnings go completely unheeded to tragic consequence. If these characters model authenticity for the reader/viewer, they do not model the most successful ways of mobilizing that authenticity politically. It remains an artist's job to do this.

Yet Pierre, like Monk, fails. Miserably. What claims does such demise make for the film's commentaries upon and attempts at subversive black satire? As I argue with *Erasure*, key framing elements in the film, consisting in this case of camera view, positioning, shot, and movement as well as a unique double-entendre in casting, destabilize the fourth wall of the film, opening the film to intersubjective space, all while bringing constant attention to practices of looking as they pertain to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy and its ramifications in black entertainment into the present and as they pertain to the medium on television. But while *Erasure* plays with textual framing to posit debates about writing,

172

meaning, and the relationship of the author to the text, *Bamboozled* plays with framing to implicate its own audience in the viewing practices it satirically condemns; this is Lee's comic revenge upon the infotainment telesector and all of us implicated in the American tradition of cathartic viewing at the expense of black humanity. Thus, the satire defined for the viewer at the very start of the film by Pierre Delacroix applies as much to Pierre's project as to Lee's. Pierre defines satire for the viewer, who he interpellates as his intended *television* audience demographic, while being filmed by Lee's signature shot: the actor moves around the space on a camera dolly, giving the disorienting illusion that the room is moving while producing a familiarizing effect of intimacy with the actor. Lee also mentions in the director's commentary of the *Bamboozled* DVD that he specifically included the definition in order to avoid wild mischaracterizations of his project as non-ironic, misinterpretations which, Lee laments, were suffered nonetheless. It is at this very moment that the satirical project of the film's protagonist and that of the filmmaker are overlayed and intentionally confused. This initial confusion is bolstered by key artistic directional choices. For one, the entire film is shot with the Sony VX 1000, a commercial handheld mini digital video recorder that gives the film the "too clear, too crisp" look of HDTV.[36] The low cost of these cameras also allowed Lee, with his small budget, to have up to 15 of them rolling at once during a given scene. The multiple angles and placements of the cameras that are frequently cross-cut in a given scene present the viewer not only with orienting, scopophilic perspectives of

---

[36] See the director's commentary on the *Bamboozled* DVD.

ILLUSTRATION 5: SHOT FROM STAGE SHOWING STUDIO AUDIENCE'S REACTION TO "MANTAN"

ILLUSTRATION 6: SHOT OF STUDIO AUDIENCE AND ALSO THE SHOW'S PRODUCERS DIRECTING

ILLUSTRATION 7: POINT-OF-VIEW SHOT PLACING VIEWER IN THE AUDIENCE

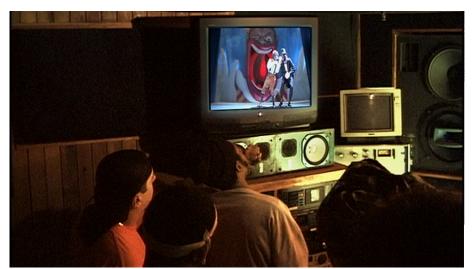**ILLUSTRATION 8: SHOT OF WOMACK, SLOAN, AND MANRAY WATCHING "MANTAN"**

ILLUSTRATION 9: SHOT OF THE MAU MAUS WATCHING "MANTAN"

ILLUSTRATION 10: POINT –OF-VIEW SHOT PLACING VIEWER IN THE TELEVISION AUDIENCE

normative looking practices but also with odd angles effecting psychological uneasiness and a surreal mood and, most importantly, point-of-view shots placing the viewer *in* the *mise en scène* of the many audiences—studio, television, nightclub—represented in the film.

