

THE IMAGINATIVE IMPERATIVE: NARRATIVE AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN  
TONI MORRISON'S *JAZZ*, RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AND THE TELEVISION  
*SHOW THE WIRE*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN <i>THE WIRE</i> .....	10
Moral Critique in Dickens and “The Dickensian Aspect” .....	10
Structure, Culture, and the Inner City .....	15
<i>The Wire</i> , “The Wire,” and The Tragic Critique .....	23
“Undertow” and the Critique of the American Dream.....	31
“Hamsterdam” and Alternative Futures for Addiction .....	35
“Final Grades,” The Carceral, and Young Black Men .....	38
III. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN RALPH ELLISON’S <i>INVISIBLE MAN</i> AND TONI MORRISON’S <i>JAZZ</i> .....	49
History as Novel, Novel as History.....	49
Types of Novels, Types of Histories .....	51
The Expressionist History .....	56
The Carnavalesque History.....	79

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how narrative might enable us a fuller grasp of the historical and social implications of our unequal and varied ways of American life. I am dependent on Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious, derived from a 1981 book of the same title, which argues that art, and specifically narrative, makes available an arena for social and historical awareness and resolution in the realm of the imaginary in a way that is unavailable to us in our material reality. Art offers us an opportunity to: "restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be...the central function or *instance* of the human mind (1825, in the *Norton Anthology of Theory of Criticism*, hereafter *NATC*). Narrative, essential to the human consciousness, provides a means for recapturing and, perhaps, refiguring the world: "...the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (1828). Narrative allows us to restructure and reevaluate our social and historical circumstances, enabling us to imagine and make explicit what does not exist and should, and, perhaps more importantly, to imaginatively make explicit what is hidden from us in our material lives and which can only be fully conceptualized in the realm of art.

We will return to Jameson and the potential of his political theory of textual

interpretation, but it is important to note the influence at least one of his Marxist predecessors, Theodor Adorno. In his 1970 *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno anticipates some of Jameson's arguments about the social utility of art, emphasizing as well its unique ability to imaginatively address what is denied to us in our material lives:

It is by virtue of its separation from empirical reality that the work of art can become a being of a higher order, fashioning the relation between the whole and its parts in accordance with its own needs. Works of art are after-images or replicas of empirical life, inasmuch as they proffer to the latter what in the outside world is being denied them. In the process they slough off a repressive, external-empirical mode of experiencing the world (232, in *Critical Theory Since 1975*).

Paradoxically, Adorno argues that a myopic view of the purely "empirical" aspects of material reality will prevent us from perceiving the full measure of that material reality. Art's ability to refer to reality without being limited by it that material reality is what endows art with its social utility as a conveyer of dissent and radical thought: "Even the most sublime work of art takes up a definite position *vis-à-vis* reality by stepping outside of reality's spell, not abstractly once and for all, but occasionally and in concrete ways, when it unconsciously and tacitly polemicizes against the condition of society at a particular point in time" (233). This imaginary power does not signal a separate realm for art; were that to exist, art would be meaningless. Despite its connections to the imaginary and its sometimes violent rejection of empirical reality, meaning from art must be made in relation to the material and social reality that give rise to it: "The aesthetic tensions manifesting themselves in works of art express the essence of reality in and through their emancipation from the factual façade of exteriority" (233). Art's ability to step outside of its empirical reality is nonetheless contingent on an awareness and

consideration of that material reality that art takes as its subject and rival: “Rather, that moment of unreality is a structure resulting from quantitative relations between elements of being, relations which in turn are a response to, and an echo of, the imperfections of real conditions, their constraints, their contradictions, and their potentialities” (234). Adorno’s emphasis on the ability of artistic tools such as narrative to imaginatively utilize and comment upon the social and historical empirical circumstances without being fully bound by those circumstances prepares the way for Jameson’s particular analysis of the social utility of narrative.

We should note at this juncture that even as Jameson’s notion of the political unconscious has primarily been applied to conventional novels, it is better read as a theory of narrative, of story-telling of all sorts, not limited to a generic or thematic focus. Thus, even as I focus on conventional novels in my analysis of *historical* utility of art in the third chapter (Ralph Ellison’s 1952 *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison’s 1992 *Jazz*), I base my examination of the *social* utility of art on the HBO subscriber television show *The Wire*, broadcast between 2002 and 2008. One might reasonably ask how these three texts, separated by genre and time, bear any kind of unified message about narrative, or anything else for that matter. First, all three shows take African-Americans living in the inner city as their focus. The majority of *The Wire* is set in the blighted West Baltimore, while the traditional black metropolis of Harlem serves as the central location of both *Jazz* and *Invisible Man*. Second, all three are focused on the bounds of freedom for a racially identified subject that finds itself in this environment. *Invisible Man* is surely the most triumphant of these, championing what I will later call the *expressionist* subject. Ellison focuses and builds a narrative

around an exceptional (though still racially identified and limited in freedom) individual and that protagonist's tenuous, yet mostly triumphant individualism within that environment. Morrison's *Jazz* revises this understanding, emphasizing instead the (1) social environment and (2) the *interplay between* subjects that gives rise to that particular individual. Her *carnavalesque* subject moves within a *dialogic* environment characterized by the interaction between many voices, as opposed to the idiosyncratic, singular, and all-encompassing single voice found in *Invisible Man*. We will attend closer to M.M. Bakhtin's essay ("Discourse in the Novel") in which these themes are explored in chapter three. With these two conventional novels and their focus on rendering a history through individual or a multiplicity of voices, we are able to grasp a historical awareness that takes account of both the potential of the individual and how that potential is shaped by a larger social environment.

