RICE UNIVERSITY

Aural Fictions: Sound in African American Literature

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

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HOUSTON, TEXAS
JANUARY 2010
Abstract

This dissertation explores the importance of representations of sound in the African American literary tradition. Beginning with Frederick Douglass’s descriptions of the slave songs and working through depictions of jazz in the early moments of the Civil Rights movement, I show that the aural dimension of African American culture has mediated black writers’ engagement with written public discourse. Looking at such diverse works as slave narratives, essays, music books, serial fiction, autobiography, and the novel, this project demonstrates that the tension between aurality and the printed word motivates much of the political work that African American literary texts accomplish. By excavating the various strategies that black writers use to resolve this tension I argue that sound, especially music, functions in African American literature to allow black writers to engage in intertextual discourses that utilize aurality to speak across temporal and stylistic boundaries that have previously limited our critical inquiries.

While critics have afforded substantial attention to African American musical culture and its influence on black writing – most notably Houston A. Baker’s work on the “Blues Matrix” and Alexander G. Weheliye’s notion of “Sonic Afro-Modernity” – this criticism has focused on specific musical forms as structuring agents that exert a direct influence upon black literature. My dissertation not only expands the site of critical inquiry to include non-musical sound, but also focuses on the ways that black writers foreground aurality as more than a means of accessing black musical traditions, but also to create an inter-textual connection to a black literary tradition as well. My dissertation shows that the African American aural tradition, and the inherent problems that accompany any attempt to represent it in writing, has provided black writers a common
site from which they can enter into literary genres and styles that are otherwise racially coded as non-black while still maintaining a strong connection to the African American literary tradition.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my dissertation director, Caroline Levander, for all of the time and energy that she has spent providing intellectual and professional guidance. The many hours that she has spent reading and critiquing my work have been instrumental in every step of the dissertation writing process. The high standards to which Dr. Levander has held me have made this dissertation a better piece of scholarship and made me a better scholar.

I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee. Wesley Morris has always proven generous with his help and his encouraging words, and I greatly appreciate both. I also am grateful to Karim Al-Zand for his willingness to join my committee and for showing such enthusiasm for my work. Above all, I would like to sincerely thank all of my committee members for the time that they were willing to give to my work.

In the years that I have spent working on this dissertation, I have had the good fortune to participate in several writing groups, and I would like to thank all of the graduate students who participated in these invaluable workshops. In 2005 I participated in a Mellon Seminar with Elizabeth Fenton, Gale Kenny, Cory Ledoux, Molly Robey, and Benjamin Wise, all of whom provided valuable feedback on the earliest chapters of this project. In 2007-08 I had the privilege of participating in an interdisciplinary reading group with Cecilia Ballí, Ryan Foster, and Ann Ziker, and my work benefitted from the unique insights that they contributed. Also, I would like to extend a sincere thank you to the members of an informal and on-going reading group that includes Lillian Crutchfield,
Cory Ledoux, and Molly Robey. Their sustained familiarity with my work and detailed readings of individual chapters have proven vital to the success of this project.

In addition to the many people whose intellectual generosity enabled me to complete this project, I would also like to thank the various institutions without whose generous financial support I could never have completed my dissertation. First, I would like to thank the Rice English Department for providing me with a stipend for the first five years of my time here, and for providing me with a Summer Research Grant. I must also thank the Americas Colloquium for providing me with a Sarofim Graduate Stipend, the Dean of Humanities for awarding me a Dunlevie Teaching Fellowship, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for offering a Summer Research Grant. I also extend a very heart-felt thank you to the Humanities Research Center for awarding me a Graduate Dissertation Fellowship. This fellowship provided me with necessary funding during a crucial moment in the development of this project.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the friends and family members whose emotional support has been just as important to the completion of this project as any intellectual or financial contributions. First, I would like to thank my parents Michalle and Barry Messmer for their never ending support of all of my endeavors, and for all of the love that they have shown me throughout my life. Next, I would like to extend sincere thanks to all of the friends who have helped me to deal with the pressures of producing this dissertation. Though some of these friends have appeared elsewhere in these acknowledgements, their unyielding support warrants repetition. At least as valuable to me as this document are the friendships that I developed with fellow graduate students Elizabeth Fenton, Cory Ledoux, Molly Robey, and Robert Erlewine. I would
also like to extend my appreciation to those friends who were able to remind me that there is a world outside of scholarship, including Virginia Oxford, Kristin Martinez, Lauren Kutac, and Kendra Scott. Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to Norie Guthrie whose coming into my life has eased the difficulty inherent in the final steps of producing this project, and whose love and companionship makes me look forward to my future endeavors.
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Desegregating the Word

“It’s striking that Jefferson and Amiri Baraka, two figures in American letters who agreed on little else, could concur in the terms of their condemnation of Phillis Wheatley.”

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. – “Phillis Wheatley on Trial” (87)

“Black is... and black ain’t.”

Ralph Ellison – Invisible Man (9)

Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, stands as the first book published by an African American author, making it, in Gates’s words, the “progenitor” of the African American tradition. If this volume, though, is the foundational text of various African American literary traditions, then those traditions do not begin with the matriarchal voice of Wheatley. They begin, instead, with the patriarchal voices of Thomas Hutchinson, Andrew Oliver, Thomas Hubbard, John Erving, James Pitts, Harrison Gray, James Bowdoin, John Hancock, Joseph Green, Richard Carey, Charles Cheuney, Mather Byles, Ed. Pemberton, Andrew Elliot, Samuel Cooper, Samuel Mather, Joon Moorhead, and John Wheatley since, before a single poem appears in Wheatley’s collection (the first and only volume that Wheatley published in her lifetime) there appears an attestation by those eighteen white men to “assure the World, that the POEMS […] were (as [they] verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa.” Thus, if “all subsequent black writers” have “consciously or unconsciously, extended and revised a canon” that begins with Wheatley, then they have also extended
and revised a canon whose constitutive moment depended on the approval of white men for its inception (Gates "In Her Own Write" x). Indeed, the "white trustee's panopticon" that Houston A. Baker claims to "overwhelm [...] and terrify" Ralph Ellison in 1945 originates in Wheatley’s 1773 volume of poetry and has, in a variety of forms, hovered over most African American writers in between. From its very beginning, then, the challenge that has faced African American writers has been to create a literary tradition that can escape the regulative gaze of whiteness and do so while operating within a discursive medium – the written word – that white culture has long claimed as a form of expression that is, if not its exclusive property, a discursive space over which it exerts its control. Put still more simply, the challenge that has faced African American writers has been the challenge of writing on their own terms.

The works that appear in this dissertation are but a meager sampling of the many texts proving that African American writers have been more than up to the task. The means by which black writers have accomplished this have been as varied as they have been sophisticated, and to account for all of the strategies that black writers have utilized is well beyond the scope of a single dissertation. Here, then, I have chosen to excavate just one: sound. This choice, though, is far from arbitrary. It is my contention that the enduring legacy of sound as it appears within African American writing is perhaps the most fruitful site upon which we can begin to better understand the unique challenges that have faced African American writers. As my project shows, the challenges that arise in black writers’ attempts to represent sound in the silent medium of print often reflect the similar obstacles that they confront regarding their struggle to participate in a U.S. literary tradition that, for much of our nation’s history, was as segregated as the bodies of
its citizens. Through an understanding of the ways that black authors respond to these challenges, though, we can come to realize the ways that they have managed to establish trans-historical literary techniques that are able to respond to the many varieties of black experience and struggle. It is my contention that some of the earliest deployments of sound in African American literature (specifically, in Douglass’s various narratives) establish a tradition of discursive resistance through aurality that remains available to later writers, even as the specific circumstances to which those writers must respond differ from the particularities of Douglass’s experience.

What this dissertation shows is that through textual representations of sound, especially (but not limited to) music, African American writers have been able to juxtapose aurality with the silent medium of print in a way that complicates the primacy of the written word as the only viable U.S. political discourse. For much of our nation’s history, writing was the only effective means for the mass dissemination of information and as a result, represented the most, if not the only, means of effective political discourse (leading to what Friedrich Kittler has called the “monopoly of writing”). The concurrent association of writing with whiteness (perhaps best evidenced by the enforcement of illiteracy among slaves), then, allowed southern whites to effectively monopolize political discussions of slavery in ante-bellum U.S. accounts of southern life.

By contrast, the representations of aurality that are the focus of my work complicate the primacy of the written word by drawing attention to its silence as a failing. The inability of prose to adequately represent sound exposes the expressive limitations of textuality and, as a result, calls into question writing’s place as the privileged carrier of meaningful cultural and political discourse. This, in turn, opens up the possibility that
aural productions can function as a site of meaningful discourse. Furthermore, the frequent repetition of this strategy by African American writers has led to the formation of a literary trope that helps to define an inter-textual network of resistance between black authors. Put more simply, this trope helps to define an African American literary tradition and, in so doing, to wrestle away the literary as the property of whiteness.

Through the study of aurality in African American texts, my dissertation offers a means of understanding trans-historical conceptions of a tradition marked by race while avoiding the essentialism that has accompanied many similar studies. For at least the last several decades (and I emphasize the phrase “at least” here) critics have turned to music as a means of making sense of the variety of black culture in the U.S. From Amiri Baraka’s *Black Music* in the 1960s, to Albert Murray’s *Stomping the Blues* in the 70s, to Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* in the 80s and 90s, black musical culture has represented a means (or, in Baker’s terms, a “matrix”) for understanding black culture. However, in addition to their emphasis on music and a trans-historical approach to literature, these studies also share a basic essentialism; they all approach black culture in such a way that defines it as somehow separate from the larger culture of the U.S. and turn to music as a means of establishing black literary “authenticity.”

The problem with such an approach becomes evident when we attempt to utilize such a “matrix” to understand a writer whose experience does not fit within such strict parameters. In this regard, Phillis Wheatley offers an interesting test case since, in the more than two hundred years since the publication of her poems, she has undergone consistent attacks from black and white critics alike, and on the same grounds: whether or
not she represents an authentic (or essential) black voice. The reason for these attacks stems largely from the uniqueness of Wheatley’s circumstances in pre-National U.S. society. When Wheatley was brought to Boston on a slave ship on July 11, 1761 she was sold to John Wheatley, a wealthy New Englander whose wife Susanna Wheatley, used her as a house servant. She was approximately seven years old and thus had little memory of her life in Africa and, because she lived among a white family in New England, had almost no contact with the African customs that had persevered in the slave culture of the south. Unlike most southern slaves, though, Wheatley did learn to read and write from her owners and, as a result, earned an extensive education in Western cultural forms, which included the study of Latin and of the classics.

It is this combination of isolation from her own culture and relative assimilation into the culture of her owners that has led to the many critiques of Wheatley that emerge from both the white culture in which she moved and the black culture that she represented. Having accomplished her initial task of proving that she could write, her struggle then shifted to showing not that “she was the genuine author but whether what she produced was genuine poetry” (Gates “Phillis Wheatley on Trial” 86). Of course, the very means by which she proved her ability to write – through an attestation by eighteen white men – weakened, in the eyes of some of her critics, her ability to maintain her own poetic voice. As Paula Bennett has argued, “the men whose patronizing signatures authorized Wheatley’s poetry denied her a legitimacy of her own. They stole the power of her word, just as she was stolen (‘snatch’d’) from a loving parent’s arms” (68). As a result, her attempts to demonstrate her own literary skills and, by extension, the skills of her race, were already ultimately doomed to failure in the eyes of her detractors since
those skills were, in their perception, not entirely “her own.” Thomas Jefferson is illustrative of the common perceptions among Wheatley’s white contemporaries when he makes his (in)famous assertion that:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions composed under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (267)

Here, Jefferson not only claims that Wheatley’s works lack real poetry, but links this claim to her race, indicating that it is her blackness that excludes her works from the realm of true literature. Though her white owners could confer literacy upon her, and the panel of eighteen white Massachusetts gentlemen could verify her ability to produce lines of poetry, many white readers continued to refuse to acknowledge her capacity to produce “authentic” literary art due to what they perceived to be an essential deficiency of the black race.

Of course, such perceptions are not surprising among Revolution Era white elites. Ironically, though, Wheatley’s African American critics have been equally harsh. Due to her isolation from black forms of culture, her writings strictly adhered to the poetic and rhetorical forms that she learned from her white masters. Gates has chronicled the many twentieth-century African American critics who have been quick to condemn Wheatley for her willingness to embrace these white poetic forms – beginning with Edward Wilmot Blyden in 1887, including such notable black writers as James Weldon Johnson, Wallace
Thurman, Seymour Gross, and Addison Gayle, Jr., and eventually culminating with Amiri Baraka’s assertion that Wheatley’s “pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry are far and, finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their *hollers, chants, arwhoilies, and ballits.*” Wheatley, of course, was simply making use of the only cultural forms that she knew – she could no more be expected to holler like the slaves in the south as they could be expected to write a poem in the style of Alexander Pope. But because the forms that she knew were of European origin, later African American critics were as quick to deny her ability to write in an “authentic” black voice as white critics were to deny her ability to write in an authentically poetic voice. Gates puts it well when he argues that Wheatley was “[t]oo black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth. She was an impostor, a fraud, an avatar of inauthenticity” (87). What is also striking is that Baraka’s critique of Wheatley places her poetry in direct contrast to the aural culture of black slaves in the south. Though he is critical of her ability to speak with an authentic black voice in her writing, he offers no literary alternative, but instead points to the aurality of the southern slave culture as the most clearly oppositional voice of eighteenth-century black Americans.

At stake here, then, are the racial connotations that accompany certain discursive systems. Baraka’s statement implies that, in the eighteenth century, writing was indelibly marked with whiteness – a claim with which Jefferson would seem quick to agree. Even more recent critics, who have been far less quick to dismiss Wheatley, have wrestled with the question of just how subversive of white “ownership” of the written word Wheatley’s
poems and her poetic voice succeed in being, or even attempt to be. As Robert Kendrick claims, “Wheatley’s critics are divided into two camps – those who contend that Wheatley critiques white oppression through the skillful use of biblical and classical references, and those who contend that Wheatley used her poetry to assimilate into the dominant culture” (71). These critical debates underscore just how much essentialist notions of black “authenticity” still affect many approaches to African American literature and, as a result, ultimately limit its potential relevance to U.S. discourses of politics and resistance.

In fact, even those who argue in favor of Wheatley’s subversive strategies tend to do so while acknowledging the discursive limitations that the written word (and the accompanying panoptic white gaze that accompanied it) placed upon her. Kirstin Wilcox, for instance, points to the highly political nature of several of Wheatley’s poems, especially “A Farewell to America,” in which she asserts that Wheatley, contrary to the claims of several of her critics, is acutely aware of and resistant to the degradations of slavery. Wilcox argues that, beneath its benign façade, “A Farewell to America,” which recounts Wheatley’s journey with her mistress to England, contains “the unsettling temptation of freedom lurking within the poem” as Wheatley ponders potentially abandoning her mistress when she arrives in England, which no longer allowed slavery (7). However, she then goes on to show that, despite the political messages that Wheatley was able to weave into her poems, the manner in which she had to fashion her literary persona in order to achieve publication ultimately muted her subversive voice, and that this was a direct consequence of her dependence upon written discourse. According to Wilcox, despite Wheatley’s apparent attempts to speak out against the slave
system, her dependence on the language and culture of her oppressors meant that she
could only reach her audience by reducing her complaints to a whisper that her audience
was unlikely to hear. The suffering that slavery caused her would never feature
prominently in the minds of her (primarily white) audience because “[i]n the absence of a
direct claim to the contrary, the mere fact of Wheatley’s existence as a printed writer
tended to obscure her en-slavement,” and the way that she had to present herself in order
to achieve publication made such a “direct claim to the contrary” impossible (7).

It is important to note, however, that Wilcox’s assertion that the constitutive
exchange that transpires between Wheatley and her audience is a decidedly one-way
venture is not one that all critics share. In an effort to assign a greater level of agency and
subversion to Wheatley’s works, several critics have pointed out that, far from being at
the mercy of her audience, Wheatley was able to exert some influence upon her readers
and to challenge their established concepts of racial identification. Even in these cases,
though, the bounds of language still hold Wheatley’s literary accomplishment far below
the subversive standards that her later African American critics hold for her. Kendrick,
for instance, claims that several of Wheatley’s poems “announce pleas for transgression,
a needed violation of the autonomy of the laws of genre which require other author(itie)s
to authorize her work. Wheatley assumes a paradoxical task: to write an epic (the most
legitimate and inviolable of genres) of illegitimacy and transgression” (72). Though
Kendrick ultimately asserts that Wheatley successfully navigates this paradox and
eventually “offers a vision of an American culture without a privileged center and
without any qualifications for membership based on race, class, or gender,” (87) he
acknowledges that “both the language and forms in which she wrote were not those of
her native Africa but those of the dominant culture” (73). Ultimately, because “she did not have unlimited access to culture, and was forced to make ‘intelligent choices’ from available figures of discourse,” the best she could do was to attempt to erase difference and assert a race-less identity for both herself and for her (and perhaps all) written discourse (79). Though she works to complicate the inherent connotations of whiteness that accompanied her writing, she is unable to re-inscribe the written word with an alternative identification. Instead, the strategy that Kendrick ascribes to Wheatley is one of negation – she seeks to establish that “all Colonial Americans are ‘equal,’ precisely because definitions of equivalency or difference cannot be established”; that she lacks identity not because she has become culturally white, but because everyone, including whites, lacks identity.

What is interesting in this critical reading of Wheatley, especially in its juxtaposition with those critics who disparage Wheatley’s “authenticity,” is how well it demonstrates different approaches to racial identity that have been prevalent in our critical discourse for quite some time now. The proto-post-modern strategies that Kendrick ascribes to Wheatley here represents a turn away from the essentialism of Baraka and Baker (and even, despite his defense of Wheatley, Gates), and towards a post-structuralist concept of identity that has arisen, according to Paula Moya, specifically “as a corrective to a prior social and intellectual tendency toward essentialism” (9). This approach to racial identity (if we can even call it that) rescues Wheatley from charges of “inauthenticity” precisely because, as Kendrick claims Wheatley’s poems do, it casts the very concept of “authenticity” as a fiction rooted in a set of social relations dependent on linguistic signifiers with no correspondence to anything “real” or “true.”
While this approach successfully moves beyond the essentialism that has otherwise hounded Wheatley for more than two centuries, it also represents an understanding of identity politics that some scholars of African American literature have been reluctant to fully embrace. Toni Morrison, for instance, in responding to post-modern claims that “‘race’ does not exist,” writes:

When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matter and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. (3)

Pointing to the European (predominantly French) origins of post-modern/post-identity thinking, Morrison asserts, “[i]t always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of ‘race’ when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist” (3). Morrison’s distrust of post-modern theories of identity that render racial (as well as other identity based communities such as gender) obsolete stems from her belief that, though not essential in nature, concepts of race and gender have, in fact, had, and continue to have, a material impact on people’s lives. As such, Morrison holds firm in her belief that, while identity categories might not represent an essential “reality,” nevertheless “there is culture and both gender and ‘race’ inform and are informed by it” (3).

Again, Wheatley stands as a compelling example of what is at stake in Morrison’s critique of post-modern approaches to identity politics. To assert a kind of post-modern race blindness on the grounds that racial identity is a social
construct is to simultaneously deny the very real impact that such a construct had upon the production of her poetry. If, as Kendrick argues, Wheatley seeks to dismiss racial categories as a means of creating a level playing field, race still remains relevant to an understanding of her work since her making such a move was necessary precisely because the society in which she moved not only “saw” race but used it to establish social hierarchies that enabled the enslavement of one race for the benefit of another. In order to fully understand the means by which writers like Wheatley are able to make political interventions in the societies that oppress them we must maintain an awareness of the terms of that oppression and, in the case of Wheatley, that means acknowledging the very tangible material effects of racial categorization.

Wheatley, then, demonstrates the value of Moya’s assertion that, “effective political agency is best located in the project of examining and explaining, rather than dismissing or subverting, identity” (12). By understanding the “socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world” we can begin to discuss the ways that Wheatley’s racial identity affected her relationship to both the poetic forms that she adopted and the African American community that, for some, she represented/represents (13). Rather than assigning her (or denying her) an “authentic” black voice, such a context specific approach to identity fosters an understanding of the ways that race limited Wheatley’s discursive freedom within forms that her contemporary audiences
perceived as the province of whites and how those limitations have continued to affect the place of her poetry in the African American literary tradition.

Unlike essentialist notions of race that led to charges of “inauthenticity,” an understanding of racial identity that is aware of specific historical contexts can, in fact, help us to realize both the important similarities that existed between Wheatley and her African American contemporaries and the reason that later critics were so quick to dismiss them. After all, as Paula Bennett argues, despite Wheatley’s relative unfamiliarity with southern black culture, there are still certain similarities between Wheatley’s works and the singing that took place among the slaves on the plantations. She points out that, “like the creators of spirituals [...] Wheatley uses stock religious imagery to signify on more than one level” (69) and that Wheatley’s many elegiac poems suggest that, “like the creators of spirituals, Wheatley was profoundly committed to the belief that she would be compensated after death for the pain she suffered in life” (71). Such similarities should come as no surprise since, while there were many aspects of Wheatley’s situation that were atypical of African American experience in the late eighteenth century, the cultural pressure of slavery was one that they shared and, as a result, their subversive desire to resist that pressure is also something that they shared.

At the same time, though, the relative particularity of her circumstances differentiate her experience from those of the southern slaves to such an extent that she does not easily fit essentialist notions of black “authenticity” since her poetry does not reflect many of the cultural practices that were common in the
south. Her works are far more than "pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry," but they do, in the end, share more in common with eighteenth-century English poetry than they do with forms of culture that appeared in other slave cultures. If her poems represent "ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their hollers, chants, arwhoilies, and ballits," then that is because southern nights were not a part of her experience as a slave in the north and, as a result, she cannot represent that element of black experience in her own works. Ultimately, Wheatley "apparently did all she could to absorb her owners' linguistic and religious culture, unlike slaves on southern plantations, who preserved many of the rhythms and beliefs of their native cultures in their songs and stories" and, in this regard, the uniqueness of her situation in the north does differentiate the particularities of her experience from the majority of African Americans at that time (Bennett 65).

This difference has been a costly one, as Baraka's derisive comments about Wheatley show. Though her desire to overcome a limited access to discourse is similar to that of the southern slaves, and her techniques for doing so bear some resemblance to their strategies, it is the aurality of slave culture that has, more than perhaps any other quality, endured as a means of resisting what I show in this project to be the continued segregation of the written word in U.S. culture. The slave songs, as a tradition that still bore traces of African culture, offered Southern slaves an opportunity to express themselves and the uniqueness of their condition in a discourse that did not already belong to the southern slave owners. Meanwhile, Wheatley, even when she does invoke aurality, can only do
so through tropes that she learned from her white masters. When she writes, in
“To Maecenas,” “So long, great Sir, the muse they praise shall sing,/So long thy
praise shall make Parnassus ring,” these lines are heavily steeped in Classical
reference and the eighteenth century poetic traditions of England. As a result,
Wheatley’s use of aurality do little to complicate the written discourses that she is
deploying since they resemble the works of white contemporaries like Alexander
Pope to a far greater extent than they resemble the musical traditions of African or
even the slave songs of the south. As a result, it has been as easy for Wheatley’s
critics to locate her works outside of the African American literary tradition as it
has been for them to locate her outside of the white literary tradition.

One of the aims of this dissertation, then, is to chart the relative success
that writers who followed Wheatley had in navigating a U.S. literary tradition
that, for much of its history, insisted upon segregating white and black culture,
including writing. While the specific limitations that have been placed upon
black writers changed substantially in the years that followed Wheatley’s “trial,”
limitations did, nonetheless, persevere. The relative success of black writers who
use aurality to overcome these limitations, though, has also persevered in ways
that Wheatley’s manipulations of Enlightenment era poetic forms did not. As a
result, previous approaches to understanding the relationship between black
writing and literature have seen in music’s enduring historical relevance an
essentialized marker of blackness in writing that Wheatley’s poetry lacks.

One of the contributions of my project, then, is to intervene in this
essentializing (and thus, ultimately, exclusionary) understanding of African
American music and its relationship to literature. In this regard, my project joins recent criticism by scholars such as Alexander Weheliye, Robert O’Meally, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Krin Gabbard, David Meltzer, and others who, through their analysis of music and literature, have worked, in the words of Brent Hayes Edwards, to allow the study of African American culture to “move beyond models of a ‘blues matrix’ or ‘signifyin(g)”’ that for so long dominated African American critical discourse (6). My work, however, differs from these critics’ approaches both in my willingness to engage a wide temporal range of texts, and in my widening of the phenomenological scope of my examination to include non-musical sound. Ultimately, these two aspects of my approach prove mutually informing since it is precisely because of my wider historical approach that an equally broad conception of sound becomes so important.

Since discussions of aurality that seek to examine its relationship to questions of racial identity must maintain an awareness of historical specificity in order to avoid the essentialism of previous approaches, recent criticism that has sought to complicate the “grand narratives” of previous critics has remained temporally narrow. For instance, Weheliye’s *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, which, like my project, works to challenge “the general hegemony of vision that permeates Western modernity,” remains focused only on twentieth century musical productions and their relationship to relatively recent advances in analog and digital sound technologies. However, it is my contention that while these new sound technologies might have altered the relationship of aurality to technology and thus impacted upon music’s place within twentieth
century U.S. society and twentieth century written discourses, we cannot fully understand the importance of this shift without a thorough account of what preceded it. As Paul Gilroy has claimed, “Black modernism [...] was ‘initialized’ by the catastrophic violence of slavery that kept its progenitors at a distance from literacy and logo-centric selfhood, and shaped by the creative musical opportunities that were offered as partial compensation for forced exile from the world of writing” (104). The stakes of Weheliye’s examination of “Sonic-Afro Modernity,” then, become clearer when we consider their relevance to a history of black aurality that predates his twentieth-century focus.

With a wider historical lens we can realize that the introduction of the phonograph, and the resulting widespread influence of black aurality that Weheliye astutely chronicles, is significant not only in what it reveals to us about the place of blackness in the formation of concepts of Modernism, but also what it tells us about the means by which African Americans were able to establish literary tropes of resistance that would have lasting historical resonance. As my second chapter shows, though the specific pressure of slavery and its attempts to enforce illiteracy among the African American community no longer existed, writers like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin encountered remarkable resistance to their desires to fully engage the written forms of Modernism. As a result, Ellison, though writing at a time that was historically very different from that of Douglass, nevertheless found himself responding to the same struggle for full access to the written form and, ultimately, deployed the same literary tactics in order to overcome this struggle. With this realization in place, we can also gain a
better understanding of Ellison’s relationship to the sound technologies that are so crucial to the notion of “Sonic Afro-Modernity” and realize that while Weheliye is correct that Ellison returns “time and again to questions of sound, technology, and (black) culture,” he does so with a degree of ambivalence that Weheliye’s temporally narrow focus misses (9).

It is important, though, to distinguish between the approach that I am using and the tradition of providing a “grand” narrative of African American literature that occupied earlier critics like Gates and Baker. Though the historical parameters of my project cross several traditional “periods” of history, I do so not in the interest of providing an a-historical approach to African American literature, but do so, instead, to show that the historical circumstances that produce the phenomena that I am charting endure across our usual understandings of nineteenth and twentieth century periodization. I am arguing that the logic of racial difference upon which both slavery and segregation rested required the preservation of the dominant political discourse in the U.S. (writing) as the province of whiteness. Therefore, African Americans struggled with what Ellison dubbed the “segregation […] of the word,” from at least the moment of Phillis Wheatley’s 1773 “trial” until the Civil Rights era ended both physical and literary segregation.

Furthermore, due to the persistence of this discursive divide, I argue that once Douglass successfully utilized black aural culture in his writing in order to challenge both the primacy of written discourse and the connotations of whiteness that that discourse carried in ante-bellum society, many African American authors
that followed him turned to the strategies that he developed in order to overcome similar discursive obstacles. This should come as no surprise given the lasting impact that his works had upon so many of the major figures of black letters, including those that appear in this project. James Weldon Johnson, for instance, states that after having won a copy of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* he “read it with the same sort of feverish intensity with which [he] had read about [his] earlier heroes, Samson, and David and Robert the Bruce” and remarked that upon seeing Douglass deliver a speech in Jacksonville he “was filled with a feeling of worshipful awe” (*Along This Way* 60-61). Pauline Hopkins, meanwhile, included Douglass in her series *Famous Men of the Negro Race*, which she published in the *Colored American Magazine* from November 1900 to October 1901. Ralph Ellison included Douglass in a passage of *Invisible Man* in which Brother Tarp brings a portrait of Douglass into the narrator’s office, and Ellison would later claim “Frederick Douglass, John Jasper and many other eloquent and heroic Negroes […] still [move] among us through the contributions they made to the flexibility, music and idealism of the American language” ("Remembering Richard Wright" 672).

That Douglass’s literary strategies would endure beyond the historical moments of his own works, then, is hardly surprising. Though there are several historically specific factors within the temporal scope of my project that exert significant influence upon the details of these strategies, the fundamental discursive problem, and the strategy that black authors use to respond to it, remain consistent. Over this period, then, I am arguing that African American writers
were able to use aurality as a strategic response to a society that insisted upon racial difference and division rather than as a result of any essential qualities of blackness, whiteness, aurality, or writing.

Since this project is far reaching in its historical scope, however, I have found it necessary to employ some of the techniques that critics have formerly used to define a distinct and "authentic" black canon, though I deploy them to different effect. For instance, while Gates' attention to music in *The Signifying Monkey* is only cursory, his claims implicitly point to music's important relationship to "Signifyin(g)" and to the ways that an attention to music in black texts will increase our understanding of the manner in which African American musical forms inform the literary tradition. What Gates' concept of Signifyin(g) shows is that African American music not only offers a site upon which African American writers can signify but, due to the frequency with which these writers have turned to music as a place of Signifyin(g), literary depictions of music have become sites unto themselves upon which African American writers can reference each other, often across significant temporal gaps. For instance, as my third chapter shows, when W.E.B. Du Bois signifies upon the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" in *Dark Princess*, this is just as important as an act of Signifyin(g) on Pauline Hopkins's similar use of "Go Down, Moses" in *Of One Blood* as it is as an act of Signifyin(g) on the song that he references. This moment in Du Bois's text works to connect his novel to another novel with similar political aims just as much as it works to connect his novel to the tradition of the African American Spirituals. Such a realization would be impossible if not for Gates's seminal work on the inter-textual relationships of African American writers in *The Signifying Monkey*. 

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Where my approach differs from Gates’s is in the work that I see this inter-textual network doing for critical conceptions of race. For Gates, the inter-connected nature of African American texts that is the inevitable result of the process of “Signifyin(g)” results in a set of parameters that establish the boundaries of an African American tradition. Indeed, Gates’s stated desire in *The Signifying Monkey* “to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions” suggests that a black tradition exists prior to our critical attempts to recover it and that the work of scholarship is to discover this tradition’s pre-existing terms. By contrast, my project attempts to connect certain authors in order to show how historically specific understandings of race often endure across traditional understandings of historical periodization. This, in turn, leads to certain aspects of shared experience among certain racial communities, and that the resulting forms of expression form a common vocabulary of resistance. This vocabulary, however, is one that informs the U.S. literary tradition in such a way that, though a product of various historical moments of black experience, is not somehow linked to an essential notion of “blackness.” Instead, this vocabulary comes to inform the very U.S. literary tradition that it initially aimed to complicate and, as a result, helps to desegregate the written word and the racial connotations of its various forms.

One of the key means by which I work to maintain this project’s sensitivity to historical specificity in the face of a wide temporal reach is through my equally wide understanding of the terms “aurality” and “sound,” especially as they differ from the more obvious terms of “song” and “music.” It is certainly the case that the African American aural tradition includes the black musical tradition and, as a result, music plays a central role in this project. However, a careful attention to non-musical sound helps to
ground claims about African American aurality in the particular material conditions
under which it is produced. It is my contention that many African American authors
utilize depictions of non-musical sound in their writings in order to offer an important
aural context that can then, in turn, affect our understandings of the musical traditions
that they also deploy.

For instance, my second chapter shows that Ralph Ellison, in his essay “Living
with Music,” carefully describes the sounds of the city in order to further demonstrate the
level of agency that he ascribes to jazz and the blues. He describes the difficulties that
confront him since he, like so many African Americans in the first half of the twentieth
century, moved to the city and thus had to confront the overwhelming noise of life in
Harlem -- noise that causes him to have an intense case of writer’s block. In this way
Ellison connects his struggles to engage the written discourse to his life in an African
American community in which poverty forces black city-goers to live in close proximity
to each other and thus create a sonic landscape full of distracting noise. Thus, when he
assigns music the task of overwhelming the noise that had previously prevented him from
writing he not only links his essay to previous texts that highlight music as a means of
overcoming the obstacles that confront African Americans in the U.S. literary discourse,
but also connects that same dilemma to the particular cultural moment and location in
which he finds himself. Our understanding of what Ellison accomplishes in this essay,
then, is contingent not only on fully understanding his text’s relationship to questions of
writing and music, but also on non-musical forms of sound that are unique to particular
African American communities.
In addition to helping to maintain an awareness of specific historical circumstances, an attention to non-musical sound also helps to highlight the full impact that African American musical traditions have had upon black resistance since it reveals the full extent of the reach of “aural discourses.” By depicting the full aural context into which some African Americans have asserted musical traditions, black writers are able to show a level of public agency that might otherwise seem to be unavailable to certain African American communities. This notion of agency is an important one since African Americans were, for so long and in such a variety of ways, denied full access to the written word as an expressive medium for the black experience in the U.S. Again, I would point to Paul Gilroy’s claim that, “Black modernism [...] was ‘initialized’ by the catastrophic violence of slavery that kept its progenitors at a distance from literacy and logo-centric selfhood, and shaped by the creative musical opportunities that were offered as partial compensation for forced exile from the world of writing” (104). While I agree with Gilroy’s claims here regarding the denial of access to the written word, my project’s attention to a more broad conceptualization of aurality shows that the African American musical tradition was not a “creative musical opportunity” that slave owners “offered as partial compensation” to the slaves but was, instead, a public medium that the slaves took for themselves and formed into a vehicle of expression and resistance at a time when the terms “expression” and “resistance” were, for slaves, almost synonymous (104). Indeed, the denial of literacy was an attempt to prevent the slaves’ access to public forms of expression, so the very act of expression, which the slaves often effected through song, was, itself, a resistant act – only one that the slave owners were unable to prevent.
Frederick Douglass’s use of aurality offers a compelling example of this process. As my first chapter argues, in his *Narrative*, Douglass carefully constructs a contrast between the sounds of violence that accompany the whipping of Aunt Hester with his famous description of the slave songs. In the first chapter Douglass describes the actions of the slave owner who “would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush,” thus establishing that, just as they did with written discourse, slave owners attempted to control their slaves’ expressive capacities in the aural realm (20). By juxtaposing this event with his description of the slave songs at the beginning of the next chapter, Douglass further highlights the struggle that takes place in the south between slaves and their owners over the right to control the aural landscape of southern plantation life since he puts a moment of aural subjugation and a moment of aural assertion in such stark relief. At a time when slaves were systemically denied access to the written word, and thus were excluded from the national public discourse on slavery (or anything else), they were, nevertheless, able to participate, and to do so quite successfully, in the public discourse of sound. Only by excavating aurality, broadly conceived, in Douglass’s text can we begin to fully appreciate the stakes of his representations of black music - there is a significant difference between Douglass depicting the slave songs in order to show a discourse that slaves possessed and of which slave owners were unaware and his doing so to show that slaves were asserting themselves in a phenomenological medium in which the slave owners were also trying to gain control. Maintaining an awareness of non-musical sound in the works of African American writers, then, not only gives us insight into a heretofore unexplored feature of
much black writing, but also contributes new insights into the already copious criticism
that takes African American music and its relationship to black writing as its subject.