Notably one of the more unique qualities of *Bamboozled* is its use of casting to point to the parallel "real" world of black entertainment outside the film. The actors cast to play certain roles signify layers of meaning beyond the characters they play, and in the juxtapositioning of celebrity personality and acted character there emerges a commentary on the role of the type of entertainer or artists that each character/actor is meant to represent. One of the best examples of this double-entendre can be detected in the casting of the Mau Maus, a pseudo-revolutionary hip-hop group whose rightful disgust for "Mantan" and misguided lust for fame lead them to stage a public execution of Manray, broadcast on the internet for all to see. Lee kills two birds with one stone in this portrayal. He pokes fun at naïve, self-deemed revolutionaries abiding by an "old school," Afrocentric politics who resemble the "self-romanticized" category of Anatole Broyard's "inauthentic Negro:" "The real content of the inauthentic Negro's romantic attitude," he explains, "may be summed up in the idea that society owes him something, and, in specific situations, those people from whom he wants something owe him acquiescence…the inauthentic Negro wears his skin as a uniform, the uniform of a man fighting a war for you, against your worst self."[37] At the same time, Lee brings attention to the presence of "socially conscious" hip-hop, which the

---

[37] Anatole Broyard, "Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro: How Prejudice Effects the Victim's Personality." *Commentary Magazine*, July 1950: 56-64; 60-1.

Mau Mau's music and philosophy parodies. The presence of socially-conscious rappers Mos Def (Big Blak Afrika, Sloan's brother), Charli Baltimore (Smooth Blak), Cannabis (Mo Blak), DJ Scratch (Jo Blak), and MC Serch (1/16th Blak) in the group, as well as in other parts of the film— The Roots play the "Alabama Porch Monkeys" on *Mantan*—remind knowing viewers of this element of black popular culture in the real world and bring their attention to the contrast between fallacies of black authenticity and authentic, socially-conscious artistry. Although the Mau Maus are unquestionably portrayed as "ignant" and provide some comic relief in this heavy film, the perspective of the actors who play them leak into the dialogue, providing a space in the *Bamboozled* for some of the most explicit critiques of the pop culture industry's treatment of "blackness." For example, in response to Sloan's accusations that the Mau Maus are inauthentic and naïve, Big Blak Afrika retorts to his big sister,

> "Why are we 'pseudo'? If we was talkin' 'bout some ice and fuckin' crystal and pushin' Bentleys and fuckin' poppin' molo or all that shit then we'd be the all the fly shit? You like that shit, you like bling blingin'…We talkin' 'bout revolution, we talkin' bout people gettin' free, and fuckin' America. USA. KKK. People's hearts are all fucked up…If I had platinum draws, I'd be the nigga, right?"

Despite its crude articulation, Big Blak provides the film's only overt critique distinguishing between the popular, hyper-commodified form of hip-hop that a network like CNS would produce and politically-charged, socially conscious hip-hop that "keeps it real"—the Mau Maus own music, as parody, fitting neatly into neither category. Serious social commentary, in fact, irrupts in otherwise farcical appearances on multiple occasions in

177

the film. To take one more example, the Mau Maus' celebratory response to Smooth Blak's insight that "black" should be spelled without a "c," admittedly a comic notion, 1/16th Blak enters into freestyle:

> B-L-A-K. BLAK. The opposite of white, man. A Member of the African community, y'naw 'mean? But check it out, here's where the gray people try to slick it to us with their trickery, and trick it to us with their slickery. Listen to the connotations in that, yo: Black. Wicked. Angry. Dog. Sullen. Depressed. Black Ball. Black Listed. Black cat is bad luck. Bad guys wear black. Must have been a white guy that started all that!

While 1/16th Blak's rhymes could be dismissed as pre-packaged nationalist rhetoric, it is important to note his keen signifyin(g) upon how the term "black" signifies in society. The fact that (mis)representation is the subject of "underground" urban expression speaks to potentially empowering modes of resistance for the black community, in this case, a socially-conscious hip-hop.

Besides the Mau Maus, we find doubling in the characters of Manray, Womack, and even Pierre. The tap-dancing prodigy and admired choreographer Savion Glover (of the Tony award-winning *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*, *Jelly's Last Jam* and other acclaimed shows) plays the latter; the comedians Tommy Davidson and Daymon Wayans well known for their appearances on the sketch comedy show *In Living Color*—a show which had been accused of its own share of buffoonery—play the former. Lee's interesting move of having real-life actors, dancers, comedians, and rappers play (more or less) minstrelized versions of themselves brings attention to the fine line all black artists and

entertainers walk in any type of (popular) performance. It also advises that, even for the most "enlightened" of us, it is hard not to laugh or cheer at some of the actual talent hidden beneath the minstrel mask. To cast off these minstrelized performances as devoid of artistic merit is often just as unfair as it is to argue that they are authentic representations.