A rendering of how the *contemporary* social environment is a product of those historical circumstances is what we're after in an analysis of *The Wire*. I argue that the show is able to account for both expressionist and carnivalesque elements within the characters it constructs through its *tragic critique* of the contemporary social environment. We will examine specifically what is so tragic about this critique, but for now let us temporarily define it as *The Wire's* position about the hope of the individual (the racially inflected, inner city subject) to make his or her desires and wishes and aspirations known and cultivated. The show depends on highly individualized, idiosyncratic characters that are the hallmark of its chosen medium, television, while also insisting that those characters be placed into situations in which their individuality and wills are disregarded. The show is

attentive to both the expressionist and carnivalesque aspects of narrative. The majority of the characters we come to identify with in *The Wire* are disregarded to no good end, just as many people forced to live in those inner city are disregarded in favor of those respectable neighborhoods with better property values. Thus, we are shown vivid individual characters (expressionism), how those characters move about and are shaped by a particular inner city milieu (carnavalesque), and how those characters and their immediate cultural environment is affected and shaped by a larger social system that assign unequal value to those characters individually and socially. In comparing *The Wire* to these earlier examples of black literature, I seek a historical understanding of the aforementioned archetypes (expressionist and carnivalesque) in the novels, and how those archetypes tell us something about our historical conjuncture through contemporary use in *The Wire*.

Other critics have noted the show's commitment to social realism and its reliance on styles of narrative usually reserved for the social novel, and it is no accident that critics such as Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall in their article "I Am the American Dream," connect these literary and social ambitions to the show's ability to present the contradictions of American life to an audience that does not come into contact with those realities by virtue of that viewer's position in the racial hierarchy that the show depicts:

Perhaps as part of this self-assessment, more than any other series, *The Wire* works to confound the line between truth and fiction. Its stories scream of verisimilitude, and the authentic dialogue draws the viewer into a sympathetic consideration of characters who live the sort of lives many viewers will not ever have examined...HBO is a subscriber-based channel, and the bulk of its audience is composed of (comparatively) affluent, middle class, white Americans. Subscribers choose to invest in programming that is assumed to have a certain quality that distinguishes it from "regular" TV. A

second audience is generated through DVD sales, another means for direct marketing of quality television to viewers, without the economic pressures of advertisers. This change in television viewing habits, particularly over the past decade, has altered the economic drives of American television (9).

*The Wire* depicts a social reality that many of the affluent, elite viewers of the show will never directly encounter, even as these viewers are nonetheless implicated in the consequences of this unequal social structure. In fact, one might say that one of the privileges of these viewers is what Anne Cheng, a literary theorist we will return to in chapter 2, calls “the freedom to not see.” One of the benefits of white and elite privilege is the option to opt out of direct confrontation with the consequences of an unequal social structure; this evasion can manifest itself in actual abandonment of these inner cities, as the sociologist William Julius Wilson chronicles in his book *More Than Just Race: Being Poor and Black in the Inner City* (a text we will return to in chapter 1), or, less directly, this evasion manifests itself metaphorically: for example, an American dream ideology that posits that material and social achievement are available equally for all and that failure to achieve this standard is the sole responsibility of the individual. Under this convenient cultural fiction, an individual cannot blame a larger inhibiting social structure for his or her failure, because the ideology of equal access is assumed to apply and function in all public institutions.

The systematic critique of these major, structuring public institutions (the school, the newspaper, the police etc.) is what we are concerned with in *The Wire*. I am arguing that its examination and critique of social institutions while making use of anchoring and representative characters that connects the show with the tradition of the social novel, perhaps exemplified best in English by Charles Dickens.

One can see fruitful connections between a traditional, Victorian social novel such as *Hard Times* and a visual, modern depiction of social life such as *The Wire*. This similarity is further strengthened by the fact that both were serialized, but even more so by an interesting conjuncture of technology and entertainment: the advent of television on DVD. Now, a viewer can peruse, study, and view a long television show in the same leisure and freedom that one has with a book. I use Dickens' novel as a starting point for differentiating the conventional *moral* critique of that novel from the *tragic* critique of *The Wire*.

In fact, this social critique is so embedded within the narrative machinery that each season functions as a narrative critique of a major social institution, and, and in Chapter 2, we will approach each of these arguments through a close reading of one episode from each season. I begin in section with a brief analysis of a passage from *Hard Times*, and I examine how it presents a *moral critique* of the early industrial society that it depicts. I also analyze the episode "The Dickensian Aspect," from the final season. This show functions as a convenient stand-in for the season as a whole, which critiques the institutions for conveying information and truth in American society. It does this with a dual focus on both a phony, Pulitzer-prize hunting reporter at the *Baltimore Sun* and by depicting a phony police investigation instigated by a detective that eventually ignites into a larger debate on homelessness, and sends the aforementioned white mayor to the Maryland State House as governor, riding on the back on a homeless problem that he emphasized for political reasons and did not address in any serious measure. Next, I use William Julius Wilson's analysis of the inner city to provide a sociological background for

understanding the urban environment that *The Wire* depicts. Then, I introduce *The Wire*, and argue that it presents a *tragic critique* of the society that it depicts by focusing on an episode from the first season, appropriately titled “The Wire.” This episode encapsulates the season’s critique of legitimate and illegitimate power, represented by an examination of the inner workings of both a criminal syndicate and the Baltimore City police department. From there, I move to season 2, where I examine the show’s critique of American dream ideology, dramatized by a focus on the white, working-class stevedores on the Baltimore Harbor. Then, I shift to season three, where show’s focus shifts to a charismatic white politician trying to become mayor of the black-majority Baltimore, juxtaposed with a self-made drug dealer from the previous seasons attempting to use that drug money to set up a legitimate downtown business empire. This pairing of opposite ambitions dramatizes the show’s critique in that season of the artificial boundary between legitimate and illegitimate business.

Finally, I attempt an analysis of an episode of season four, which focuses nominally on the schools and education, but is also a story of the precariousness of young black men in inner cities. The show seems to share this focus, and presents us with four black middle school students, all from a different fragment of their shared inner city Baltimore. I use Michel’s Foucault’s concept of the carceral, developed most fully in his *Discipline and Punish*, to argue that this inner city society that the boys find themselves in is organized along a “disciplinary continuum” that prepares a large number of its black men for prison, even in institutions that would seem to function to prevent such an outcome (i.e. the school). Returning to Wilson’s

sociological analysis and pairing it with Louis Althusser's concept of ideological internalization, I argue that the "street smarts" deployed by many of these black men are not a manifestation of a chosen, individual persona, but rather a coping and survival mechanism in a social structure that continually reinforces and assumes prison as a likely outcome for most of these men.