It is important to note, here, the emphasis that I place on the textual. Despite the
attention that this dissertation pays to African American aurality in black writing, it
consciously and specifically does not make any claims to act as an analysis of African
American aural culture directly. What interests me here is not the production of musical
expression, but what the existence of that expression within African American culture
offers to black writers as a source of cultural capital. This is not to imply that the process
by which musicians have labored to produce that cultural capital is not of great interest,
but it is to say that excavating that process is beyond the scope of the textual focus that
the principle aims of this project require.

This is partly a necessary consequence of the historical range of my project.
Despite the long history of African American music, and an equally long history of its
place within the aural landscape in which African Americans have found themselves, its
presence in the historical record is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, prior to the
advent of sound recording technologies of the twentieth century, African American
music's presence within the historical record depended entirely upon written accounts of
the music, whether through description or transcription. During this time, though,
depictions of early African American music through prose are, in many ways, more
reliable than sheet music (which, itself, did not appear in significant quantities until the
late nineteenth century) since the western classical notation system (of which sheet music
is, of course, comprised) can only represent music that conforms to its conventions.
Thus, while prose must depend upon the slippage inherent in descriptive language for its
depictions of music, sheet music, when confronted with African American forms that do not conform to the twelve-tone scales of European music, creates representations that suffer from inaccuracies of notation that can be misleading rather than just suffering from the subjectivity and vagueness that accompanies prose.

The struggles of African American writers to effectively wed the aural and the textual, which is this project's primary focus, then, is an important part of that music's history prior to the twentieth century, and the literary tropes and devices that evolve through this process persist into the twentieth century black literary tradition even if new technological advances make these devices unnecessary for the preservation of the actual music. While musicians in the twentieth century gained new avenues for the widespread distribution of their work, writers who sought to represent aural phenomena in their texts still encountered the same struggles to overcome the silence of the printed word that had existed for their predecessors. For many African American writers, though, this struggle also carried a certain political value since it was precisely the uneasy conjoining of sound and text that had produced a trope of resistance in earlier texts by African American authors. Remaining focused on the textual aspects of aural culture despite the emergence of new aural technologies, then, allows us to see the ways that some African American writers continued to utilize this trope in order to challenge the cultural and discursive limitations that had been placed upon them.

This is important in part because it contributes to the "Sonic Afro-Modernity" that Weheliye shows to be so important to the infusion of black aural production into the larger U.S. culture – a process that he shows to be crucial to bringing about the end of segregation and the advancement of civil rights. After all, the cultural impact that
resulted from the wider distribution of black aural culture that recording technology allowed would only prove effective if aurality, itself, had gained purchase as a viable political discourse. For this reason, the persistence of literary tropes of aurality was crucial to the political effect of actual aural phenomena since one of the features of those tropes was to show the limitations of the written word and, in doing so, offer the possibility that other discursive modes could contribute to the national discourse on race in productive ways. This would be impossible if those alternate discourses relied solely, or even primarily, on the written word.

This also explains why my project remains focused on literary genres that utilize prose rather than poetry. This decision is a product of my desire to excavate the value of aurality specifically as a literary *trope* rather than to examine aural phenomena directly. By this I mean that I am interested in the ways that African American writers have attempted to represent aural phenomena exterior to their own writing and how the development of a set of literary tools to accomplish this task has, itself, become a commonality that connects many African American texts. In this regard, poetry represents a unique set of dilemmas since it is both a literary and aural form of expression or, as Brent Hayes Edwards has claimed, “[a] black poetics [...] mine[s] the fertile edge between ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’” (5). Poetry, then, is a literary form that, at some level, exists in the aural realm and thus is not as effective a means of demonstrating the written word’s limitations in representing sound.

Put more simply, it is, ironically, poetry’s aural properties that, in part, make it unsuitable for my mode of inquiry. As Robert Pinsky has claimed, “poetry is a vocal [...] art. The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped
into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth” (8). Poetry performs aurality even as it sometimes seeks to describe or represent it textually. In fact, even the non-aural, textual aspects of poetry are more effective for direct representation of aurality than the corresponding aspects of prose. Meta DuEwa Jones, for instance, claims that, “the influence of the sounds of jazz performance on patterning procedures in a poem such as syllabic arrangement, word count, stanza length, and orthographic variance” allow poetry to represent aurality directly in a way that prose cannot (68). We could make similar claims regarding the music and poetry that precedes jazz, as well. As a result, the tropes that poets utilize are necessarily different from those that prose writers must put into practice since the tropes that poets utilize, rather than merely evoking the aural, actually perform it.

While this subtle distinction might seem trivial, the ability of poets to participate directly in aural phenomena provides a range of expressive possibilities that are not available to writers of prose, and this necessarily affects their relationship to textuality. Langston Hughes’s poetry, for instance, demonstrates a remarkable flexibility in regards to its engagement with the aural that allows him to engage African American music in a way that a contemporaneous prose writer like Ralph Ellison is unable to emulate. Ellison can only evoke the jazz tradition by referencing Louis Armstrong, but then must acknowledge the limitations of language in regards to aurality, writing that he “play[s] the invisible music of [his] isolation. The last statement doesn’t seem just right, does it?” By contrast, Hughes, whom Jones calls “in short, the jazz poetry figure par excellence,” unselfconsciously believes that his poetry is capable of performing the jazz tradition rather than simply evoking or describing it, prompting jazz pianist Randy Weston to
claim that "[h]e was truly a musician, as far as I am concerned" (Rampersad 327). That Hughes could be considered a musician demonstrates just how powerfully poetry is able to not only represent, but also participate in, the aural tradition. If Hughes’s poems are music, then they do not have to struggle in their representations of music in the same way that, for instance, Ellison struggles to represent the blues in his prose and this struggle, I argue, is an important element of the protest that Ellison effects in his writing.

Of course, there is one very direct manner in which writers have challenged the silence of the printed word that is equally available to writers of poetry and prose: the use of dialect. Indeed, dialect almost demands the aural performance of the written word, whether it appears in poetry or in prose, since the phonetic spelling of the words grounds their meaning in the sounds that the words produce. As a result, studies of dialect\(^7\) (much like poetry) hold a unique and important place in the tension between aural and textual cultural productions. However, to perhaps an even greater extent than was the case with poetry, the aural dimensions of dialect make it a fundamentally different phenomenon from the one that I argue is present in the descriptions of aural phenomena that help to delineate a prominent feature of African American prose. In fact, while it is my contention that depictions of aurality work to challenge the racial connotations that accompany the written word, several recent critics have pointed to the ways that the aural dimensions of dialect in African American writing work to the exact opposite effect. Dean McWilliams, for instance, claims that while "[n]o one, not even the most educated speaker, pronounces English precisely as it is written," it is still the case that dialect "notes these discrepancies selectively, calling attention to them in the speech of one group of speakers, but not for others" (64). Prose written in dialect, then, only calls
attention to the aurality of language when that language is being spoken in dialect – the surrounding non-dialect language remains rooted in the textual and thus wholly separate from the aural. As a result, McWilliams argues that, “black vernacular dialect was yoked in a powerful cultural binary where standard ‘white’ English was the privileged term. Any attempt to imply that black speech was the equal of the ‘white’ standard was instinctively seen as presumptuous and absurd” (64).

Dialect, then, reinforces a cultural binary between the written and the aural and ultimately privileges the written and this is due, ironically, to the very aurality that dialect brings to the printed word. By producing black speech in the form of dialect, writers must trust the transparency of language to adequately reproduce the aural dimensions of that black speech. That “[b]oth Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris” prided themselves on the accuracy of their renderings of rural black speech” suggests that, for both writers, writing was fully capable of capturing the aural aspects of black vernacular language within the silent medium of print (McWilliams 64). As such, the use of dialect neither challenges the boundaries between the written and the aural, nor does it work to significantly alter the racial connotations that accompany the written word (at least not the non-dialect forms of the written word).

Some African American writers, of course, have been able to utilize dialect in a subversive manner. Indeed, McWilliams goes on to argue that, despite the seeming failings of dialect, Charles Chesnutt “self-consciously exploits plantation school and dialect humor stereotypes to turn these images against the ideology they conventionally support” (64-65). Similarly, Nadia Nurhussein has argued that Lawrence Dunbar’s use of dialect in his poetry “emphasizes the continuities and tensions between orality and
literacy in dialect poetry in general” (234). However, in both cases, it is the rhetorical and narrative frames that the writers provide that enables this examination of the tension between written and aural discourses, not the act of writing in dialect itself.

McWilliams’s claims, for instance, depend upon the narrative ironies of stories such as “Appreciation” and “The Fall of Adam” to ultimately satirize the process of writing black vernacular speech in the form of dialect. Nurhussein, meanwhile, points to Dunbar’s use of the epistolary poem as a means of recasting the usual relationship of dialect to questions of literacy and aurality. She argues that, “Dunbar’s choice of the letter as a model for these poems highlights a tension between a traditional dialect poetry that is performatory and an emerging dialect poetry of silent literacy” since letters “as private communication, are usually written and read silently, in the absence of the addressee and writer respectively” (234). In both of these cases, then, it is only by complicating the accepted transparency of language to represent the aural that these authors are able to similarly complicate the literary boundaries that they and African American communities face. In other words, it is only by stripping dialect of its aural qualities and posing it as a literary phenomenon that its full subversive value becomes apparent and this, in turn, ultimately privileges the literary.

The analyses that comprise my dissertation seek, by contrast, to show how many black writers are able to utilize aurality in order to de-privilege the literary and, conversely, privilege the aural. While this trope of aurality does, ironically, help to inform a literary tradition of its own, it does so with a consistent awareness of the importance of recognizing the political value that other discursive forms hold. It is the
duality of this trope, then, that allows it to define an African American literary tradition and, in so doing, challenge notions of the literary as the property of whiteness.

As I've already shown, this trope has proven both temporally broad and historically specific, and it is for this reason that I have divided my project into two sections. In order to demonstrate the far reaching historical relevance of literary aurality in my project, the first section examines the relationship that I show to exist between two authors at the historical boundaries of my project’s field of inquiry. By examining the similarities that I show to exist between Douglass and Ellison in their representations of sound in their texts, the first section demonstrates the continued political relevance of tropes of literary aurality across a temporal span of more than a hundred years. The second section, by contrast, works to show that such a far reaching historical scope, rather than essentializing racial identities without an awareness of historically specific understandings of race, instead offers a valuable tool for understanding the contingent notions of identity that are specific to certain historical moments. For this reason, I have chosen to focus the second section on texts that emerge during one of the most pivotal moments of change in concepts of black identity to occur during the historical span of my project: the years leading up to and culminating in the Harlem Renaissance. In this section, I show that the questions regarding the relationship of racial identity and cultural productions that are so central to the various aims of black writers in the U.S. in the early moments of the twentieth century, rather than rendering previous questions of the racial connotations of writing and sound obsolete have, in fact, the opposite effect. This section shows that even as writers of this time made contrasting and sometimes directly oppositional claims regarding the relationship of biology and culture to conceptions of
racial identities, these same writers shared in their utilization of the aural tropes that preceded them in much African American writing.

My first chapter "If Not In the Word, In the Sound: Frederick Douglass's Mediation of Literacy Through Song," examines what I claim to be a foundational moment in the relationship of sound and text in African American literature. Despite the huge emphasis Frederick Douglass places upon the importance of literacy as necessary to his intellectual development in both the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and his 1855 narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, his very first act of open and successful opposition to his masters occurs not through literacy or even physical resistance, but through his refusal to sing devotions at Covey's farm. Thus, the immense critical attention surrounding Douglass's passage into literacy, though crucial to an understanding of his place within the abolition movement, does not adequately address the modes of resistance that Douglass utilizes while still within the bonds of slavery. This chapter seeks to show the ways in which Douglass's accounts of the slave songs as well as his depictions of other forms of slave aurality offer a model of slave resistance that not only demonstrate the subjective capacity of a seemingly illiterate culture, but also reorients Douglass's own relationship to the written national discourse following his escape from slavery.

I argue that the slave songs help to mediate Douglass's passage into literacy at a time when his ability to read and write led to a paradox in which he could, as a former slave, only stand as an example of the intellectual capacity of slaves by distancing himself from his slave past and entering into the racially marked realm of the written word. However, his depictions of the slave songs provide a means of not only
demonstrating his capacity to participate in a subjective discourse that exists outside of writing, but also affords him an opportunity to challenge the primacy of the written word that generates such a need in the first place. Perhaps more importantly, though, by showing that the discourse contained within the slave songs is more than simply a spontaneous expression of emotion and is, instead, a communicative device that the written word cannot adequately contain, Douglass shows the slave community to possess a kind of literacy that does not depend upon Western understandings of the written word and linguistic discourse. As a result, his description of the slave songs does more than simply contribute to the discourse of sectional aurality; it substantially challenges its terms.

The second chapter, “‘Trumpets, Horns, and Typewriters: A Call and Response Between Ralph Ellison and Frederick Douglass’” establishes the temporal boundaries of my project by demonstrating the contributions that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* makes to the early developments of the civil rights movement through his own invocation of aurality and the tropes that Douglass established. Though in *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison makes only a passing reference to Frederick Douglass, some of the rhetorical devices and narrative structures of the novel act as extended examples of the same strategies for representing aurality that Douglass had employed a hundred years earlier. In particular, the ways that Ellison incorporates jazz and the blues into the framing of his text signifies upon Douglass’s use of slave songs in his various narratives. By utilizing many of the same devices that Douglass employs in his description of the slave songs, Ellison is able to invoke and build upon Douglass’s musical subversion of the written word through an
act of literary signifying between writers that, ironically, is grounded in the undoing of
the written word within both texts.

Through this undoing, Ellison is able to mediate his use of a literary style that
otherwise seems in keeping with his own stated privileging of aesthetics over politics. In
doing so, he distanced himself from his African American literary contemporaries.
However, Ellison’s turn to African American music, as well as his signifying on
Douglass, maintained a connection to the African American literary tradition that critics,
and even Ellison himself, have sometimes overlooked. Ultimately, by utilizing
Douglass’s strategies to wed the unwritten, sonic qualities of jazz to the linguistic
medium of literary Modernism, Ellison is able to use an aural discourse that derives from
African American cultural history to reorient the racial connotations of Modernism – a
literary mode that Ellison believed to be “artistically” sound, but that others felt (and
continue to feel) to be inadequate as a vehicle for social reform.

With the temporal stakes of my dissertation in place, the third and fourth chapters
offer a thorough examination of the complex notions of identity that emerge from the
conjoining of sound and text in the works of three turn of the century writers: W.E.B. Du
Bois, Pauline Hopkins, and James Weldon Johnson. Before beginning this second section
of the dissertation, though, I use a brief interlude to demonstrate that these three writers
utilize many of the same strategies that enabled Douglass to effectively represent African
American aurality in print. Thus, as precursors to Ellison, the authors that I feature in the
second section are part of the literary genealogy that would eventually lead to Ellison’s
writings. The interlude, then, helps to situate the works of these three authors within the
broad historical context that the first section establishes and to explain how it is that
aurality in writing was able to transcend the specific historical pressures that initially
gave rise to its viability as a politically affective literary trope. Situated at the peak of
white southern violence against African Americans, the texts that I examine in the second
section of this project show how the set of historical circumstances in which these authors
wrote still necessitated the kind of discursive resistance that emerged in the ante-bellum
south since the enduring efforts of white southerners to impose political silence and
physical control over black bodies made direct confrontation difficult, if not impossible.
As a result, these authors turn to the tropes of aurality that Douglass had already
developed as a means of resistance in order to effect their own forms of protest – forms
that were vital to the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance. As a result, they were crucial to
the Harlem Renaissance’s own construction of black aural and literary culture as being
dynamic and integral aspects of the U.S. literary tradition more generally. The
prominence of aurality in the works of these turn of the century authors, then, would be
instrumental in the establishment of aurality as a crucial contribution of African
American authors to the U.S. literary tradition.

In the third chapter, “Finding the Nation in Song: James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B.
Du Bois, and the Harlem Renaissance,” I show that Johnson builds upon Du Bois’s
calls in *The Souls of Black Folk* that black music is the primary (perhaps solitary)
artistic contribution that the U.S. has made to world culture. I argue that Johnson uses
the racially ambiguous narrator of *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* as a vehicle for
various forms of music in order to challenge the nation’s insistence upon racial
difference. I argue that Johnson juxtaposes representations of his characters’
participation in aural and written discourses repeatedly throughout the novel in order to
challenge traditional understandings of the role that these forms of expression play in white and black culture. He shows, for instance, that the emotional and improvisational traits that many associated with both music and black culture were, in fact, as much a part of his character’s introduction to European culture as his knowledge of reading and scholarship are a product of his African American heritage. However, Johnson clearly establishes that the racial difference that U.S. society insists upon – an insistence that he shows to persist in the aural and written realms as well as in the material effects on citizens’ bodies – is ultimately robbing the nation of its most valuable and meaningful cultural resources. Through this critique of U.S. understandings of racial identity Johnson weds the sonic and the textual in his novel in order to establish musical forms such as the spirituals and ragtime as an expression of a painful yet shared national history. This history stands in contrast to the classical tradition of Europe, rather than as markers of a racial divide that requires violence to maintain its boundaries.

While the third chapter claims that Johnson turned to Du Bois’s early concepts of music as a marker of U.S. national identity, the fourth chapter shows that Pauline Hopkins’s novel Of One Blood, a novel whose serial publication spans the 1903 publication of Du Bois’s Souls, offered a radically different model of identity. This chapter, “Finding the Self in Song: Pauline Hopkins, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Pan-African Imaginary,” shows that Hopkins, like Johnson, rejects biological markers of racial identity and the violence that such divisions ultimately inflict upon African American communities. However, in contrast to Johnson’s highly nationalistic agenda, this chapter also excavates Hopkins’ commitment to a Pan-Africanism that depends upon cultural markers of race for its model of identity and, as a result, allows for a unified
blackness that transcends national borders. Hopkins, I argue, uses depictions of aurality to establish firm cultural barriers that define racial identities and, in so doing, seeks to unify people of African decent around a shared sense of aural identity.

As a result, this chapter not only shows the versatility of tropes of aurality in early twentieth century African American writing, but also gives us a new understanding of the full vision of Hopkins’s politics and the far reaching impact that it eventually proved to have. This chapter, and its focus on aurality, helps to answer critiques of Hopkins that have focused on her more domestic fiction, thus missing this radical and influential element of her work. Furthermore, by demonstrating the ways that Du Bois’ 1928 novel *Dark Princess* borrows the musical tropes that are so prominent in *Of One Blood*, as well as the Pan-African model of identity that they represent, this chapter shows the continuing importance of the discourse that she developed at the turn of the century.

What these chapters collectively show, then, is the important role that aurality has come to have in the formation of a set of tropes that have helped to challenge the segregation of the written word and, in so doing, have come to contribute a key trope of resistance to the larger U.S. literary tradition. The conclusion to the project uses a brief reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* to show that the development of literary aurality acted to not only allow African Americans to participate in the national literary culture, but to transform that tradition as well. Through careful attention to the existing manuscripts and final version of Fitzgerald’s (and, arguably, the nation’s) most canonized novel, I show the pervasive influence of aurality as both a marker of Gatsby’s economic and ethnic “difference” and as one of the primary vehicles of his attempts to overcome the social limitations that that difference places upon him. I argue that
Fitzgerald, despite demonstrating no direct knowledge of Douglass's work (or that of any other black writer) nonetheless reveals the extent to which the aural tropes that black writers introduced into their own works have come to penetrate the U.S. literary culture to such an extent that Fitzgerald, who, with Gatsby, aimed to write a self consciously "artistic," "modern," and "American" novel, inevitably did so by employing aspects of black literary culture – a culture heavily grounded in tropes of aurality. What this conclusion suggests, then, is that aurality in African American literature ultimately proves successful in overcoming the segregation of the word and thus challenging notions that racial identity limits the range of an author's "authentic" expression in writing.

The consequence of this is not only that writers can write without the same burdens of the white gaze that hounded Wheatley, but also means that the techniques that so many black writers developed to resist the limitations that were placed upon them have also gained significant purchase in the U.S. literary discourse as a means of resistance. By charting the long process by which this transpired, my dissertation demonstrates the possibility that an understanding of racial identity and its effect upon the production of cultural traditions over an extended historical scope can contribute to our understandings of the means by which certain racial groups can form a multi-generational tradition without resorting to a divisive and essentializing notion of cultural or political "authenticity."

1 Though we cannot identify her exact birth date, when she arrived in Boston she "had lost her front teeth, and so was thought to be about seven or eight years old" (Gates "Phillis Wheatley on Trial" 82).
2 According to Paula Bennett, "if Wheatley family legend is to be believed, she retained only one brief memory of her Gambian childhood – her mother's morning ritual libation to the sun" (65).
3 For a thorough account of Phillis Wheatley's reception over the years, see Gates' "Phillis Wheatley on Trial."
4 In addition to Gates, these include Houston A. Baker, Mary McAleer Balkun, James Levernier, Sondra O'Neale, and John Shields, among others.
Mary McAleer Balkun's essay "Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Idiology" is also illustrative of this point.

Throughout this project, my use of the term "aural landscape" refers quite simply to the sounds that accompany a particular environment. Here, then, I simply mean that the slaves and the slave owners both attempted to assert control over what living on a plantation sounded like.

For some outstanding analyses of the important relationship between dialect and aurality see Dean McWilliams' *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* and Nadia Nurhussein’s "Paul Lawrence Dunbar's Performances and the Epistolary Dialect Poem.".
“If Not In the Word, In the Sound”: Frederick Douglass’s Mediation of Literacy Through Song

Frederick Douglass’s passage into literacy does not enable him, while a slave, to openly resist his masters. In fact, despite the huge emphasis that both the 1845 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and his 1855 narrative, My Bondage and My Freedom, place upon the importance of literacy as necessary to his intellectual development, it is through a physical confrontation with Covey that, “a slave was made a man” (69). Thus, the immense critical attention surrounding Douglass’s passage into literacy, though crucial to an understanding of his place within the abolition movement, does not adequately address the modes of resistance that Douglass utilizes while still within the bonds of slavery through expressions of African American folk culture. While some critics have acknowledged the ways that Douglass shows “increased attention to the details of African American folk life on the plantation,” this chapter aims to demonstrate that Douglass’s attention to that folk life not only critiques the southern slave system, but also the very linguistic system upon which that slavery is based (Sundquist 105). Thus, Douglass does not come, as Eric J. Sundquist asserts, to stand “outside the broken language of the surrounding slaves” in order “to appropriate the tools of the master,” but, instead, uses the slave “language” to make those tools his own.

In this regard, it is important to realize that even before Douglass resists Covey physically, a moment that critics have addressed almost as thoroughly as accounts of Douglass’s literacy, his very first act of open and successful opposition to his masters occurs not through violence nor through literacy, but through his refusal to sing. Douglass relates that:
The exercises of [Covey's] family devotions were always commenced with singing; and, as he was a very poor singer himself, the duty of raising the hymn generally came upon me. He would read his hymn, and nod at me to commence. I would at times do so; at others, I would not. My non-compliance would almost always produce much confusion. To show himself independent of me, he would start and stagger through with his hymn in the most discordant manner. (Narrative 67)

Even before he openly resists slavery by proving himself Covey’s physical superior, he is able to resist by withholding a superior ability to produce sound. As an abstract, representational discourse, then, it is music, not reading and writing, that acts as the turning point in Douglass’s open defiance of slavery. While his literacy enables him, upon his escape from the south, to join the abolitionist cause, his most effective discursive resistance to slavery while a slave depends upon his aural abilities rather than his skills as a literate subject.

The importance of song as a discursive practice capable of resistance, though, does not end with his passage into the north and into the public discourse on slavery. Once Douglass joins the abolitionist movement, musical discourse remains crucial both as a means of furthering abolition and as a way of assuring that, through his entrance into the national debate on slavery, he is not merely exchanging the bodily confinement of the slave system for what Wilson J. Moses calls the “literary confinement of the slave narrative” (67). This last point is crucial to a discussion of Douglass’s narratives that addresses the important tension between his acquisition of literacy and his ability to accurately represent and speak for the slave community that he has left behind. Douglass
is, in his narratives, necessarily restricted to written discourse as a means of expressing his experiences, but his representations of the slave songs act as a powerful mediating agent that allows him to resist assimilation into a national culture that still condones slavery even as he enters into that culture through its own discursive practices. In this regard, it is important to make a clear distinction between Douglass’s use of aurality through the slave songs and his performance of aurality as an orator, since the terms of oratorical performance were at least as determined by European cultural practice as those of written language and thus, like his writing, participated in the linguistic and performative conventions of northern elites in a way that the aural performance of song did not. While Douglass’s desire to participate in the debate surrounding slavery requires that he write and speak in the language of his oppressors, his careful representations of an alternative discourse in the form of song helps to complicate what Friedrich Kittler has called the “monopoly of writing” that existed in antebellum America.

The importance of such a distinction is clear when we realize the ways that Douglass repeatedly connects certain discursive practices to the culture of his oppressors, and places these practices in contrast to the culture of the slaves who are legally denied certain forms of discursive access—most notably literacy. In fact, he even goes so far as to explicitly connect the act of writing with slavery itself when he writes, “[t]he overseer had written his character on the living parchment of most of [the slaves’] backs, and left them callous” (My Bondage 130). Similarly, after escaping slavery, he remarks “‘I was a ‘graduate from the peculiar institution,’ Mr. Collins used to say, when introducing me, ‘with my diploma written on my back!’” (My Bondage 264 emphasis in the original). In both of these instances, Douglass connects the act of writing with the act of enslavement;
in describing the scars on his back he eschews the language of physical violence and resorts to a metaphor of the “peculiar institution” and its agents as the authors of his slavery. Textuality, then, becomes a permanent marker of his own slavery—just as the scars that have been “written” upon him will not disappear, the act of writing remains the discourse of his oppressors and thus will always author his body as the body of a slave.

Douglass even depicts his own acquisition of literacy as a process that stems from his oppressors rather than from himself. In his Narrative, he writes of his desire to become literate: “[i]n learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress” (45) and comments that, “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man” (44). For Douglass, then, it is the southern states’ systemic cordoning off of literacy as a form of discourse that is denied to the slaves that inspires his resolve to acquire it. Douglass’s determination to acquire literacy, then, is not expressive of his own cultural heritage—in fact, as Eric J. Sundquist notes in To Wake the Nations, “[t]he power of literacy, of course, stood in contrast to the folk culture of slavery in Douglass’s view less for any inherent reason than because literacy was a weapon of resistance frequently forbidden to slaves” (105). It is a resistant act, to be sure, but that is all that it is; the initial desire to acquire it lacks any of the expressive impulses that would help to construct an African American or even an individual self.

Whether initially inspired by it or not, though, Douglass quickly realizes the expressive potential of written discourse and, by the time that he actually writes the narratives is fully enmeshed in the process of “not simply [making] it his own language but indeed [claiming] that the high political ideals enshrined in it belonged rightfully to
African Americans” (Sundquist 105). While this is certainly true upon the composition of his 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass’s awareness of writing as a self-constructing act undergoes significant development throughout his literary career.\(^4\) For instance, early in his 1855 narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass adds to his earlier accounts of his mother by claiming that she was literate and that, “I can, therefore, fondly and proudly ascribe to her an earnest love of knowledge” (46). He goes on to assert that

I am quite willing, and even happy, to attribute any love of letters I possess, and for which I have got—despite of prejudices—only too much credit, *not* to my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother—a woman, who belonged to a race whose mental endowments it is, at present, fashionable to hold in disparagement and contempt. (46 emphasis in the original)

Here, then, Douglass, in contrast to his claims throughout the 1845 *Narrative* and even to claims that he makes later in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, attempts to align his literacy with his blackness. That he would make such an addition, and one that stands in such stark opposition to claims that he makes elsewhere regarding the impetus of his desire for literacy, demonstrates the extent to which his relationship to written texts was a struggle not only against the laws that denied him literacy but also against a construction of literacy that aligned it with racial identity. Furthermore, this alignment, rather than calling attention to the very real systemic obstacles that slaves faced, instead depended upon a general “disparagement and contempt” for the “mental endowments” of the slaves. This further complicates Douglass’s passage into literacy since literacy has come to represent not only privilege, but mental capacity as well.\(^5\) The strict regulation of
literacy at a time when the written word was the only means of expressing one’s self to a national audience, and the corresponding association of literacy with a culture that condoned slavery, led to a paradox in which Douglass could, as a former slave, only stand as an example of the intellectual capacity of slaves by distancing himself from his slave past and entering into the racially marked realm of the written word. This was, however, a paradox that Douglass had to engage since, as Henry Louis Gates has argued, “[t]o become subjects, as it were, black ex-slaves had to demonstrate their language-using capacity before they could become social and historical entities” (*Figures 105*).

However, the inherent danger in doing so is something that Douglass cannot fully escape. Baker notes:

> Had there been a separate, written black language available, Douglass might have fared better. What is seminal to this discussion, however, is that the nature of the autobiographer’s situation seemed to force him to move to a public version of the self—one molded by the values of white America. (*Journey 39*)

According to Baker, “[t]he voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery” (*Journey 43*).

Thus, Douglass’s claim of his mother’s literacy acts as a small and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to make an intervention into the racial markers of literacy—an intervention that is quickly overwhelmed by both the powerful cultural constructions of literacy in ante-bellum America and Douglass’s own constructions of literacy elsewhere in his narrative. Because “ethnocentrism and logocentrism have been forged together
into one irresistible weapon drawn upon to justify the enslavement of the African,”
Douglass’s own logocentrism perpetuates a certain discursive ethnocentrism that has
been wedded to it (Gates *Figures* 104). Evoking his African American mother as the
source of his love of learning does not sufficiently dissolve this marriage because it still
privileges writing as the means by which he proves his own (and, by extension, the slave
community’s) mental and subjective capacity.

However, while Douglass’s attempts to solve the paradox of writing through his
own acquisition of literacy are largely insufficient, the slave songs provide a means of not
only demonstrating his capacity to participate in a subjective discourse that exists outside
of writing, but also affords him an opportunity to challenge the primacy of the written
word that generates such a need in the first place. This is perhaps most evident in
Douglass’s rather famous and seemingly ambivalent passage on the slave songs that
appears in his 1845 *Narrative*:

> I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and
> apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I
> neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a
tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension;
they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and
complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. [...] To those
songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing
character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs
still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my
sympathies for my brethren in bonds. (27)
This passage seems, initially, to be disparaging the discursive potential of the songs, suggesting that only after acquiring literacy, and thus no longer being “within the circle,” does Douglass have the intellectual skills necessary to recognize them as containing any coherent meaning. In this reading, the songs are nothing more than an outlet for intense emotions of “the bitterest anguish” rather than a mode of sophisticated expression capable of constructing a conscious notion of the self and of the community. However, he then asserts that, even while “within the circle,” they inspire his “first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.” That the songs could lead to such conceptual revelations suggests that they were more than uncontrollable expressions of feeling but were, instead, offering a conscious critique of the slave system and the material and psychological oppression that resulted from it. Such notions of critique mark the songs as a representational discourse rather than as expressions of pure emotion since they are able not only to express feeling but also make causal connections between those feelings and the slave system that produces them.

The apparent contradiction between these two moments in the passage, though, does not result from ambivalence on the part of Douglass. Instead, this passage demonstrates one of the most important and discursively powerful aspects of the songs: their ability to operate independent of written discourse. Rather than standing out as a moment of authorial inconsistency, Douglass’s seemingly contradictory written account of the slave songs points to the very insufficiency of writing (or language in general) to represent the discourse that the slaves often deploy. This suggests the possibility of a slave subjectivity that does not depend upon writing either for its existence or for its participation in a network of resistance—though Douglass’s acquisition of literacy affords
him certain privileges and reorients his relationship to both the slave system and abolition
movement, his participation in, and even resistance through, the slave songs affords him a
subjective identity that is not already determined by the linguistic codes of his oppressors.
This, in turn, complicates pro-slavery notions of the slaves as lacking fully developed
subjectivities, since, as Douglass's account of the songs shows, such notions rest upon the
insufficiencies of writing rather than on any insufficiencies in the mental capacities of the
slaves.

Douglass further reinforces this critique of written discourse by repeating this
passage in each of his subsequent narratives. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass
repeats the passage exactly as it appears in his 1845 *Narrative* and even calls attention to
this repetition by commenting on it in the text and separating the passage visually from
the rest of the text. Similarly, in *The Life and Times* he puts quotation marks around the
large portions of the passage that he once again repeats. In both of the later narratives
there are certainly many other aspects of the 1845 version that Douglass repeats, but this
particular passage marks one of only a few to which he draws explicit attention. Contrary
to Jürgen A. Grandt's claim that this repetition points to Douglass's satisfaction with his
linguistic representation of the songs and his invocation of the "inner circle," I argue that
the very self-conscious repetition of a passage that contains such a blatant contradiction
shows Douglass's continued belief in (and strategic representation of) the insufficiency of
language. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass writes, with a tone of resignation
rather than celebration: "I cannot better express my sense of them now, than ten years
ago, when, in sketching my life, I thus spoke of this feature of my plantation experience"
There is no reason for Douglass to attempt to better express the songs in language because the insufficiencies of language make such a pursuit utterly futile.

Through this deconstruction of language Douglass is able to demonstrate that his own subjective capacity—a capacity that abolitionists remarked upon at length as being extraordinary—though affected by his literacy, is not wholly contingent upon it. His passage regarding the slave songs helps to mediate his problematic passage into the discursive modes of his oppressors and thus helps resolve one of the most difficult paradoxes with which Douglass must contend: in order to join the abolition movement and speak for the slave community he must resort to the written modes of his oppressors and, in so doing, distance himself from the illiterate culture that he seeks to represent.

Douglass’s account of the slave songs acts as a complication of the relationship between the slave subject and literacy since, through this account, he is able to accomplish what his expanded description of his mother cannot: he is able to privilege a logos that belongs to the slave and thus is not irrevocably connected to the ethnocentrism that plagues writing. However, accomplishing this while still operating within the logos of the oppressor is still a difficult challenge as the many critical accounts of Douglass’s description of the slave songs demonstrate, since many critics ultimately perpetuate the very logocentrism that Douglass sought to work against. Grandt, for instance, reads Douglass’s comment that he could not fully understand the songs while “inside the circle” as being evidence that, after leaving the circle by acquiring literacy, he “has the advantage of seeing and hearing analytically, but this refined perception comes at the necessary cost of forsaking the unmediated experience of seeing and hearing, which is feeling” (20). Grandt, then, even as he attempts to show that “it is Douglass’s aim to
break out of the tautology of language,” perpetuates that very tautology (12). He aligns the slave songs exclusively with feeling while joining literacy with analytical thought. This dualism perpetuates the notion that the slave, in the absence of literacy, is bereft of any mode of expression that would make him/her a critical, intellectual subject capable of anything more than expressing emotion. As a result, Grandt’s reading of Douglass’s description of the slave songs, rather than complicating language, still places the burden of analytic capacity only on the literate slave and leaves Douglass firmly ensconced within the “tautology of language.”