One of the most important actor/character doubles in *Bamboozled is* Junebug, whose voice haunts the film in a way not unlike invisible man's grandfather's instructing the young protagonist to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction…swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."[38] Junebug, whose last instruction to Pierre is to "always keep 'em laughing," represents a more classic model of African American humor that comes, in one sense, from the minstrel logic of the "hidden transcript."[39] However, Junebug's brand of stand-up comedy cannot be a strong enough "comic antedote" for the ailments of society because of his self-imposed relegation to the chitlin' circuit. The subject matter of his humor is political, racial, and critical, however it is not meant to incite any sort of a riot. Instead, its intention is more for redressive and cathartic purposes.

Junebug is played by Paul Mooney, the mind behind the Richard Pryor show and much of his stand-up material. Mooney connotes, along

---

[38] *Invisible Man*, 16.

[39] Cf. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Scott explains, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant…We are saved from throwing up our hands in frustration by the fact that the hidden transcript is typically expressed openly—albeit in disguised form. I suggest, along these lines, how we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct," xii-iii.

with Junebug, the classic elements of African American comic traditions, but also the more post-soul phenomenon of television sketch comedy. He conjures both the crossover popularity of Pryor's shows, stand-up specials, and movies and also the actor's own relatively underground status. Mooney never "makes it" like Pryor does because of his refusal to play by Hollywood's rules, even while participating from behind the scenes as Pryor's right-hand man. To a large extent, Mooney plays himself in *Bamboozled*, performing routines one could encounter off-set. But the casting of Mooney also juxtaposes the provincialism of Junebug's chitlin' circuit hibernation, if you will, with Mooney's cosmopolitan interactions with the mass media and crossover venues. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Mooney continues to enjoy far more in-group than crossover recognition as a comedian. Junebug, dressed in an ostentatious zoot suit, keeps cool in order to keep his values warm, maintaining an authenticity, but one that he does not necessarily channel into a political strategy—one that involves risk of cross-cultural pedagody.

This is where Pierre's death takes on additional significance. We might ask of the two texts in question here: why do both filmmaker and novelist foreground failure in their respective pieces? What does that do for us to see failure, and how does that contrast with the potential success of the larger pieces? Returning to the importance of the dead author for a moment, we recall that in *Erasure* the author's death is used to posit ongoing debates about the relevance of the author the text, as well as the relationship of the author's biography to meaning, authenticity of meaning, and the ability to tell the story. In *Bamboozled*, it is not as obvious why the author—the satirist—has to die, since the theoretical

180

point about authorship at the center of *Erasure* is not a pointed concern of the film. On the one hand, we can think of Pierre's death as a dramatic statement about the perils of performance and of taking on an inauthentic identity. Not only does his death punctuate the biopolitical consequences of harmful representations of blackness (as do the deaths of Manray and the Mau Maus too), but it also points to the risk involved in comic revenge strategies which step outside the safety of the village and into the colonized terrain of the dominant culture. The militaristic resonances of the "avant-garde" return here as nonviolent strategies run perilously close to violent ones, and in the examples here, even intersect. It is as if both Lee and Everett must stage fictional violence in order to make nonviolent attacks upon the causes of such dire circumstances. It is thus the simultaneity of the comic acts enables novelist and filmmaker to experiment with the limits of buggy jiving without sacrificing himself fully to the cause. As well, it is the simultaneity of real-time and fictional buggy jiving that stages a nightmarish encounter of the horror of violent ends for the reader and viewer, yet, as in a dream, offers a second chance for reflection, redemption, and action upon waking.

CONCLUSION

If Du Bois was right when he wrote that that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, are Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova correct when they argue that, in the twenty-first century, we should add to that the "epistemic line," or, we could say, the "cultural line"?[183] This shift in emphasis from "color" to "culture"—if we are to go along with this schema—means a radical shift in the focus of oppressive forces. This is not to deny that many of the obstacles to freedom have yet to be ameliorated. Rather, as the last chapter has indicated, the cultural obstacles are gaining more attention from those raised in the aftermath of color line struggles. However, as this study's ongoing discussion of the "funny Negro" has shown, not only has culture always been an area of concern, but many intellectuals and artists living under Jim Crow prioritized it in their own political pursuits; for the prescient knew that the structural is subordinate in many ways to the cultural, and while the immediate needs of bread and land are dire, both are just as related to survival, at the very least because what happens at the level of governance, law, and economy is determined by the lower frequencies of the cultural substratum.