In chapter 3, I turn from the potential of art to illuminate our contemporary social situation to its ability to enable us to understanding our historical circumstances. I use Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to argue that different types of narrative techniques engender different sorts of historical truth. First, I return to Jameson's political unconscious and couple it with Hayden White's analysis of fictiveness of historical narratives, arguing that history depends on the same verbal devices as fiction does. From this, I argue that we are able to understand Ellison and Morrison's depictions as histories of African-American life in the city. Then, I argue that Ellison depends on a highly individualistic, *expressionist* novel, while Toni Morrison gives free reign to various voices in her novel, demonstrating a *carnavalesque approach*. Both of these terms are associated with other critical figures; expressionist with novelist Henry James, and carnivalesque with the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. I analyze the former's "The Art of Fiction" and the latter's "Discourse in the Novel" to argue that these essays provide theoretical evidence of the types I've argued are organizing narrative devices for the authors. Next, we turn directly to the texts of *Invisible Man* and *Jazz*. I provide close readings of passages from each, with an eye towards extrapolating the unique (and uniquely literary) histories that each embed within their narratives.

## II. SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN *THE WIRE*

### Moral Critique and “The Dickensian Aspect”

In this chapter we will explore how artistic texts enable a fuller and more nuanced grasp of the social environment that we occupy as Americans in the twenty-first century. Let us first take a conventional social novel, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. The novel has served as a model of social criticism, attracting the attention of radical and liberal thinkers such as George Bernard Shaw and George Orwell. Indeed, *Hard Times* provides a scathing and often humorous depiction of the moral implications of the endpoints of industrialization and mechanization. What I will argue in this section is that Dickens in *Hard Times* formulates a *moral critique* of these institutions, whereby he identifies and diagnoses the problems of corruption and those people that do not do their job correctly from within the system. Thus there are hosts of incompetent teachers, parents and factory bosses that mete out incredible suffering to individual characters. While Dickens does an admirable job of diagnosing the excesses of industrial capitalism, I argue his moral critique presupposes the permanence of such a system, as if the answer is a more benevolent existing system, rather than a new one.

George Orwell, in an essay on Charles Dickens, describes this sentiment: “It would be difficult to point anywhere in his books to a passage suggesting that the economic system is wrong *as a system*. Nowhere, for instance, does he make any

attack on private enterprise or private property” (138). Orwell finds in Dickens’ oeuvre an acute eye towards injustice, but even with *Hard Times* in particular finds that there is no attendant push for something new coupled with his social awareness:

There is not a line in the book that can properly be called Socialistic; indeed, its tendency if anything is pro-capitalist, because its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious. Bounderby is a bullying wind-bag and Gradgrind has been morally blinded, but if they were better men, the system would work well enough – that, all through, is the implication (138).

We might begin by describing these two characters. Bounderby is an industrialist that has managed to come into his money from poverty, and he cannot help but let people know this at all turns. We might read him as an exemplar of an upward mobility ideology, whereby it is believed that any person who would work hard could accomplish the same social and material existence. It ignores the role of chance and luck in Bounderby’s success. Gradgrind represents the excesses of rationalism that come coupled with an enamored view of industrialism and capital. Dickens describes him as:

A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds on the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over...ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to (2).

Dickens thus identifies the papering over of individuality that these industrializing processes have. Gradgrind’s understanding of reality leaves no room for creative ambiguity, for deviation from an ethic of normalization. This almost farcical insistence on a common path is Dickens’ method for criticizing the excesses of an industrial system.

We see this most in Gradgrind's interaction with Sissy Jupe, an orphaned circus girl that readers are meant to sympathize with. When her father leaves and she is forced to shift from the illegitimate (in the view of Gradgrind, Bounderby, and others) society of the circus to the legitimate (that is, socially appraised and administrated) one of the school, Gradgrind attempts to slot Jupe into this normalizing institution. We don't have the time or space to cover the full extent of the relationship, but we can focus on the first scene of the book, which is his first interaction with her. His speech on the first page functions as an informal educational pedagogy: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them" (1). Gradgrind proceeds from the understanding that it is only empirical facts agreed upon by all that have any sort of currency. Individual expression has no value precisely because it is individual and not standardized: "Why, then, you are not to see anywhere, what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anywhere, what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact" (5). Thus one of the major storylines of the book is Gradgrind's attempt to domesticate, or de-circus Jupe.

Dickens' sympathy is with some of those non-rational, non-empirical traits brought in by Jupe from the world of the circus, and these are the traits that he affirms in distinction to the all-encompassing commitment to industrial capital demonstrated by many of the legitimate characters:

Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to

help and puty one another, deserving often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the every-day virtues of any class of people in the world (33).

Thus we see that Dickens clearly means to affirm those traits of Jupe that seem to disrupt the legitimate order. The problem with this as a critique is that it assumes the continued existence of those classes. Dickens may want a measure of play, a measure of human emotion to be allowed in the almost fantastical world of calculation that he creates, but he doesn't call for an end to those class distinctions all together. This sympathy for individual characters and their individual suffering under a larger systemic structure that he will not call for the end for is what demarcates his book as a *moral critique* as opposed to a *tragic critique*. As Orwell stated, Dickens seems to think that better men could make society (as it is currently constituted) work. *The Wire*, a tragic critique, argues that it is just the overwhelming power of societal devices such as education, the police and such that allows it to negate and swallow up individual actions.

We might better understand the difference of these two methods by examining an episode from *The Wire's* last season, "The Dickensian Aspect." Here the creators make their debt to the social novel the most explicit. This last season is a critique of journalism and the means that society has of conveying truth to its citizens. It uses the *Baltimore Sun* as an arena to explore this, and picks a journalist of dubious credentials to represent the contemporary reporter. This reporter is Scott, who has nothing more on his mind than writing his way out of Baltimore onto a larger and more prestigious city paper. Scott is hunting for Putlizers. In keeping with its larger structural critique, the season includes a management at the paper

that encourages this blind opportunism. Indeed, it is from one of his bosses that the phrase “The Dickensian Aspect” materializes.