What this reading misses is the subtle way that Douglass complicates the opposition of song and writing. As I have already argued, his contradictory passage describing the slave songs performs the insufficiencies of written language and thus also performs the insufficiencies of the ethnocentrism with which that written language has become almost synonymous. Perhaps more importantly, though, by showing that the discourse contained within the slave songs is more than simply a spontaneous expression of emotion and is, instead, a communicative device that the written word cannot adequately contain, Douglass shows the slave community to possess a kind of literacy that does not depend upon Western understandings of the written word and linguistic discourse. As Jacques Derrida points out, “the peoples said to be ‘without writing’ lack only a certain type of writing” (83), thus “the expression ‘society without writing’ […] is dependent on ethnocentric oneirism, upon the vulgar, that is to say ethnocentric, misconception of writing” (109). Rather than placing literacy in opposition to the songs, Douglass’s account of the slave songs reveals the extent to which those songs are able to subvert the ethnocentric concept of the logos that drives the thinking of the southern
plantation owners. Douglass writes that, “[i]n all the songs of the slaves, there was ever some expression in praise of the great house farm; something which would flatter the pride of the owner, and, possibly, draw a favorable glance from him” (*My Bondage* 74). Similarly, he claims that the slaves “would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone” (*Narrative* 26). In both of these instances, Douglass shows the slaves’ ability to carry on a mode of discourse that critiques the slave system’s privileging of writing by showing how that very privilege deafened the slave owners to the cultural critique embedded within the songs. Even as the songs “flattered the pride of the owner” through a linguistic discourse, they critiqued that same owner through a discourse that the owner could not understand. Indeed, the ethnocentric notion that discourse was a necessarily linguistic practice prevented the slave owners from realizing that the songs that they often coerced from the slaves were a form of discursive resistance that existed “if not in the word, in the sound” (*Narrative* 26). Thus, the songs became a powerful version of the “doublespeak” that Gates discusses in *The Signifying Monkey*, but one that does not depend upon linguistic and rhetorical double meaning, but upon a discourse of sound and tone that can simultaneously critique linguistic meaning and act separate from it.

There is, though, an inherent danger in this process: by converting the previously aural songs into textual representation, Douglass risks reducing them to the same discursive form that the songs work against. If, as Daneen Wardrop has claimed, Douglass “is able, *while he is writing*, to conjoin the world of slave songs and text, of marginalized and centrified, oral and written cultures,” then this would seem once again to privilege written discourse as a transparent medium capable of adequately representing
the songs and thus reducing them to a visual and linguistic medium (654 emphasis in the original). The notion that Douglass could effect a “colliding of languages” through the use of only one of those “languages” is to ultimately privilege the present (print) at the expense of the absent (song). What is striking about Douglass’s account of the songs, though, is just how remarkably absent from the text they remain. Though he undeniably draws attention to the songs, he does so only through a description of their affective potential. He writes that,

If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul. (Narrative 28)

Missing from this, and indeed most of his depictions of the slave songs, is any real attempt to describe them beyond vague references to “sound” and “tone.” He tells us that they are songs of woe, but does little to describe the actual sound of woe; he tells us that they inspired a hatred of slavery in him, but does little to convey the specific devices through which they brought him to this realization. What Douglass does show us is the relationship of the songs to language, and “that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (Narrative 27). But he seems to self-consciously avoid giving any actual descriptions of the songs themselves beyond brief bits of lyric, which, of course, he has already shown to be inconsequential. As a result, though Douglass does reveal the slave songs as a system of discourse and exposes them to the discourse of writing, he does not reduce their specific discursive techniques
to those of the written word and thus attempts to maintain a separation between these two representational systems. He is careful to maintain a certain boundary between textual and aural discourses—one that, though perhaps permeable, is nonetheless always present. Ultimately, Douglass does not affect a “colliding of languages” since only one language is present. However, by evoking the slave songs (which is not the same as describing them), Douglass is also able to evoke their power to destabilize the tautology of linguistic discourse within the national debate on slavery and this, in turn, helps to mediate his own problematic entrance into that debate through the production of a text.

Of course, even exposing the songs as discourse (even if he does not—indeed, cannot—expose the actual songs) carries with it a certain danger since it could potentially alert southern plantation owners to a form of slave resistance that they might not have known to exist. This very real concern is one to which Douglass was certainly quite sensitive. In other instances, he specifically chooses not to expose methods of subverting the power of the slave owners for fear that doing so will lead to further regulation of the slaves. For instance, he writes in his 1845 Narrative that, “I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the underground railroad, but which, I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the upperground railroad” (95). Furthermore, in My Bondage and My Freedom, he specifically links such admonishments to the act of writing. In the later narrative he writes:

The practice of publishing every new invention by which a slave is known to have escaped from slavery, has neither wisdom nor necessity to sustain it. Had not Henry Box Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding
attention to the manner of his escape, we might have had a thousand Box Browns per annum. The singularly original plan adopted by William and Ellen Crafts, perished with the first using, because every slaveholder in the land was apprised of it. The salt water slave who hung in the guards of a steamer, being washed three days and three nights—like another Jonah—by the waves of the sea, has, by the publicity given to the circumstance, set a spy on the guards of every steamer departing from southern ports. (235)

Here, then, he shows a specific distrust of “publishing” the means of escape since the widespread distribution of such narratives subjects them, and those African Americans who are still slaves, to more intense and more effective regulation by slave owners and overseers. Contrary to Lisa Yun Lee’s claim that, “[t]hrough silence about his escape, Douglass asserts control over the text [and] places himself in the empowered role of protector by withholding information,” it would seem that it is Douglass’s awareness that he cannot control the uses to which his text is put that he chooses not to narrate his escape (57). In fact, Douglass even points out the extent to which his own Narrative, when published ten years earlier, leads to fears of being recaptured when he writes, “I was induced to write out the leading facts connected with my experience in slavery [...] [t]his statement soon became known in Maryland, and I had reason to believe that an effort would be made to recapture me” (267).

Despite this awareness, Douglass still chooses to reveal the resistant nature of the slave songs because they represent a space of discursive struggle that the slave owners are unable, whether they are aware of the songs’ discursive potential or not, to fully curtail. In fact, the importance of the songs rests in part on the notion that they had come
to represent a mode of resistance that took place in a discursive and cultural realm that, though still highly contested, was not under the dominion of the slave system and thus was a realm in which slaves could challenge the slave owners on equal footing. As the beginning of this chapter claims, Douglass is able to defy Covey aurally even before he defies him physically, and this act of defiance is one that Douglass shows to take place through song; one that the slave owners are powerless to stop. In fact, Douglass shows that this aural form of resistance develops within a cultural space that the slave owners believed to be a source of their own empowerment rather than their slaves’ subversion. For instance, when he sees the punishment of Nelly, a fellow slave, he is careful to emphasize the role of sound in the punishment when he writes, “[t]he cries of the woman, while undergoing the terrible infliction, were mingled with those of the children, sounds which I hope the reader may never be called upon to hear” (My Bondage and My Freedom 72). Similarly, upon witnessing Captain Anthony whipping his Aunt Hester, Douglass writes:

The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. (Narrative 20)

This passage acts as a particularly gruesome example of a phenomenon that permeates much of Douglass’s narratives. By whipping Hester both “to make her scream, and […] to make her hush,” Captain Anthony forces her to produce sound. While Hester’s punishment is obviously an attempt to inflict physical pain on her body, its performance of Anthony’s cultural power over her takes place through his ability to regulate the
decision of whether to produce or not produce sound. Furthermore, by coercing screams from her, he not only forces her to produce sound, but also to produce inarticulate sound. Thus, Anthony not only forces her to enter into the aural realm but to enter into it in a way that perpetuates the racist concept that slaves were discursively inferior—the sounds that he coerces from her are instinctual outpourings of feeling rather than examples of a critical and self-aware discourse.

Significantly, this gruesome depiction of aural space is one of the few events that precedes Douglass’s description of the slave songs and, in this regard, Douglass’s placing of the songs seems strategic. Though lacking the horrific tone of Hester’s punishment, Douglass begins his discussion of the slave songs by showing that they, like Hester’s cries, are coerced from the slaves as a means of regulation. Douglass states that “[a] silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers” and that the overseers would rob the slaves of their ability to be silent by screaming “‘Make a noise,’ ‘make a noise’ and ‘bear a hand,’ [...] to the slaves when there [was] silence amongst them” (My Bondage 74). He then shows that, in the minds of the slave owners, the sound that they demanded was, like Hester’s screams, to take the form of what they thought was “unmeaning jargon” (Narrative 27). As a result, Douglass only reveals the songs as a powerful form of discourse after he has carefully shown that the slave owners depended upon the coercion of sound as a means of performing the regulatory power of the slave system. Thus if, as John Cruz argues, “[m]usic making helped create as well as maintain fledgling and fragile black public spheres” in the antebellum south, they did so in a medium whose regulation was tied to the slave owners’ attempts at control (20). In other words, Douglass’s accounts of sound prior to his demonstration of the discursive potential of the
songs shows that the ability to force the slaves to produce sound (whether through screams or song) had become a vital component of the owners’ ability to oversee the slaves. The slave songs had become so ingrained in the cultural dynamics of the south that to attempt to eradicate them would be not only futile but also damaging to the slave owners’ ability to assert their power. Thus, for Douglass, there is little danger in revealing the discursive nature of the songs since the subversive power that they contain is one that the slave owners cannot regulate due to their own dependence upon the songs.

However, by strategically revealing the discursive and resistant role of the songs so early in the narrative, Douglass complicates the notion that the slave owners held dominion over aurality. This move enables him to infuse his later constructions of the aural realm into what was a national discourse of sound in such a way that he begins to move the slave songs out of the cultural margins. In *Listening to the Nineteenth Century*, Mark M. Smith shows that contested aurality was an important feature of northern and southern antagonism, claiming that “[t]he acoustic dimensions of sectionalism evolved and gained currency in the 1840s and 1850s especially when leaders in each section listened to and heard one another in binary terms” (120). Though Smith is interested primarily in northern and southern elites rather than marginalized cultures such as that of the slaves, his work complicates Alexander G. Weheliye’s claim of “the general hegemony of vision that permeates Western modernity” by demonstrating the extent to which constructions of sound in the 19th century were vital to the political aims of abolitionists and slaveholders alike (2). Smith argues that southern plantation owners constructed the southern soundscape as containing what they “believed were the keynotes of southern society—tranquility and quietude punctuated with a healthy dose of humming
industriousness and the melodies of singing slaves—and contrasted them with what they believed was the destructiveness of northern modernity” (5). Thus, the slave songs were vital to the south’s aural concept of itself as well as its sectional opposition to the north. Douglass, then, armed with a depiction of the slave songs that shows them to be a form of resistance rather than contentment, is able continually to intervene in these idealized depictions of southern aurality and to present the southern soundscape as a space in which the interests of slave and slave-owner collided, making contentious sound an almost constant companion to the slave system. This culminates most clearly in Douglass’s reaction to reaching the free states:

> On the wharves, I saw industry without bustle, labor without noise, and heavy toil without the whip. There was no loud singing, as in southern ports, where ships are loading or unloading—no loud cursing or swearing—but everything went on as smoothly as the works of a well adjusted machine. How different was all this from the noisily fierce and clumsily absurd manner of labor-life in Baltimore and St. Michael’s! (254 emphasis added)

Here, it is the north that demonstrates “humming industriousness” while the south is loaded with the sounds of “destructiveness” and conflict. Importantly, since Douglass has, earlier in the narrative, shown the slave songs to be a resistant discourse rather than evidence of happiness, he can directly contrast the “loud singing” of the slaves with the “loud cursing or swearing” of the overseers, which stands in stark contrast to constructions of the south that Smith shows to have existed.
Where I would most clearly depart from Smith is in the relationship of these aural constructions to the written forms through which they were largely transmitted. Smith claims that:

[T]he printed words used to convey the various sounds and their meanings rendered aurality permanent and rescued them from the ephemerality of voice. [...] Unlike the modern ability to record and thereby reproduce sounds precisely, the antebellum aural metaphor and projection that was communicated through print (and actual hearing) allowed contemporaries to have access to a permanent image of how each section (and other things) supposedly sounded. [...] On the whole, aural representations of sectional identity were remarkably clear, candid, and to sectional ears, compelling and required little decoding on the part of listeners. (8)

While this might have been true of representations of sound that northern and southern elites produced, Douglass's depiction of the slave songs operates in a very different manner. As I have already argued, there is very little aural description in Douglass's account and he does little to paint a "permanent image" of the slave songs. Instead, he challenges the ability of the written word to capture aural phenomena—he not only shows the southern (and even northern) constructions of sectional aurality to be inaccurate, but also shows that no construction of the aural realm can adequately capture the cultural contest that takes place in the south. As a result, his description of the slave songs does more than simply contribute to the discourse of sectional aurality; it substantially challenges its terms.
Thus, while it might be accurate to claim that Douglass extended to northern abolitionists an “invitation for study” (13), Cruz’s assertion that Douglass provided “early field maps that guided white sympathizers into the hitherto mysterious and noisy domain of black culture” (66), fails to recognize the extent to which the very lack of a “field map” was crucial to what Douglass’s account of the slave songs accomplished.

Douglass’s emphasis on aurality throughout his narratives invokes the national discourse surrounding sound even as the manner of his presentation of the songs complicates that discourse and its dependence on the silent medium of print. If, as Cruz claims, “Douglass’s interpretation of black song making added to the abolitionist movement’s cultural arsenal against slavery,” it did so only after first adding to his own arsenal against the northern dependence on the written discourse (99). If southerners used printed accounts to construct the slave songs as part of a tranquil, pastoral southern soundscape, Douglass’s revelation that those songs were discourse, rather than merely products or constructions of discourse, armed northern abolitionists against the south only after those abolitionists acknowledged the potential of the aural, non-written discourse that the slave songs represented.

Ultimately, this process would, in turn, further mediate Douglass’s own reluctant dependence upon the written word in his abolitionist strategy. If northern abolitionists come to recognize alternative discourses such as tone and sound as possessing the ability to carry on sophisticated cultural critique and to participate in national debates surrounding sectional politics, then his own passage into literacy is no longer necessary to his realization of a fully formed subjective identity. His literacy, while still undeniably valuable to the abolitionist cause, is no longer the only means by which he can resist
slavery and thus his participation in written language becomes an act of cultural agency rather than cultural containment. Furthermore, his own ability to recognize and participate in alternative discourses shows him to have a more sophisticated relationship to discursive possibilities than the “literate” white society. If his passage into “literacy” afforded him a perspective that his fellow slaves lacked, then his knowledge of the slave songs as a representational system of discourse also affords him a perspective that his fellow abolitionists lacked since they remained “within the circle” of written, linguistic forms of cultural and political debate.

1 Douglass’s relationship to language and written discourse is perhaps the single most pervasive topic in scholarship on Douglass. Eric J. Sundquist, in his introduction to Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays, sees Douglass’s acquisition of literacy as “the moment he discovered the means to gain mastery of himself and seize control of his most powerful weapon—language” (8) and also comments extensively on Douglass’s literacy in To Wake the Nations. Foundational texts such as Houston A. Baker’s The Journey Back and Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s Figures in Black argue that Douglass’s passage into literacy poses an unsolvable paradox in which he must relinquish his cultural “blackness” in order to fight for the rights of that blackness. Robert Stepto’s From Behind the Veil makes a similar argument with an emphasis on narrative structures. Daneen Wardrop’s “While I Am Writing”: Webster’s 1825 Spelling Book, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass’s Positioning of Language,” Lisa Sisco’s “ ‘Writing in the Spaces Left’: Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass,” Jürgen E. Grandt’s “A Life and Power Far Beyond the Letter: Life and Times of Frederick Douglass and the Authentic Blackness of Autobiography,” Robert Fanuzzi’s “The Trouble with Douglass’s Body,” Lisa Yun Lee’s “The Politics of Language in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of an American Slave,” and Peter Dorsey’s “Becoming the Other: The Mimesis of Metaphor in Douglass’s My Bondage and My Freedom” attempt to demonstrate the ways in which Douglass might subvert the restrictions that language would seem to place on Douglass. Paul Christian Jones’s “Copying What the Master Had Written: Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave’ and the Southern Historical Romance” and Douglass Anderson’s “The Textual Reproductions of Frederick Douglass” give specific examples of the narrative structures that Douglass copies, while Ann Kibbey’s “Language in Slavery: Frederick Douglass’s Narrative” points to specific linguistic structures. Other examples abound.

2 Robert Fanuzzi reminds us that “[i]n the early national and antebellum era, oratory […] was considered a branch of art” whose codes extended beyond the words that were spoken (29). Works such as The Columbian Orator (a work with which Douglass was very familiar and even mentions in his narratives) described effective methods of body movement and voice inflection, and provided precise rules not only for effectively communicating ideas, but also for conveying emotion. As such, “[i]n accordance with [The Columbian Orator], Douglass learned to manifest the elusive quality of exemplariness—that is, the ability to reveal the commonly held standards of public intercourse—in seemingly personal expression, even in his physical comportment” (32).

3 In “The Textual Reproductions of Frederick Douglass,” Douglass Anderson has shown that even when Douglass did depart from the standard practices of oratory, he did so within the conventions of European
theatrical modes of performance and was thus still perpetuating a form of discourse that originates in a culture that is not his own.

4 For a thorough account of Douglass’s changing relationship to literacy over the course of his life, see Jürgen E. Grandt’s “A Life and Power Far Beyond the Letter: Life and Times of Frederick Douglass and the Authentic Blackness of Autobiography” and Lisa Sisco’s “‘Writing in the Spaces Left’: Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass.”

5 Lindon Barrett’s article “African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority” demonstrates the ways in which the alignment of writing with whiteness both perpetuated and was perpetuated by the alignment of the nineteenth century’s concept of the mind/body split with notions of racial identity.

6 Though I quote Grandt here, this view is a common one. For instance, similar readings of this passage appear in Ann Kibbey’s article “Language in Slavery: Frederick Douglass’s Narrative” and Steven Mailloux’s “Misreading as a Historical Act: Cultural Rhetoric, Bible Politics and Fuller’s 1845 Review of Douglass’s Narrative.”
Trumpets, Horns, and Typewriters: A Call and Response Between Ralph Ellison and Frederick Douglass

Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word. And by this I mean the word in all its complex formulations, [...] the word with all its subtle power to suggest and foreshadow overt action while magically disguising the moral consequences of that action and providing it with symbolic and psychological justification. For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison and destroy (81).

Ralph Ellison – “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1953)

In those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live (227).

Ralph Ellison – “Living with Music” (1955)

When the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man enters the office that the Brotherhood has provided him, one of the first events to occur is that Brother Tarp hangs a picture of Frederick Douglass on the wall. Though the narrator immediately recognizes Douglass’s image, when Tarp asks what he knows about Douglass, the narrator replies, “Not much. My grandfather used to tell me about him though” (378). Ironically, despite all of his education and familiarity with other prominent African
American authors, Ellison’s narrator is only aware of Douglass through oral and visual histories passed down through his grandfather. That even Frederick Douglass, the “great prophet of literacy,” continues to inhabit political space (the picture is hanging in the office of the highly political Brotherhood) through forms that do not require the use of the written word helps to illustrate that the non “literate” forms of black culture remain vital components of not only African American culture, but also of African American resistance (Griffiths 618).

Of course, Invisible Man’s author clearly does not share this ignorance of Douglass’s written texts. In fact, while the explicit mention of Douglass is decidedly brief, some of the rhetorical devices and narrative structures of Invisible Man act as extended moments of the literary “Signifyin(g)” that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has described as being one of the defining aspects of African American literature. In particular, the ways that Ellison incorporates jazz and the blues into the framing of his text signifies upon Douglass’s use of slave songs in his various narratives. This reveals Ellison’s own awareness of the inherent difficulties of achieving expression through the written word at a time when “[c]opywright still provided a living for a few, but authorship itself remained only partly black-owned” (Griffiths 338). Furthermore, by utilizing many of the same devices that Douglass employs in his description of the slave songs, Ellison is able to invoke and build upon Douglass’s musical subversion of the written word through an act of literary signifying between writers that, ironically, is grounded in the undoing of the written word within both texts.

Through this undoing, Ellison is able to mediate his use of a literary style that otherwise seems in keeping with his own stated privileging of aesthetics over politics.
Indebted to the rhetorical strategies of Kenneth Burke, whose pragmatism sought points of cultural unification rather than overt political conflict, Ellison turned to literary Modernism as an aesthetic model for *Invisible Man* because he believed that Modernism could produce a more "artistic" model of black writing. In doing so, he distanced himself from his African American literary contemporaries precisely because, in Ellison's estimation, quality writing was still the domain of whiteness and it was his assault on this domain—through his own attempts to produce an "artistically" sound work of fiction—that represented one of the central elements of protest in his work. However, Ellison's turn to African American music, as well as his signifying on Douglass, maintained a connection to the African American literary tradition that critics, and even Ellison himself, have sometimes overlooked. Ultimately, by utilizing Douglass's strategies to wed the unwritten, sonic qualities of jazz to the linguistic medium of literary Modernism, Ellison, in an extension of Burkean rhetoric, is able to use an aural discourse that derives from African American cultural history to reorient the racial connotations of Modernism—a literary mode that many felt to be inadequate as a vehicle for social reform.

Most critical discussions of Ellison's ability to signify upon other texts, though, focus on his intertextual relationship to his immediate contemporaries, especially Richard Wright (in fact, Ellison's signifying on Wright is one of the most prominent examples that Gates invokes to outline his concept of Signifyin(g)). In doing so, critics have often accused Ellison of lacking Wright's strong commitment to improving the conditions of mid-20th-century black life or to challenging the racism that led to black oppression. However, it is my contention that Ellison's commitment to aesthetics in *Invisible Man*, though lacking the tangible didactic drive of *Native Son*, does still show a consistent
awareness of and sensitivity to the need to challenge the political and cultural status quo and, most importantly, makes important interventions in these regards. By considering Ellison’s connections to Douglass we can see that his incorporation of African American musical forms into *Invisible Man* in ways that are similar to the techniques that Douglass employed (perhaps most clearly evinced in Douglass’s assertion that slave expression through song occurred “if not in the word, in the sound”) helps to complicate the primacy of the written word in U.S. political discourse (*Narrative* 26-27). More importantly, at the same time that he challenges the power of the written word, he also offers an alternative form of cultural expression that resists the linguistic forms that would continue to render African Americans nameless and invisible.

This last point is important to studies of Ellison since it is his own seeming invisibility as an agent of the Civil Rights movement that has led to many of the criticisms that have followed *Invisible Man* since its publication. In 1963, Irving Howe, in his well known essay[^3] “Black Boys and Native Sons,” charged that, “*Invisible Man* is a brilliant though flawed achievement” because it is “marred by the ideological delusion” of the fifties (363-364). While Howe praises “the accumulated material of circumstance which naturalistic detail provided” for Richard Wright in *Native Son*, he is critical of Ellison’s adherence to a more flexible but less tangible concept of social reality in *Invisible Man* – an adherence that causes his work to lose any tangible social effect, thus causing the novel’s final statements to become “vapid and insubstantial” (365). Similar to Howe’s argument, persistent critiques of *Invisible Man* and its author often derive from the novel’s apparent preoccupation with a narrowly defined modernist aesthetic[^4] that precludes the possibility of both tapping into and contributing to the burgeoning Civil...
Rights movement that had begun to pick up substantial momentum in the years of the novel’s composition and publication.

For instance, this lies at the heart of Houston A. Baker’s more recent critiques of Ellison. Baker states, in his essay “Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant-Garde” that, “in his single completed novel, Ralph Ellison missed altogether the revolutionary possibilities of black life in America as they unfolded, even while his book was in page proofs” at least in part because the novel is “overwhelmed by excessive literary ‘smartness’” (2-3). Like Howe, Baker believes this shortcoming on the part of *Invisible Man* stems in part from its eschewing the attention to material detail that characterizes Naturalism in favor of an over dependence on the literary models of more modernist writers:

> The author of *Invisible Man* pays little studied attention to the intimate horrors of racism in the United States. He relinquishes such analysis for a mess of Eliotian or Hemingwaysque allusions. Wright works as an embattled, public, activist, black intellectual. Ellison writes as though intellectualdom is both colorblind and capable of effective, non-engaged, philosophical intervention in the terrors of ‘race’ in these United States.

(5)

For Baker it is Ellison’s dependence upon modernist models of literary expression – his adherence to the aesthetics of Eliot and Hemingway, for instance – that largely hindered his ability to adequately represent the tangible realities of both the African American social condition and the equally tangible forms of social revolution that were gaining considerable political and cultural force at the time of the novel’s composition.
While I do not wish to argue the relative political merits of Naturalism and Modernism, what does interest me in these critiques is that the aesthetic dichotomy that both Howe and Baker establish between Ellison’s modernist and naturalist predecessors also becomes a racial dichotomy. Baker claims that Ellison’s chosen aesthetics “constitute a veritable archive of white literary modernism” (6 emphasis added). As a result, “[a] white trustee’s panopticon overwhelms and terrifies Ellison’s narrative into hiding its own best self” (6) and the novel “misses, of course, all the nascent energy of Civil Rights and Black Power” and instead “produced a clubbable monster in Ellison” (5). Ellison, himself, reinforced this dichotomy in his famous passage from “The World and the Jug” in which he writes in passionate response to Howe:

But perhaps you will understand when I say [Wright] did not influence me if I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one’s relatives, one can, as artist, choose one’s “ancestors.” Wright was, in this sense, a “relative”, Hemingway an “ancestor.” Langston Hughes, whose work I knew in grade school and whom I knew before I knew Wright, was a “relative”; Eliot, whom I was to meet only many years later, and Malraux and Dostoevsky and Faulkner, were “ancestors” – if you please or don’t please! (185)

This is not to suggest that Invisible Man exists in a vacuum of whiteness that denies any literary connection between Ellison and Wright save the racialized presumptions of critics such as Howe. As Gates has convincingly argued, “Ellison in his fictions Signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright’s literary structures through repetition and difference” (106). But while he might engage the texts of his African American “relatives,” it is to
his white "ancestors" that Ellison turns for the forms and techniques of his fiction.\(^6\)

Ellison is careful to point out that his decision to pick white literary "ancestors" was not motivated by a desire to align himself with their whiteness\(^7\) – he says that he was attracted to the works of Hemingway "[n]ot because he was white, or more 'accepted'" – but to align himself with what he saw as an awareness of artistry and craft rather than explicit politics (185). Even here, though, he is careful to qualify his privileging of form over protest. He writes that, "protest is not the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing; the desire to have protest perform the difficult tasks of art, the belief that racial suffering, social injustice or ideologies of whatever mammy-made variety, is enough" (182). While this stands as a rather harsh critique of the African American literary tradition that precedes him, Ellison’s turn to white models of literary expression was not a turn away from protest or politics. In fact, for Ellison, a turn towards aesthetic concerns rather than explicit politics was, itself, a highly politicized act. If, as James M. Albrecht suggests, Ellison was critical of "writers such as Richard Wright for portraying African Americans as too determined, too defeated by their social environment," he was also critical of authors like Wright for being similarly determined and defeated in their willingness to explore new formal possibilities (46). By refusing to allow the oppressive material conditions of African American life to determine the shape of his work, Ellison similarly refused to allow the pursuit of aesthetics to remain an exclusively white enterprise and it is in this refusal to allow racial identity to limit his mode of expression that Ellison’s politics lay.

Ironically, this move on Ellison’s part was not without precedent in the very African American tradition that he is so quick to deride. As Ken Warren has pointed out,
“[a]s early as 1892, Anna Julia Cooper […] called […] for a more literary black fiction” and that, “[b]y the 1920s Alain Locke […] disparaged the literature of most of his predecessors for being governed by concerns other than artistry” (4). In fact, Sandra Adell has even claimed that Ellison’s writing directly “responds to Locke’s Imperative for black participation in the modernist movement through the appropriation of T.S. Eliot and Kenneth Burke in *Shadow and Act*, and to Locke’s and Du Bois’s cultural pluralism through the many intertextual instances […] that permeate *Invisible Man*” (380). What is at the heart of these calls for more attention to artistry, though, is a desire to allow black expressivity to enter into realms that had previously been reserved for “whiteness” and, in this regard, Ellison is perhaps in greatest debt to Frederick Douglass. Indeed, for Douglass the very act of writing in ante-bellum America was a form of protest to at least the same extent that Ellison’s pursuit of craft represented protest in the 1950s. However, just as the narrator of *Invisible Man* is unfamiliar with Douglass as writer, Ellison’s connection to Douglass is not as a literary “ancestor” since he does not look to Douglass for an aesthetic model for his work. However, there is an important connection between the two authors in that Ellison draws on the strategies that Douglass uses to be able to both engage and transcend the apparent “whiteness” of his expressive forms.

This is not to suggest that Ellison’s pursuit of form and craft has no African American predecessors, just as it would be untrue to claim that Douglass was incapable of expression prior to his acquiring literacy from his white masters. In fact, Steven C. Tracy has argued that Ellison’s initial attention to aesthetic concerns actually does stem from his African American contemporaries when he writes “[f]rom Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, Hot Lips Page, Walter Page, Count Basie, and countless other jazz
musicians from his youth, Ellison learned to take his craft seriously” (96). So, even as Ellison offers his critique of the African American literary past, he proudly claims that, “good art – and Negro musicians are ever present to demonstrate this – commands attention of itself, whatever the writer’s politics or point of view” (183). Ellison says that, “the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest; they are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice” (“Blues People” 287). It is in their very assertion of craft, then, that Ellison sees the blues as a form of protest – they are able to transcend the social limitations of the culture that produces them precisely because they refuse to let those limitations dictate their form or content. As a result African American music is a form of cultural expression that becomes viable both artistically and politically.

So, while Ellison was careful to distance himself from the African American literary past in his pursuit of what he considered to be a greater awareness of craft, he was quick to invest his admiration for jazz and the blues in a long history of African American musical expression. In fact, it was the very desire for craft that Ellison sees as a crucial connection between the African American music of the past and present. He writes:

A slave was, to the extent that he was a musician, one who expressed himself in music, a man who realized himself in the world of sound. Thus, while he might stand in awe before the superior technical ability of a white musician […] His attitude as “musician” would lead him to seek to possess the music expressed through the [white musician’s] technique, but
until he could do so he would hum, whistle, sing or play the tunes to the
best of his ability on any available instrument. And it was, indeed, out of
the tension between desire and ability that the techniques of jazz emerged.

("Blues People" 284)

Jazz, then, represents the culmination of a struggle that has spanned centuries, during
which African Americans refused to acknowledge the superiority of their white
counterparts. Even as the limitations of their material conditions restricted their ability to
achieve the artistic successes that they sought, the slave, rather than explicitly protesting
these limitations, "would hum, whistle, sing or play the tunes to the best of his ability"
and thus refuse to let his social condition limit his expressive capacities. The jazz
musician, then, embodies what A. Timothy Spaulding describes as "the confluence of
tradition and innovation, past and present, individual and communal identity" (482). If
Ellison lauds the artistic merits of jazz it is because as a form it is connected to a long
tradition of artistic pursuit – a tradition that he sees as lacking in African American
writing.

Ellison's challenge in his own writing, then, is similar to that of Douglass. Both
authors, even as they wish to prove the literary merits of their African American
subjective positions, must struggle with a general unavailability of African American
models from which to draw. For Douglass, this problem arose because the strict ante-
bellum laws forbidding literacy among the slaves limited the availability of African
American writing in a broad sense, whereas for Ellison it arose due to his own general
unwillingness to utilize the models that his many African American forbears provided.
Unable (or, in Ellison's case, unwilling) to turn to an African American literary tradition
for models of writing, both authors instead tried to adapt another form of African American expression (in both cases, music) to the written form in order to avoid simply replicating models of expression that are culturally connected to “whiteness.” Indeed, in his essay “Living with Music” Ellison explicitly acknowledges the importance of music to his goals as a writer when he claims that, “[i]f I was to live and write in that apartment, it would be only through the grace of music” (233). The implication is clear: for Ellison writing and music could not be separated. Years after writing “Living with Music,” Ellison acknowledged that, “My basic sense of artistic form is musical. […] I think that basically my instinctive approach to writing is through sound. A change of mood and mode comes to me in terms of sound” (“A Completion of Personality” 801 emphasis in the original). Thus, if Ellison subjugated the concerns of politics to the issues of craft that he found in the modernist aesthetic he similarly subjugates that aesthetic to the formal concerns of music and sound as they are expressed in literature.

This, of course, brings with it certain challenges. Contrary to Paul Allen Anderson’s claim that “[a]n extraordinary philosophical faith in the translatability, if not transparency, of meaning across artistic media shone through Ellison’s joint account of racial invisibility and musical technique,” I would argue that Ellison ultimately faced the same dilemma that Douglass faced in the writing of his Narrative: any attempt to capture the ephemeral and aural medium of music in the silent print of the word without stripping it of the very phenomenological traits that make it appealing to the writer in the first place will prove difficult if not impossible (85). If Ellison’s dilemma is similar to that of Douglass, though, so too are the various strategies that he employs in order to resolve it. First, both authors establish a clear frame through which to interrogate the relationship of
sound and writing early in their respective works. Throughout his *Narrative*, Douglass asserts that the aural realm is a contested space in which African Americans are able to resist their masters in a way that they cannot in other public, social realms. In fact, his first open defiance of the slave system occurs when he refuses to sing a hymn at Covey’s dinner table and this theme of resistance through aural means is prevalent throughout the work. However, before asserting aurality, especially music, as a valuable form of protest, Douglass frames the contested role of aurality in the ante-bellum south at the work’s beginning. In the first two chapters of the *Narrative* Douglass tightly juxtaposes the whipping of Aunt Hester, in which Plummer “would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush,” with the expressiveness of the slave songs that, despite lyrically praising the masters, used “tone” to offer critiques of the slave system and to express the sadness that that system evoked (20). Similar to Douglass’s contrasting of inarticulate screams and subversive song as a framing device that establishes the terms of aurality that appear throughout the remainder of the narrative, Ellison provides a musical framing device for his own work. Central to both the “Prologue” and the “Epilogue” of *Invisible Man* is the constant presence of Louis Armstrong’s recording of “What Did I Do (To Be So Black and Blue)?”