Ralph Ellison's writings have honed in on this, convincing us to look in unlikely places for strategies, not only of private rebellion but also of larger social change. Black entertainment, which has saturated American culture since the dawn of the minstrel show in the mid-nineteenth century,

---

[183] Cf. Walter D. Mignolo and Madina V. Tlostanova, Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge. *European Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 9 (2006): 205-221; 218.

has in a sense provided both a target of and a training ground for the type of social action *Buggy Jiving* aims to make sense of. The funny Negro on stage can smile in compliance with the racial program, bolstering attitudes of difference which fuel unethical acts of discrimination and subjugation. Or she can smile with the satisfaction of a trickster, using the act to disrupt the act, and with it, the discourses of oppression on which the act depends. The chapter on Nina Simone presented an example of how buggy jiving gets mobilized in a cross-cultural, critical pedagogy that breaks down the framing elements which would prevent her white audiences from seeing the musical performer as the authentic artist who she knows herself to be. Simone, like the protagonists of *Erasure* and *Bamboozled*, and like Rinehart of *Invisible Man*, take on the mask on invisibility in order to manipulate their way into otherwise inaccessible arenas of power and platforms for being recognized while multiplying the possibilities for their personal exploration and growth. *Buggy Jiving* showed how taking on a one-dimensional role allows for multi-directional movement that can compensate for an ordinarily restrictive social environment. Wendell Harris, Jr.'s avant-garde film of 1989, *Chameleon Street,* fits alongside *Erasure* and *Bamboozled* as a tribute to *Invisible Man* that centers on the possibilities of comic performance for infiltrating segregated areas. Unlike Thelonious Monk Ellison and Pierre Delacroix, *Chameleon*'s protagonist Doug Street is a struggling member of the working class, supporting himself and his wife with whatever odd jobs he can get. However, an impressive autodidact, he matches, if not surpasses the bourgeois black protagonists discussed in the last chapter in his erudition. Instead of earning his way into elite society with the procurement of degrees from

institutions like Harvard, Doug Street performs his way in, using people's preconceptions against them. While a model of invisibility, Doug lacks the ethical motive behind buggy jiving. Indeed, his comic heroism comes off as selfish at best, sinister at worst. As a contrast to some of the examples of buggy jiving amongst the post-soul generation discussed in these pages, *Chameleon* could provide an apt subject for future considerations of the ethical and pedagogical elements supporting this comic mode of political action.

The absurdity of all that can be called "buggy jiving" links back to the Prologue/Epilogue of *Invisible Man*. In this study, not enough stress was placed on the significance of reefer intoxication to the aesthetics of what I am theorizing. "Buggy," in jive talk, refers to being crazy, off-kilter, "out there," as well as to being high on marijuana. "Jiving" refers to telling a tall tale, often with the intention of fooling the listener in one way or another (as in "shuckin' and jivin'"). It also means speaking "jive," or the black slang of 1940's hepster culture. In jive lingo, "jive" also means a "joint," or marijuana cigarette, and while rare, the verb form also has been used in music of the era to mean smoking reefer. Future exploration of buggy jiving should do more to link the qualities of the absurd and surreal found in all instances of buggy jiving with the off-kilter perspective of marijuana intoxication, and also to link the strategic element of buggy jiving to the subversive tendencies of jive culture. Hepster extraordinaire, Cab Calloway, who wrote the "official jive language reference book for the New York Public Library," also boasted notoriety for being the "reefer king." Some of his banned recordings of "reefer songs" could provide helpful centerpieces for addressing the "high" aspect of buggy jiving,

especially since these songs contain within them overt critiques of the "white man." We know that hepcats like the zoot-suit donning Calloway possessed a coolness that Ellison greatly admired—a coolness that, he says, "helped keep our values warm."