Scott finally catches his break where there is a perceived rash of homeless murders throughout the city. He is told to go interview subjects and to focus on “The Dickensian Aspect” of homelessness, that is, those aspects of poverty and inner city life that invite curiosity from the readers of the *Baltimore Sun*. It is my argument that the show’s creators associate this form of journalism with the critique of Dickens in that it seeks to identify and diagnose problems, and to treat those problems as inevitable and permanent. It isn’t fair to assign that level of cynicism to Dickens, who after all thought that concrete change was necessary, even as he couched that change in individual actors. The “Dickensian Aspect,” as *The Wire* satirizes it, is a contemporary understanding of our lust as citizens and readers to latch onto a spectacular, singular and attention-grabbing aspect of a story (the disgraced celebrity, the family man or woman gone to drugs, grotesque manifestations of mental instability), and to focus on those individual actors at the expense of understanding alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness as structural issues that cannot be reduced simply to individual behavior. When his boss tells Scott to focus on the Dickensian aspect, he is telling him to focus on those aspects of homelessness that of the most interest to readers, the aspects that are attention getting. His boss is telling him to find an “individual” angle into homelessness, a way of boiling down an intractable and immovable social problem into the realm of human interest. It is a way of foregrounding the individual and

willful effects of homelessness at the expense of overshadowing those structural conditions that compromise individual behavior.

This is precisely what Scott does. He encounters an ex-marine that has clearly suffered from PTSD. The marine tells him a story of failed offensive in Fallujah that caused the catastrophic psychological break in his life. When Scott tries to get him to tell him more individual details about the story, the marine says that his story is too common for such details. Scott wants the marine to tell him a distinctive and attention-grabbing story, so that readers may focus on the meteoric rise and fall of this particular marine, rather than the process that enabled this rise and fall. Scott clearly has sympathy for this man and means to write a story that will get the sympathy from readers, but he clearly intends his critique of society to end with those sympathetic feelings. By reading a unified story about this one individual, readers would be able to reduce a larger problem of poverty to a set of individual stories. This is the opposite of the creators of *The Wire* convey with their structural critique of inner city.

#### Structure, Culture, and the Inner City

Before we turn directly to the earlier seasons *The Wire* and its tragic critique of the social environment of the modern American city, we might want to explore what is so tragic about that social environment. If both Dickens and the creators of *The Wire* take as their beginning point a critique of their contemporary city (whether this concerns the year 1850 or the year 2000), what is it about the city for the creators of *The Wire* that is so irredeemable, so inevitably tragic? We might say

that the difference is one of time, but I think this is too simplistic. It seems to be a difference of vision, a difference of style. As explored in the section above, Dickens' quarrel is primarily with corruption, hypocrisy and the overt bad treatment of the least of those (circus workers, factory workers, beggars, etc.) in the industrial city. His compassion with these sufferers does not come coupled with a desire for the full-scale reinvention of the social that the creators of *The Wire* seem to call for. In this section, with the help of contemporary sociologist William Julius Wilson and the 20<sup>th</sup> century French theorist Louis Althusser, I aim to examine the material reality of the city that is the subject of the critique of *The Wire*. As mentioned in the introduction, Wilson's 2010 *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* explores the structural and cultural issues surrounding the urban poor. In Althusser's 1969 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," the theorist examines how ideology is a tool that depends upon a dynamic relationship between the base (structural) and the superstructure (cultural), rather than on the superstructure being determined by the base. I combine these two sources to try and understand how cultural adaptation of ideology by the urban poor (such as "street smarts," adopted by many young black men), is a means of navigating a harsh and not willfully chosen living environment, rather than the assertion of a defiant individuality. Wilson devotes an entire chapter to the material and social conditions surrounding the underemployment and discrimination against young black men, and I follow his lead in chapter two by reading season four of *The Wire* in a similar manner.

In other words, I argue that it makes no sense to try and answer that vexing question from the culture wars, namely: Were the cultural attitudes of urban youth a mere manifestation of structural inequality, or were those cultural attitudes themselves what inhibited structural equality? If we learn anything from Althusser, it is that there are no real structural conditions untouched by ideology, no “outside” in which we are safe. Further, we learn that ideology isn’t autonomous either; there does not exist a set of universal, malevolent rules by which prospective rulers might subject their citizens. Rather, ideology arises and makes its presences known only on through its impression and molding on subjects:

*the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as subjects. In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but its functioning the material forms of existence of that functioning (116).*

Thus we see that there are no cultural attitudes that could exist free form without relation to real structural conditions, and there are no real structural conditions that are not informed by ideology. Althusser puts this more simply: “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (112).

In some ways, without using the same terminology, Wilson’s *More Than Just Race* begins by positing a similar argument about the difference between a moral and tragic social critique. The sociologist distinguishes between social *acts* and social *processes*. Wilson argues that social acts are to be distinguished by their origin in a willful act by a single individual: “Examples of social acts are stereotyping; stigmatization; discrimination in hiring, job promotions, housing, and admission to

educational institutions...when any of these are the act of an individual or group exercising power over others” (5). These single, individual acts are different from social processes, which work on a larger, more impersonal scale: “*Social processes* refer to the ‘machinery’ of society that exists to promote ongoing relations among members of the larger group...These range from explicit arrangements such as Jim Crow...to more subtle institutional processes, such as school tracking that purports to be academic but often reproduces traditional segregation, racial profiling by police that purports to be about public safety but focuses solely on minorities...In all of these cases, ideologies about group differences are embedded in organizational arrangements” (5). I argue that although *The Wire’s* creators certainly highlight individual, negative social acts that affect and agitate the urban environment that the characters move within: there is Officer Walker in season 4, a cop so corrupt and so much a “type” of the individual menace to the overall societal system from within, and then there is hypocritical narcissist Avon Barksdale, whose use of “family” in association with the acts he carries out proves largely opportunistic and, in an entirely different league, there is the almost supernaturally ruthless Marlo Stansfield who replaces the Barksdale syndicate in season 3; although these highly stylized characters exert unique influence on the plot and thus the social environment of *The Wire*, it is clear that the show’s creators emphasize a larger social structure that tends to swallow these characters’ individuality.