The choice of this particular song rather than any of the other well known Louis Armstrong standards is telling since it ties together many of the tensions that Ellison is engaging through his deployment of modernist literary devices as well as his willingness to engage the written word at all. Though Ellison claimed that, “the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest,” he chooses here to represent one of the few (at that time) blues songs whose lyrical content is, in fact,
explicitly a form of protest ("Blues People" 287). As Robert G. O’Meally convincingly shows in his essay "Ellison on Armstrong’s Humor," "the song was a site of contestation over the meaning of black expression and history" and thus Ellison’s use of it is provocative since its inclusion complicates the relationship of his own, written work to that same question of "black expression and history" (130). However, where I would depart from O’Meally’s reading of Ellison’s use of the song is in the emphasis that it places on the lyrics. He points out that the original lyrics of the song, as written by Andy Razaf, are "a protest song gently ribboned in humor; Armstrong edited out the humor to intensify the protest song’s racial edge and tragic thrust; and Ellison edited it still further [...] compressing it to the bare, bluesy ten words of the song’s title" (130). The implication here is that Ellison’s decision to only give the song’s title is an "editing" of the song down to its most relevant content – the song’s title. However, I would argue that this is a move that is not meant to draw extra emphasis to the title, but is instead meant to draw attention altogether away from the linguistic content of the song and instead emphasize the sound of the song.¹⁰

This is an important distinction since the ultimate de-emphasis of the lyrics provides Ellison with an important connection to the African American literary past. Over a hundred years earlier, Douglass anticipated Ellison’s move in regards to song lyrics through his own inclusion of only a few inconsequential lines from the slave songs. In the famous passage of the Narrative’s second chapter, in which Douglass describes the slave songs, he says that the slaves would “sing most exultingly the following words:-/I am going away to the Great House Farm!/Oh, yea! O, yea! O!” (27). After this brief mention of the lyrical content of the songs, though, he quickly asserts that slaves would
also incorporate “words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning” through their use of tone (27). If, ultimately the “mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” this is because the songs, unlike volumes of philosophy, engaged aural modes of expression that were available to the slaves in ways that written discourses were not (27). If this helped to demonstrate that the meaning of the slave songs was “if not in the word, in the sound,” then Ellison’s own reduction of Armstrong’s lyrics has a similar effect, especially in light of the emphasis that Ellison puts on Armstrong’s use of aural devices in his music.

These devices, Ellison shows, are crucial to the meaning of the song and its impact upon the narrator and it is perhaps at these moments that Ellison’s depictions of music seem most similar to those of Douglass. Both writers claim ignorance on the part of the music’s performers regarding the content of their own performances. Just as Douglass states in his Narrative that he “did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs” (27), Ellison says of Armstrong “[p]erhaps I like Louis Armstrong’s music because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music” (8). This is, for Ellison’s narrator, what Alexander G. Weheliye has called “a moment of disavowal, the protagonist casts Armstrong in the role of naïf, rather than skilled performer, in order to better understand the parameters of his own invisibility” (111). While Douglass’s “newfound” understanding of the slave songs stems from his acquisition of literacy, Ellison’s narrator
has gained his insights into the “invisibility” of Armstrong’s music as a result of his odyssey through Ellison’s modernist literary narrative – insights that he claims Armstrong lacks even as he listens to a song whose explicit political message would seem to announce Armstrong’s awareness of his invisibility. However, just as Douglass’s assertion of ignorance is fraught with contradiction (even as he asserts his ignorance of the songs’ meaning while a slave he also attributes to those songs his “first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery”)\textsuperscript{13}, Ellison’s account of Armstrong is similarly inconsistent (27). The narrator of \textit{Invisible Man} relates:

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

Just moments after the narrator has asserted that Armstrong is unaware of his own invisibility he hears in his music not the “imperceptible flowing of time” but the “\textit{aware}[ness] of its nodes” and the ability to “look around,” implying a level of agency and insight that seems at odds with his earlier comments. Here, then, the narrator seems to be struggling to adequately relate Armstrong’s own relationship to his music and its connection to the social network in which he performs it. The narrator even acknowledges, “[a]nd so I play the invisible music of my isolation. The last statement doesn’t seem just right, does it? But it is; you hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians” \textsuperscript{(13)}. Here the narrator, rather than
claiming that musicians such as Armstrong are less aware of the “meaning” of their work, asserts that musicians experience their work on a more complete phenomenological level than others (they can both hear and see music), including the narrator himself who, in his dependence on the visual medium of writing is reduced to making a statement that “doesn’t seem just right.” In the “Epilogue” the narrator makes this contrast still more clear when he asks, “So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down?” (579), and even claims that:

Here I’ve set out to throw my anger into the world’s face, but now that I’ve tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I’m drawn upward again. So that even before I finish I’ve failed (maybe my anger is too heavy; perhaps, being a talker, I’ve used too many words). But I’ve failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness. (579)

Shortly after this passage the novel ends, but not before the narrator allows Armstrong to get a final word, writing:

Of course Louis Armstrong was kidding, he wouldn’t have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air’s horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I’ll be up and around with mine. (581)

So while “the very act of putting it all down has confused and negated” much of the narrator’s purpose, causing him to question why he writes at all, in Armstrong’s music he
hears the ability to include the “Bad Air” without breaking “up the music and the dance.” Though in the act of writing the narrator believes “before I finish I’ve failed,” he is, nevertheless, inspired to end his hibernation and once again “be up and around” through music.

For Ellison, as for Douglass, the contrast between writing and sound is an important and motivating one, and one that mediates what might otherwise be a problematic pattern of influence. This concern is more acute in the case of Douglass since the “illiterate” community from which he emerged meant that any act of writing ran the risk of alienating him from the community that he sought to represent while aligning him with the community that was responsible for his oppression. For Ellison, the African American literary tradition had, thanks in large part to black writers such as Douglass as well as Wright (as well as many, many others), altered the racial significations of the written word to such an extent that the mere act of writing was not as culturally limiting as it was for Douglass. However, his choice of literary style and his willingness to name exclusively white authors as his “ancestors” created a dilemma that was similar to Douglass’s – he abandoned the expressive tools of the very community that he sought to represent. In his attempt to achieve a level of craft in African American writing that he believed had been lacking, he chose to adopt a set of forms that, according to him, were not a part of that tradition. However, his evocation of African American music enabled him to bring to the modernist aesthetic something that his white “ancestors” could not and, in so doing, he was able to make his “passage” away from Naturalism and into an unabashedly modernist aesthetic while still remaining connected to the African American culture that he sought to represent.
The irony of this move, though, is that in utilizing aural African American culture (or what Alexander G. Weheliye calls “Sonic Afro-modernity”) he is able to not only connect his writing to African American culture through its musical tradition, but also to connect it to African American literary models of the past. While listening to Armstrong in the “Prologue,” Ellison’s narrator (with the help of a “reefer”) “not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths” where he eventually encounters a slave woman and her children who, as the sons of both her and her master, are intent upon killing their father/owner (9). Armstrong’s music not only connects him to musical traditions of the past, but immerses the narrator in ante-bellum slave culture more generally – a culture that the narrator will later reveal (in the passage regarding Douglass that I discussed earlier) to include Douglass. Though Ellison never names Douglass as a literary ancestor he does show him to be a vibrant aspect of the slave community that music evokes for him. His musical connection to the slave past also acts as a connection to Douglass, and thus, indirectly, to the culture of African American letters that Douglass represents. Furthermore, Ellison’s depiction of music leads to his use of the same discursive tools that Douglass employed as he struggles with a contrast between musical and written forms that also culturally bear connotations of racial identity and authenticity.

It is also important to note that the meaningful similarities between Ellison and Douglass’s accounts of the African American musical tradition also extend to certain dilemmas with which both authors must contend despite the radical changes that take place in U.S. aural culture in the years separating them. Even as music provided Ellison with connections to past moments in African American culture, he is aware that their
relationship to American culture more generally has changed in the years that separate him from Douglass (a change for which Douglass himself is partially responsible). Jon Cruz charts the first stages of this shift in his work *Culture on the Margins*, in which he argues that, “between the time of Douglass’s request and the early-twentieth century, black music had not only been discovered; it had also passed under a series of major interpretive lenses” (4). In the decades leading up to the Civil War and then in the period of Reconstruction, transcribed archives of African American music “would bring the spiritual into, and launch black music on a new cultural trajectory” in which it was “considered as a modern scientific artifact, a specimen fit for capture by the spreading nets of an emergent ethnoscience” (125). Because most of Douglass’s audience had never heard the slave songs that he evoked, the interpretive lens that he provided guided initial understandings of the music. However, as the slave songs and spirituals came to be archived textually in printed anthologies and experienced aurally through traveling performers, the cultural place of the music became more determined by white interpretation than it had been when white northerners were unaware of African American musical forms. If the slave songs had previously been a means by which the slaves could enter into the south’s contested aural space they now became a contested aural (though increasingly textual) space unto themselves.

The nature of this contest is one of which Ellison is clearly aware. In fact, in one of the many memorable episodes of *Invisible Man* he confronts the potential danger inherent in this very dilemma – a dilemma with which he, in his own invocations of African American aural culture, must constantly contend. When the novel’s narrator attends the ceremony at the college – a ceremony highlighted by several musical
performances as well as a speech by Homer A. Barbee – Ellison presents a constant aural contest between the African American folk musical tradition and the attempts of both Bledsoe and the white trustees to lay claim to that tradition in order to justify and support their own political and personal aims. During his sermon Barbee relates that when the Founder’s health began to fail, “as we stretch the Founder upon a bench to rest, I hear Dr. Bledsoe stomping out the time with mighty strokes upon the hollow platform, commanding not in words but in the great gut-tones of his magnificent basso – oh, but wasn’t he a singer? Isn’t he a singer still today?” (125). Invoking a well-known tradition in which the form of musical expression is “not in the words but in the great gut-tones” of his voice, Bledsoe, “with his singing of the old familiar melodies,” is able to build upon the expectations that the dissemination of African American music had created among white audiences while simultaneously “sooth[ing] the doubts and fears of the multitude” within the African American community that he is supposed to represent (129).

However, the narrator quickly reveals that this evocation of the African American musical tradition is one that, like most of Bledsoe’s actions, is meant to serve the aims of the white trustees and to consolidate his own self-serving power, all at the cost of the community that he is supposed to be serving. As the novel’s narrator arrives at the ceremony that is to take place in front of the white trustees, he relates that:

> Around me the students move with faces frozen in solemn masks, and I seem to hear already the voices mechanically raised in the songs the visitors loved. (Loved? Demanded. Sung? An ultimatum accepted and ritualized, an allegiance recited for the peace it imparted, and for that perhaps loved. Loved as the defeated come to love the symbols of their
conquerors. A gesture of acceptance, of terms laid down and reluctantly approved.) (111)

Here, then, the musical tradition has been taken out of the social network that initially produced it and has become an empty discourse that Bledsoe, who silently commences the ceremony “as though he had given a downbeat with an invisible baton,” is able to manipulate to his own ends (115). The meaning of the music does not belong to the African American community that the school supposedly represents, nor does it belong to the individual performers of the songs. Bledsoe’s selfish aims and the discourse that he has created overwhelm the musical performances and reduce them to the expectations of the many white gazes that surround them. The narrator relates:

I saw a thin brown girl arise noiselessly [...] and begin to sing a cappella. She began softly, as though singing to herself of emotions of utmost privacy, a sound not addressed to the gathering, but which they overheard almost against her will. Gradually she increased its volume, until at times the voice seemed to become a disembodied force that sought to enter her, to violate her, shaking her, rocking her rhythmically, as though it had become the source of her being, rather than the fluid web of her own creation. (116)

As her song proceeds and “the guests on the platform turn to look behind them, to see the thin brown girl” she “become[s] before our eyes a pipe of contained, controlled and sublimated anguish” full of the “regret and repentance” that leads to her eventual “controlled collaps[e]” (117 emphasis added). By initially seeming to be singing an expression “of utmost privacy” that is heard “almost against her will” the singer’s
performance becomes a carefully constructed affirmation of the trustees' sentimental presumptions regarding the interior desires and feelings of the African Americans that they believe they are helping. As such, the music ceases to be a mode of personal expression for the singer and, instead, comes to constitute her identity in the minds of the audience. Bledsoe, as the wielder of an "invisible baton" has constructed a performance that does nothing to intervene in the condescending discourse that permeates the perceptions of the trustees, but instead consolidates and validates that discourse. Rather than representing "the fluid web of [the singer’s] own creation" in which she can achieve a mode of personal expression, the music acts to constitute her identity in the minds of the audience in a manner that she cannot control; the song becomes a carefully controlled performance that "enter[s]" and "violate[s]" her even as it solidifies Bledsoe’s position among the white lookers on. As "[t]he white guests exchanged smiles of approval” the narrator “looked out at the scene now from far back in my despair, seeing the platform and its actors as through a reversed telescope; small doll-like figures moving through some meaningless ritual” (117). The performance has been robbed of any significance for the narrator. It is a meaningless ritual performed by mere “actors” because its invocation of the African American folk tradition is one that is completely dependent upon the expectations of a white audience and thus fails to represent the African American community’s ability to find expressive forms independent of whiteness. Even when, following Barbee’s speech, the students begin to sing and “[t]his time it was music sincerely felt, not rendered for the guests, but for themselves; a song of hope and exaltation” (134) this is quickly silenced in favor of “excerpts from Dvorak’s New World Symphony” in which the narrator “kept hearing ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ resounding
through its dominant theme – my mother’s and grandfather’s favorite spiritual” (134). Thus, even though the students briefly penetrate Bledsoe’s carefully constructed aural veneer, the final musical statement of the evening is one that affirms the approving and appropriative gaze of the white trustees; the symphonic appropriation of a white, European composer working within the classical tradition gets the final musical “word.”

Tellingly, this final statement is not only an example of white appropriations of African American music, but also one that calls attention to the importance of written texts to the appropriative process. Though the songs that the students performed had probably been transcribed by the time of their performance within the text, they originated as part an oral/aural culture that did not depend upon (indeed, even defied the act of) written musical scores. However, by ending the ceremony with a performance of a symphonic score, Ellison emphasizes the prominent place that the writing of music has had upon the African American musical tradition as, in the years following Douglass’s first account of the slave songs, written accounts of the music put the songs on a new cultural trajectory. The difficulty that Ellison faces, then, is one that is significantly more complicated than that of Douglass: if Douglass had to try to avoid the possibility of reducing the power of the slave songs by rendering them into text even as he evokes them in text, Ellison must, in his own text, attempt to work against the textual appropriations that have already occurred.

Of course, by the time Ellison published *Invisible Man* in 1952, all music had also launched on a new cultural trajectory as a result of the emergence of recording technology; a technology that radically reformulated the relationship of writing and sound to each other as well as to the culture in which they coexisted to a far greater extent
than even Cruz’s study, which does not extend into the twentieth century, shows.\textsuperscript{14}

Weheliye claims that, “[w]hen phonographs began to augment and replace live performances and/or musical scores at the end of the nineteenth century, they created a glaring rupture between sound and vision” (100) that led to “the machine’s worrying of the immediate connection between sound and writing” (101). As a result of the phonograph’s ability to reproduce sound with relative accuracy “marks on a page now seemed glaringly mute in comparison” (102). For Weheliye, then, the gramophone reinforced the importance of “sonic Afro-modernity” in the American and even world culture of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century in such a way that allowed African American musical practice to flourish. If Cruz believes that transcriptions of African American music forced it “to succumb to the pressures of a popular culture industry that reduced creativity to cliché and commodification,” (25) Weheliye believes that the innovations of recorded sound “might move us away from the zero-sum game of authenticity versus commodification” (113).

What interests me about the contrast in these two outlooks is the extent to which Ellison himself anticipated the tension between sound and its various modes of reproduction and how this, in turn, influences the connections to the past that he seems intent upon evoking through music. In the interview that appears in “Some Questions and Some Answers,” Ellison is critical of the gramophone and its promise of widespread dissemination of aural culture, lamenting that, “there is the danger that the rapid absorption of Negro American musical forms by commercial interests and their rapid vulgarization and dissemination through the mass media will corrupt the Negro’s own taste” (298). Ellison feared that an over dependence on recorded music would create “an
impression of mysterious rootlessness, and the true and often annoying complexity of American cultural experience [would be] over-simplified” (“The Charlie Christian Story” 270). Without the full complexity of the culture out of which the music arose, the folk tradition would be subject to the discursive constructions of its audience and this could lead to appropriations and characterizations of the music that would limit the music’s ability to act as a form of African American expression. In other words, reproducing sound with the gramophone caused that sound, its creators, and the culture from which those creators sprung to all be reduced to a single performance heard out of context. For Ellison, then, the stakes of his representation of music are perhaps even higher than those of Douglass. For Douglass, alerting white northerners to the expressiveness of the slave songs would inspire those northerners to seek out African American culture and experience it firsthand. For Ellison, though, representing African American music, rather than announcing it as a form of black expression, protected it from the appropriative influence of the relatively new recording industry.

The importance of this concern becomes clear when we consider another crucial moment in *Invisible Man*: Clifton’s death and funeral. Shortly after Clifton is shot by police while he is selling Sambo dolls, the narrator, shocked by the death of his friend, begins to observe Harlem in a newfound light. While observing the many people around him he realizes:

I’d missed them even when my work had been most successful. They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them. […] I moved with the crowd, the sweat poring off of me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop.
loudspeaker blaring languid blues. I stopped. Was this all that would be
recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by
trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid,
inadequate words? (443)

While the narrator’s concern that recorded music overly reduces the complexity of
African American culture and limits the available modes of expression clearly reflects
Ellison’s own stated concerns in many of his essays, it is in the contrast that Ellison
presents between this moment and the eventual funeral for Tod Clifton that the full
consequences of this concern become clear. During the funeral march, for which a large
portion of Harlem turns out, one of the men in the crowd begins to sing “Many Thousand
Gone” – a well-known slave song and spiritual. The narrator quickly links this song to
the Harlem community as well as his own identity, commenting that, “[i]t was as though
the song had been there all the time and he knew it and aroused it; and I knew that I had
known it too and had failed to release it out of a vague, nameless shame or fear” (453).
He then emphasizes the importance of aurality to the song’s meaning by establishing,
once again, a strong contrast between sound and words when he claims:

It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it
was as though he’d changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the
old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now
deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had
given me no name. (453)

In this moment, then, the singing of the march evokes the folk tradition and its important
place within the community. While the narrator feels that the speech he delivers at the
funeral is inadequate, claiming “I had no words and I’d never been to a Brotherhood funeral and had no idea of a ritual,” the funeral still manages to unite and rally the community through a performance of that community’s folk musical tradition (454). However, as Kenneth Warren has observed, “precisely what the crowd means to express and affirm remains largely a matter of interpretation” (44). After all, when the Harlem crowd begins to sing, “[e]ven white brothers and sisters were joining in” and the funeral is organized by and in the name of the Brotherhood rather than the Harlem community itself (IM 453). Though the musical performance has a powerful impact upon the crowd that gathers at the funeral and makes clear how deeply the African American folk community permeates both black and white consciousness, the ultimate meaning of the performance and the funeral that inspires it remains very much in question.

Indeed, it is this very question of meaning that is at stake in the argument that ensues between the narrator and Brother Jack upon the narrator’s return to Brotherhood headquarters following the funeral. In the end, Brother Jack’s statement that, “[a]s for [the funeral], just let things float. It is a development that is important only if we make it so” shows that, for Ellison, the black musical tradition, even when expressed within the African American community, cannot, itself, lead to effective political change – in this instance, change will only take place if the Brotherhood decides to make use of the political momentum that the song created (477). Due to the mass dissemination of African American music through recorded sound, the music’s meaning has come to be determined by external forces far more than by the music’s own expressive qualities. The song sung at Clifton’s funeral is able to move its audience for a day, but for that to
translate into extended political action requires a level of agency that the songs alone
cannot seem to provide.

That Ellison would depict both live and recorded performances in *Invisible Man*
in such a manner should come as no surprise, though, as it is consistent with his general
views regarding folk traditions. As Baker argues in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro American
Literature*, “Ellison’s criticism ranks folklore below literary art on a total scale of value”
(175).17 Just as Ellison disparaged Naturalism for its privileging of politics over artistry
and form, he similarly sees the folk tradition upon which he draws so freely as flawed in
its failure to achieve the “high art” status that he sought in his writing. So, even as
Ellison argues that African American folk traditions, including music, have shaped the
American literary language, it is only when those forms are put into *artistic* language that
their full value can be realized – otherwise they remain open to the interpretations and
manipulations of the likes of Brother Jack. For this reason, then, neither the folk tradition
of the blues, nor the proliferation of the gramophone are alone sufficient for achieving the
rhetorical intervention into the pervading social discourses against which the African
American community is struggling. While both remain important, they are just that –
tools; only powerful when put to use within the finely crafted and aesthetically minded
forms of “high art” (which, as a writer, he finds in the forms and techniques of
Modernism). Just as Ellison believes that the conjoining of the apparently disparate
forms of the blues and literary Modernism will re-inflect and improve Modernism
through its new-found inclusiveness, the bringing to bear of modernist aesthetics on the
blues will similarly re-inflect the blues with a new-found (and in Ellison’s mind) much
needed high-artistry that will make the cultural bridge that he seeks to create between the two forms all the more viable and thus socially useful.

Given Ellison's complicated connection to the gramophone and the mass dissemination of music that it represents it is far from surprising that it is a recording of Louis Armstrong that fills the sonic space of the Invisible Man’s hole and it is the presence of this technology that helps Ellison to rescue *Invisible Man* from charges that its concerns with aesthetics diminishes the social aims of his work. Ultimately, it is the conjoining of rhetorical strategies contemporary to Ellison with African American musical history as it is expressed through the technologies of the twentieth century that excavates the political intervention that Ellison is making. As many critics have already noted, Ellison was heavily influenced by the rhetorical practices of Kenneth Burke. Donald Pease argues that, “after it was mediated through the fictional techniques Ellison learned from Hemingway, Burke’s theoretical perspective would also provide Ellison with the imaginative resources to distinguish his literary practices from Wright’s” (66). It was Burke, then, who provided a model that enabled Ellison to reject the aesthetic of Wright without yielding to what Robert Genter refers to as “charge[s] that Ellison remained trapped in an aesthetic framework that prioritized the cultural project of meritocratic artist over the practical needs of oppressed populations” (194).

One of the most important implications of Ellison’s connection to Burke is that it shows that Ellison’s relationship to Modernism was not as one-sided as it might seem—through rhetorical devices that Ellison first encountered in Burke, Ellison is able to not only deploy a modernist aesthetic, but to critique and extend that aesthetic as well. While Ellison clearly engages the tools of Modernism he also utilizes Burke’s pragmatic
concept of discursive formations to re-inflect Modernism’s representations of and relationship to the African American community. Burke’s concept of rhetoric did not require the replacement of one ideology with another in the same way that the Marxist principle that motivated so many of the naturalist writers did. Instead, for Burke, the power of rhetoric lay in its ability to find a common ground upon which different cultural networks could exert an influence on each other through a shifting of discursive practice.

Since Ellison famously acknowledged the importance of Burke’s concept of rhetoric to the process of outlining *Invisible Man*, it should come as no surprise that this process of identification is crucial to the novel’s social impact, even as this idea led to critiques from those on the left who believed (and still believe) that such practices represent a concession to the reigning hegemonic ideology. If “[r]hetoric, for Ellison, does not consist of replacing one ontological scheme with another, one version of reality with another, or one paradigm with another, but of finding a way to shift the points of identification within a discourse through its own logic” then there does exist an inherent privileging of the status quo (Genter 199). However, what Ellison is able to accomplish through his use of sound is to extend Burke’s rhetorical strategies to not merely alter a “discourse through its own logic,” but to bring a seemingly incongruous form of cultural expression – one that operates on a different set of terms – to bear on that discourse. Ultimately, Ellison’s political interventions do not depend only upon the “distinct linguistic paradigms” that are Genter’s focus, but also upon non-linguistic, aural paradigms (196). These were paradigms that he was able to incorporate, though, primarily as a result of the advent of recorded sound.
Indeed, it is important to realize the crucial role that recording technology had come to play for Ellison in his deployment of a Burkean rhetoric. As Weheliye notes, “[...] sound technologies, as opposed to being exclusively determined or determining, form a relay point in the orbit between the apparatus and a plethora of cultural, economic, and political discourses” and this, I would argue, has important consequences for the role that they play in allowing aural discourses to enter and complicate the pervading relationships between forms of culture and the politics of racial identity in a way that sound had previously struggled to penetrate (113). Since the gramophone has placed African American music within a cultural network that was unprecedented in earlier periods it became a tool with which Ellison could create some of the cultural bridges that his rhetorical aims required (113). If, prior to the gramophone’s invention, Douglass had avoided descriptions of the specific aural qualities of the slave songs (he gives a detailed account of their importance and effect, but strikingly little description of the actual sound of the songs) because he didn’t want to include them for fear of reducing their potency, Ellison avoided these descriptions because he didn’t have to include them – Ellison could, with the simple mention of a name (Louis Armstrong), invoke an aural expressivity with which most if not all of his readers would already be familiar. Any thick description of the music that he could provide would not only reduce the music’s aurality to the silence of print, but would also be redundant – his readers already knew what a recording of Louis Armstrong sounded like because they had likely heard – perhaps even owned – such a recording themselves.

What is significant, though, is the use to which Ellison puts this identification. Evoking a cultural “object” that was recognizable to his audience at the same moment
that he employs similarly recognizable literary techniques works to bring these two discourses into a dialog that alters the terms of both. Through the processes that he borrows from Burke, Ellison is able to create a “convergence of the styles of black jazz and blues men with those of the heroes of American and African-American literature and folklore” (Adell 382). This, in turn, allows him to utilize the aurality of African American culture to alter the racial connotations of a literary form that might seem to otherwise be apathetic to the political aims of the black community. Additionally, by invoking the African American musical tradition in such a way that connects it to both the African American literary past (in its connection with Douglass) and the modernist literary present, Ellison provides a cultural context and an interpretive lens through which his audience can understand and interpret the music. Through the modernist aesthetic that he brings to bear on the musical tradition, Ellison is able to exert some control on the music’s place within a complicated cultural network that still privileges language over sound. However, by utilizing the strategies of Douglass at the same time that he also turns to the rhetoric of Burke, Ellison avoids the pitfall of merely bending the music to his own individual purposes in the appropriative manner that he is wary of in others. His use of music to make a connection to both the African American musical and literary pasts enables him to allow the interpretations of the music that his text inspires to remain firmly rooted in the community that he represents even as he seems to bring them into a different discursive network.

In doing so, Ellison furthers a project of linguistic and musical identification that he repeatedly showed to be central not only to his aesthetic aims, but to his political aims.
as well. In a 1958 interview that would appear in *Shadow and Act* under the title “Some Questions and Some Answers,” Ellison says:

In my own case, having inherited the language of Shakespeare and Melville, Mark Twain and Lincoln and no other, I try to do my part in keeping the American language alive and rich by using in my work the *music* and idiom of American Negro speech, and by insisting that the words of this language correspond with the reality of American life as seen by my own people. (296 emphasis added)

While this oft-expressed desire on the part of Ellison to unify seemingly disparate idioms owes an obvious debt to Burke, Ellison was also careful to be clear that it was a process also rooted in the African American tradition, such as his claim in a 1972 commencement address at the College of William & Mary that, “in this section of the new nation there were a lot of *my* ancestors who were lending their particular *music* to the English language” (tellingly, he refers to them as his *ancestors*, not his *relatives*) (413 emphasis added). In fact, it is in this regard that Ellison makes his own connection to Douglass most explicit when he claims that the past has given us “Frederick Douglass, John Jasper and many other eloquent and heroic Negroes whose spirit still moves among us through the contributions they made to the flexibility, *music* and idealism of the American language” (“Remembering Richard Wright” 672 emphasis added). That Ellison’s depiction of music evokes many of the literary devices that Douglass deployed only reaffirms that for Ellison the act of writing as well as his choice of form are not as important as his many critics have claimed because Ellison believed that all literary forms, through their dependence on the American language, already contained elements
of “blackness” since African Americans had, at least as early as Douglass (though Ellison claims even sooner) helped to shape and contribute to that language. That he continually relies upon both metaphorical and literal references to music to outline this process further emphasizes the important status that Ellison affords to aurality in both American culture generally and American literature specifically as well as the highly ironic potential for language to mediate the passage of African American music into the broad discourse of the mass media.

So, while Ellison, unlike his narrator, never organized a funeral march rallying around a black leader, or any other march for that matter, in his narrator’s plight he reveals the contribution that he does attempt to make for the betterment of the African American community. While Clifton’s funeral march is a striking and potentially powerful event, the narrator soon learns that, unless he has the agency to turn the physical energy of the Harlem community into rhetorical energy that is able to influence the racial discourse of American society, all of his efforts are for naught. It is this, I believe, that is at the heart of Ellison’s project in *Invisible Man* as well as his many essays: his use of African American folk traditions, especially those that had already entered the mainstream mass media (such as music), aims to change the place of black expressivity within the larger U.S. culture in order to allow material protest to achieve lasting gains. Though Ellison did not engage the Civil Rights movement directly, his keen awareness of the extent to which his work was in dialog with the social climate around him shows that his concern with aesthetic considerations did not blind him to his cultural surroundings. Instead, he was determined to provide what the narrator of *Invisible Man*
could not: a rhetorical framework that would allow for the resistant elements of folk culture to withstand the appropriations and erasures of the mass media.

This is not to say that the many critiques of Ellison with which I began the essay are wholly without merit. If I may be allowed a final comparison between Ellison and Douglass, both writers showed a profound and sophisticated understanding of the need for protest to claim rhetorical space for the African American community to express itself without being reduced to the racist presumptions of both white opponents and white allies. However, Douglass was able to make substantial representational advances while also maintaining a prominent place as a leader of the abolition movement and, following the Civil War, as an activist for the African American people more generally. In this regard, it is true, Ellison was not Douglass’s equal. But to hold Ellison, or anyone else, to such standards is probably to set the standards too high.

1 In addition to Gates (in both Figures in Black and The Signifying Monkey), examples of Ellison’s connections to Wright include Lawrence P. Jackson’s “The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright” and Frederick T. Griffith’s “Copy Wright: What Is an (Invisible) Author?” William Lyne’s essay “The Signifying Modernist” not only shows Ellison’s connections to Wright, but also argues for his having signified on W.E.B DuBois, Henry James, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Similarly, Griffith’s essay “Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Case of Angelo Herndon” argues that Ellison Signifies on Angelo Herndon as well as Richard Wright. Finally, Sandra Adell argues Invisible Man owes a deep intertextual debt to Kenneth Burke, T.S. Eliot, and, again, Fyodor Dostoyevsky in “The Big E(llison)’s Texts and Intertexts: Eliot, Burke, and the Underground Man.”

2 In fact, it is the relationship between Ellison’s intertextual uses of Wright’s work and the politics of Ellison’s work that drives the debate between Brian Roberts and Barbara Foley in their respective articles “The CPUSA’s Line and Atmosphere: Did Ellison and Wright Walk It as They Breathed It as They Wrote?” and “Ralph Ellison, Intertextuality, and Biographical Criticism: An Answer to Brian Roberts.”

3 Well known as much because of Ellison’s response to it in his essay “The World and the Jug” as for the content of Howe’s essay, which is far more concerned with Richard Wright and James Baldwin than it is with Ellison.

4 As William Lyne claims in his essay “The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness,” “while critics have argued the virtue of Invisible Man’s status as a modernist text, few have disputed that the novel is one” (321).

5 Baker outlines his critique of Ellison in both “Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant-Garde” and in Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America.
William Lyne has argued that Ellison’s clear allusions to these writers in *Invisible Man* are not wholly made out of a sense of homage, but also represent his desire to signify on the white literary tradition as much as he seems to signify upon the black. While Lyne’s argument is convincing, it still does not erase Ellison’s connection to these white authors since that connection extends beyond particular allusions to texts such as *The Wasteland* or *Notes from the Underground*, but manifests itself in the literary forms and techniques of the novel as a whole. As irony laden as Ellison’s allusions might be, the novel still clearly represents an unabashed embracing of the modernist style—a style that Wright had rejected in favor of what he believed to be the more politically activist style of Naturalism.

For a discussion of Ellison’s ambivalent relationship to his white literary contemporaries, see the “Introduction” to Kenneth Warren’s *So Black and Blue*.

For an extended discussion of this framing in Douglass’s work, see my article “‘If Not In the Word, In the Sound’: Frederick Douglass’s Mediation of Literacy Through Song.”

For extended analyses of the figure of Louis Armstrong and his relationship to Ellison’s work see Robert G. O’Meally’s “Checking Our Balances: Ellison on Armstrong’s Humor,” Andrew Radford’s “The Invisible Music of Ralph Ellison” and Michael Borshuk’s “So Black, So Blue: Ralph Ellison, Louis Armstrong and the Bebop Aesthetic.”

Anderson offers a similar reading when he claims that “Ellison’s narrator considers the lyrics but focuses more intently on the specifics of Armstrong’s tone and phrasing” (82).

Even Ellison’s presentation of the lyrics mimics that of Douglass as they are clearly separated from the rest of the text rather than incorporated into the prose (*IM* 12).

This privileging of sound over lyric content is one that Ellison also emphasized elsewhere, such as in his essay “Remembering Jimmy” in which he writes:

> Indeed, when we listen to his handling of lyrics we become aware of that quality which makes for the mysteriousness of the blues: their ability to imply far more than they state outright, and their capacity to make the details of sex convey meanings which touch upon the metaphysical. For, indeed, they always find poetry in the limits of the Negro vocabulary [...] he has worked out a flexibility of enunciation and a rhythmical agility with words which make us constantly aware of the meanings which shimmer just beyond the limits of lyrics (277).

For a thorough account of this element of contradiction and its role in complicating what Friedrich Kittler has called “the monopoly of the written word” in ante-bellum U.S. society, see my essay “‘If Not In the Word, In the Sound’: Frederick Douglass’s Mediation of Literacy Through Song” In which I show that Douglass follows his claims of the slave’s ignorance with an immediate assertion of their awareness of the expressive capacity of the songs.

For a thorough account of this shift see Lisa Gitelman’s *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era*. For an account that examines the consequences specific to African American culture (and Ellison in particular), see Alexander G. Weheliye’s “‘I Am I Be’: The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity.”

For a thorough account of the complexity of meaning that is at work in the funeral episode, and its stakes for understanding the role of the Brotherhood in the novel, see Warren’s chapter “Race, Literature, and the Politics of Numbers” in *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism*.

Again, for a thorough account of this argument see Warren’s chapter.

He also makes a similar point in *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*.

Alexander G. Weheliye’s “‘I Am I Be’: The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity” offers a thorough account of the relationship of Ellison’s depiction of the gramophone to the motif of vision that permeates the novel. See Donald Pease’s essay “Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: The Nonsymbolizable (Trans)Action” and Robert Genter’s “Toward a Theory of Rhetoric: Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Problem of
Modernism’ for thorough account of this influence and the continuing dialog in which Ellison and Burke participated throughout both writers’ careers.

20 For a detailed description of those aspects of Ellison’s work that are more in line with pragmatism than Modernism see Genter’s essay.

21 In addition to the examples that I provide in the body of this essay, see his “Haverford Statement” of 1969, in which he claims, “The American language owes something of its directness, flexibility, music, imagery, mythology, and folklore to the Negro presence” (434), or his comment in a lecture on Alain Locke in 1973 “that the music of the African voice and the imagery coming from the people who lived close to the soil and under the conditions of slavery added greatly to that language” (449).

22 For a convincing argument of this point see the “Introduction” of Warren’s So Black and Blue.
Interlude

In the first section I show that despite shifting historical and cultural concerns, there remains a consistent engagement among black writers with questions of the availability of public forms of discourse to the African American community, especially in regards to written and aural forms of production. Though Ellison did not have to defy laws forbidding his literacy in order to become a writer, as Douglass did, he still had to confront certain critical assumptions regarding the kinds of writing he could and could not perform. What this demonstrates is the extent to which the tension between written and aural forms of culture remained a viable site of political resistance for African American writers who continued to struggle against what Ellison called the “segregation [...] of the word” long after legislation forbidding literacy to certain African American populations (specifically southern slaves) had ceased to exist.