Buggy Jiving, as a concept, has the potential to be a useful trope for describing an aesthetic and political practice, one that more conventional ways of describing and theorizing black culture require. *Buggy Jiving*, as a project, can also serve to bring increasing attention to comedy as a theoretical concern in Afro-diasporic studies. As the line of questioning and exploration in this study showed, comedy finds a secure place in urgent conversations about politics, race, and freedom. "Buggy jiving" may not be the only term we can use, and perhaps insisting on this term could prove to be limiting in future manifestations of this project. As well, its filial ties to Ralph Ellison maternal apron strings must be, to a degree, severed since theorizing it ultimately continues Ellison's critical work beyond what he could accomplish during his lifetime.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, Elizabeth. "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Videos." *Public Culture* (Fall 1994) Vol. 7, No. 1: 77-96.

"Africans, Darkies and Negroes: Black Faces at the Pan American Exposition of 1901, Buffalo, New York." *Uncrowned Queens Institute for Research and Education on Women, Inc.* University of Buffalo. November 22 <http://wings.buffalo.edu/uncrownedqueens/C/history/black_faces/old_plantation.html.

Anderson, Telia U. "Calling on the Spirit": The Performativity of Black Women's Faith in the Baptist Church Spiritual Traditions and Its Radical Possibilities for Resistance. *African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. Harry J. Elam Jr., David Krasner; Oxford University Press, 2001, 114-131.Aristotle, *Poetics*. N.G.L. Hammond, trans. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2001.

Appiah, Anthony. "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986 (21-37).

Aristotle, Malcolm Heath, trans. *Poetics*. London: Penguin, 1996.

Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. New York, Penguin Books, 2006.

_____. "We Refugees." *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.

Artaud, Antonin, Mary C. Richard ed. *The Theater and Its Double*, New York: Grove Press, 1958.

Ashe, Bertram. "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review*, Vol 41, No 4 (2007): 609-623.

Baker, Houston. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1968.

Bamboozled. Dir. Lee, Spike. Damon Wayans, Savion Glover, Jada Pinkett Smith, Tommy Davidson, Michael Rappaport. New Line Cinema, 2001.

Banes, Sally. *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Baraka, Imamu Amiri. "Black Dada Nihilismus." *Transbluency*. Marsilio Publishers, 1995.

Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice." In *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Bauman, Zygmunt. "The Left as Counter-Culture of Modernity." *Telos*. No. 70 (Winter 1986-1987), p. 81-93.

Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of the Post-Apocalypse.*
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. (133-216).

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.*
Cloudesely Berereton and Fred Rothwell, trans. New York: The
MacMillan Company, 1914.

_____. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of*
Consciousness. F. L. Pogson, trans. London: G. Allen & company,
ltd., 1921.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture.* London and New York: Routledge,
1994.

Bowman, Rob. Liner notes. *Jazz Icons: Nina Simone Live in '65 & '68.*
Reelin' in the Years Productions, 2008.

Bowser, Eileen. *American Cinema 1890-1909: Themes and Variations.* New
Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009.

Brecht, Bertolt, John Willet, trans. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of*
an Aesthetic. New York: Macmillian, 1964.

Brody, Jennifer. *Punctuation.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
(62-84).

Brooks, Daphne A. "'All That You Can't Leave Behind': Black Female Soul
Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe.*"*

Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism (2008) vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 180-204.

_____. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Anatole Broyard, "Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro: How Prejudice Effects the Victim's Personality." *Commentary Magazine*, (July 1950) 56-64.

Best, Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

Carpio, Glenda. 2008. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Chandler, Nahum D. "Between." *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*. 20 (1993): 26-7.

Colston, Herbert L. "I've Never Seen Anything Like It": Overstatement, Understatement, and Irony. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 12(1), 1997. 43-58. Journal of Pragmatics 32 (2000) 1557-1583.

_____ and Jennifer O'Brien. "Contrast and pragmatics in figurative language: Anything understatement can do, irony can do better"

Cosgrove, Stuart. "The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare." Stephen Duncombe,
    ed. *Cultural Resistance Reader*. London, New York: Verso, 2002.
    (157-165).

Crowdus, Gary and Dan Georgakas. "Thinking about the Power of Images:
    An Interview with Spike Lee. *Cineaste*. Vol. 26, No. 2 (March 2001):
    4-9.

Cruse, Harold, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. New York: New York
    Review of Books, 2005.