Why is this so? How does ideology work through structural factors to limit individual expression? First, we need a more precise definition of ideology, and Althusser in the aforementioned essay provides an excellent one: “all ideology

represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relationship of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (111). As a Marxist, Althusser believes that even given his dynamic model of interplay between the economic base and the cultural structure, that ultimately the material conditions of social reality derive from the base: “the determination in the last instance of what happens in the upper ‘floors [of the superstructure] by what happens in the economic base” (91). In other words, we might say that for Althusser, what constitutes social reality is the representation of the reproduction of the material relation between classes, or those material social relationships that make up the base. Even with this reservation, we must remember that for Althusser this relationship is primarily dynamic; thus, what role does culture, or ideology play?

First, as we will discuss later (with the help of Althusser’s essay), it isn’t exactly true that ideology works entirely in the realm of culture and violent repression entirely in the realm of the permanent, structural, reproductive processes, but let us leave this aside for now. More importantly, we must return to the first quoted passage above and focus on ideology’s role in the “imaginary distortion [of] not the existing relations of production...but above all the (imaginary) relationship of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.” This is where culture begins to make its move.

We can illustrate this by means of an example, an exploration of the sneaky insidiousness of a cultural ideology; let us take the ideology of the American dream. As mentioned before, the terms of this cultural ideology are familiar to any

American citizen: that access to material, social, and economic success is equal and always has been given the historical commitment to equality and democracy contained in our sacred democratic documents, documenting our commitment to equal access from the beginning. As a formulation that serves the interests of the dominant, moneyed, well-connected class, it is no surprise that members of that class would believe and perpetuate such an ideology. However, what is innovative about Wilson's sociological analysis is that he also focuses on how elements of supposedly indigenous and ethnic black culture inform and perpetuate structural inequality. I use those qualifying terms because I argue that the negative cultural trends that Wilson focuses on (both the aforementioned "street smarts" and "the code of shady dealings") do not represent the willfully chosen, individually articulated actions of any individual young black man. Those attitudes, those adaptations are rather measures borne of the ideological atmosphere that informs the real material relations of existence that are masked from both dominant and repressed classes.

We might use an example from *The Wire* as a means of explanation. There is a scene in the episode discussed in the next section ("The Wire") in which three drug lieutenants share a fateful lunch. Wallace, who is about to be executed by his fellow employees Poot and Bodie, relates a sentimental story about how the hot dog eatery they are in reminds him of happier memories with his now alcoholic and absent mother. Bodie reprimands Wallace for such childish behavior, arguing that talking about his mother all of the time is a signal of weakness, a sign of a discontinuous front. Wallace counters that one doesn't always have to act "so hard"

all of the time. But Bodie is correct: there is no room for deviation from the code, a dropping of one's guard: this is precisely reason he and Poot must kill Wallace. In the aftermath of a murder that will be discussed further in the next section, Wallace began using the heroin that he sold, a cardinal sin for anyone employed by the drug syndicate. It is often a sign that one is stealing from the organization to finance a habit that will eventually spiral out of control. Indeed, drug use is stigmatized in a manner similar to regressive law enforcement views: as a condition of the soul, rather than as a sickness. It doesn't matter that Wallace abruptly begins using drugs as a traumatic response to a murder that the drug syndicate itself made him commit: regardless of individual situation, this disciplinary breach compels the same punishment. This is dramatized vividly when Bodie and Poot finally confront Wallace in an empty vacant to murder him. Wallace, understandably, urinates on himself in nervousness and Bodie criticizes him, alerting him to the fact that he isn't dying like a man should. Bodie emphasizes further that it is this failure to maintain a united front that attracted the suspicion of the superiors in the organization anyhow. Wallace has no response other than "This is me...yo, this is me..." As we will see in section 1.2, he is murdered seconds after by Poot and Bodie.

However, we must stress quickly that neither Poot nor Bodie commit this act out of pure malice. Indeed, as we shall see, Bodie functions as something of a moral presence within the drug syndicate; someone who resorts to violence only when commanded, and never excessively. His work is also hand to mouth: he owns no real estate or jewelry bought from drug money; Bodie has been working for the syndicate for more than ten years and does not own a motor vehicle. In a trend that

we will continue to see throughout the series, Bodie is driven into this line of work by necessity, not because of an occupational decision to become a drug dealer. It is not an avoidance of “legitimate” or “respectable” responsibilities; indeed, the consequences not only for failure but for the *suspicion* of failure are much harsher than in the legal world that these characters have no access to. The exercise of individual will within the syndicate invites lethal reaction as we see with Wallace in this episode, and as well will see again in Bodie’s death in season 4 discussed in section 1.5.

From this situation, I think we can grasp how *The Wire* illustrates conceptions of ideology found in both Althusser and Wilson. We might first emphasize how these are *adaptive* measures, how Wallace doesn’t have the option to let his guard down and show weakness (in either his brief lapse into drug use, or in his sentimentality involving his mother): he must maintain a continuous front proscribed by his position in the syndicate hierarchy. If we say that Bodie, Poot, and Wallace are guilty of posturing, guilty of allegiance to what Wilson calls “the code of the streets” and “the code of shady dealings,” we see that (paradoxically) it is an involuntary posture. Any posturing, any self-identification with these violent adaptive methods must therefore be seen as an ideological adaptation, a belief colored by a mistruth. This is where Althusser’s formulation of ideology’s role in the “imaginary distortion [of] not the existing relations of production...but above all the (imaginary) relationship of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (111). The “real” relationship of individuals such as Poot and Bodie to the existing relations of production is one of membership in a systematic disenfranchisement

that has compelled the erection of a more brutal alternative economy and social system. The “imaginary” relationship, the ideology that informs the organizational structure of the syndicate, is very similar to the ideology of the American dream that works in the legal world: anybody in the drug organization (even lowly lieutenants such as Bodie and Poot), no matter what their place, is subject to both physical and financial protection from the syndicate. One of Avon Barksdale’s favorite words of emphasis is “family.”