It is the persistence of these ideas that is of interest to me here – that Ellison’s engagement with the tension between aurality and textuality as a means of deploying specific literary aesthetics (specifically Modernism) that otherwise seemed at odds with the expressive direction of his black contemporaries was a continuation of a discursive strategy that African American writers had continued to deploy in the years that separate Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and Invisible Man. The ability of aurality, especially as a corrective to the limitations of textuality, to remain a viable marker of black literary identity in the face of unique cultural pressures, then, is what the second section of this project excavates. Through an examination of two black authors – one a key figure in turn of the century black writing and the other a pivotal writer of the Harlem Renaissance – I demonstrate that the important relationship between sound and text that
motivates so much of Douglass’s writing remains a prominent concern for these authors and, in fact, can allow us to see connections between them that we might otherwise miss. My emphasis in this section, then, is on examining the ways that authors like Pauline Hopkins and James Weldon Johnson turn to African American aural culture in an attempt to define the boundaries of blackness in the hopes of utilizing those definitions to positive political effect. Furthermore, I aim to show that, despite what ultimately amount to radical differences in their models of identity, their deployment of aural devices in their writing remain strikingly similar. Unlike the previous chapter on Ellison, then, my priority is not in showing these authors direct indebtedness to Douglass, but instead to show specifically, how the tropes that Douglass introduced remain politically viable long after his immediate goal (the abolition of slavery) has been accomplished. In other words, while the previous section demonstrates the historical reach of Douglass’s use of aurality, the second section reveals how these strategies, despite major historical shifts, remain a rich site of cultural capital for African American authors.

It is important, then, to first show that Douglass’s strategies are, in fact, a prominent feature of the turn of the century writing that the second section examines. Indeed, both Hopkins and Johnson, like Ellison, signify directly upon Douglass’s Narrative at several points in their own writing. For instance, in Of One Blood, when describing the reactions of a shipping crew upon arriving in Africa for the first time, Hopkins writes:

All the little world about them was in an uproar, everyone signaling, gesticulating, speaking at once. Such a fray bewilders a civilized man, but those familiar with Southern exuberance regard it tranquilly, well knowing
the disorder is more apparent than real. Those of the party who were familiar with the scene, looked on highly amused at the bewilderment of the novices. (511)

This scene bears a striking resemblance to Douglass’s contrast of a northern port’s “industry without bustle, labor without noise, and heavy toil without the whip” with the “noisily fierce and clumsily absurd manner of labor-life in Baltimore” in My Bondage and My Freedom (254). In both cases, the authors highlight that, in the south, labor is accompanied by harsh, abrasive sound to the extent that, as Hopkins describes the scene, those from the South have come to simply expect, even find comfort in, such aural combativeness. However, by invoking Douglass’s passage when the characters of her own text are arriving in Africa she is able to broaden Douglass’s concern with the notion that the aural realm is a space of discursive contest in which African Americans have been able to compete in the south, even in times of slavery, into a claim of pan-African aurality that is in line with her own desire to establish a sense of black identity that transcends national boundaries.

Johnson also often relies on allusions to Douglass and his use of aurality in his texts. In Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man Johnson says of the slave songs:

As yet, the Negroes themselves do not fully appreciate these old slave songs. The educated classes are rather ashamed of them and prefer to sing hymns from books. This feeling is natural; they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced; but the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro. (182)
The similarities that exist between this passage and the moment that Douglass, in his *Narrative*, claims that he “did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs” because he was “within the circle; so that [he] neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear” are clear (27). Johnson, of course, inverts the rationale of Douglass’s statement – Johnson claims that the African American does not recognize the value of the songs because they wish to depend upon written texts whereas Douglass claims that he did not realize the value of the songs due to his lack of traditional literacy – and it is precisely this ironic move in a passage that is otherwise a clear reference to Douglass’s earlier text that makes Johnson’s claims effective. While Douglass was, as I argued in my first chapter, critiquing white northern intellectuals for failing to realize the full value of the slave songs, Johnson invokes Douglass’s passage in his own work to similarly critique the African Americans of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance movement for their over-dependence on literary discourses as a means of proving their intellectual capacity to a white audience. Johnson’s claim becomes all the more effective through this invocation of Douglass since he is able to show that if Douglass, one of the foundational figures of African American letters, privileged the slave songs as a form of discourse, then the African American intelligentsia that follows in his footsteps should be equally willing to recognize their value.

What both of these examples show is that it is through moments that express the relationship of African American culture to aurality that Hopkins and Johnson make what appear to be rather explicit allusions to Douglass and his own treatment of sound. Like Ellison, they recognize the importance that the tension between written and aural
discourses has held in the creation of an African American literary tradition and, by invoking this tension through allusions to Douglass, they not only invoke some of the foundational works of the African American literary tradition, but also participate in the continued development of that tradition since the concerns that Douglass raises regarding textuality and aurality remain one of that tradition’s enduring tropes.

What is significant about the endurance of this trope is the relative discursive freedom that it ultimately provides for the authors that invoke it. In the cases of both Douglass and Ellison, as I have already shown, aurality acts as a means of making realms of discourse that had previously been coded as “white” (or, at least, “not black”) available to black authors without forcing them to distance themselves from the political or material concerns of the African American population. For Hopkins and Johnson the connection to the African American literary tradition that they are able to engage through their use of aurality enables them to posit widely disparate notions of African American identity while still retaining a common tie to the existing tradition.

These disparate notions are another focus of the second section of this project. The disparity in the models of “Negro” identity that these two authors offer is ultimately the result of the different emphasis that they place on the terms “African” and “American.” In Of One Blood, Hopkins utilizes aural culture to connect the identities of her black characters to a pan-African understanding of identity that transcends national boundaries. Through sound and music, her characters awaken to an African heritage that ultimately leads to the main protagonists’ rejection of U.S. definitions of race and ends with him taking his place as a king in Africa and the leader of people of African descent across the globe. In stark contrast to Hopkins, Johnson uses music to reaffirm
nationalistic distinctions while simultaneously deconstructing racial difference. In *Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*, Johnson uses the protagonist’s talents as a musician to establish a clear nationalistic distinction between his American musical heritage and those of Europe. At the same time, however, he combines the protagonist’s musical and scholarly talents with his racial ambiguity to challenge essentialist notions of race. In the end, Johnson posits his narrator’s identity as residing in a shared (as well as tragic and painful) national past rather than in a racialized model of difference.

What is striking about the contrast in these two authors’ views is that their means of presenting them is startlingly similar. In both cases, they pose identity as residing in cultural forms of expression rather than essentialist notions of biology and, in both cases, the primary vehicle of culture is music. That they would both resort to music so quickly is not surprising since both, though eventually establishing themselves as significant authors of prose, began their careers with a close relationship to music. Hopkins was a singer in her youth and began her career writing musical dramas. Though she was unable to sustain a career in musical theater, two of her early works, *Colored Aristocracy* (1877) and *Slaves’ Escape; or the Underground Railroad* (1879), experienced moderate success, earning performances by several groups, including the Hyers Sisters Concert Company.¹

Johnson, meanwhile, first established himself as an international figure in large part through his early musical career. In 1900 he and his brother collaborated to write the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and this began a highly successful partnership that would, in the form of a trio that also included Bob Cole, produce over 200 popular songs and culminate in a successful international tour. In addition to a great deal of commercial success, the music of the Cole and Johnson Brothers trio appeared in many Broadway
productions and two of their songs were featured in Theodore Roosevelt's Presidential campaign in 1904. In his autobiography, *Along This Way*, Johnson relates that his early connection to music never fully left him, and he even claims that when he left the trio in 1905, the other members, who would continue to write music and tour for many years without him, felt that his new pursuits in the realms of politics would be "advantageous, for [he] should be likely to return with new ideas for Broadway and for Cole and Johnson shows" (224). Though Johnson never did rejoin the trio, he did later collaborate with his brother to produce *The Book of Negro Spirituals*, a project that resulted in two volumes published in 1925 and 1926 respectively. Johnson's career, like that of Hopkins, maintained close ties to music even as his authorial and political pursuits kept him from sustaining a career as a professional musician, and this preoccupation with music on the parts of both authors would continue to exert a powerful influence on their writing.

Another crucial similarity that they share is the close relationships that their texts have with the works of perhaps their most prominent contemporary: W.E.B. Du Bois. In fact, I have chosen to end this interlude with an extended discussion of Du Bois and his literary relationships to Hopkins and Johnson because doing so excavates a complex network of discourse that exists between the three of them. Tellingly, this network is one that we can see most clearly only after realizing the crucial importance of aurality in all three of these writers' works, since it is around issues of sound and music that their otherwise seemingly disparate ideas cohere. Using the politics of aurality as a thematic through-line, though, we can see the ways that Du Bois offers a site upon which Hopkins and Johnson, two authors whose texts have rarely, if ever, been considered in close dialog with each other, and whose models of identity are, in many ways, in direct contrast to
each other, can nevertheless remain discursively connected to such an extent that to consider them together becomes critically productive.

Du Bois becomes crucial to this consideration because it is through his own relationship to the issues that they addressed through sound, as well as his own unique place in the canon of African American letters, that we can see the development of two competing models of identity that emerge in the first quarter of the twentieth century. For Du Bois, African American aural culture was a formative influence on his writing and would remain a crucial element in the development of his racial politics throughout his long and varied career. As Houston A. Baker has argued, Du Bois’s extended discussion of The Fisk Jubilee Singers in Souls’ final chapter “constitutes ancient African-American sound performed by a new generation of black folk. It signals a conflation of African and American selves on the ritual ground of a black southern university” (58 emphasis in the original), but this was a university “not characterized by halls of ivy but rather by ‘chapel[s] of melody’” (65). Through Du Bois’s emphasis on a culture of African American sound, then, “the spirituals stand as counter and deforming forms in relation […] to Western verbal arrangements. Each chapter of Souls is prefaced by a fragment of the score — that actual sounding music — of a spiritual as well as by a written passage from the work of a Western poet” (60 emphasis in the original). The work then ends with an extended discussion of the songs, effectively giving African American music the final “word” in the text. In this way, Du Bois is building upon the model that Douglass’s use of the slave songs had provided since he, like Douglass, is placing African American aural culture into a discursive conflict with the written word. As Eric J. Sundquist has claimed:
When he put the spirituals at the center of *The Souls of Black Folk* and identified their slave creators as the foundational voice of black culture, Du Bois responded on the one hand to the white cultural critics and ethnographers who misconstrued, or at the least dominated the interpretations of, the value of African American culture, and on the other to what he took to be the inadequate assertiveness of black cultural leadership. (465)

Like Douglass, then, Du Bois accesses the slave songs as a means of asserting the existence of a black culture that, though unacknowledged by whites, nonetheless exists and is equal if not superior to the expressive capacities of white artists (which Du Bois represents through quotations from poetry by whites).

Unlike Douglass, though, Du Bois shows a willingness to textualize black aural culture. Rather than simply evoking music and describing its affective influence, as Douglass does, Du Bois includes bars of music, thus performing black aural culture within the silent medium of print. As Sundquist argues, this willingness to place music firmly in the textual realm creates a conscious conjoining of cultural practices that had previously been seen as separate, even mutually exclusive. Sundquist writes:

> Du Bois forecasts the antiphonal relationship that would exist between music and text [...], a relationship in which the two forms gradually coalesce, as the volume unfolds, into an inseparable articulation of the tonal and the semantic dimensions of African American cultural expression. (460)
At the turn of the century, then, Du Bois was willing to place aurality and textuality in juxtaposition and even collusion in a way that Douglass, whose status as an escaped slave in the ante-bellum U.S. did not afford him the same discursive possibilities that were available to Du Bois, could not. While Douglass utilized the slave songs as a means of demonstrating the silence (and thus limited expressive capacities) of the printed word, "Du Bois offers a singing book" (Baker 68).

In regards to the relationship of African American aurality to the ongoing formation of an African American literary canon, then, *Souls* stands as a watershed text. In the relatively immediate aftermath of *Souls* the writers of the Harlem Renaissance would continue to turn to Du Bois’s models of aural culture in their own attempts to establish the twentieth-century’s “New Negro.” Indeed, as Baker claims, “the space between *The Souls of Black Folk* and [Alain Locke’s] *The New Negro* […] can be thought of as bridged by spiritual sound” (72). My third chapter, then, explores this bridge more fully through an examination of Johnson’s *Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man* – a text whose complicated publication history\(^2\) allows it to occupy a unique, and thus critically illustrative, place in the chronological development of the Harlem Renaissance.

Of particular importance in this examination of Johnson’s work is the relationship that African American aurality comes to play in the formation of new concepts of identity formation, especially as they relate to notions of race and nationality. As the following chapter shows, we could just as easily attribute Paul Allen Anderson’s argument in regards to Du Bois to Johnson:
In a book dedicated to exploring the inner life of African America behind the veil of racial misunderstanding and separation, the proprietorship of the 'sorrow songs' was clear. Nevertheless, Du Bois made sure to extend the 'sorrow songs' as a gift to the dominant culture in a gesture of reconciliation. The humblest of Americans had supplied the nation with its greatest musical idiom and a most challenging test to its democratic promises. (30)

For Du Bois, then, the “sorrow songs” are a means of not only proving the intellectual and artistic capacities of blacks, but also of staking their claim to full citizenship as Americans. This notion that a flourishing of black arts would be an effective means of establishing claims to an African American national identity was one that would be central to the aims of the Harlem Renaissance, and my third chapter seeks to excavate the ways that Johnson’s only novel is a pivotal text that bridges Souls and the later Renaissance texts – a bridge that I, like Baker, believe is built upon the melodies of African American aural culture.

Interestingly, though, it is a bridge that Du Bois himself did not wholly cross. While he certainly remained a central figure in black (as well as national and even international) politics during the years of the Harlem Renaissance, two of his most extensive works of that period – Darkwater (1920) and Dark Princess (1928) – actually represent a divergence from the models of identity that appear in Souls, as well as the role of aurality in the formation of those models. As a result, these works also represent a divergence from many of Du Bois’s Harlem Renaissance contemporaries – contemporaries who still turned to Souls for their own models of racial and national
identity as expressed through sound. Du Bois’s texts from this same period, though, seem indebted to earlier models that are not his own. This divergence, then, might at least partially explain why *Souls* has remained at the very center of the African American literary canon while a work like *Dark Princess*, which Du Bois, in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, he claimed to be his “favorite,” has garnered relatively little attention since its publication in 1928 (270).

Specifically, the strong influence of pan-African concepts of national and racial identity that permeates both *Darkwater* and *Dark Princess* seems to bear a far greater resemblance to the models of identity that appear in Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* than they do to Du Bois’s own *Souls*. What is striking about Du Bois’s move away from his own turn of the century model of racial discourse towards a concept of identity that more closely resembles that of Hopkins’ is that, in many ways, *Of One Blood* and *The Souls of Black Folk* utilize music as a vehicle for discussions of identity in strikingly similar manners. The almost simultaneous publication of *Of One Blood* and *Souls* in 1903, though, means that it is unlikely that either exerted a direct influence over the other upon their initial publication. However, as my fourth chapter shows, Hopkins’s attempts to offer a workable definition of racial identity that is not located in biology but instead exists in unique forms of cultural expression would have a profound impact upon Du Bois as he, too, struggled to find a satisfactory definition of race in his works of the 1920s.

At the time of *The Souls of Black Folk*’s publication, though, Du Bois’s concept of racial identity still rested largely in the physical as a marker of racial categories. In “The Conservation of Races” (1899) Du Bois remarks that, “race differences have
followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences – the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups” (22). At this early moment in his thinking Du Bois refrains from wholly endorsing physical characteristics as a means of defining racial difference, but his attempt to offer an alternative definition is undeniably vague:

What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. (21)

In the absence of a clear and workable definition of race Du Bois, in “The Conservation of Races” and elsewhere, relies on physical characteristics to mark, if not define, racial difference. A year later, in “To the Nations of the World” (1900) his portion of the Report on the Pan-African Conference, Du Bois eschews a discussion of the complicated question of defining race, and simply locates racial difference “in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair” (625). In the absence, then, of an adequate definition of race that clearly outlines the parameters of racial difference beyond the physical, his depiction of music in The Souls of Black Folk links cultural expression to U.S. national identity to almost the same extent that it links it to race. Though the end-results of the spirituals are “still distinctively Negro,” the “elements are both Negro and Caucasian” and are thus unique to African Americans as a marker of both a black and U.S. identity (209). This stands in stark contrast to Hopkins’s use of the spirituals as a means of establishing a
collective pan-Africanism that locates black identity in an aural culture that transcends both biology and nation.

However, by the 1920s, Du Bois seems to adopt many of the concepts of identity that Hopkins puts forth in *Of One Blood*. As my fourth chapter argues, Hopkins’s radical notions of racial identity and pan-African culture, notions that she expresses through her representations of sound, act as discursive and literary precursors to Du Bois’s later works, culminating in what appears to even be direct homage in *Dark Princess*. Of course, until recently, Hopkins’s works have shared the fate of *Dark Princess* – while *Souls* and the works that follow in its model (such as Johnson’s *Autobiography* and Locke’s *New Negro*) have moved to the center of the African American literary canon, *Of One Blood* languished in obscurity until *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* reprinted Hopkins’s works and brought critical attention to this important voice of turn of the century black thought. Through an attention to the ways that aurality provides a common discourse that authors like Hopkins and Du Bois both frequently access, my fourth chapter helps to show the far reaching consequences of *The Schomburg Library*’s important project of once again giving voice to Hopkins and other strong feminist voices like hers since it excavates the impact that women such as Hopkins ultimately had upon the intellectual and political development of the African American literary tradition.

What the third and fourth chapters demonstrate collectively is the central place that aural culture holds within disparate, even competing, discourses within that tradition. Despite the contrasts that emerge in their evolving notions of identity, Du Bois, Hopkins, and Johnson are all able to consistently turn to aurality and aural culture, especially as it
stands in contrast to writing, as an effective means of establishing and expressing racial identity in textual form, just as Douglass had done before them, and just as Ellison would do after. But this consistent use of aurality is more than simply a coincidence or a convenient and readily available means of expression. It is a discursive site that allows writers like Hopkins and Johnson to work out the disparity of their models of identity and the differences in their priorities regarding race and nation. Sound and music become more than simply a vehicle for these writers to present their ideas, but also act as a site upon which they formulate those ideas in the first place. As a varied and sophisticated discourse in its own right, African American aural culture is able to participate in and shape the shifting discourses of racial identity that these authors continue to develop and express in their writing.

1 For a further discussion of Hopkins’ earlier work, see Hazel Carby’s “Introduction” to The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins.

2 Originally published anonymously in 1912, then republished under Johnson’s name in 1927, The Autobiography stands as both an immediate precursor to and central text of the Harlem Renaissance.

3 The publication of Of One Blood, which appeared serially in The Colored American Magazine, actually spans the publication of The Souls of Black Folk, so its earlier chapters predate Du Bois’s seminal work, while its conclusion came after Souls was already available.
Finding the Nation in Song: James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Harlem Renaissance

While authors such as Frederick Douglass and Ralph Ellison show that the relationship between sound and text was a major feature of African American writing both before and after the Harlem Renaissance, it was during this Renaissance in the 1920s that black writers and political leaders began to explicitly point to a distinct contrast between the cultural value of black aurality and black writing. In fact, the self-consciously literate “New Negro” movement would ultimately prove to be a watershed moment in the development of a new understanding of the ways that both sound and text could come to signify race. It should come as no surprise, then, that an exploration of the relationship of textuality, aurality, and racial identity is a central feature of one of the Renaissance’s own watershed texts: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*. Its explicit juxtaposition of music and literacy as fluid markers of an equally fluid concept of race remain strongly tied to the specific aims of the Harlem Renaissance and its attempt to lift black writing into the mainstream of the U.S. literary conscious. While Douglass evokes black aurality in an attempt to give himself purchase within a discourse (writing) that had come to connote whiteness, Johnson continues a project that W.E.B. Du Bois began in *The Souls of Black Folk* by evoking the tension between writing and sound in an attempt to deconstruct the phenomenological gap between the two. In so doing, he works to open up the possibility of expression in both forms being understood as markers of national identity at least as much as racial identity. *The Autobiography*, then, becomes an important bridge between Du Bois’s earlier text and the later works of the Harlem Renaissance. Furthermore, it is a bridge that shows the
ways that questions of U.S. identity pervade much Renaissance writing even as they attempt to establish the merits of an explicitly African American literary tradition.

Originally published anonymously in 1912 (leading many to believe that it was an actual autobiography rather than a work of fiction), *The Autobiography* was republished in 1927 with Johnson, who had already established himself as a central figure in black letters, listed as the author. As a result, the novel occupies a space as both one of the central texts to appear at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance and as a crucial literary bridge between the Renaissance and its turn of the century precursors. That a novel so heavily steeped in questions regarding sound and text could occupy both spaces speaks to the lasting importance that such questions posed to black writers. However, the emphasis that the novel places on breaking down the terms of these questions shows that black aural culture had come to represent a means of complicating the notion that the U.S. culture could be understood in the clearly demarcated racial terms upon which the logic of southern lynchings and Jim Crow depended.

As the interlude to this section of my project claims, at the turn of the century, Du Bois had begun a process of using literature to join aural and textual cultures through the use of the "Sorrow Songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This wedding of the tonal and the semantic is a project that Johnson would continue with the initial publication of *The Autobiography* as well as some of his later works. Certainly his 1928 collaboration with his brother to produce *The Book of Negro Spirituals*, a written transcription of slave songs for which Johnson provided the introduction, can be seen as an extension of Du Bois's impulse to produce bars of music in *Souls*. But even in *The Autobiography* Johnson, though not going so far as to include bars of music, does provide musical
terminology and direct description of the sound of the various forms of music that appear in the text, thus engaging in the kind of thick description that Douglass so carefully avoids. For instance, in his first description of rag-time, Johnson writes:

The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect. And, too, the player – the dexterity of his left hand in making rapid octave runs and jumps was little short of marvellous; and with his right hand he frequently swept half the keyboard with clean-cut chromatics which he fitted in so nicely as never to fail to arouse in his listeners a sort of pleasant surprise at the accomplishment of the feat. (99)

The detailed description of not only the music’s effect upon the audience but of the specific sounds that comprise it, including mentions of musical terminology such as “octave runs” and “clean-cut chromatics,” conveys a specific idea of the sound of the music that allows the reader to imagine it as if reading a kind of sheet music in prose. As a result, Johnson’s willingness to conjoin the textual and the aural within the descriptions of music perhaps even takes Du Bois’s project a step further. While Du Bois was willing to place black aural culture within the bounds of a printed medium, he still did so through specifically musical forms of notation – he used actual bars of music and refrained from including lyrics to all but the final song. Johnson, though, not only placed black aural culture within a printed medium, but placed it within the bounds of language. By describing the music in explicit and technical detail, Johnson conjoined musical and
literary forms of expression to a far greater extent than Douglass or even Du Bois was willing too. While Douglass (and, later, Ellison) would decry language’s inability to adequately represent sound without significantly diminishing its phenomenological and political viability, Johnson’s willingness to offer detailed and unselfconscious descriptions of music shows that he holds a faith in the power of writing to represent African American subjectivity as it appears in music to an extent that Douglass, Ellison, and perhaps even Du Bois, did not.

This faith in the written word as a vehicle for black expression helps to explain \textit{The Autobiography}’s importance as a text that both predates and is central to the peak of the Harlem Renaissance since the Renaissance placed such explicit emphasis on notions of high art and the “literary.” \textit{The Autobiography} represents an early manifestation of the importance of the written word to Johnson’s notions of black expression as a form of racial uplift – a notion that would continue to manifest itself in his later works. As Michael Nowlin has claimed, in Johnson’s 1930 work \textit{Black Manhattan} “Johnson was exhibiting to a white readership his knowledge that stable cultural capital such as ‘pure literature’ mattered as an index of social power (while documenting the precarious cultural capital his people had accumulated under incredibly oppressive conditions)” (322). It is important to realize, however, that what Nowlin reduces to a parenthetical insertion – Johnson’s desire to document the existing cultural capital of the African American community, which he locates primarily in music – is in fact a prominent feature of his writing and a crucial component to understanding the often confused model of racial identity that the racially confused narrator of \textit{The Autobiography} poses to critics.
In fact, it is in this regard that another crucial element of Johnson’s textual relationship to Du Bois and his use of music in *Souls* emerges. As I argued in “Interlude,” Du Bois, despite a persistent concern with questions of pan-African identity—concerns that predated even *Souls*—nevertheless seemed to understand the tension between black aurality and written discourse as a U.S. phenomenon. As a result, his discussion of the sorrow songs in *Souls* places them firmly within the context of U.S. racial politics and sees in them a marker of U.S. rather than pan-African or even African American identity.

It is in this regard that Johnson’s uses of black music in *The Autobiography* signify most clearly upon Du Bois. Rather than use music to protect black subjectivity from the consuming discourses of whiteness, as I have argued Douglass did, or to use it to define the limits of black identity across national boundaries, as many of Johnson’s contemporaries did (including Pauline Hopkins, whom I discuss in my fourth chapter), Johnson borrows from Du Bois’s turn of the century conceptions of black music in order to assert that African American aural culture is a crucial site for establishing a distinctly U.S. national culture.

In this regard, Johnson’s aims in *The Autobiography* are in many ways far more ambitious than critics have realized. Commentators have long sought to place the narrator’s decision to pass as white within an ideological spectrum in which he either betrays or vindicates the black community. As Katherine Biers has aptly observed, “[c]ommentators have tended to bifurcate into two camps [...] arguing either that the novel exposes black identity and all identity as a fiction, or that it portrays a character who is insufficiently true to his identity” (117). Biers also observes that these
commentators “have taken for granted the literariness of the work as a frame for dramas of the gaze” and thus fail to adequately address the aural dimensions of the novel (117). While I certainly agree with Biers call for an attention to what she calls the “phonographic voice” of the novel, I would depart from her claims that an attention to sound ultimately reestablishes the narrator’s black identity; that while the narrator’s “internal [racial] difference cannot be ‘read’ on the countenance, it can be heard” (116). On the contrary, a thorough account of the role of music within the text reveals the ways that the narrator acts less as a symbol of the specific struggles of the black community and functions more as a symbol of the failings of the U.S. nation to adequately account for questions of racial identity. Through Johnson’s juxtaposition of literature and music, as well as his juxtaposition of a wide array of racially marked musical styles, he shows that the narrator’s ultimate failure is not the result of his being a black man lacking the courage to face the oppression of his race. Instead, he is symbolic of a nation that is failing to reach its full cultural potential due to its unwillingness to acknowledge and embrace its own diverse and painful history.

Biers, though, is certainly not alone in her move to use black aurality as a means of reinscribing a black identity upon the narrator of the The Autobiography. Recent work by Cristina L. Ruotolo, A. Timothy Spaulding, and Salim Washington has also tended to place the role of music in the novel within a set of dichotomies that seem at odds with the fluid notions of race that the novel presents. Even as these critics’ accounts of The Autobiography seek to examine the extent to which Johnson deconstructs the racial binaries that shape the narrator’s story in order to display race as a fluid and culturally determined category, their discussions of the novel’s use of sound have tended to place
music in a stark dichotomy with literature, and to place different musical genres within a racial binary in which black, performative folk-art forms stand in contrast to the white, classical, written tradition. Ruotolo is perhaps most clearly illustrative of this tendency when she writes:

Indeed, the novel arguably grounds its otherwise slippery approach to ‘race’ in the audible blackness of certain African American musical practices that ultimately cannot be imitated or reproduced: the ragtime performed by the “natural” player at the “Club,” the “call and response” songs performed by “Singing Johnson” and the Southern black congregation, and the Southern melodies sung by the narrator’s mother.

(250)

According to Ruotolo, Johnson locates the “blackness” of this music in its aurality – unlike western classical music, black music cannot be authentically reproduced textually. As a result, Ruotolo sees Johnson breaking down biological notions of race in The Autobiography, even as he maintains racial marking through differing relationships to textuality and aurality.

Ruotolo is certainly not alone in her tendency to simultaneously argue that the novel challenges racial categorization even as it reaffirms cultural difference through a contrast between sound and writing. Washington, for instance, though she argues that, “The Autobiography reveals a mulatto-centered, American nationalism, as much as it does a black nationalism,” (233) still claims that in regards to high and low brow artistic productions the novel “depicts them as springing from two opposing forces, orality and literacy, which are more or less figured as black and white epistemologies in the novel”
Similarly, Spaulding, though eager to point to rag-time as “a flexible and unstable symbol” (227), ultimately does so by pointing to it as a form of black music that was exceptional precisely because it was often written down and thus stands in stark contrast to “other black musical forms that relied mostly on improvisation, such as the blues and spirituals” (228).

What these readings miss is the way in which Johnson places these apparent dichotomies of music and literature as well as textual and performative reproduction in apposition to the narrator’s seeming racial dichotomy in such a way that they come to ultimately deconstruct each other. If, as Spaulding asserts, “the narrator’s crisis in terms of his biracial identity occurs in tandem with his confusion regarding his identity as a musician” then his increasingly fluid concept of his own identity in relationship to the culture that surrounds him brings with it an understanding of various literary and musical traditions that is equally fluid (225). From its very beginning the novel sets in motion a perpetual circle of logic in which the breakdown of stable racial categories similarly breaks down the traditional means of defining difference within racially marked forms of artistic production and vice versa. In the absence of any clear physical markers of race, the narrator can only be defined through his adherence to certain racially marked cultural practices. If these practices, in turn, depend upon characteristics such as textuality or orality for their own racial demarcation, then the novel’s successful deconstruction of these characteristics as markers of race place the narrator’s identity further into question.

It is easy to see, though, why critics have tended to place music and literature within binary terms since Johnson so often evokes the tension between sound and text throughout the novel. As Washington has pointed out, within the text “chronicles of
learning about music are usually placed in apposition to descriptions of his studies in literature,” an “apposition, which occurs almost a dozen times throughout the novel” (239). Indeed, the repeated pairing of music and literature is so pervasive that it seems self-conscious. For instance, of his earliest education at the hands of his mother, Johnson writes, “[a]s busy as she generally was, she found time, however, to teach me my letters and figures and how to spell a number of easy words. Always on Sunday evenings she opened the little square piano and picked out hymns” (7). This particular moment is illustrative of a trend that persists throughout the novel as the narrator’s musical and literary educations occur simultaneously throughout.

As striking as this repeated apposition of music and literature is in its own right, it becomes even more so when we realize that it often occurs at moments in the novel in which the narrator’s racial identity is in some state of flux. One such moment occurs when the narrator first learns that, within the context of his elementary school, he is considered black. Upon learning of his racial identity, the narrator begins to withdraw from all of his classmates – white and black. He then goes on to claim that, “[t]here were two immediate results of my forced loneliness: I began to find company in books, and greater pleasure in music” (24). Here, then, Johnson, though clearly drawing attention to the possibility that the narrator’s racial identity impacts upon his relationship to both music and literature, does so without affirming the traditional alignments of race with certain expressive modes. In fact, while his confusion regarding his racial identity causes him to effectively withdraw from contact with children from either race, it does not cause him any similar confusion or withdrawal from music or literature but instead inspires a greater love of both forms.
Of course, we could simply see the narrator’s attempt to find solace in both music and books simultaneously as a natural result of his hybrid biological identity. Due to his own seeming racial ambiguity, he is able to participate in both forms of discourse without concern for the racial connotations of either and this, in turn, might become most pronounced in those moments when he most directly confronts his own hybridity. However, at an even earlier moment in the novel, Johnson has already begun to interrogate the notions that either music or writing is as clear a racial marker within the novel as critics such as Spaulding and Washington have suggested. When the narrator first begins to attend school, his descriptions of his two closest friends, “Shiny” and “Red,” establishes a clear racial dichotomy between the two. “Red” he describes as having “a face full of freckles and a head full of very red hair,” (11) whereas “Shiny” he describes in an almost minstrel-like fashion as having a “face [that] was black as night, but shone as if it were polished; he had sparkling eyes, and when he opened his mouth, he displayed glistening white teeth” (14).

Having established this racial dichotomy between the two friends, then, Johnson uses their equally dichotomous abilities with the written word to show that literacy is in no way linked to whiteness. When, one day, each of the students is asked to spell his respective place in line, “Red,” even with help from the narrator, requires three attempts before he is able to spell “fourth.” By contrast, the narrator considered “Shiny” “to be the best speller, the best reader, the best penman – in a word, the best scholar, in the class” (14). Here, then, Johnson is careful to challenge any essentialist notions that proficiency with the written word is the domain of whiteness. If “Shiny,” whose physical characteristics the narrator describes in terms of almost stereotypical blackness,
represents the school’s most accomplished scholar, then we should clearly not assign the narrator’s own talents for reading and writing to his white parentage.

If the narrator’s skills with the written word are not linked to his whiteness, neither are his abilities as a musician linked to his blackness, though critics have been apt to overlook the deconstructive moves that Johnson makes in this regard even more than in regard to the narrator’s skill with language and writing. This is not to suggest that critics have tended to see the novel as coding all musical talent as black within the text. But scholars have tended to separate music within the text into racialized categories depending on whether the forms of music in question are part of the written, classical tradition (most often represented by Chopin and Beethoven in the text) or the improvisatory traditions of black folk culture (represented through the Spirituals and ragtime). Ruotolo, for instance, after describing the narrator’s mother’s songs and western classical music as “fundamentally opposed musical practices,” (260) then claims:

Understood as “natural” rather than disciplined, vocal rather than instrumental, oral rather than textual, and improvisatory rather than composed, his mother’s Southern songs invoke a black space of freedom that depends on its difference and separation from white cultural practices.

(260)
The implication here is clearly that if the narrator sees black music as natural, vocal, oral, and improvisatory, then music that is disciplined, instrumental, textual, and composed is the domain of whiteness and that these dichotomies are the means by which music can be coded as either authentically black or authentically white. This strict lens, then, governs Ruotolo’s reading of the narrator’s description of the ragtime musician that the narrator
encounters in New York, claiming that, “[t]he pianist in the ‘Club,’ [...] achieves the status of originator and rightful owner because he can’t write his music down; he is untrained in a skill that [...] would destroy its authenticity” (261 emphasis in the original). And Ruotolo is certainly not alone in assigning such strict racial barriers to Johnson’s concept of music. Biers claims that, for Johnson, the infectious nature of the rhythms of ragtime stems from the notion that, “rhythm is phonographic – a sound whose origins and effects cannot be fully accounted for because they cannot be rendered into writing” (108-109).