DeVoe, Thomas F. *Market Book Containing a Historical Account of the
    Public Marcskets in the Cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia
    and Brooklyn Etc.* Ayer Publishing, 1969.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An
    American Slave. The Classic Slave Narratives*. Henry Louis Gates,
    Jr., ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2002. 323-436.

Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls *of Black Folk : Authoritative Text, Contexts,
    Criticism*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, eds. New
    York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

Eaton, Kimberly. "Deconstructing the Narrative: Language, Genre, and
    Experience in *Erasure*." *Nebula* (September 2006) Vol 3, No. 2-3, p.
    223.

Elam, Harry A., Jr. The Black Performer and the Performance of
        Blackness: *The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom* by William Wells
        Brown and *No Place To Be Somebody* by Charles Gordone. *African-*
        American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader.
        Harry J. Elam Jr., David Krasner; Oxford University Press, 2001,
        288-305.

Elam, Michele. "Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Phillip Roth,
        Colson Whitehead." *African American Review*, Vol 41, No 4 (2007):
        749-768.

Ellis, Trey. "The New Black Aesthetic"; "Response to NBA Critiques."
        Callaloo. No. 38 (Winter,1989): 233-243, 250-251.

Ellison, Ralph. "An Extravagance of Laughter," *The Collected Essays of*
        Ralph Ellison. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library,
        1995, 613-658.

_____. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." *The Collected Essays of*
        Ralph Ellison. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library,
        1995, 100-116.

_____. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1995.

_____. "The Shadow and the Act." *The Collected Essays of Ralph*
        Ellison. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library, 1995,
        302-22.

_____. "The World and the Jug." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library, 1995.

_____. "Study and Experience: An Interview with Ralph Ellison." *Massachusetts Review* (1997): 417-435.

Everett, Percival. *Erasure*. New York: Hyperion, 2001.

_____. "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel." *Callaloo* 22.1 (1999): 18-23.

Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

_____. "The Fact of Blackness." *Black Skin White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967 (109-140).

Feldstein, Ruth. 2005. 'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s. *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4:1349-1379.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relations*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1960.

Gammond, Peter. "Stride." *Oxford Companion to Music*.

Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar, ed. *Alternative Modernities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

Gates, Jr. Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: OUP, 1988.

Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

_____. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Gold, Joe, Dir. *Nina Simone: A Historical Perspective*. Peter Rodis Productions, 1970.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality." *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 102-125.

Hall, Stuart. "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" Wallace, Michele, et al. *Black Popular Culture: A Project*. Vol. 8. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. (21-36)

Hampton, Sylvia, and Nathan, David. *Nina Simone: Break Down & Let It All Out*. London: Sanctuary, 2004.

Harding, James M. and John Rouse, eds. "Introduction." *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*. Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press, 2006 (1-17).

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York, Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Hegel, G.W.F. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Wiley Book Co. 1944.

hooks, bell. "Dialectically Down with the Critical Program." Wallace, Michele, et al. *Black Popular Culture: A Project*. Vol. 8. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992, p. 51.

_____. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Howe, Irving. "Black Boys and Native Sons." *Dissent* (Autumn 1963).

Hughes, Langston. "Backlash Blues." *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. v.74 no.5 1967 (Jun 1966): p. 251.

Hunter, Tera. "'It's a Man's Man's Man's World': Specters of the Old Re-Newed in Afro-American Culture and Criticism." *Callaloo*. No. 38 (Winter, 1989): 247-249.

Hutcheon, Linda, and ebrary, Inc. *The politics of postmodernism*. London; New York: Routledge, 1989.

Jackson, Bruce. *Get Your Ass out of the Water and Swim: African American Narrative Poetry from Oral Tradition*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Jackson, Esther Merle . "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd," *Phylon*, Vol. 23, No. 4 , (1962): 359-71.

Jackson, Lawrence. *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002.

Jameson, Frederick. *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Jeffers, Lance. "Nina Simone" *When I Know the Power of my Black Hand*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974.

Kant, Emmanuel. *Kritik of Judgment*, John Henry Bernard, trans. London and New York, Macmillan and Co., 1892.

Kiel, Charles. *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907-1913*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

Laughing Ben. American Biograph Company, 1903/4.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*: *African-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: OUP, 1997.