At the beginning of the series, Bodie internalizes and believes this, which is the reason he kills Wallace. But later, Bodie is subject to the same punishment for the same crime that Wallace was. He is suspected of collaborating with the police at the end of season 4, as we will discuss in section 1.5. It doesn’t matter that Bodie doesn’t actually collaborate, because as with Wallace it the *suspicion* alone compels punishment. From an individual standpoint, Bodie did everything he was supposed to do, fulfilled the ideal of hard work at work in both legal and illegal realms, and yet, as he will say in the same episode in which he is killed, “the game is rigged.” The drug syndicate he is a part of is set up so that people like Wallace, Poot, and Bodie absorb the collateral damage from a drug trade that rewards only the very privileged few. We might couple this with the overall tragic critique by saying that Bodie is doomed to such a fate from the beginning by nature of his *station* within the system, regardless of any individual work on his part. As he will say, he was born “a pawn.”

*The Wire*, “The Wire,” and the Tragic Critique

Though it is the sixth episode of the first season, “The Wire” serves as an excellent introduction to the series as a whole. The first scene is striking: it shows a dead young man sprawled on the hood of a car. One of his eyes is gouged out, and, on his body, there are visible cigarette burns. The camera then pans upward, and follows a rigged, makeshift electrical cord to a room in a dilapidated and boarded up row house. The alarm in the room sounds, and a 16-year-old boy named Wallace (Michael B. Jordan) rises, turns the alarm off, and begins his morning routine. This includes rousing the four or five elementary school children (too young to work the drug corners) under his care, and then waking his fellow “pit worker” (“the pit” refers to the courtyard in the middle of the project high-rises that serves as an open air drug market) Poot (Tray Chaney) to begin their work day. They encounter the dead young man arranged in a crucifix position as the car as turned into a crime scene. This sight is particularly shocking for Wallace, for he is partially responsible for the murder. Though Wallace is one of the more admirable characters on the show, never violent and clearly capable of better things, the drug organization he finds himself a part of destroys those ambitions and compromises an otherwise non-violent moral conscience: in an earlier episode, Wallace was directed by one of his superiors in the organization to make a call when he saw Brandon (Michael Kevin Darnell) enter a certain restaurant. He did so, and there is Brandon, on the car hood. He expresses remorse and stalks off, and the scene ends.

This scene encapsulates much of what goes on in *The Wire*: Wallace is an individual that finds himself a part of a social structure not of his choosing and not arranged in order to maximize his opportunities. Further, though clearly not capable

of murder directly, his presence in, and allegiance to, a system that *does* employ such methods renders him morally culpable for something that he would not as an individual do. This erasure of individuality is a common theme in *The Wire*, but it is present not only in the Barksdale gang organization, but also in the police department fighting that organization. The weight of Wallace's guilt finally compels him to tell the police about Brandon's murder, but because of budget cuts and a lack of oversight, the witness protection program that Wallace is a part of fails to protect him when he unexpectedly returns to Baltimore City. He is killed execution style by Poot and another drug lieutenant, Bodie (J.D. Williams), who, as we shall see, in many ways replaces Wallace as the moral conscience from within the drug organization.

Before we try and draw some of the show's larger themes, we might couple this depiction of instability within the ranks of the drug organization with a scene from the generally inept Baltimore City Police Department that is supposed to combat them. In the same episode, Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), a homicide detective, is called before his supervisor, Bill Rawls (John Doman). McNulty is the closest thing to a central character that *The Wire* possesses: his independent streak and charismatic nature make him the natural choice of identification with viewers. Rawls, on the other hand, represents bureaucracy at its most detached and severe.

Rawls presents an excellent opportunity to talk about one of *The Wire's* other links with the social novel- didacticism. *The Wire* is many things, certainly the best American television show of all time, perhaps the best and most multifaceted visual narrative offered about race (the sheer number, diversity, and proportion of black

characters is unmatched except by a few shows, and *The Wire's* depiction of same-sex relationships of color [not to mention interracial heterosexual couples] is essentially unique)- all of these things are true, but *The Wire* is certainly not subtle: Rawls has called his detective in to reiterate that because Baltimore is a city with 300 murders, it is important that he adhere to a strict "rotation." Rawls is telling his detective not to take a personal interest in a particular case, even though McNulty's murder has the potential to shed light on a special investigation, because this would devote human resources to a case that will not result in any more murder "clearances." Rawls, like Boudier from *Hard Times*, loves to talk in numbers and figures and catch-phrases: chain of command, red-to-black; this language of sheer efficiency is the show's didactic tool for indicting a system of accountability beholden to statistics, rather than the lofty ideals of protection and service.

Some of this raw, unsubtle narrative characterization is a consequence of the show's chosen genre: tragedy. Other critics have identified this as the show's chosen genre: Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall in their article "I Am the American Dream" argue that part of *The Wire's* uniqueness is just this generic stance, at a time with triumphant, individualistic heroism usually carries the day: "Tragedy is a concept that Western literature has found difficult to represent since the late-nineteenth century, in part because of its central preoccupation, the cost and consequences of greatness, sits uncomfortably with the democratizing tendencies coincident with the effects of the Industrial Revolution" (5). The authors argue that tragedy as a form is not accommodating to the "one man against the odds" that has preoccupied much of narrative since the Industrial Revolution, a philosophy that can accommodate

capitalist aspirations. A narrative style as accommodating as the triumphant individual narrative can accommodate characters that can succeed, indeed, thrive, within the larger social system. In many ways, such a style accommodates and remains neutral about the system as a whole. *The Wire's* refusal to appraise this mode of narrative is what characterizes it as a *tragic critique* of a social system, as opposed to the *moral critique* of Dickens. I argued earlier that Dickens' wish that the social system worked as it advertised, as a system of governance that actually fulfills its promises, as a system that is *moral*: as Orwell has stated, this is a more transformative critique than seems apparent at first glance. But it does presuppose and is limited to, at best, a benevolent version of what already exists. Some of this must be due to Dickens' pragmatism: it probably made sense to focus on an illumination of what actually existed and to devoted imaginary resources to modifications to the here and now, as opposed to positing scenarios that could never possibly exist in his contemporary world; this is clearly a different sort of critique than *The Wire* (we will come to the purely fantastic drug legalization zone of "Hamsterdam" in section 1.5).