As strongly as critics have asserted that, within The Autobiography, black music is most “authentic” when it eludes written forms of representation, critics are perhaps even more emphatic in claiming that the novel defines white music almost exclusively through its textual nature. Again, Ruotolo is illustrative when she claims that:

An essential, if mutable, difference inheres for Johnson between “black” and “white” models of music production: for the rag player, as for the narrator’s mother, music remains inseparable from the moment of its performance and from the body of its performer; for the white “imitator,” as for the narrator himself, music transcribed into notes on a page becomes detached from its originator and endlessly repeatable anywhere there is a piano and someone who can read music. (262)

According to Ruotolo, then, Johnson sees white musical performance as only existing in the textual realm. Spaulding makes a similar claim when, in discussing the moment in The Autobiography in which the narrator receives an upright piano from his father, he writes that:
In this moment, then, the narrator establishes the racial distinctions and cultural constraints upon his identity: “white music” (i.e. Chopin), written in standard notation and played with a faithful adherence to the score, represents the world he cannot access as a black man – a world of wealth, high art, respect, and (paternal) acceptance. Conversely, “black music” – emotional, spontaneous, improvisational – represents the narrator’s natural (maternal) birthright. (232)

Here again, it is the “faithful adherence to the score” that defines white music. For both Spaulding and Ruotolo, then, even in regards to music, there remains a stark contrast for Johnson between aural and textual practices. The black musician, for whom the act of composition and performance cannot be separated, creates his or her art in the aural realm. The white musician, however, only traffics in the textual, rendering silent marks upon the page. The performer of white music is almost stripped of the title of artist and is, instead, nothing more than a kind of living player-piano, mechanically following the instructions of the composer/artist’s distant creative act.

Spaulding, though, does acknowledge that the novel makes some deconstructive moves regarding sound and text, but poses these moves as being exceptions to the binaries that he otherwise sees as governing the novel’s models of the relationship of sound and text. He points out that “[u]nlke other black musical forms that relied mostly on improvisation, such as the blues and spirituals, ragtime was largely composed, and thus embodied the union of oral and print culture,” (227) therefore “ragtime, from a deconstructive standpoint, is a flexible and unstable symbol” (228). However, in Spaulding’s reading of the novel, this deconstruction of aurality and textuality only
occurs through its presentation of ragtime. For Spaulding, each of the other forms of music and text that Johnson presents in the novel are meant to establish a binary that only ragtime can deconstruct. Ragtime becomes an exceptional form of music precisely because it is able to deconstruct the dichotomies that otherwise racially mark certain musical forms.

Closer attention to Johnson’s presentations of music in the novel, however, shows that this deconstruction is an important part of all of Johnson’s descriptions of writing and music in the text. In fact, in regards to “white” forms of music, Johnson, rather than emphasizing its textual origins, seems to draw attention to the very aural qualities of the music that critics have been so quick to ignore. After all, though music in the western classical tradition originates from a written score, there is still an enormous space for individual interpretation and personal, and even spontaneous, expression.

Johnson seems rather aware of this very notion when his narrator describes his own early experiences playing the piano. He writes:

I can believe that I did astonish my audience, for I never played the piano like a child; that is, in the “one-two-three” style with accelerated motion. Neither did I depend upon mere brilliancy of technique, a trick by which children often surprise their listeners; but I always tried to interpret a piece of music; I always played with feeling. (27)

That the narrator must, at this point, “interpret a piece of music” clearly indicates that he is playing from a written score, probably in the western classical tradition. Despite his adherence to written notes, however, he still “always played with feeling.” While he does eventually claim that his ability to find emotion and feeling in the music “was due
[...] largely to the fact that I did not begin to learn the piano by counting out exercises, but by trying to reproduce the quaint songs which my mother used to sing” and thus associates it with his education in the black musical tradition, he does not align less passionate performances in any way with whiteness, linking it instead with childishness (27). There is nothing in the passage to suggest that the narrator’s performance is superior to those of equally skilled and passionate white performers. His experience with the African American musical tradition might have enabled him to realize this earlier than some of his peers, but ultimately he is doing the same thing that accomplished white performers do: bringing a spontaneous sense of feeling and imagination to a score that, regardless of its meticulous notation, is never fully realized without the interpretive element of its performance in the aural realm.

The narrator even explicitly acknowledges that the classical tradition requires more than an imitative reproduction of the textual when he describes his experiences playing music for his father. In order to alleviate the initial awkwardness of his father’s visit, his mother asks him to play the piano. Still feeling the awkwardness of the situation, the narrator “played something in a listless, half-hearted way. [He] simply was not in the mood” (34). In the absence of a strong “feeling” for his performance, the narrator simply imitates the notes on the page. It is not until his father’s praise inspires him that he “showed [his] gratitude by playing for him a Chopin waltz with all the feeling that was in [him]” (35). Here, then, Johnson is careful to demonstrate a distinct difference between mechanical imitation of a written score and a fully realized, spontaneous performance of art, and he does so without moving beyond the bounds of the classical tradition. Johnson clearly indicates that even in a musical tradition whose
transmission depends so heavily upon written notation, the true artistry of that tradition still rests in its aural performance. Mere imitation can produce a “listless” reproduction of a nameless score, but an “authentic” performance of Chopin requires as much feeling and spontaneity as a performance of a Spiritual.

Johnson also seems to make this claim through his choice of particular composers whose scores his narrator performs. Johnson is certainly critical of the state of classical composition in his own time, as evidenced by his narrator’s derisive description of “the modern innovators who strive after originality by seeing how cleverly they can dodge about through the rules of harmony and at the same time avoid melody” (102). The implication here is that modern music has lost its capacity for emotive impact due to an over-intellectualized concept of composition that places technical mastery above personal expression. However, the narrator limits this critique to only the “modern innovators,” a group that he makes no attempt to claim as representative of the classical tradition. In fact, throughout the novel, the narrator only mentions two musicians by name: Frederick Chopin and Ludwig Van Beethoven. That Johnson would choose these two composers is telling since both, despite their rather impressive technical innovations, are known for the emotional nature of their work (it is also interesting to note that both are known to have been great improvisers when they were alive). Johnson even highlights the emotional nature of their work through the narrator’s description of his own performance of Beethoven’s “Pathetique” sonata, which he plays at a fund-raising recital shortly after his mother’s death:

My selection might have appeared at that particular time as a bit of affectation, but I considered it deeply appropriate; I played Beethoven’s
“Sonata Pathétique.” When I sat down at the piano and glanced into the faces of the several hundreds of people who were there solely on account of love or sympathy for me, emotions swelled in my heart which enabled me to play the “Pathétique” as I could never again play it. (51)

While this passage’s mention that the sonata – whose name and reputation immediately indicate that it is intended to evoke a certain emotional response – might be seen as a piece of “affectation” could seem to indicate that Johnson is charging the classical tradition with an imitative and “inauthentic” relationship to feeling expressed in sound, the outcome of the performance ultimately shows his own conviction that the classical tradition is capable of just as much genuine pathos as any of the African American forms of music that he mentions elsewhere in the novel. Though artists such as Beethoven and Chopin, due to the textual nature of their musical legacies, might be vulnerable to performances full of affectation, this is not the fault of the composer or of the tradition itself, but of the inadequate performer. When the narrator performs the piece while feeling the same emotions that Beethoven meant to express, the result is a performance that even the narrator acknowledges he could never replicate (or imitate), instead claiming that, “emotions swelled in my heart which enabled me to play the “Pathétique” as I could never again play it.” Ultimately, then, this moment, much like the earlier performance of Chopin for the narrator’s father and even his later performance of Chopin for his wife,5 demonstrates Johnson’s own belief that the classical tradition is far from being an exclusively textual cultural practice but is instead grounded in the immediate aural performance of an individual performer who is only able to connect with and express the artistic aims of the composer through his own capacity for feeling.
Importantly, by erasing the line between the composer’s fixed text and the immediate, potentially even improvisational, performance of music in the aural realm the narrator is furthering a larger challenge to the notion that aspects of performativity and individual, personal expression are absent from any written text. This challenge appears early in the novel when the narrator discusses his first experiences learning both music and reading. Just as his music teacher “had no small difficulty at first in pinning [the narrator] down to the notes,” the woman teaching him to read found that he “was prone to bring [his] imagination to the rescue” (10). Rather than seeing this as a liability, however, the narrator found that, “she not only was sometimes amused at the fresh treatment [he] would give an author’s subject, but, when [he] gave some new and sudden turn to the plot of the story, [she] often grew interested and even excited in listening to hear what kind of denouement [he] would bring about” (10). That the act of reading a fixed text could result in such a performance, and one that Johnson, in another apposition of music and literacy, compares to musical improvisation, indicates the extent to which Johnson does not see the process of reading and the process of aural performance as being wholly separate.

Later, Johnson is also careful to show the necessary aural, performative dimension of textuality. In another telling moment, the narrator finds work at a cigar factory where he is eventually promoted to the position of “reader.” Here again, it is not merely a technical proficiency for imitating and/or reproducing the words on the page that leads to the narrator’s acquiring the position, for, as the narrator points out, the “reader” “must, of course, have a good voice, but he must also have a reputation among the men for intelligence, for being well posted and having in his head a stock of varied
information” (73). Here again, then, reading is not merely a passive act in which the text asserts its fixed will upon the reader. Instead, the “reader” must engage the written words and select “whatever […] he may consider would be interesting” (73). Reading in the cigar factory, then, becomes a kind of willful, communal act much like the singing of the Spirituals that the narrator witnesses in southern churches where the leader’s “memory and ingenuity are taxed to keep the songs going” (180). The reading at the factory, then, like the narrator’s experiences reading for his teacher or even playing Beethoven or Chopin, is a performance that, though originating from a fixed written text, refuses to be a mere imitation or copy.

In each of these cases, too, Johnson is careful to show that the refusal to surrender agency to the text does not diminish the value of the written word or score but is instead a vital aspect of that text’s full realization as a means of transmitting culture. Whether playing music from a score or improvising a narrative, the narrator’s performances of written texts are always pleasing to the audience and ultimately have a greater impact than a simple reproduction of the text would have had. As a result, Johnson is able to show that the true value of the written text lies in its eventual performance and that the best performances are always, on some level, an act of interpretation, regardless of whether this interpretation takes the form of an unabashed improvisation, an infusion of personal feeling, or simply a conscious decision regarding what to perform or not perform.

Importantly, Johnson also seems to show that if textual productions stand to benefit from the practice of aural performance, so too can aural forms benefit from their transmission to written text. This is perhaps most evident in the narrator’s decision, after
an extended stay in Europe, to return to the U.S. and compose classical music based upon
African American folk musical forms. The moment at which the narrator makes this
decision comes to represent an interesting inversion of typical understandings of the
relationship of sound and text in the different musical traditions since, in describing the
event, in which a musician who has just heard him play ragtime jumps from the audience
and wants to play, the narrator writes:

He seated himself at the piano, and, taking the theme of my rag-time,
played it through first in straight chords; then varied and developed it
through every known musical form. I sat amazed. I had been turning
classic music into rag-time, a comparatively easy task; and this man had
taken rag-time and made it classic. The thought came across me like a
flash – It can be done, why can’t I do it? From that moment my mind was
made up. I clearly saw the way of carrying out the ambition I had formed
when a boy. (140-142)

Here, it is the European musician, trained exclusively in the classical tradition, who
performs an improvisation – taking up the ragtime themes and then “var[ying] and
develop[ing]” them on the spot while maintaining a classical style. The narrator,
meanwhile, comes to see great value in the textualization of African American musical
forms that had previously been understood only aurally and seeks to return to the U.S. in
order to carry out his ambition to be the first to make this new combination of sound and
text take place. At this pivotal moment, Johnson emphasizes that neither the African
American nor the classical traditions can be defined by an exclusive relationship to
textuality or aurality. The classical musician is able to improvise just as well as the
ragtime pianist is able to compose a score and, furthermore, it is the European pianist’s ability to do the former that inspires the narrator to do the latter.

This moment’s deconstruction of the barriers between sound and text is also important since it acts as a moment for establishing the model of identity that Johnson is offering in place of a racially demarcated relationship to aurality. When the narrator performs for European audiences, his millionaire benefactor does not introduce ragtime as a racially marked musical form at all, instead calling it the “new American music” — a title that neither the narrator nor Johnson makes any attempt to challenge (141). In fact, Johnson even seems to reinforce this notion by setting the scene of the narrator’s awakened ambitions outside of the racially divided U.S. While in Europe, the narrator is able to live a sort of race-less existence — the people of Europe do not see him as black or white but only see him as an American. Thus, when he acquires a new musical ambition that depends upon the conjoining of different musical traditions, he does not frame it as a contrast between black, aural forms and white, written forms, but instead frames it as a contrast between European and American traditions. Despite the narrator’s own considerable skill as a classical pianist, it is the German pianist who comes to represent the ultimate achievement of western classical performance while the narrator becomes the standard bearer of a U.S. tradition. Rather than acting as a representative of blackness, the narrator comes to represent a U.S. national identity whose very hybridity subordinates racial difference to the category of “American” — a category that the novel privileges as a more viable and essential means of understanding identity.

This is not to say that Johnson, or even the narrator, makes a case “for a race blind America,” as Washington asserts, or that he aims to dispel the notion that certain artistic
productions are in some ways linked to certain racial communities. Indeed, as Johnson would later assert in his introduction to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* “[t]he Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro; that is, as much so as any music can be the pure and sole creation of any particular group” (17). Instead, the novel offers a new conception of identity that is linked to concepts of shared history and experience. In a move that echoes Du Bois’s use of the Spirituals in *Souls*, Johnson conflates sound and text in an attempt to privilege national identity over racial identity. Again, Johnson’s comments in his introduction to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* is illustrative when he claims that:

I think white singers, concert singers, can sing Spirituals – if they feel them. But to feel them it is necessary to know the truth about their origin and history, to get in touch with the association of ideas that surround them, and to realize something of what they have meant in the experiences of the people who created them. In a word, the capacity to feel these songs while singing them is more important than any amount of mere artistic technique. (29)

Contrary, then, to Ruotolo’s claim that, “Johnson chooses […] to preserve the idea of an authentic black music outside the domain of the American culture industry,” Johnson believes that the Spirituals, though “belonging” to the black community, can still be accessed, performed, and felt by white performers without losing “authenticity” as long as the performer is in touch with the history that led to their production. For this reason, Johnson asserts that, “in Europe, in spite of the vogue of American popular music […] the best bands are not able to play it satisfactorily. Of course, they play the notes
correctly, but any American can at once detect that there is something lacking” (28). The European cannot fully understand the experiences that have led to the formation of black music, and thus cannot adequately perform the music in the same way that “any American,” black or white, can. While Johnson explicitly links the origins of the Spirituals to the black community and their unique place within U.S. history, their continued relevance and practice has become part of a shared American experience, an experience that is fundamentally different from the European experience.

The novel’s climactic moment, then, rather than representing a racial betrayal on the part of the narrator, instead becomes an indictment of a U.S. nation that insists upon racial difference and division and thus fails to realize the full potential of its own hybridity. At the pivotal moment of the work, the narrator witnesses a lynching and the resulting fear and shame seems to lead him to a crossroads in which he must choose between continuing his life as a black man or deciding to pass as white. Wedded to this decision regarding his racial identity is a question of his mode of expression: if he remains black he will continue to study African American folk songs and pursue his musical ambitions; if he chooses to pass as white, which is the decision that he ultimately makes, then he can only tell his story in the form of *The Autobiography* itself. Put more simply, the narrator must choose to either be a black musician or a white writer. His ultimate decision to pass as white, then, also seems to represents a decision to choose one discursive form over another since, as Salim Washington points out: “the narrator’s linguistic/literary pursuits triumph over his musical endeavors. In the end, he is a failed musician, but he succeeds as the ‘author’ of the narrative” (244). The final moments of
the novel, then, would seem to reaffirm the very binaries that I have argued the novel seeks to deconstruct.

What this reading misses, though, is a crucial distinction that Johnson makes between the nation’s potential and its ability to realize that potential and, in that regard, the narrator once again acts as a symbol of the U.S. nation at least as much as he acts as a symbol of blackness. Ultimately, the narrator’s “passing” is not, as critics have debated, the result of his abandoning his race or his subversive manipulation of U.S. understandings of race. Instead, the narrator comes to represent the cultural potential of a hybrid America that remains trapped by the nation’s own insistence on strict racial divisions. After all, it is ultimately the nation, and not the relatively passive narrator, who is guilty of the narrator’s successful “passing.” Of his “passing,” he writes:

I argued that to forsake one’s race to better one’s condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one’s country for the same purpose. I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a moustache, and let the world take me for what it would [...] (190)

The narrator highlights the role that national identity plays in his decision by beginning his argument with a comparison between “race” and “country.” Then, faced with the climactic decision, the narrator makes no decision at all but instead simply allows the nation to act upon him as it sees fit – he does not decide to “pass,” but instead lets the nation impose its racial will upon him and that will is one that understands race in binary terms of black and white.
As significant as the narrator’s passivity in regards to determining his own race might be to the novel’s indictment of the nation, though, the novel makes perhaps its most powerful statement in this regard through a return to questions of black aurality. Biers claims that, during the lynching, “[w]hile [racial] internal difference cannot be ‘read’ on the countenance, it can be heard [...] as a function of the aural” (116). However, this aural blackness does not take the form of music, but instead is a function of the lynching victim’s “cries and groans that [the narrator] shall always hear” (Autobiography 136). At this moment in the novel, black aurality comes to be located in what Biers calls the “telling inarticulacy” of the victim whose place in the aural realm has been determined by his white attackers and their insistence on maintaining racial divisions through acts of violence and murder (116). These same events, though, also cause the narrator to abandon his musical ambitions and return to the north as a white man. Thus just as, in Douglass’s Narrative, Captain Anthony “would whip [Aunt Hester] to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush,” in The Autobiography the white mob lynchesthe victim to make him scream while it is the narrator who is made to hush (20). However, since the novel has already shown that black aural culture signifies U.S. identity at least as much as it signifies racial identity, this silencing of the narrator becomes a national loss as much as a racial or even personal loss. Through its insistence on racial difference, then, the nation stifles its own cultural potential and, rather than encouraging a national musical culture to rival the classical traditions of Europe, generates an aural culture located only in the helpless screams of the victims of racial violence.
This indictment of racial violence, then, also becomes an ironic indictment of the nation’s unrealized cultural potential as well as an indication of just how far the nation was from fulfilling that potential. As Johnson’s comments in *The Book of Negro Spirituals* suggest, he sees the Spirituals as part of a national, rather than racial, cultural heritage – though originating in African American culture, they “belong” to the entire U.S. However, in order for this to be true, the nation must embrace its shared history and this requires that it acknowledge the racialized violence that has so long been a part of its history. If, in order for white people to fully appreciate the Spirituals, they must first “realize something of what they have meant in the experiences of the people who created them,” then they must first understand that they were produced under the horrors of African American slavery and the continued racial violence at the hands of whites. Put more simply, if the U.S. is to fully realize its own culture it must first be willing to confront and accept the shames of its past. The Spirituals come to represent an ironic duality as they are both reminders of a deeply divided national past and bearers of a potentially unified, hybrid American future. It should come as no surprise, then, that the ultimate result of the lynching scene in the novel is the narrator’s abandonment of his musical ambitions since the violence of that scene highlights the nations’ unwillingness to move beyond the oppressive violence of slavery. Instead, both the nation and the narrator remain mired in a state of silent “shame, unbearable shame” (191).

In the end, then, the narrator’s unfulfilling life as “an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money” comes to represent the plight of a similarly unfulfilled nation – a lack of fulfillment that results from an unwillingness to fully embrace the full diversity of experience that is both his and the nation’s cultural heritage (211).
Spaulding’s claim that “Johnson’s novel is [...] less about passing from black to white than it is about the varied strategies for embracing or, in the protagonist’s case at the end of the novel, rejecting black identity as a musician and an individual” is only partially correct (226). The novel is not only about the narrator’s rejection of a black identity (something that he repeatedly says that he never felt he had complete claim to in the first place) but also about rejecting a fully realized U.S. identity that understands race as being located not in physical characteristics nor in opposing traditions of musical vs. literary or oral vs. textual practice, but in differing roles within a shared history and community. In the absence of the substantial artistic productions that such a realization might have allowed the narrator to give to U.S. culture and the world had he followed through on his goal to produce classical music based on the Spirituals, his only contributions (and Johnson’s novel seems to offer this as a warning to the nation as a whole) become economic as he has “sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage” (211).

1 Though the exact years of the Harlem Renaissance are always subject to debate, many consider the 1925 publication of The New Negro to be the defining moment of the movement, which places The Autobiography’s republication in close historical proximity to the Renaissance’s most visible and influential moment.

2 In this regard, the differences in opinions have been quite vast. In “Of Souls and Pottage: James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man,” Maurice O’Sullivan argues that Johnson presents the narrator’s passing as a betrayal of the black race and thus asserts that the narrator warrants our ridicule. Taking a more moderate stance, Joseph Skerrett’s “Ironic and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man” claims that the novel acts as a site upon which Johnson works out his own feelings about racial identity, and thus the narrator’s plight is laced with irony and subversion. Kathleen Pfeiffer, in “Individualism, Success, and American Identity in The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man,” takes an even more forgiving stance, arguing that the narrator’s ability to manipulate and subvert racial categories as a means of achieving a sense of individuality sets him up as a kind of hero.

3 The narrator, of course, demonstrates his talents for writing through the production of the presumed autobiography that is the text. He also demonstrates a strong capacity for reading when, following his ill-fated attempt to attend the University in Atlanta, he finds work at a cigar factory where he quickly earns a pay raise for his ability to articulately read the newspaper to the workers there. In fact, his abilities as a reader help him to rise above the economic hardships that he experiences in Florida just as much as his ability to play music aids him in New York.
In *The Lives of the Great Composers*, Harold C. Shonberg repeatedly praises Chopin’s ability to improvise and claims that Beethoven was “perhaps the greatest improviser who ever lived” (113).

Again, in this moment, Johnson draws special attention to the immediate aural performativity of Chopin’s music rather than depicting his performance as a mechanical reproduction of the score. After learning that the woman he loves has agreed to marry him, he says that, “I took her place at the piano and played the Nocturne in a manner that silenced the chatter of the company both in and out of the room, involuntarily closing it with the major triad” (209). Once again, while in an intense state of feeling, he is able to perform the music in such a way that it captivates the audience to an extent that it otherwise would not have. That he even alters the ending of the piece, “involuntarily closing it with the major triad” further demonstrates the mutability of even written scores once they become realized aurally.

When, in Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, Charles Montefort decides to relocate his family from Barbados to North Carolina, his decision, and the ensuing journey, is framed by the singing of slaves. As Mr. Montefort makes his final decision to leave Barbados, where the British colonial government has begun a gradual process of emancipation, the local clergyman points to a pastoral scene that includes “the strange monotonous music of drums without tune, relics of the tom-tom in the wild African life which haunted them in dreamland” (26). Similarly, when Montefort arrives in North Carolina, he glimpses a scene of labor in which “[a] band of slaves sang in a musical monotone, and kept time to the music of their song as they unloaded a barge that had just arrived” (32). The tones of these two scenes are decidedly different. The slaves in Barbados, who are soon to be emancipated, sing in a pastoral scene full of “waterfalls [falling] in the sunlight in silvery waves; parti-colored butterflies of vivid coloring, and humming-birds [flashing] through the air with electrical radiance; gay parakeets [swinging] and [chattering] from the branches of the trees” (26). By contrast, the slaves in North Carolina must contend with “placing the heavy load to the satisfaction of their drivers” (33). Still, despite the marked differences in these scenes, Hopkins is careful to connect the slaves, despite the differences of their geographic locations and material conditions, through strikingly similar depictions of the slaves’ “musical monotone.”

This connection is an important early marker of the model of racial identity that would gradually emerge in Hopkins’s work, one that included a unified concept of blackness whose Pan-African awareness put Hopkins at the cutting edge of much turn of
the century black thought. Hopkins's emphasis on the role of sound as a means of establishing this unity of identity was unique and offered a cultural marker of identity that would eventually free contemporaries such as W.E.B. DuBois from an over-dependence on biology as a means of marking race. Though her later works would indicate that the local political climates that people of African decent endured did much to shape their modes of expression, she maintains music as a consistent point of identification and even communication between blacks, regardless of (or perhaps even in spite of) their location.

However, while Hopkins’s eventual interest in the black diaspora has garnered significant critical attention in recent years, the role that music plays in her model of transnational identity has gone largely unnoticed. Augusta Rohrbach has even claimed that Of One Blood uses “vision as the central trope that often controls the novel’s several themes” (492 emphasis added). Similarly, Carol Allen, whose interest in Hopkins’s developing interest in the African Diaspora leads her to a sustained analysis of Of One Blood, does not discuss the role of music, instead focusing on Hopkins’s use of visuals in a process that she calls “photo-narration.” This is surprising since the passing interest in sound and music that Hopkins displays in Contending Forces would become a prominent feature of her work in the years immediately following the novel’s publication, perhaps peeking (at least in her fiction) in her serialized novel, Of One Blood. In fact, in Of One Blood, her final novel, music establishes the breadth as well as the limits of the black diaspora as a place of both racial identity and racial pride to a far greater extent than the role of either the occult or racial science, though these two elements of the story tend to garner most of the novel’s critical attention. The seeming deafness that critics have demonstrated regarding music in Hopkins’s work, then, has led them to miss a crucial
element in her development as a radical literary voice. Rather than representing a
continuation of the domestic fiction of the late nineteenth century, Hopkins was a leading
figure at a time when black women’s fiction was undergoing a crucial, though difficult,
period of change as it attempted to overcome the Victorian era’s inability to
accommodate shifting social and political structures in the modern era.\(^3\) While Hopkins’s
growing interest in racial science, mesmerism, the supernatural, psychology, and new
popular novelistic forms (mysteries, ghost stories, and Westerns, to name but a few)
certainly did much to frame her writing after *Contending Forces*, interpreting the role of
these elements without a thorough understanding of the ways that Hopkins also
incorporates music into her work makes it difficult to fully appreciate the innovative and
sometimes radical cultural critiques that are an important feature of her writing.

However, when we do realize the radical nature of Hopkins’s later fictional work
we gain new insights into her important place in turn of the century black politics and the
role that she played in offering a strong feminine voice to the racial politics that
surrounded her. Furthermore, the crucial role that sound and music played in her work
demonstrates the equally crucial role that these forms of expression played in forming
cultural networks across both national and gender divides. Given the importance of her
radical politics, then, it is surprising that even as critics have been quick to recount the
ways that Booker T. Washington’s takeover of *The Colored American Magazine* led to
her dismissal because her politics were too radical to fit into Washington’s model of
racial uplift,\(^4\) many analyses of the writing that she was producing at the time seem to
respond to a perceived conservatism in her work. These analyses, even when they
ultimately aim to praise Hopkins, sometimes fail to recognize the extent to which
Hopkins was engaged in a direct resistance to racism that is grounded in a discourse of radical politics rather than in a timid and careful resistance to the accommodationist strategies of Washington. With an understanding of the role of sound in her narratives, though, we can come to realize not only Hopkins’s own politics, but also to see the ways that her innovative use of sound as a marker of identity provides models for other radical African American intellectuals, especially Du Bois. Furthermore, realizing these critiques enables us to see Hopkins’s fiction as a powerful voice of not only Pan-Africanism, but also of black feminism. Recognizing the eventual influence that she exerted on her contemporaries helps to disrupt what Hazel Carby has called the “rarely questioned notion of masculinity as it is connected to ideas of race and nation” since it enables us to see that the definition of Pan-African identity that Du Bois would eventually adopt in the 1920s actually depends quite substantially upon the voice of a strong black female intellectual (*Race Men* 5).

Before we can fully understand the extent of this influence, though, it is important to first interrogate the reasons that critics have been skeptical of Hopkins’s political stance since these critiques are so often located in the very aspect of her work that eventually allows for some of her most substantial innovations: her use of mixed-race characters to propel her plots. Indeed, the action of all four of Hopkins’s novels hinges upon the confused racial identities of at least one, if not several, characters who, as products of miscegenation, complicate notions of racial purity. It is important to note, though, that the notion that miscegenation would complicate the racial “purity” of the characters rests in a very biologically determined concept of racial identity. What my attention to the role of sound in Hopkins’s work shows is that she was able to develop a
concept of racial identification that moved consciously away from biology as a marker of race, and instead would turn to cultural markers of identity, especially, in the case of black identity, to aural culture. By overlooking this important aspect of Hopkins’s work, critics have instead turned to the biological consequences of mixed race characters and, as a result, have missed some of Hopkins’s most direct and radical political interventions.

This is even true of those critics who have made strong arguments in support of Hopkins and her role as a radical feminist voice. For instance, in Reconstructing Womanhood, Hazel Carby’s landmark chapters on Hopkins claim that the novels make a direct and aggressive political intervention through their use of mixed-race characters. Carby argues:

The social relations of the separation of the races in which Hopkins’s fiction was produced – disenfranchisement, lynching, and the institutionalization of Jim Crow – were displaced by her alternative fictional history of close blood ties through miscegenation. Social Darwinism and the discourse of racial inferiority were replaced by an attack on the barbarity of the practices of rape and lynching. (128)

For Carby, the apparent whiteness of Hopkins’s protagonists did not represent a valorization of that whiteness or even an attempt to arouse sympathies within white readers. Instead, Hopkins created mulatta heroines in order to question the very existence of the racialized categories upon which so much racism was based and to consequently “attack” the “barbarity of the practices” that that racism produced. Carby is careful to note that Hopkins’s use of mulatta heroines “did not represent an implicit desire to ‘lighten’ blacks through blood ties with whites,” but instead played a crucial role in her
hope “that her fiction would encourage among her readership a resurgence of the forms of political agitation and resistance of the antislavery movement” (129).

While I certainly agree with Carby’s assertion here that Hopkins uses mixed race characters to call into question those racist institutions that sustain themselves through oversimplified biological understandings of race, she does not fully excavate the alternate model that Hopkins provides. By not fully exploring the ways that Hopkins uses music as a cultural marker of race that replaces biological understandings of identity, Carby’s foundational work, groundbreaking though it is, still allows for a persistent confusion to exist regarding Hopkins’s devotion to a strong black aesthetic that does not depend upon whiteness for its value and this has led some later analyses of Hopkins’s fiction to be more measured in their assertion of her radical politics. Claudia Tate, for instance, praises Hopkins for making political interventions that, though certainly not of the accommodationist nature of Washington, nonetheless largely cater to the expectations of white readers. She argues that Hopkins’s novels, rather than making direct political appeals, framed racial discourses “within Victorian ideologies of true love to enhance both black and white readers’ racial sympathy” (196). Moreover, while she evokes sympathy in all of her audience, Tate claims that, “the text attempts to regulate particularly the white reader’s attitude toward the mulatta heroine and ultimately liberalize particularly that reader’s racial outlook” (197 emphasis added). Because the novel caters to these readers’ expectations regarding the traditional Victorian love plot while simultaneously depicting the obstacles to that love as stemming from racist prohibitions against the mixing of races, she forces her readers to “either sanction the arbitrary racist conventions or the power of true love between the interracial couple”
Ultimately, then, for Tate the political interventions that Hopkins’s novels make, though certainly not akin to the tactics that Washington was deploying (at times from the very magazine for which Hopkins acted as editor), lack the active voice of protest that was central to Du Bois’s political stance. Tate ultimately praises Hopkins’s ability to expose an inherent contradiction that exists within her white audience’s racial and literary expectations – a move that might have contributed to her growing rift with Washington. However, she does so without asserting a powerful and defiant black voice of her own.

It is this very lack of a clear black voice that prompted Houston A. Baker to take a far less complimentary stance towards Hopkins. He claims that Carby’s “analyses are based on deep-contextual, authorial intentionality rather than on actual literary consequences” (25). He says that Will Smith, the mixed race hero of *Contending Forces*, “is a W.E.B. Du Bois look-alike, sans radical politics” (25 emphasis in the original) and that Hopkins (and, indeed, most of the prominent black women writers of the time) “shares a history with Booker T. Washington’s manipulations of minstrel discourse” (26). Though he does differentiate Hopkins from Washington in that she “refuses the split-subject position that comes from inhabiting the black-faced minstrel mask,” he still ultimately accuses her of attempting “to inspire confidence in a new northern race in whiteface” (26). For Baker, Hopkins’s dependence on idealized mulatta heroines rather than “the southern, vernacular, communal expressivity of black mothers and grandmothers” not only diminishes the political role of Southern blacks, but also acts as an “ironic transmutation of the mark, sign, and act of concubinage (read: ‘rape’) into a symbolic black code of beauty, grace, intelligence, and historically embodied prominence” (24). Unlike Carby, whose reading of Hopkins’s novels praises their use of
the mulatta as an aggressive, if not radical, political intervention, Baker sees these characters as representing “a mulatto utopia” that silences the black voice and its capacity for political protest, even going so far as to suggest that the presence of whiteness in her characters actually valorizes racist practices, especially rape (30).

What these widely disparate readings of Hopkins demonstrate is the seeming elusiveness of her politics since her own model of racial identity is often complex and evolves substantially in the short period of time separating her novels’ publications (Contending Forces, her first novel, was published in 1900 and Of One Blood, her last of four novels, was published in 1903). In this regard, Baker’s critiques of Hopkins are illustrative since he limits his analysis of Hopkins to Contending Forces. If we consider Contending Forces a representative work, then Baker’s critiques are largely warranted. Indeed, in this novel, even her use of music falls very much in line with Baker’s comments. In a moment that is highly derisive of black folk culture, Hopkins makes light of Ophelia Davis (whose dark skin and heavy vernacular places her in stark contrast with the fair skinned and highly refined Sappho Clark) when she performs “Suwanee River.” Hopkins establishes a clear contrast between European classical forms of music and southern black folk music when she describes the performance:

[T]he air was filled with Mrs. Davis’ ambitious attempts to imitate an operatic artist singing that good old-time song. With much wheezing and puffing – for the singer was neither slender nor young – and many would-be fascinating jumps and groans, presumed to be trills and runs, she finished to the relief of the company. (109)
This almost blackface minstrel-like performance is clearly derisive of southern culture and, especially when placed in contrast with Dora and Sappho’s skill at performing classical forms of music, supports Baker’s critique of Hopkins as ultimately valorizing the influence of white blood as a means of lifting the black race into a “mulatto utopia.”

Baker, though, does not offer any account of Hopkins’s work beyond Contending Forces and thus misses the evolution of her work in which depictions of music and culture come to act as markers of race that transcend her characters’ physical whiteness. Instead, he uses that novel to justify his inclusion of Hopkins in a group of black women writers that he calls the “northern daughters”; a group that he claims does not honor “black women’s vernacular southern culture in the heroism of its economic survival, and then in the resonances of its quilts, gardens, conjuration, supper-getting-ready songs, [and] churched melodies” (30). By grouping several important black women intellectuals (the list includes such prominent voices as Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Frances Harper, and Anna Julia Cooper) under the broad category of “northern daughters” Baker flattens their individual voices underneath a gendered category that he then discounts because of their use of white Victorian models of domesticity in some of their fiction.

This gendered discussion of Hopkins (as well as the many other women whom Baker critiques) is not only highly problematic, but also contradictory for two important reasons. First, Baker’s critique of these women for their use of Victorian models of identity is at odds with his stance on Du Bois’s politics at the same turn-of-the-century moment. As Cornel West has pointed out, Du Bois’s construction of his own intellectual identity rested largely upon Victorian models, claiming that:
The Victorian three-piece suit – with a clock and a chain in the vest – worn by W.E.B. Du Bois not only represented the age that shaped and molded him; it also dignified his sense of intellectual vocation, a sense of rendering service by means of a critical intelligence and moral action.

Despite Du Bois’s dependence on white Victorian intellectual models (and dress), Baker does not hesitate to offer Du Bois as the standard bearer of black radical politics at the very same moment that he uses Hopkins’s dependence on Victorian models of domesticity (which he explicitly connects to femininity) to support his claims of her conservatism in *Contending Forces*: he calls Will Smith “a W.E.B. Du Bois look-alike, *sans* radical politics.” For Baker, then, Victorian masculinity does not preclude radical racial politics, but Victorian femininity does. It is Baker’s gendering of these women’s approach to fiction, then, that lies at the heart of his attempt to marginalize them by aligning them with Washington’s assimilationist politics (in an ironic reversal of Carby’s claim that Du Bois feminized Washington in *The Souls of Black Folk* in order to marginalize him).