Lewis, Pericles. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York and Oxford: OUP, 1995.

_____. "Response to Trey Ellis's 'The New Black Aesthetic'." *Callaloo*. No. 38 (Winter, 1989): 244-246.

Mackey, Nathaniel. "Other: From Noun to Verb." *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. Robert G. O'Meally, ed. NY: Columbia University Press, 1998, 513-534.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.

Mignolo, Walter. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality." *Cultural Studies*. Vol. 21, Nos. 2-3 March/May 2007, 449 -514.

_____. *Local Histories Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000.

_____. and Madina V. Tlostanova, Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge. *European Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 9 (2006): 205-221

Monson, Ingrid T. *Freedom Sounds :Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa.* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

_____. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Moya, Paula M. L. and Michael R. Hames-García, eds. *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2000.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Pease, Donald. "Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: The Nonsymbolizable (Trans)Action." *Boundary 2*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2003.

Posnock, Ross, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Rabinovitz, Lauren. "Past Imperfect: Feminism and Social Histories of Silent Film," *Cinémas: revue d'études cinématographiques / Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2005): 21-34.

Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 2007.

Robinson, J. Bradford. "Stride." *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, 2nd edition*.

Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: UNC Press, 2000.

Sapphire. *PUSH*. New York: Random House, 1996.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*, Richard Burdon Haldane and John Kemp, trans., Third Edition, Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1888.

Scott, David: *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Englightenment*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Simone, Nina. 1974. *It is finished Nina Simone, 1974*. Vol. 1 sound disc : analog, 33 1/3 rpm, stereo. ; 12 in. New York, N.Y: RCA Victor.

_____. 1964. *Nina Simone in concert*. Vol. 1 sound disc (34 min.) : analog, 33 1/3 rpm, stereo. ; 12 in. Chicago: Philips.

_____, and Cleary, Stephen. *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

_____, and Music Video Distributors, Inc. 2003. *Nina Simone live at Ronnie Scott's*. Oaks, Pa: Music Video Distributors.

_____, et al. 2005. *Nina Simone live at Montreux 1976*. Vol. New York: Eagle Eye Media.

_____, et al. 1993. *Live at the Village Gate*. Narberth, PA: Collectables.

_____, et al. 2008. *Nina Simone live in '65 & '68*. Vol. San Diego, CA: Reelin' in the Years Productions; Naxos.

Snead, James. "On Repetition and Black Culture." *Racist Traces and Other Writings*. New York: Palvgrave Macmillan, 2003 (11-33).

Sonnega, William. "Beyond a Liberal Audience." *African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. Harry J. Elam Jr., David Krasner; Oxford University Press, 2001, 89-98.

Spillers, Hortense J. "'All the Things You could be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race." *Critical Inquiry*. 22.4 (1996): 710-34.

_____."Ellison's 'Usable Past': Toward a Theory of Myth." *Black White and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago and London: U. Chicago Press, 2003 (65-80).

_____. "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon." *Black White and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago and London: U. Chicago Press, 2003 (251-276).

Stewart, Jaqueline Najuma. *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2005.

Taylor, Clyde. "Minding the Messenger: a Symposium on *Bamboozled*." *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* (Summer 2001) Vol. 3, No. 3: 8-32.

Taylor, Paul C. "Post-Black, Old-Black." *African American Review*, Vol 41, No 4 (2007): 625-639.

Waligora-Davis, Nicole A. "Riotous Discontent: Ralph Ellison's 'Birth of a Nation'." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 50.2 (2004) 385-410.

Wallace, Maurice O. *Constructing the Black Masculine*: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

Wallace, Michele. Interview. *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*, Kino Video, 2005. DVD.

_____. "Bamboozled: the Legacy." *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* (Summer 2001)Vol. 3, No. 3: 33-38.

Watkins, Mel, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005.

Wexler, Laura. "Laughing Ben on the Plantation." *English Language Notes*. Vol. 44, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 181-225.

Willet, Cynthia. *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008.

Wright, John S. *Shadowing Ralph Ellison*. Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2006.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 1998.

X, Malcolm. "The Ballet or the Bullet." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1997.

_____. Archie Epps, ed., *The Speeches* of *Malcolm X* at *Harvard.* New York: Morrow, 1968, 170.