This difference of method is what distinguishes *The Wire* as not simply a social critique separated in time from *Hard Times*, but also in form. Despite the scathing indictment found in *Hard Times* of industrialization, mechanization, bureaucracy, utilitarianism, and, perhaps prophetically, computerization; we end up with essentially a happy ending in that novel: we emerge with a more benevolent domestic situation, one less harsh and more moral than before. There is none of this in *The Wire*, in fact, there isn't even enough room for an individual character to take

center stage. *The Wire* is a strange sort of tragedy: there is no central figure, no Oedipus, no Hamlet to hang our hopes on. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall argue:

There are simply too many stories, too many characters whose experience is presented in *The Wire*, for the focus on the individual to assert itself, as would be required by conventional representations of tragedy. Whenever something bad happens to someone the audience has been led to care about, we are equally committed emotionally to several other characters as well, and inevitably their stories go on. Events have consequences, but they are denied grandeur (6).

The authors' emphasis on the show's de-individualization of character helps explain how Wallace is killed so brutally so quickly, and how McNulty, the closest character to a central one, can disappear for episodes at a time. This lack of focus on a single, unifying voice for the audience to identify with, instead relying on fragments supplied by a multiplicity of voices: this signals *The Wire's* dialogic, or many-voiced, emphasis. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose "Discourse in the Novel" we will return to in section 2.4, supplies this term.

If the series lacks a central hero, it also lacks a central villain. Even Rawls is not sadistic, he merely does what is expected of him and follows the "chain-of-command" directive and the dictates of the stats: the most we can fault him with is being an effective and defensive and perhaps cunning bureaucrat, not a devil or a tyrant. Indeed, Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), the lieutenant in charge of the special unit that McNulty is attempting to aid, functions as one of the more moral characters of the show that manages to rise within the ranks of the police department. He eventually arrives in Rawls' chair, and despite his best intentions, finds his hands tied by the same system that Rawls was. Also, Bodie, who kills Wallace savagely later in the season, is only following orders, much as Wallace was

in his role in the death of Brandon. That there are no heroes to have supernatural hope in or villains to unequivocally condemn shows the show's commitment to a tragic critique rather than a moral one: it is clear that replacing Rawls isn't the answer, because he is replaced, and the process continues. It also shows that a single pariah for society's ills will never do: Bodie seems the personification of the problem with inner city; an ill-educated and violent young man that murders for a gang organization. But the show reveals that Bodie's compromises make sense given the environment that he had to make his way within; one thinks of the adaptive measures of "street smarts" discussed in section 1.2. The point of these examples is this: single tyrants do not stand at the helm of these large social systems, and single heroes do not liberate society. Individuals are either utilized or swallowed up by those systems: this is the show's tragic critique. We may applaud the courageous actions of McNulty, or the hard-won morality of Bodie, or the measured attempt at Daniels to remain true to both his career and to the collective well-being of the police department, but all of these individuals fail, and their failure is a foregone conclusion: this is the tragedy of *The Wire*, and, if we believe the show's creators, the fate of the individual in the modern American city.

If we took the closest thing we have to a central character, McNulty, and tried to identify a central, tragic flaw in him, it would be precisely his insistence on the individual character of corruption within the police department. He insists in this episode, for example, that the reason why Rawls will not let him pursue extra time on his investigation is because of a personal vendetta between the two of them. There is certainly something of a continuing rivalry between the two characters

throughout the series, but it McNulty's insistence on rocking the boat that puts him on Rawls' radar; it would be overestimating Rawls' commitment to policing to locate his antagonism for McNulty in anything other than a supervisor's attempt to scrupulously follow the chain-of-command and minimize dissension within the ranks. McNulty's partner, Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce), another of the more moral characters of the series that manages to remain in the chain of command, observes as much in this episode: when McNulty tries to assign blame for the administrative roadblocks in his investigation, Moreland tells him that Rawls and Jay Landsman (Delaney Williams), their supervisors, are simply after "clearances," that "it's not personal." McNulty refuses to listen to such advice, preferring to see himself as a heroic, helpless crusader for moral justice in an evil department. We might observe, then, that McNulty's heroism throughout the show is often coupled with a narcissism that insists on himself as the center of attention. It is almost as if it is McNulty's attempt to make himself into a hero that is his tragic flaw in the show. This paradoxical central character signals the show's commitment to a tragic rather than a moral critique: a triumphant McNulty at the end of the series would signal that the corruption that beset him was simply a moral concern, a matter of corrupt officials. *The Wire's* refusal of narrative closure in this regard is a commitment to a systemic, all-encompassing, tragic critique.

There are two more issues we should discuss in this episode that have relevance for the series as a whole: the "wire" itself and work-life boundary. The "wire" is of course a bug, an audio tracer that allows the police to listen confidentially to conversations. This surveillance starts simply enough, with a bug

on the pit phone, but as the criminals become aware of the police, they “change up” tactics. A major sub-theme of the series thus becomes the legal battles as the police seek more and more intimate contact with their suspects. The police must move to bugging cell phone conversations, text messages, and, in a moment of hubris during season 5, McNulty attempts to bug the cell phone of a reporter in contact with a suspect (he fails).

There is a scene in this episode where detectives Roland Prezbolewski and Lester Freamon (with the aid of the wire-tapping device) listen to a call on the place on the pit phone. There is no explicit mention of drugs or violence or murder, so Officer Prezbolewski moves to categorize the call as “non-pertinent” This theme of surveillance and the strange glee that the detectives get from listening into others lives is a theme outside of the scope of this paper; but whoever does it can be sure that consulting one of the chapters of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* that I did not use, “Panopticism,” will surely benefit from the reading.

Besides the perpetual theme of surveillance that is embedded within the series, the viewer also encounters example after example of the failure of the show’s characters to police a boundary between work and private life. We might say that McNulty has two or three tragic flaws, then: in addition to his out-sized ego we may also add the familiar vices of drink and adultery. The show presents the pervasive alcoholism of many of the characters as a coping mechanism for the carnage they witness on a daily basis, but also shows that the job itself serves as encouragement for extra-marital trysts by virtue of the enormous time commitment that it demands. This doesn’t let McNulty off the hook, who often uses the job as a reason

to ignore his wife (before she wises up) and his two sons, but the potential of the demands of the police profession to produce a fractured and tenuous personal life is more realized in another of the show's more moral characters, officer Keema Greggs (Sonja Sohn). Her relationship with her partner Cheryl suffers precipitously and then finally deteriorates because of Greggs' commitment to her job above her personal life. As viewers we instinctively applaud her selfless behavior, but such dedication on the part of both Greggs and McNulty hides both the psychic trauma of the job that involuntarily intrudes into personal life and the job's ability to utilize the worst of individual traits for its own use. Paradoxically, then, the show's creators show us how the ineptitude and bureaucracy of a large public organization like the Baltimore Police Department can both limit opportunities for personal actions and utilize just those personal traits in service of its own ends.