Baker’s critique of the “northern daughters” is also problematic since its attempt to find adequate connections between the various women that he discusses forces him to only discuss those elements that the women *sometimes* have in common (most notably their occasional dependence on Victorian models of domesticity). As a result, he completely ignores the vastness of each writer’s intellectual contributions to turn-of-the-century black politics, and this is particularly evident in his discussion of Hopkins. Rather than continuing to rely upon long-established Victorian models of femininity, as
does *Contending Forces*, Hopkins’s later fiction complicated models of white
domesticity and offered new models of both feminine and black identity. Indeed, in her
last novel, *Of One Blood*, Hopkins’s use of African mysticism as well as the southern
spirituals demonstrates the extent to which her writing came to value the “conjuration,
supper-getting-ready songs, [and] churched melodies” whose absences are at the heart of
Baker’s critique. Furthermore, Hopkins’s later developments not only rescue her from
possible charges of being a “W.E.B. Du Bois look-alike, *sans* radical politics,” but
actually enable her to pioneer notions of racial identity that Du Bois would later adopt in
his own works.

Even as she refigures her relationship to the Victorian domestic novel, though,
Hopkins still utilizes mulatto characters as the primary vehicles of her narratives, even in
her later novels. This continuing presence of whiteness in her characters, even as her
move away from Victorian modes of fiction seemed to limit the presence of whiteness in
her narrative forms, might seem to be at odds with her rapidly developing politics,
especially her interest in Pan-Africanism. Hopkins’s dependence upon mixed-race
characters ran the risk of evoking a nationally specific phenomenon – mixed race identity
resulting from rape as a product of U.S. slavery and the “one-drop rule”7 – even as,
towards the end of her employment at the CAM, her concept of racial identity became
increasingly trans-national.8 In fact, in *Contending Forces*, Hopkins writes that only in
the U.S. is the Montefort’s “whiteness” even called into question. Though “there might
even have been a strain of African blood polluting the fair stream of Montefort’s vitality,
or even his wife’s,” in the absence of U.S. one-drop rule politics this possibility “would
not have caused him one instant’s uneasiness” (23). In other words, the Monteforts are
only black in the U.S. and, thus, their ties to the black diaspora are tenuous at best. In the years that followed the publication of *Contending Forces*, then, Hopkins would have to reconcile her budding interest in models of racial identity that transcend national borders and politics with her continued dependence on mulatto characters to propel her narratives.

That her work would undergo such shifts should come as no surprise given the rapidly shifting character of racial politics that surrounded her during her most productive literary period (beginning with the writing of *Contending Forces*, published in 1900, and ending with her leaving the *Colored American Magazine* in 1904). These years witnessed Du Bois’s participation in the Pan African Conference of 1900, the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the takeover of her magazine by Washington. These events surely influenced some major shifts in her work and these shifts, in turn, exerted an important influence back upon the political climate that surrounded her. In particular, Hopkins’s engagement with the question of what defines race, a question of great consequence for Du Bois at the time (and beyond), and how that definition relates to questions of both racial and national identities emerges in Hopkins’s writing to an extent unseen in her earlier work.

In this regard, Hopkins’s texts engage in an important dialog with those of Du Bois and, through their innovative uses of sound and music as markers of pan-African black identity, develop a discourse that would appear in Du Bois’s later models of Black Nationalism. In his discussion of Du Bois’s increasing interest in Pan-African and Black Nationalist concerns, Eric J. Sundquist has argued that, with *Of One Blood*:
Hopkins placed in concentrated allegorical form a virtual catalogue of the Pan-African ideas that Du Bois would develop as he extrapolated, from the foundation set down in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a theory of Africa's psychological and cultural importance to black America's life behind, and within, the veil of color. (573)

Where my argument departs from Sundquist's is in his assertion that Hopkins's work would influence Du Bois only retroactively; that Du Bois, in the years leading up to the publication of *Darkwater* (1920) would turn to Hopkins's work as a sort of imaginative archive that would help him to fully realize a model of Pan-African identity that already existed in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and that was outside of Hopkins's influence for its generative moment. Instead, what interests me here are two different points of intersection that exist between Hopkins and Du Bois, both centering around their respective use of music as a marker of racial identity. First, some striking similarities between the authors' depictions of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the spirituals in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Of One Blood* (whose first installments predate *Souls*) would seem to indicate that Hopkins ideas regarding the black diaspora exert a stronger influence on Du Bois's early concept of Pan-African identity than Sundquist acknowledges. Second, the even more strikingly similar use of the spiritual "Go down, Moses" in *Of One Blood* and Du Bois's 1928 novel, *Dark Princess*, indicates that Hopkins's use of the spirituals had a direct and powerful influence over Du Bois's later thinking on pan-African identity as it developed into a radical trans-national model.

In fact, if not for the novel's title, and the implications that accompany it, in *Of One Blood* Hopkins's assertions of Black Nationalism are in many ways far more radical
than those of Du Bois’s turn-of-the-century models of Pan-African identity. At first

glance, Hopkins’s title is a clear example of Du Bois’s claim in “The Conservation of

Races” that African Americans have “been led to deprecate and minimize race
distinctions, to believe intensely that out of one blood God created all nations, and to

speak of human brotherhood as though it were the possibility of an already dawning to-
morrow” (20). In clear critique of this notion, Du Bois writes that, “[n]evertheless, in our
calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races” and

that “the resulting problem as to the future relations of these types is not only of intense
and living interest to us, but forms an epoch in the history of mankind” (20). In light of
these comments, Hopkins’s decision to title her novel Of One Blood would seem to act as

a direct refutation of Du Bois’s claims for the need of a clear and workable definition of
racial categories. However, such a view ignores the multiple ironies of Hopkins’s title.

First, there is the obvious double meaning of the title: in addition to referencing the
biblical verse that Hopkins even includes as the last line of the novel – “Of one blood
have I made all races of men” – the title also references the relationship of the three main
characters who, despite complicated romantic entanglements with each other, we

eventually learn are all three siblings (621). However, there is also an irony in the title in

that even as it seems to collapse racial difference around an assertion of common physical
origin, the novel simultaneously works to establish racial identity as residing in non-
physical characteristics. The novel ultimately seems to claim that, as far as racial politics
are concerned, it is irrelevant that we are all “Of one blood” since race is not necessarily
(or at least not entirely) located in the physical characteristics that the idea of a lineage of
“blood” connote.
Without physical characteristics to define racial identity, then, Hopkins turns to other, cultural forms to offer markers of "blackness." More specifically, Hopkins uses music, beginning with the spirituals and eventually broadening into a remarkable panorama of different musical forms, to establish a definition of race that rests in cultural memory rather than biology. Importantly, this altered use of sound allowed Hopkins to successfully wed her developing interest in questions of Pan-African identity with cultural markers of race that might otherwise seem regionally determined, such as the Montefort's "blackness." In doing so, she successfully connects two aspects of Du Bois's work (music and the black diaspora) that remain largely separate in his early writings and, in doing so, also reconciles the seemingly disparate aims of her own Pan-African concerns with her dependence upon mixed-race characters.

In this regard, Hopkins's use of sound is ironic in its relationship to Du Bois since, while she utilizes music as a means of connecting mixed-race characters in the U.S. to members of the black diaspora beyond U.S. borders, Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* uses black music to define the very limits of African-Americanness. In "Of the Sorrow Songs," Du Bois claims that, "the Negro folk-song [...] stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas" (205). Though Du Bois does go on to connect these songs to their African roots and describes the lengthy process by which they have been transmitted across both geographic and temporal gaps, Sundquist's assertion that "Du Bois would not begin to argue vigorously for the African roots of black American culture for another ten years" holds true (479). Du Bois still ultimately calls the spirituals "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation" (205) and claims that "[o]ur song, our toil, our
cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood” (215). While Du Bois’s interest and participation in the Pan African Conference of 1900 certainly points to an early preoccupation with models of racial identity that transcend national borders, it was not until Darkwater “culminated the first long stage of Du Bois’s evolution of Pan-African philosophy, [that he] tied the labor and language of the black American South, in slave culture and after, to that of Africa and the greater colonial world abroad” (Sundquist 464).

By contrast, Hopkins eventually came to depict black music, including the very spirituals that were central to The Souls of Black Folk, in a way that, rather than seeking to set the parameters of African American identity, sought to connect her seemingly national concerns (in the form of the mulatta heroine as a product of U.S. slavery) to a Pan-African racial politic. As her own interests became increasingly transnational, Hopkins relied on music as a marker of racial identity in order to allow her mixed-race characters, whose physical “whiteness” would seem to separate them from the black diaspora as Du Bois defined it in “To the Nations of the World,” to represent and confront the concerns of the larger black diaspora. By the time that Hopkins published Of One Blood, which was perhaps her most explicit and extended focus on transnational models of identity in all of her fiction, music became as crucial a racial marker as appearance in a novel whose plot rests upon repeated confusions of personal and racial identities.

Initially, though, Of One Blood provides a depiction of music that bears striking similarities to those in The Souls of Black Folk, which was published during Of One Blood’s serial run in the CAM. In the novel’s opening scene, Aubrey Livingston
implies Reuel Briggs to accompany him to a performance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Livingston, like Du Bois, depicts the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the music that they sing as a distinctly southern phenomenon, but one that, upon reaching northern ears will have a powerful emotional impact. Eventually, Reuel agrees to go and, upon reaching the performance, Hopkins writes:

A band of students from Fisk University were touring the country, and those who had been fortunate enough to listen once to their matchless untrained voices singing their heart-breaking minor music with its grand and impossible intervals and sound combinations, were eager to listen again and yet again. (450)

Du Bois offers a similar description of the Fisk Jubilee Singers when he writes:

Their appearance was uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power. [...] But the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again. (205)

Both authors are quick to emphasize the humble origins of the music – Hopkins references their “untrained voices” while Du Bois claims that “[t]heir appearance was uncouth, their language funny” – yet both also emphasize that the Fisk Singers’ music made a permanent and significant impact upon its audience. Perhaps more importantly, both authors emphasize that these songs were a form of protest; a means of speaking out against the wrongs that Africans Americans had suffered in the past and continued to suffer in the present. Hopkins calls the Jubilee Singer’s performance “the outpoured
anguish of a suffering soul. All the horror, the degradation from which a race had been
delivered were in the pleading strains of the singer’s voice” (454). Du Bois echoes this
description when he says of the slave songs, “[t]hey are the music of an unhappy people,
of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing
toward a truer world” (207). In both authors’ accounts of the spirituals, then, there is an
awareness of the music as a form of protest that arose and continues to develop in
response to the oppression that blacks suffer specifically in the U.S. South.

It is important to note, though, that as similar as these passages are, the close
proximity with which both were published makes it unlikely that either exerted a direct
influence over the other. Instead, the resemblance between the passages shows that
both authors not only saw the political potential of the songs, but saw that potential as
stemming from the same source: the songs were expressive modes originating among
southern U.S. blacks that were capable of evoking powerful emotional responses among
both black and white audiences for the express purpose of exposing the wrongs of the
U.S. South. Moreover, the parallels also show a similarity in the two authors’ political
perspectives. That Du Bois would offer such an indictment of the south and assign such
agency to a group of African American performers should come as no surprise, but the
notion that Hopkins would do so, and do so in such remarkably similar terms, begins to
indicate the extent to which her political aims share far more with those of Du Bois than
critics have previously acknowledged, especially when we consider that she was making
these implications at the very moment that Washington was already beginning his take-
over of the CAM.
As important as the parallels between Du Bois and Hopkins’s depictions of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the spirituals might be, however, the opening of Hopkins’s novel also contains some significant departures from “Of the Sorrow Songs.” Perhaps the most significant of these is the physical appearance of Dianthe Lusk – the featured singer at the performance in Hopkins’s novel who sings “Go Down, Moses.” In describing Dianthe, Hopkins writes:

She was not in any way the preconceived idea of a Negro. Fair as the fairest woman in the hall, with wavy bands of chestnut hair, and great, melting eyes of brown, soft as those of childhood; a willowy figure of exquisite mold, clad in a somber gown of black. (454)

Hopkins makes the central performer of the Fisk Jubilee Singers a mixed-race woman whose physical characteristics would allow (and, later in the novel, do allow) for her to easily pass as white. As Marla Harris has pointed out, “[t]he public interpretation of Dianthe Lusk’s racial identity […] depends upon where she appears; performing in the black choir, she is perceived as a light-skinned black, but entertaining in the Vances’ parlor, she is seen as unquestionably white” (380). Due to the fluid perception of her appearance, then, Hopkins locates Dianthe’s racial identity not in her physical characteristics, but in both her ability to express herself through sound and through her ability to use that expression to represent a suffering that she shares with other southern blacks. While Hopkins’s dependence on musical skill as a marker of racial identity (which she even emphasizes earlier in the novel when she claims that, “the Negro possessed a phenomenal gift of music”) certainly opens her to charges of racial essentialism and stereotyping, it also indicates that Dianthe’s most remarkable and
valuable attribute is one that she has inherited from her black, rather than her white, ancestors (450). Regarding notions of racial identity, then, Dianthe’s physical “whiteness,” challenges Du Bois’s model of identity since she is physically “white” yet through music is able to maintain what is, for Hopkins, an essential connection to her black heritage.

However, this apparent separation between the racial models of Hopkins and Du Bois is one that Hopkins uses to ultimately realign herself with Du Bois’s interest in the black diaspora since her uniting of music with racial identity becomes a thematic means of establishing a transnational blackness that is very much in line with the models of Pan-African identity that Du Bois was developing. While Hopkins begins Of One Blood by locating racial identity in cultural expression (through music) rather than in the physical body, she refrains from locating national identity in either the physical or the cultural. In fact, questions of national identity, though ultimately crucial to the novel’s politics, remain absent from the opening scenes of the narrative.

Instead, the first three installments of Hopkins’s narrative seek to explore notions of race as they relate to personal, individual identity. Once again, this exploration of identity takes place largely through representations of music and, once again, takes place primarily through the character of Dianthe Lusk. In particular, the complicated relationship of Reuel and Dianthe leads to an equally complicated investigation of racial identities and most of this relationship’s most poignant moments occur in musical settings. In fact, their relationship effectively begins during Dianthe’s initial performance as a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Earlier in the afternoon Reuel has a vision in which he sees “a fair face framed in golden hair, with soft brown eyes, deep and earnest
[...], rose-tinged baby lips, and an expression of wistful entreaty” (445). When Reuel sees Dianthe performing a spiritual, he is “carried out of himself [...] in eager contemplation of the artist” as he comes to realize that Dianthe is “wearing the face of his vision of the afternoon!” (454). His initial, powerful connection to Dianthe, then, is inspired by his seeing her perform the music that is a part of the racial heritage that he, as a black man passing as white, had previously attempted to renounce. While the music “pictured to that self-possessed, highly-cultured New England assemblage as nothing else ever had, the awfulness of the hell from which a people had been happily plucked,” it inspires in Reuel a kind of cultural memory that connects him to a woman who shares his heritage – both racial and, as we later discover, familial (454).

As important as this music is in temporarily connecting Reuel to his “blackness,” though, it is Dianthe’s own racial identity, and Reuel’s relationship to it, that exposes Hopkins’s dependence on music as a marker of race. Following the Jubilee performance, Dianthe is involved in a train accident in which she is left for dead. Reuel, calling upon mystic practices of the occult, is able to revive her, but she has lost her memory and only Reuel and Aubrey Livingston recognize her as the African American performer of the night before. As such, they tell her that she is white and help her to enter the white society in which they already move. While Reuel’s “passing” represents a common trope in black writing that would continue to persist for several decades, Dianthe’s passing is unique due to her amnesia. Unlike Reuel, Dianthe is unaware of her “blackness” and is as fooled by her light skin and “wavy bands of chestnut hair” as those around her (454). In fact, other that Reuel, the only other character who is aware of Dianthe’s racial identity is Aubrey Livingston who, we learn later in the narrative, is also living under a mistaken
belief in his own “whiteness.” Importantly, Reuel, whose desire for Dianthe to be his wife necessitates her “blackness” remaining a secret, seeks to maintain Dianthe’s ignorance of her own racial identity in large part by attempting to separate her from music for fear that it will trigger some kind of latent racial memory. On the evening in which he exposes his feelings and becomes engaged to Dianthe, Hopkins describes the scene as such:

Musical girls, generally with gold eyeglasses on aesthetic noses, played grim classical preparations, which have as cheerful an effect on a gay crowd as the perfect, irreproachable skeleton of a bygone beauty might have; or articulate, with cultivation and no voices to speak of, arias which would sap the life of a true child of song to render as the maestro intended.

(491)

She then contrasts this cold and emotionless musical performance by pointing to Dianthe’s own musical skill, which has apparently disappeared with her memory:

The grand, majestic voice that had charmed the hearts from thousands of bosoms, was pinioned in the girl’s throat like an imprisoned song-bird. Dianthe’s voice was completely gone along with her memory. But music affected her strangely, and Reuel watched her anxiously. (491)

In addition to the obvious comparison that Hopkins establishes here between white women who sing with “cultivation” yet have “no voice to speak of” and Dianthe’s “grand, majestic voice,” it is important that Dianthe’s loss of her memory, including her memory of her blackness, leads to a corresponding loss of her musical gift. Reuel even seems to consciously recognize a correlation between the two as he “watche[s] her
anxiously” and promptly leads “her to the conservatory to escape the music” and to, eventually, propose to her (491). That Reuel would fear that music could reawaken Dianthe’s racial memory demonstrates his investment in music as a marker of identity – he fears that, should Dianthe discover her own musical gifts, she would also realize that such gifts could only belong to a member of the black race and would thus force him to choose between his love for her and his own choice to pass as white. If Dianthe becomes aware of her blackness then he could only marry her if he also admitted his own racial identity and this dilemma all stems from the powerful connection that he sees as existing between racial identity and its expression through the cultural form of music.

Perhaps more importantly, though, Hopkins seems to share Reuel’s belief in the power of musical talent as a marker of race since his fears are ultimately confirmed. When Reuel leaves for Africa he can no longer shield Dianthe from the musical performances that are a part of the white society in which they pass. In another crucial scene within the novel, Dianthe attends a social gathering in which there is a call for music. She again asserts the musical inferiority of white culture when the narrator says that Molly, the hostess of the gathering, “calculated her available talent and was about to give up the idea and propose something else” (501). However, Dianthe moves to the piano and begins to play and sing and what follows is a powerful statement of Hopkins’s belief in music as both a marker of racial identity and a carrier of cultural memory. When she begins to sing “Go down, Moses” the connection between Dianthe’s own memory and that of her race becomes explicit. The audience hears, in addition to Dianthe’s voice, a “weird contralto, veiled as it were, rising and falling upon every wave of the great soprano, and reaching the ear as from some strange distance” (502). As
Dianthe sings the spiritual, the audience comes to quite literally hear more than just a single singer, but to hear the collective voice of an entire race. Furthermore, just as Reuel feared, the reawakening of her musical talent leads to a corresponding reawaking of her memory and knowledge of her racial identity. The performance is so overwhelming for Dianthe that she falls "back in a dead faint" but, upon reviving, finds her "[m]emory had returned in full save as to her name" (502).

While Dianthe experiences this realization of her identity within the residence of a white New England home, Reuel undergoes a similar realization during his travels in Africa. After a series of adventures he finds himself in the ancient Ethiopian city of Meroe where he learns that he is in fact a decedent/re-embodiment of Ergamenes, the ancient king of the city, and is the rightful heir to the throne. He learns this, though, through song when "from the hidden recesses the musicians came forth, and kneeling before Reuel, one began a song in blank verse, telling the story of Ergamenes and his kingdom" (554-555). Once again, Hopkins highlights a pivotal moment in the narrative with a musical performance and one in which, again, she emphasizes the superiority of musical performances by blacks, commenting that, "Reuel had listened to the finest trained voices attempting the recitative in boasted musical circles, but never in so stately and impressive a manner as was now his privilege to hear" (556). Significantly, though, the implications of the musical performance in Meroe extend beyond the personal consequences of Dianthe's reawakening to her racial identity upon her performance of "Go down, Moses." As the "strange force" of the music affects him, Reuel comes to the realization that, "[t]he nature of the mystic within him was, then, but a dreamlike devotion to the spirit that had swayed his ancestors; it was the shadow of Ethiopia's
power" (558). Just as song reawakens Dianthe’s personal memory, the musical performance by the people of Meroe reawakens a mystic, cultural memory in Reuel in which he realizes that he is, in fact, Ergamenes, and must relocate to Meroe and act as a leader of the Ethiopian nation.

Given the large, even epic, consequences of his decision, Reuel’s own embracing of his racial identity extends beyond the personal and into the context of the larger black community – indeed, into the global black community. He not only decides to once again live as a black man, but to be a leader of the black race. Unlike Dianthe’s reawakening into a nebulous, communal “blackness,” represented by a disembodied voice, Reuel’s musically inspired reentrance into “blackness” carries implications regarding definitions of racial and national identities. Shortly after the court of Meroe has made Reuel aware of his heritage through song he engages Ai in a discussion of the plight of blacks in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. Reuel reveals to Ai that in the U.S.:

[T]he dark hue of your skin, your waving hair with its trace of crispness, would degrade you below the estate of any man of fair hue and straight locks, belonging to any race outside the Ethiopian, for it is a deep disgrace to have within the veins even one drop of the blood you seem so proud of possessing. (560)

Here, then, Reuel does not discuss the plight of U.S. blacks as oppressed members of the U.S. community, but instead links their ostracism specifically to their belonging to a different nation: the nation of Ethiopia. He points out that the racism that has caused him
to hide his racial identity is not reserved for U.S. blacks, but is part of a shared “history of the wrongs endured by the modern Ethiopian” (560).

Ai then further links racial and national identities when he responds to Reuel’s description. However, through a subtle shifting of terms, he is able to not only strengthen notions of a Pan-African black national identity, but also to alter the terms through which that identity is defined. He says:

And yet, from Ethiopia came all the arts and cunning inventions that make your modern glory. At our feet the mightiest nations have worshipped, paying homage to our kings, and all nations have sought the honor of alliance with our royal families because of our strength, grandeur, riches and wisdom. (560)

In contrast to Reuel’s locating race in “the dark hue of your skin, your waving hair with its trace of crispness,” Ai defines the Ethiopian nation in terms of its “arts and cunning inventions.” According to Ai, Reuel should not take pride in whatever physical traits might result from having “within the veins even one drop of [Ethiopian] blood,” but should, instead, be proud to represent a nation with a cultural heritage of “strength, grandeur, riches and wisdom.” That this valorization of Ethiopia’s heritage initially stems from a performance of the culture’s music links the people of Meroe to those that share a musical heritage in the U.S. Though Reuel and Dianthe’s physical characteristics allow them to pass as white, their connections to a shared culture mark them as members of the Ethiopian nation and it is music that makes both Dianthe and Reuel aware of, and even proud of, their identities in these terms.
That the musical heritage of U.S. born blacks such as Reuel and Dianthe are intrinsically linked to those of Africa, thus marking the boundaries of a Pan-African Ethiopian national identity, becomes still more clear in the final crescendo of the novel’s plot. After being kidnapped by Aubrey Livingston, forced to marry him, and taken to a remote home in the South, Dianthe attempts to escape her captivity by poisoning Aubrey while he is asleep. Aubrey, however, realizes her plot and eventually forces Dianthe to drink the poison that was intended for him. Meanwhile, Reuel, who has become aware of Aubrey’s treachery, and has come to realize that Aubrey is his (as well as Dianthe’s) brother, returns to the U.S. to free Dianthe and bring her to his newfound kingdom in Africa where she, who we have since learned is his sister, will rule alongside him and his new Queen. As Dianthe lies on her deathbed, “strains of delicious music, rising and falling in alternate cadence of strong martial measure, came floating in waves of sound down the corridor” (614). The performers of this music are an “unseen mass [that] must have been the disembodied souls of every age since Time began, so vast the rush and strong the footfalls […] it was the welcome of ancient Ethiopia to her dying daughter of the royal line” (615). If the single disembodied voice that accompanied Dianthe’s singing of “Go Down, Moses” helped to awaken her to her blackness as defined by the U.S. “one drop rule,” this “vast but viewless army” awakens Dianthe to her identity as a crucial member of the Pan-African nation, inspiring her to cry “I see them now! the glorious band! Welcome, great masters of the world’s first birth! All hail, my royal ancestors […] the great masters of the world of song” (615). As the sound of the music fades, it is replaced by “the very distant rumbling of wheels” as Reuel returns, making the
disembodied music not only a march welcoming Dianthe into the afterlife, but also announcing Reuel’s arrival and brief reunion with his sister (616).

This moment is also important in its complication of the resolution of the relationship between Aubrey and Dianthe. Despite the fact that we eventually learn that Aubrey is Dianthe’s brother and thus also has black blood, his abduction of Dianthe still remains an embodiment of the very practice that has led to their confused, mixed-race heritage: the rape of black women by white men. Contrary to Baker’s claim that Hopkins’s mixed-race characters transform rape into “a symbolic black code of beauty, grace, intelligence, and historically embodied prominence” (24), here we find Aubrey, raised as a white man bearing no knowledge of his own “blackness,” perpetrating the act of rape and ultimately leading Dianthe and himself to death. That Hopkins places two characters that physically share the same racial (and even familial) heritage into the otherwise racially divisive trope of a wealthy, southern white man forcing himself upon a defenseless black woman affirms the notion of black identity residing in the cultural formations that define the diasporic Ethiopian nation rather than in the physical traits that blood connotes. Though Aubrey contains the “drop” of black blood that in the U.S. would define him as black, his complete disconnection from the cultural forms of “blackness” that Dianthe expresses allows him to fulfill the role of the white rapist. Dianthe’s death and Reuel’s arrival, then, further emphasize this point since, while Dianthe finds herself welcomed by her ancestors in the after-life through song, Aubrey finds himself to be the victim of African mysticism – Ai hypnotizes him and forces him to commit suicide.
The powerful use of music in these final moments of the novel, then, help to tie together several of the important themes that Hopkins injects into the narrative of *Of One Blood*. While Hopkins's early depiction of Dianthe as a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers differed from Du Bois's account of the spirituals primarily in its refusal to assign the songs a U.S., or, indeed, any national identity, music's final appearance in the novel draws a clear connection between music and the Ethiopian nation while simultaneously rejecting models of race that depend purely on physical lineage. This, combined with her consistent use of music as a model of racial identity, ultimately leads to a powerful merger of racial and national identities that are in some ways similar to those of Du Bois, whom Sundquist claims "returned again and again to quasi-mystic notions such as 'genius,' 'strivings,' and 'common memory'" (462). However, while Du Bois was not yet able to move past an "amorphous interpretation of the category of race that would have significant implications for his nationalist aesthetic" due to a persistent inability to either move past physical traits as markers of identity or to offer concrete definitions of cultural markers of race, Hopkins's novel's tangible representation of cultural memory as a means of defining race allows her to collapse racial and national identities to an extent that Du Bois cannot (Sundquist 461). Rather than seeing a reliance on the "quasi-mystic" as possibly weakening her assertions, Hopkins's embraced mysticism and combined it with the tangible cultural form of music to make a claim for black identity that shared, and contributed to, Du Bois's later and more clearly defined notions of Black Nationalism.

Furthermore, it is in her use of music in this regard that we can see Hopkins's persistent influence on Pan-African thought as it continued to develop in the decades that
followed *Of One Blood*'s publication. In fact, there appears to even be a direct pattern of influence that connects *Of One Blood* to Du Bois’s 1928 novel *Dark Princess* and shows the way that Hopkins exerts a powerful feminist influence upon Du Bois. Early in this novel, the protagonist, Matthew Towns, attends a conference in Paris that represents a meeting of the “darker races” (including representatives from Japan, China, India, Egypt, and an Arab) to discuss strategies for throwing off white oppression. At the climax of this discussion, Du Bois resorts to the use of music and, as a result, his debt to Hopkins becomes explicit. In a passage that bears striking similarities to Dianthe’s performance of a spiritual that leads to her regaining her memory, Matthew ultimately surprises himself and the rest of the conference through a sudden and dramatic eruption of his own cultural memory expressed through the very same song that Dianthe spontaneously sings: “Go down, Moses.” Du Bois writes:

The blood rushed to Matthew’s face. He threw back his head and closed his eyes, and with the movement heard again the Great Song. He saw his father in the old log church by the river, leading the moaning singers in the Great Song of Emancipation. Clearly, plainly he heard that mighty voice and saw the rhythmic swing and beat of the thick brown arm. Matthew swung his arm and beat the table; the silver tinkled. Silence dropped on all, and suddenly Matthew found himself singing. His voice full, untrained but mellow, quivered down the first plaintive bar. (25-26)

Following this eruption of song and a few brief remarks, Matthew “passed into blank silence, wondering how he had come to express the astonishing philosophy which had leapt unpremeditated from his lips” (27). Matthew’s experience of hearing “again the
Great Song” (and that that song is, specifically, “Go down, Moses”) in a spontaneous emergence of music that seems to startle him as much as it startles his audience evokes Dianthe’s similar experience of a disembodied voice singing with her as her memory (both individual and racial) comes flooding back to her.

As closely as this passage connects Matthew to Dianthe, the discussion that he has with the other members of the conference that leads to this musical moment also bear a striking resemblance to Reuel’s reawakening of his racial pride. As the sole representative of the black race, Matthew finds himself explaining the plight of African Americans in terms very similar to those that Reuel employs in Of One Blood. Just as Reuel says to Ai, in the U.S. “it is a deep disgrace to have within the veins even one drop of the [Ethiopian] blood,” Matthew describes to the members of the conference that, “[w]e American blacks are very common people. My grandfather was a whipped and driven slave; my father was never really free and died in jail. My mother plows and washes for a living. We come out of the depths – the blood and mud of battle” (23). Highly reminiscent of Reuel and Ai’s ensuing discussion of Ethiopian culture as a marker of identity and even racial superiority, Matthew’s depiction of blackness in the U.S. leads to debate between the members of the conference regarding the importance of blood vs. the importance of cultural heritage. While the other members of the conference adhere to a notion of blood-lines shaping identity and as the locus of power in the world (a power that they wish to reclaim from whites), Matthew argues that, “[t]here is some weak, thin stuff called blood, which not even a crown can make speak intelligently” (23) and asks “does the tint of a skin matter in the question of who leads?” (25).
Here, then, Du Bois evokes one of the central themes of Of One Blood: the importance of privileging racial memory through cultural forms over the importance of physical characteristics passed down through “blood” and he further privileges music as the cultural form most able to transmit black identity. Furthermore, Du Bois abandons the U.S.-centric view of the spirituals that appears in The Souls of Black Folk, instead utilizing the spirituals as a means of linking African Americans with “Negroes” elsewhere (especially Africa) and even to give him a voice amongst the other “dark races.” All of these ideas, then, represent an extension of Hopkins’s thought as it appears in Of One Blood far more so than it represents an extension of Du Bois’s own ideas as they appear in The Souls of Black Folk.

In fact, even the titular character, Kautilya, the “Dark Princess,” seems a subtle homage to Hopkins’s African Queen, Candace. Hopkins describes Candace as having “great black eyes” (568) while Du Bois describes Kautilya as possessing “eyes that were pools of night” (8). Also, both authors pay particular attention to the glorious skin of the female monarchs that, despite its beauty, remains racially ambiguous. Candace’s skin makes her “a superb statue of bronze […] but an animated statue, in which one saw the blood circulate, and from which life flowed” (568). Similarly, Kautilya radiates “a glow of golden brown skin. It was darker than sunlight and gold; it was lighter and livelier than brown. It was a living, glowing crimson, veiled beneath brown flesh. It called for no light and suffered no shadow, but glowed softly of its own inner radiance” (8).

Despite the similarity in their physical characteristics, though, it is in their impact upon their eventual husbands that we can see Hopkins’s Candace as a precursor to Du Bois’s Kautilya. Both women rescue the male protagonists of the novels from their provincial
and highly nationalistic concept of race relations and set them on a trajectory in which they become aware of a Pan-African notion of blackness that considers race as a global phenomenon. Candace makes Reuel aware of his being heir to the African throne and thus he becomes a leader of blacks throughout the world. Kautilya brings Matthew to the international conference of the “darker races” and introduces him to a level of transnational thought that ultimately motivates much of the proceeding action of the novel. It is in this parallel, then, that we can see that Hopkins’s influence of Du Bois through representations of music also altered his view of the place of women in the development of radical black politics. While it might be true, as Carby suggests, that at the time of his writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois “was not yet able to imagine a community in which positive intellectual and social transformation could be evoked through female metaphors or tropes,” *(Race Men 20)* twenty five years later he would not only use his fiction to “imagin[e] the pleasure of a fulfilling sexual relationship with a woman who is an intellectual equal” *(Tate “Introduction”)* but would do so while using models whose imaginative origins spring from a novel that depends on women for several of its key tropes as well as its authorship.

This is certainly not to suggest that Du Bois’s novel is entirely derivative of Hopkins’s earlier work. While Du Bois is clearly in debt to Hopkins for much of the thematic content of *Dark Princess*, he ultimately uses those themes, especially music, to assert a level of agency in black thought that Hopkins, writing twenty five years earlier, could not fully imagine. Even as Du Bois’s novel depends so heavily upon Hopkins’s model of music as a marker of Pan-African racial identity, the ultimate consequences of this identification for black men and women undergo significant changes in Du Bois’s
1928 novel. For Hopkins, the awakening of identity that both Reuel and Dianthe experience through music, rather than empowering them, forces them to further realize the obstacles that their racial identity poses. Dianthe’s realization of her blackness only leads to hardship as it immediately places her at the mercy of the racist U.S. nation in which she still resides – a nation that will not protect her from the unwanted sexual advances of Aubrey Livingston. For Reuel, the reemergence of his racial pride and his acceptance of his role as the new Ethiopian king certainly provides him with a new sense of purpose, but he is ultimately not able to rescue Dianthe from death, nor is he capable of effecting significant change within the U.S. At the novel’s conclusion, he has relocated to Africa where he can only view “with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land” (621).

In contrast, Du Bois asserts music as not only a marker of racial identity, but also a source of agency for all people of African decent. In another moment that seems strongly reminiscent of *Of One Blood, Dark Princess* ends with a final crescendo of collective music that asserts a strong Pan-African sense of belonging. However, while Dianthe witnesses a “pageant” of “the great kings of the early days, and the great masters of the world of song,” (615) upon her death at the hands of Aubrey at the end of *Of One Blood, Dark Princess* offers a final eruption of music and song as a climax to a far happier and more hopeful scene. At the end of the novel, Matthew learns that Kautilya has born him a child and, after a lengthy estrangement, they are reunited and finally married at the humble home of Matthew’s mother. In celebration, Matthew’s mother “paused abruptly, stiffened, and with rapt face whispered the first words of the old slave song of world revolution” (310). This song is then met with a “pageant [...] of men
clothed in white with shining swords” who, amidst the “silver applause of trumpets,” raise their voices in song to declare Matthew’s child to be “Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!” (311). This almost mystical evocation of a Pan-African heritage through music at the conclusion of Dark Princess parallels the ancestral pageant that appears near the end of Of One Blood to such an alarming extent that it seems to function for Du Bois as a final homage to Hopkins’s important influence. However, its decidedly empowered and hopeful message points to music as not just a marker of identity and a source of racial pride, but also as a site of protest and revolution.

It remains true, nonetheless, that the strong sense of agency that we can see at the conclusion of Dark Princess still rests heavily upon a Pan-African imaginary grounded in music as a carrier of racial identity and pride that Du Bois did not locate in his commentary on black music in The Souls of Black Folk, but instead found in a work that was Souls’s contemporary: Hopkins’s Of One Blood. What is striking about Hopkins’s accomplishment is how fully formed her Pan-African notion of race seems to be relative to those that Du Bois and her other contemporaries were espousing at the time of Of One Blood’s publication. Ironically, it might have been the very notion that Hopkins “represent[ed] a progressive African Diaspora, a concept that had not yet been introduced to the masses,” that, at least in part, limited her literary productivity in the years that followed Of One Blood while others, like Du Bois, continued to flourish. In her well-known letter to William Monroe Trotter (dated April 16th, 1905), Hopkins explains the sequence of events that led to Washington’s take-over (aided by John C. Freund) of The Colored American Magazine and Hopkins’s eventual firing:
Little by little [Freund] opened his views to me and I found that he was curtailing my work from the broad field of international union and uplift for the Blacks in all quarters of the globe, to the narrow confines of the question as affecting solely the Afro-American. (242)

That Washington and Freund (an avid supporter of Washington) would find Hopkins’s Black Nationalist claims, expressed through her belief in a Pan-African “Ethiopianism,” threatening, given their own assimilationist stances regarding U.S. racial politics, should come as no surprise. The unfortunate result of this stance, though, was that less than two years after the publication of the final installment of *Of One Blood*, Hopkins was no longer working for the CAM and thus would struggle to publish and maintain her public voice in the remaining years of her life. 15

This is unfortunate since it is the relative brevity of her career that has, at least in part, prevented many critics from fully realizing the impact and diversity of her work. 16 While Du Bois would maintain a significant public voice for several decades beyond the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, thus allowing us to see the development of his thought over a significant span of time, Hopkins’s relatively short period of influence often leads to inadequate and over-simplified depictions of her work that insist on connecting her to her female contemporaries rather than acknowledging the broad influence that she exerted across gendered boundaries. But what is remarkable about the brevity of Hopkins’s major publishing career is that it still demonstrates an extraordinary amount of growth and development as Hopkins underwent a “major shift from a concentration on domesticity to a concentration on nationalism […] a shift that also represents a more general transition in African-American letters” (Allen 22). It is this
rather rapid change in her political and artistic views that some of her harsher critics fail
to acknowledge.

It was Hopkins’s re-evaluation of the relationship of music to representations of
African culture, then, that gave her the vehicle through which to represent her political
shift away from the model Victorian home as a repository of political power (which she
presents in Contending Forces) and towards a focus on Black Nationalism as an effective
means of enabling black resistance and protest. While it might be true, as Allen claims,
that in 1903 her interest in the African Diaspora led “to many unexplored places that
Hopkins could not yet envision given her moment in history,” her innovative version of
transnational blackness would continue to exert its influence on her contemporaries who,
in later moments of history, could envision what she could not (45).

Ultimately, the unfortunate events that led to her being fired from the CAM
prevented us from witnessing the continued development of Hopkins’s notions of racial
and national identities. While Of One Blood shows clear discursive parallels to The Souls
of Black Folk, Hopkins did not have the opportunity to produce a similar counterpart to
Darkwater, Dark Princess, or any other later works by her African American
contemporaries. However, her use of music and her adherence to radical politics in Of
One Blood connect her not only to a watershed moment in the development of African
American thought, but also allow her works to remain in important dialog with African
American writers long after the circumstances of her publishing career limited her post-
1905 voice.

1 Most notably in Carol Allen’s Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and
Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner.
2 For a thorough account of Hopkins’s use of the occult and racial science see Susan Gilman’s “Pauline
Hopkins and the Occult: African-American Revisions of Nineteenth-Century Sciences,” Martin Japtok’s

3 For a longer discussion of this, see Hazel Carby’s chapter on W.E.B. DuBois in Race Men, or Houston A. Baker’s introduction to Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing.

4 Jill Bergman provides a very thorough account of Washington’s take-over and argues that Hopkins’s radical gender politics were at least as responsible for her dismissal as her race politics were in “‘Everything we hoped she’d be’: Contending Forces in Hopkins Scholarship.” For another thorough account of this process, see Hanna Wallinger’s “Pauline E. Hopkins as Editor and Journalist: An African American Story of Success and Failure.”

5 Thomas Cassidy has commented upon this very concept, that “because Hopkins understood her black and her white audiences to be far apart on racial issues [...] she developed a self-contradictory narrator [...] whose moral judgments are shaded according to the complexion of the audience Hopkins is tying to reach, whose views sometimes contradict one another, and whose opinions are sometimes refuted by her characters and by her story” (661).


7 I certainly do not mean to imply that the rape of slaves only occurred in the U.S. I am referring here to the almost systemic rape of black women that occurred due to “one drop rule” politics.

8 Too often, critics have tended to treat Hopkins’s highly productive five-year period as a contributor and editor to The Colored American Magazine as a cohesive body of work, rather than as a time in which her intellectual engagement with her contemporaries led to experimentation and change. Specifically, Hopkins’s increasing interest in exploring racial identity beyond national borders directly engages Du Bois’s own attention to Pan-African concepts of racial identity in the time immediately following his participation in the Pan-African Conference of 1900.

9 Music does appear prominently in Hopkins’s earlier novels, but its terms are quite different in Of One Blood.

10 I would limit this statement, though, only to her fiction as her non-fiction would continue to show an increasing emphasis on the concerns of racial identity on a global rather than national scale.

11 The novel was published serially beginning in November of 1902 and ending in November of 1903.

12 Aubrey describes the songs as “something Northerners know nothing of; but I who am a Southerner, born and bred, or as the vulgar have it, ‘dyed in the wool,’ know and understand Negro music,” (449) which bears a certain resemblance to Du Bois’s assertion that, “[t]hey came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine” (204).

13 “Of the Sorrow Songs” was one of the new essays that Du Bois wrote for the publication of The Souls of Black Folk, so it is highly unlikely that Hopkins would have seen even an earlier version of it prior to her writing of the first installment of Of One Blood.

14 Allen argues that, in addition to Du Bois, Hopkins’s representations of the African Diaspora also influenced Marcus Garvey.

15 This is certainly not to suggest that her publishing career ended with her career at the CAM. In fact, her works “The Dark Races of the Twentieth Century,” published in The Voice alongside articles by Du Bois, and A Primer of Facts, a self-published pamphlet on “the Early Greatness of the African Race,” both of which appeared in 1905 after she had left the CAM show a strong continued interest in Pan-African models of identity.

16 There are of course several exceptions. For instance, Deborah Horvitz has pointed out that Hopkins’s belief in the potential improvement of U.S. racial politics diminished, arguing that, “by the time of Of One Blood, her last novel, Hopkins has lost faith that a brilliant and beautiful African American woman artist and performer like Dianthe can survive, never mind thrive, in the racially bigoted and misogynistic United States” (255).
Dispelling Aural Fictions

Douglass’s deft deployment of black aural culture in his *Narrative* resulted in a text that, in its description of distinctly African American cultural forms, was able to prove both his own capacity to create literature that did far more than imitate white models and to maintain a strong connection to the black culture to which he belonged. As a result, Douglass’s text has proven to be a watershed moment in the direction of much black writing. What the chapters of this dissertation collectively show is the enduring role that sound has come to play in an emergent African American tradition; a tradition that challenges some of the difficulties that have accompanied black authorship in a nation that has insisted on fundamental boundaries (cultural as well as physical) between racially marked bodies.

In the years that followed the publication of Douglass’s landmark text, African American authors encountered new challenges both in their material circumstances and in the artistic mores of the reading public. Whether grounded in issues of racial difference or resulting from cultural developments that were not explicitly motivated by U.S. racial politics, events such as the Civil War, Emancipation, the Industrial Revolution, Reconstruction, segregation, the southern lynching epidemic, World War I, and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement all led to a world very different from the one in which Douglass composed his *Narrative*. At the same time, of course, U.S. literature, in order to better represent a world that had undergone such radical transformations, also underwent several significant changes, including the rise to prominence of the novel as arguably the central form of the national literature and the development of a modernist aesthetic whose emphasis on the individual subjectivity of its characters was well suited
to the challenges of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Ironically, though, while African American communities experienced perhaps the most radical changes to their place within U.S. culture during this time, the continued segregation of not just physical bodies but also cultural practices worked to deny African American authors unfettered access to the very literary innovations that arose as a means to express the major cultural shifts that were taking place. Writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Pauline Hopkins (among others) were faced with the seemingly paradoxical task of representing African American subjectivities in literary forms that could both exemplify the notion of the "New Negro" while maintaining an "authentic" connection to the African American literary past – a past whose origins were grounded in an obsolete literary genre: the slave narrative.

What my dissertation has shown is that many black authors have responded to this dilemma by first recognizing that this paradox, rather than being a new phenomenon brought about by the development of modern culture, was instead already present for Douglass. Thus his texts, and their successful use of aurality to address this paradox, offered valuable models that later writers could develop in response to their own specific expressive challenges. Thus, while the specific conditions of black authorship have proven variable both across and even within certain historical moments, the models that Douglass produced have maintained a cultural viability that many black authors have accessed and made their own.

Ironically, the paradox that faced African American writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – the struggle to produce a literature that could both maintain an "authentic" connection to the past while also reflecting the modern impulse towards
exploring individual subjectivity and the "high art" ideals of the "New Negro" – would be one that, in many ways, all U.S. writers faced. With the rise of modern literature came a perpetual struggle among U.S. authors to successfully wed the expression of the individual subjectivity with the collective psyche of the nation; to produce texts that could be simultaneously steeped in cultural allusion and yet maintain an originality of form. As such, it should come as no surprise that the aural models that African American authors had developed as a means of addressing such tensions would become a feature (albeit one that white writers often repressed) of much modern U.S. literature. As a result, even as modern U.S. literature appeared to be grounded in an aesthetic that denied black access, that aesthetic was, in fact, already dependent upon acts of black authorship for many of its own most enduring literary tropes.

As a conclusion, then, I would like to briefly consider the implications that the emergence of aural tropes in much African American writing has come to have upon the U.S. literary tradition more generally. After all, as the preceding chapters have shown, one of the consistent effects of deploying tropes of black aurality in writing has been to call into question the viability of the very boundaries that made such tropes necessary in the first place. If the logics of slavery and segregation depend upon a concurrent distinction between white and black cultural practices (a distinction that often appears as a contrast between the written and the aural), the successful conjoining of the two does more than simply demonstrate the ability of African Americans to participate in white cultural forms, but exposes the very notion of distinctly white (or black) cultures to be a fiction. While my aim in the previous chapters has been to show the ways that African American authors have used sound to challenge the racial connotations of various forms
of writing, here I argue that the aural tropes that Douglass introduced, and that many black authors deploy, have also become important characteristics of much writing by white American authors.

The list of such authors is certainly a lengthy one but here I have chosen to focus on F. Scott Fitzgerald and his landmark novel, *The Great Gatsby* – a novel that is exemplary in both its nearly unparalleled status in the U.S. literary canon and in what proves to be its undeniable dependence upon tropes of aurality and the resulting contrast that those tropes create with written forms of expression. Through an analysis of both *Gatsby* and the process of its creation, we can begin to clearly see that the tropes that Douglass introduced in his 1845 *Narrative* exert, albeit indirectly, an influence on Fitzgerald’s seminal literary work, published in 1925. Fitzgerald’s use of aurality throughout the novel links him to an African American literary tradition that had established the tropes of literary aurality that are so important to the characterization of the central character of Fitzgerald’s most enduring and important work.

This connection is an indirect one because there is no specific evidence (in Fitzgerald’s published letters, for instance) that he read Douglass’s works (or those of any black author, for that matter). What is important to my argument, though, is not whether or not Fitzgerald had direct contact with texts by African American authors, but the extent to which the tropes that those authors had deployed had become a part of the U.S. literary tradition more generally – a tradition with which Fitzgerald was undeniably familiar. Also, despite a lack of direct evidence that Fitzgerald had read any literature by black authors, *Gatsby*’s subject matter would also seem to suggest that it would bear certain similarities to many African American texts. After all, *Gatsby*’s struggle is that of
a man who is struggling to overcome social boundaries, and his eventual downfall results from his inability to overcome his society's essentialist views regarding social hierarchy.

These similarities have certainly not escaped the notice of several critics. Michael Nowlin, for instance, in describing the central struggles of many of Fitzgerald's male protagonists, says that, "he is also someone who might know something of what it is like to be black in Jim Crow America: a parvenu who, while making creative use of the materials America affords to make a name for himself and gain admission into the club, can never wholly disavow the identification with America's most abject 'other'" (13). He then shows that this link is one that exists primarily due to these characters' (as well as Fitzgerald's own) consumption of African American music, especially jazz. Similarly, Meredith Goldsmith demonstrates in her article "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in The Great Gatsby" that by "[f]raming the revelation of Gatsby's past with African-American and ethnic comparisons, F. Scott Fitzgerald reveals a lacuna in the narration of white, working-class masculinity" (443). She then goes on to describe a similarity between Gatsby's use of hair and clothing as signifiers of status and similar manipulations in James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man.

What these critics recognize is a certain "blackening" of the novel's main character. However, while I certainly agree with these critics' associations of Gatsby with certain elements of "blackness," I think it is also important to realize the extent to which Fitzgerald's engagement with black culture went beyond the specific circumstances that surround Gatsby and begin to inform the very literary fabric of Fitzgerald's novel. For instance, the similarities that exist between Gatsby and The
*Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man* go well beyond the self-constructed nature of the protagonists, but also include the narrative framing of the two novels. Like *Autobiography*’s narrator, Nick Carraway functions not merely as a narrator of the tale, but as a self-conscious *author* of the narrative – we are meant to believe that Johnson’s narrator has written an autobiography, and that Nick Carraway, knowing Gatsby’s story personally, has chosen to “put it down here” (107). In both cases, too, this writing of the story appears as a kind of failure: Johnson’s narrator writes his story to partially compensate for the musical ambitions that he abandoned when he chose to pass as white, while Nick writes Gatsby’s story because his attempt to assimilate (in terms of class rather than race) have resulted in his death.

Perhaps most significantly, though, *Gatsby* resembles *Autobiography*, as well as a host of other texts by black authors, in its dependence upon aurality, especially as it lies in tension with the written word, to establish its structure and several of its key themes. As Kim Moreland asserts, in *Gatsby* “Fitzgerald insists on sound” (29) and this insistence comes to define, as it does in the texts of so many black authors, the social struggles at the novel’s heart. Much as I argued Johnson and Pauline Hopkins did in their texts, Fitzgerald connects sound to nationality and uses its relative success or failure within the narrative to echo the nation’s hypocrisies back upon itself. When Jordan Baker describes the circumstances of her first meeting with Daisy, she says that, “I had on a new plaid skirt also that blew a little in the wind and whenever this happened the red, white and blue banners in front of all the houses stretched out stiff and said *tut-tut-tut-tut* in a disapproving way” (79). What this passage suggests is the inherent hypocrisy of the members of the U.S.’s upper class – though the inhabitants of the expensive houses on
this well-to-do street fly flags in an attempt to show their belief in the U.S. and the chance for prosperity that it promises, the flags themselves respond with disapproval, as if in protest of their unwitting association with an upper class that, though benefiting from the social and economic opportunities of the nation, are simultaneously denying those benefits to others. That Fitzgerald would convey this idea by connecting the prosperous vibrancy of the visual image of “the red, white and blue banners” with a trope of disapproving aurality helps to maintain the novel’s consistent association of aurality to critiques of the exclusivity of the U.S. upper class.

At the same time that the novel celebrates the aural, Gatsby seems to hold the written word in almost open disdain. In his house he has a “high Gothic library” full of “bona fide piece[s] of printed matter,” but “he didn’t cut the pages,” indicating that the books are merely for show and Gatsby has never read them (50). Rather than resulting in any kind of disappointment in his guests, however, the “owl-eyed” man who discovers the books announces that “[i]t’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism!” and is impressed that, in not cutting the pages, Gatsby “[k]new when to stop too” (50). The books, then, offer Gatsby status among his guests as an elaborate and successful show of wealth. Just as Gatsby is drawn to Daisy’s voice because it “is full of money,” regardless of the actual words that that voice might utter, his library’s value does not reside in the actual written words that the books contain – though Gatsby has ambitions of entering the social class that these books signify, they ultimately, like Daisy, remain closed to him.

If Gatsby’s investment in the written word is negligible, though, his investment in aurality is perhaps his most readily identifiable characteristic. Though Nick does offer a brief account of the appearance of Gatsby’s house, which is “a factual imitation of some
Hotel de Ville in Normandy,” he does so before he has even met Gatsby, which serves to keep the home at a relative narrative distance from its owner. In contrast, the sounds that emanate from Gatsby’s mansion seem ever present in the narrative and work, perhaps more than anything else, to define for Nick the time that he spends in New York. He introduces his first narrative encounter with Gatsby by claiming that, “[t]here was music from my neighbor’s house through the summer nights” (43) and later asserts that, even after Gatsby’s death, he “could still hear the music and the laughter faint and incessant from his garden and the cars going up and down his drive” (188). Whether “commanding” Klipspringer to sit at the piano and not “talk so much, old sport [...] Play!” (100) or announcing his presence in Nick’s driveway by using his car to give “out a burst of melody from its three noted horn” (68), it is through sound that Gatsby fully exerts control over his environment and, in this control, similarly demonstrates the cultural capital that, despite his lower-class origins, he has acquired.

The center-pieces of Gatsby’s aurality, of course, are the elaborate parties that he throws, complete with “the orchestra [...] – no thin five piece affair but a whole pit full of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos and low and high drums” (44). Here, guests sing alternately “in Italian” and “in jazz” (51), and even when a drunk woman is reduced to mascara laden tears “she sing[s] the notes on her face” (56). Even the many conversations of the guests, who, like Gatsby, are members of a rising social class, take on a musical quality. The party goers, in their search for status and “easy money” are “convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key” (46). In the end, Gatsby’s army of sound is, for him and for his guests, a full-fledged assault on the aural territory of the wealthy.
As important as these parties and the music that accompanies them are to Gatsby, however, they prove equally important in demonstrating Fitzgerald's own relationship to music and aurality. What is of particular interest to me here is that despite the overwhelming presence of sound and music in the finished novel, there is actually less use of aurality in the characterization of Gatsby than appeared in Fitzgerald's earlier manuscripts. As the novel developed from the original hand-written manuscript to the first galley proofs to its final form, Fitzgerald gradually reduced his description of the "Jazz History of the World" that is the central musical feature of one of Gatsby's parties until, in the published work, the description had completely disappeared.

In the original manuscript, though, Nick's description of the music is extensive and, though by the time of the galley proofs Fitzgerald had already deleted a great deal of this description, it nevertheless did not wholly disappear until Fitzgerald made his final edits. Importantly, in addition to a lengthy description of the music, this extensive passage gives us valuable insights into the role that Fitzgerald saw the music playing in the novel and its characterization of Gatsby. While Fitzgerald's specific inspiration for the "Jazz History of the World" is unclear, what is important is that it is not the same kind of commercial "jazz" that Gatsby's guests were accustomed to hearing – a style that had little connection to the jazz that black musicians like Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton were producing at the time. Nick relates that, at the end of the first movement "we all laughed and looked at each other rather nervously as the second movement began," which suggests that Nick as well as the rest of the audience were hearing something unfamiliar – something to which they did not know how to react (Manuscript 54). Still more importantly, by the end of the third movement, Nick "was curiously
moved and the third part of the thing was full of an ever stronger emotion” (Manuscript 55). At the very moment that Nick feels the music having its most profound effect upon him, though, he suddenly claims to be unable to adequately describe it, claiming that, “I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it – which proves I’ve been told that it must have been pretty low down stuff – but it wasn’t really a story” (Manuscript 55).

This comment bears a striking resemblance to the many disavowals that I have shown to be a part of many African American texts when faced with the prospect of conveying the meaning of black musical forms. Just as Douglass claims that, “I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs,” Nick here asserts that the nature of the music eludes him and that he can only really describe it by telling a story. However, again like Douglass, Nick’s previous descriptions of the music indicate that he is far from lacking in musical knowledge and descriptive acumen and in his handling of this third movement, according to Mitchell Breitwieser, he “describes it well […], almost as well as the Invisible Man does when he talks about Armstrong” (65). In the absence of descriptive language, though, he turns to the music’s affective properties, writing that, “after they had finished playing that movement it went on and on in everybody’s head until the next one started. Whenever I think of that summer I can hear it yet” (55). This passage, and the descriptive strategy that it employs, also bears a striking resemblance to Douglass’s description of the slave songs, in which he emphasizes that, despite the passage of time, “[t]hose songs still follow me” (27).
Of course, it is also important that Nick mentions that his inability to describe the music in technical terms leads him to think that others might find it to be “low down.” Earlier he had related that the orchestra – an orchestra that seems happy to spend most of the evening playing “jazz” music that was far from the celebrated western classical idiom of the elite classes – “looked at one another and smiled as tho [sic] this was a little below them then after all” when asked to play “The Jazz History of the World” (Manuscript 54). And, finally, in describing the fourth and final movement, Nick writes, “[t]he last was weak I though most of the people seemed to like it best of all. It had recognizable strains of famous jazz in it – Alexander’s Ragtime Band and the Dark Town Strutter’s Ball and recurrent hint of the Beale Street Blues” (Manuscript 56). As Breitwieser argues, these pieces, “though jazz, [are] more famous, but weaker and perhaps for that reason safer, therapeutic, rehabilative, a return to recurrent hints of attainable fulfillment” (67). In other words, the music of this movement is further removed from the African American origins of jazz, and thus it should come as no surprise that the audience “like[d] it best of all” (56 Manuscript). Nick, however, found it to be weak. While I certainly agree with Breirwieser’s statement that “I am not claiming that Fitzgerald affirmed jazz,” it is significant that, through, Nick, Fitzgerald seems to hold a style of jazz that is “low down” in higher esteem than he does the appropriated forms of jazz that had captivated mainstream white audiences.

Significantly, this esteem extends beyond Fitzgerald and Nick, and is also characteristic of Gatsby himself. At other times in the novel the orchestras at Gatsby’s parties are free to choose their own music, changing on a whim to accommodate the moods and excesses of the guests. When the orchestra plays the “Jazz History of the
World," though, they do so very specifically, according to the band leader, "[a]t the request of Mr. Gatsby" (54). After the performance of the piece is over, Gatsby looks over the crowd with "approving eyes," as though this piece has filled him with a regard for his guests that their usual antics do not (56). These moments provide a frame for the performance and indicate that "The Jazz History of the World," is most indicative of Gatsby's musical taste. Later in the manuscript, in another passage that Fitzgerald first shortened before deleting altogether, Nick reveals that Gatsby, himself, had a background as a musician in the jazz tradition, relating that at the age of fifteen Gatsby "attributed deep significance to melodies and phrases set down cynically in tin-pan alley" and that, "when their romantic possibilities were finally exhausted he made up his own song and sang it to himself with infinite satisfaction in the images it evoked for his eye" (217).

Of course, this passage, as well as the lengthy description of the "Jazz History of the World," do not appear in the final version of the novel, and this excision is at least as important as the content of the deleted passages. While these passages indicate that both Gatsby and, by extension, Fitzgerald, had a more intimate knowledge with African American cultural productions than the finished novel reveals, their removal might seem to indicate that this is a knowledge that Fitzgerald wished to suppress. If the approval that Gatsby demonstrates for the "Jazz History of the World" provides a frame for the performance, in the published novel the frame is all that remains – we know that Gatsby has requested the piece, and that he approves of its performance in the end, but we are left with no knowledge of what it is that he approves of and what the content of the performance turns out to be. Instead, we simply get Nick’s brief dismissal that the
“composition eluded me” (54), a claim that seems to almost parallel Fitzgerald’s own assertion that the passage describing the music was “rotten” (Letters 174).

As Breitwieser astutely observes, though, this elision is not a complete deletion. He argues that, “excision is obliviation rather than obliviousness, a surgery necessitated by a correct diagnosis of the danger. The passage as it stands in the published text, then, is scarred, and a scar is a memory” (66). Indeed, while Fitzgerald’s removal of the passages that link Gatsby to African American musical culture do work to diminish the appearance of black culture within the novel, they cannot wholly erase it. Breitwieser is right in pointing to this “scar” as one of three “strands” of African American culture that appear in the novel (the other two being the “three modish Negroes” (73) with whom Nick and Gatsby have an unspoken, “haughty rivalry” and the “pale, well dressed Negro” who identifies Gatsby’s car after the accident that kills Myrtle).

What is important to me, though, is the fabric to which these threads are attached. Contrary to Nowlin’s claim that, “Fitzgerald’s art would ultimately keep distinct the (white) modernist aspiration to cultural domination and the (black) entertainer’s aspiration to cultural and social equality,” what we can see in The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald’s finest artistic achievement, is that the “(black) entertainer” is always already present in the “(white) modernist aspiration to cultural domination”; that the two cannot be kept distinct because each depends upon the other (14). In his own aspirations for artistic achievement (in his letters he repeatedly pointed to Gatsby as an attempt at artistic rather than popular success) Fitzgerald was unable to fully acknowledge his own dependence upon black cultural forms for not only the musical backdrop of his novel, but also for the literary tropes of aurality that permeate it at every turn. However, as Ralph
Ellison has pointed out, saying this “is not intended as a criticism of Fitzgerald, but only to suggest some of the problems and possibilities of artistic communication in the U.S.A.” Indeed, as Goldsmith claims of Fitzgerald’s relationship to the “African American […] literary and popular culture of the 1920s” Fitzgerald, in much the same way that Ellison would later do, “sublimated difference to the level of style, engaging with the racially […] diverse popular culture of his day through textual allusions and stylistic innovations” (463). Through his repeated attempts to mute the presence of blackness in his novel, Fitzgerald attempted to maintain the white artistic privileges that were a by-product of Jim Crow laws and a legacy of slavery. However, in his failure to fully accomplish this silencing, his novel simply reaffirmed Ellison’s claim in “Roscoe Dunjee and the American Language” that Frederick Douglass “was defining the American reality, adding a fourth dimension to the American experience because you could not know who the white American was without knowing something about who the black American was” (461).

I end my discussion with a quote from Ellison here in part because in it lays a certain irony. Woven into the fabric of Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*, one of the high U.S. achievements in literary modernism, is the undeniable presence of black literary tropes of aurality. Yet, twenty years after the publication of *Gatsby*, the publication of *Invisible Man* would subject Ellison to critiques for his choice of modernist aesthetics on the grounds that they represent a rejection of the black literary tradition. If, as I have already argued, he answers these critiques through his use of black aurality within his text, this is less a process of bringing something new to the modernist aesthetic as it is simply teasing out something that was always already there. Indeed,
what Douglass’s successful conjoining of black aural culture to white literary forms accomplished was to show that attempts to maintain them as separate cultural traditions were doomed to failure; that each was always mutually informing and informed by the other; that both were already aural fictions.

1 While it would be impossible to even begin to provide an exhaustive list, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner come immediately to mind as authors whose texts (especially *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sound and the Fury*, respectively) utilize tropes of black aurality at key moments in their novels. Likewise, the Beat writers depend heavily upon jazz for the fundamentals of their literary aesthetic.

2 There is also other significant similarity between the two: Gatsby’s relationship to Dan Cody bears a striking resemblance to the relationship between *Autobiography’s* “Millionaire.”

3 Since the deleted passages do not appear in any final edition of the novel, I have included my own transcription of these passages here for reference. First, from Gatsby’s hand written manuscript:

[p.54] “Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Leo Epstein’s latest work which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation.” He smiled with jovial condescension and added “Some sensation” whereupon everybody laughed.

“The piece is known,” he concluded lustily, “as Leo Epstein’s Jazz History of the World.”

When he sat down all the members of the orchestra looked at one another and smiled as tho this was a little below them then after all. Then the conductor raised his wand — and they launched into one of the most surprising pieces of music I’ve ever heard in my life. It fascinated me. I’ve never heard it since and perhaps it was the champagne but for about fifteen minutes I don’t think anyone stirred in their chairs — except to laugh now and then in a curious puzzled way when they came to the end of a movement.

It started out with a weird, spinning sound that seemed to come mostly from the cornets, very regular and measured and inevitable with a bell now and then that seemed to ring somewhere a great distance away. A rhythm became distinguishable after awhile in the spinning, a sort of dull beat but as soon as you’d almost made it out it disappeared — until finally something happened, something tremendous, you knew that, and the spinning was all awry and one of the distant bells had come alive, it had a personality somehow of its own.

That was the first movement and we all laughed and looked at each other rather nervously as the second movement began.

The second movement was concerned with the bell anymore but a muted violin cello and two instruments I had never seen before. At first there was a sort of monotony about it — a little disappointing at first [p.55] as if it were just a repetition of the spinning sound but pretty soon you were aware that something was trying to establish itself, to get a foothold, something soft and persistent and profound and next you yourself were trying to help it, struggling, praying for it — until suddenly it was there, it was established rather scornfully without you and seemed to look around with a complete self-sufficiency as if it had been there all the time.

I was curiously moved and the third part of the thing was full of an ever stronger emotion. I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it — which proves
I've been told that it must have been pretty low down stuff – but it wasn't really a story. He didn't have lonely music for the prehistoric ages with tiger-howls from the trap finishing up with a strain from Onward Christian Soldiers in the year two B.C. It wasn't like that at all. There would be a swell of interruptive notes that seemed to fall together accidently and colored everything that came after them until before you knew it they became the theme and new discords were opposed to it outside. But what struck me particularly was that just as you'd get used to the new discord business there'd be one of the old themes rung in this time as a discord until you'd get a ghastly sense that it was all a cycle after all, purposeless and sardonic until you wanted to get up and walk out of the garden. It never stopped – after they had finished playing that movement it went on and on in everybody's head until the next one started. Whenever I think of that summer I can hear it yet.

The last was weak I though most of the people seemed to like it best of all. It had recognizable strains of famous jazz in it – Alexander's Ragtime Band and the Dark Twon Strutters Ball and recurrent hint of the Beale Street Blues. It made me restless and looking casually around my eye was caught by the straight, well made figure of Gatsby who stood alone on his steps looking from one group to another with a strange eagerness in his eyes. It was as though he felt the necessity of supplying, physically at least, a perfect measure of entertainment to his [p.56] guests. He seemed absolutely alone – I never seen anyone who seemed so alone. I wondered if the fact that he was not drinking – he had refused his own champagne several times at the table helped to set him off from his guests, for certainly his odd distinction stood out increasingly as the fraternal hilarity grew. When the "Jazz History of the World" was over girls were going around putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girl's where swooning backward playfully into men's arms even into groups knowing that someone would arrest their falls – but no one swooned backward on Gatsby and no French bob touched Gatsby's shoulder and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby's head for one link.

What follows is the edited version of this passage, which appears in the galley proofs of the novel (I have not included any of Fitzgerald's handwritten corrections and deletions since they are all accurately reflected in the final, published manuscript):

[p. 35] "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladmir Epstein's latest work which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation." He smiled with jovial condescension and added "Some sensation" whereupon everybody laughed.

"The piece is known," he concluded lustily, "as Vladmir Epstein's Jazz History of the World."

When he sat down all the members of the orchestra looked at one another and smiled as though this was a little below them then after all. Then the conductor raised his wand – and perhaps it was the champagne, for fifteen minutes I didn't stir in my chair.

I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it – which proves I've been told that it must have been pretty low down stuff – but it wasn't really a story. He didn't have lonely music for the prehistoric ages with tiger-howls from the trap finishing up with a strain from "Onward Christian Soldiers" to mark the year 2 B.C. It wasn't like that. It started out with a weird spinning sound, mostly from the cornets. Then there would be a series of interruptive notes which colored everything that came after them, until before you knew it they became the theme and new discords were opposed outside. But just as you'd get used to the new discord one of the old themes
would drop back in, this time as a discord, until you’d get a weird sense that it was a preposterous cycle, after all. Long after the piece was over it went on and on in my head – whenever I think of that summer I can hear it yet.

It left me restless. Looking around I saw the figure of Gatsby standing alone on his steps, looking from one group to another with watchful eyes. I wondered if the fact that he was not drinking helped to set him off from his guests, for it seemed to me that he grew more and more alone as the fraternal hilarity grew. When the “Jazz History of the World” was over girls were going around putting their heads on men’s shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girl’s where swooning backward playfully into men’s arms even into groups knowing that someone would arrest their falls – but no one swooned backward on Gatsby and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder and no singing quartets were formed for Gatsby’s head for one link.

Several critics have hypothesized that Fitzgerald had specific concerts in mind. Darrell Mansell, in “The Jazz History of the World in The Great Gatsby,” claims that it is a reference to Strauss’s “Also Sprach Zarathustra.” Mitchell Breitwieser, meanwhile, points out that it could have been Stravinsky’s Histoire du soldat and Darius Milhaud’s La creation du monde. Michael Nowlin, meanwhile believes it to have been Paul Whiteman’s “Experiment in Modern Music.”

Nick’s description of the music being performed earlier at party is telling. He relates that, “[a] celebrated tenor had sung in Italian and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz,” suggesting that, to Gatsby’s guests, there is little difference between the two styles of music (51).

Again, I include here my own transcription of these passages in both the original manuscript and in the galley proofs:

The part of his life he told me about began when he was fifteen, when the popular songs of those days began to assume for him a melancholy and romantic beauty. He attached them to reveries as transitory as themselves and attributed deep significance to melodies and phrases set down cynically in tin-pan alley. “I’m Going to Maxine’s” and the Shell Song from the Prince of Pilsau carried him effectually to a world of shining boots and furred dolmans – when their romantic possibilities were finally exhausted he made up his own song and sang it to himself with infinite satisfaction in the images it evoked for his eye. For awhile these reveries provided an outlet for his vitality, reflecting with their contemporary glamour the gaudy universe in which he believed. They were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing (217 manuscript).

The part of his life he told me about began when he was fifteen, when the popular songs of those days began to assume for him a melancholy and romantic beauty. He attached them to reveries as transitory as themselves and attributed deep significance to melodies and phrases set down cynically in Tin-Pan Alley. For awhile these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination, reflecting with their contemporary glamour the gaudy universe in which he believed. They were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing (168 galley proofs).

As Michael Nowlin astutely observes, Fitzgerald’s short stories “The Offshore Pirate” (one of his very first stories) and “Dice, Brass Knuckles, and Guitar” (a story that he wrote in preparation for Gatsby) indicate that he had a relatively close knowledge of African American cultural practices – knowledge that he acknowledges in these stories to an extent that he does not in any of his novels. Also, Breitwieser has argued that when Fitzgerald discusses the music of the “Jazz Age” in The Crack Up he does refers to “bootlegs” of jazz, which implies that he was familiar with African American jazz musicians (whose music
could only be acquired on bootlegged recordings) and saw them as being more reflective of the era than the mainstream white musicians that were also given the label of "jazz."
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