#### "Undertow" and the Critique of the American Dream

Let us posit a theme for season one: the examination of structural deficiency in both legitimate (police) and illegitimate (the Barksdale gangster syndicate) arenas. The show seeks to dissolve the absolute moral barrier that separates these two organizations: we are shown corrupt and sinister elements within the department, and we are shown how life within a criminal organization represents not some utopian, willful life free of responsibilities that the rest of legitimate society dutifully takes on; we are instead shown a world where the consequences for the failure to commit to the rules of that illegitimate world are much more sinister and severe. The first season of *The Wire* asks us to question the purity and

intentions of those that represent the legitimate police force, and to perhaps revise our view of those individuals caught within a brutal, illegal system. In positing this social dilemma in this manner, the show seems to be asking us to reevaluate our conventional social ideologies that advance criminality as an aberration of the soul, rather than a product of an unequal social environment.

One of the ways the show accomplishes this is by introducing an entirely new set of characters in the second season that represent the limits of “traditional” and “legitimate” economic and social aspiration. These characters are poor, white, working class stevedores on Baltimore Harbor. Though the police and the Barksdale syndicate are still in the orbit of the show (indeed, all three storylines come together), this shift in focus of social environment is a rare depiction of the effects of the drug trade and economic instability demonstrates a rare artistic televisual depiction of the effects of crime on what is taken to be the normative and majority group in America: the white American family.

In keeping with the overall tragic critique of the series, the Sobotka family is driven into illegality by necessity, just like Wallace and the others from season one. Frank Sobotka (Chris Bauer) is the secretary-treasurer of a chapter of the International Brotherhood of Stevedores, a union representing the workers at the port. There isn't nearly enough work for all of the union, with many men sitting out of work on days without ships to work, so Sobotka, to keep the union afloat and the paychecks coming, has taken to using his access to the port as a means of smuggling. Using his contacts at the port, he is able to make cargo crates “disappear” and leave them in safe keeping for later pick-up. His main contact for this operation is a Greek

criminal known as Spiros Vondas (Paul Ben-Victor). At first, the operation mostly concerns cars and electronics, and is a mostly internal affair. Then a crate containing dead sex workers (fourteen women) from abroad is found in the port, which leads to the police investigation.

Also, Sobotka's larger family is drawn in crime as a result of economic necessity: Sobotka's son, Ziggy (James Ransone), works at the port, but has relationships (has taken and received "packages" to sell at a profit) with both black and white drug dealers in Baltimore. It is Ziggy's failure to return the money to one of these drug dealers that begins the episode that we are concerned with in this section, "Undertow." Because of his failure of payment, Ziggy's car is taken as collateral and he given one week to find the money or be murdered. His desperation draws his more responsible cousin, Frank Sobotka's nephew Nick (Pablo Schreiber), into criminality in order to help.

We should pause here to note that Nick has none of the willingness to participate in drugs for easy money that his cousin has (he once says "I won't sell no drugs like no nigger"); what draws Nick into criminality is his concern for Ziggy, the lack of ships at his legitimate job, and finding a means to pay for his girlfriend (who also works, as a hairdresser) and young daughter to move into a house. The show's creators dramatize the insurmountable gap that lies between the incomes of the young couple and their dreams of living in their (newly expensive and hip) historic port neighborhood by having those characters attend an open house during the episode. In an effective, didactic, and none-too-subtle move by the creators, the house that the couple tours used to belong to Nick's aunt. The family was forced to

sell it at a loss to take care of the aunt's own funeral expenses. In this way, the show's creators demonstrate that what separates Nick and his girlfriend from being able to own this house is not a lack of hard work or effort, but simply belonging to a family that owned the house before property values rose. Again, an ignorance of the historical dimension would lead to an improper understanding of the contemporary social situation.

One of the exceptions to this general historical ignorance of the impermanence of a given social configuration is dramatized when the police department finally is able to hand out grand jury summonses to the union. This doesn't scare the union, or Sobotka, who cheerfully make use of their Fifth Amendment rights. The Sobotka and the union's historical awareness of the limits of the power of what the grand jury can do to them mitigate the contemporary and temporary threat posed by the writ of the grand jury. This historical awareness is not a mere intellectual assent; it is borne of their own experience, and also of the experience of their fathers and grandfathers as well, as Sobotka responds to a police officer: "Every IBS local on the East Coast has had its ass in front of a grand jury 2 or 3 times in the past 8 years. We've been through Bobby Kennedy, Trick Dick Nixon, Ronny the Union Buster Reagan, we'll be here through your bullshit no problem." This situation represents one of the few opportunities that the repressed classes have to resist the power of the police and the judicial system successfully in the series. That this is due to a historical awareness of the contingency of a given social configuration fits well with the overall tragic critique of the series.

Frank has a good knowledge of the past and of how to make use of those lessons in the present, but alas, close attention to his diatribe shows he has a poor eye for the coming future: when he insists not simply this particular union will survive but the ability of a large population of stevedores to continue to survive a subsequent set of historical epochs as he named, he reveals his inability to read “the writing on the wall,” as his nephew Nick puts it. Nick’s subservient role within the stevedore organization (not at the top, like his uncle) allows him to ascertain more precisely the future for workers like him. Frank and his union may get by with tricks and individual ingenuity, but it is doubtful that there will even be an organization left in twenty or thirty years for Nick to “work his way up” in. This is when Nick and Ziggy begin to use connections at the dock to help the Greeks smuggle in chemicals for cocaine. We do not have the space to explore fully the consequences of this action, but the results are unmistakably tragic: Frank ends up dead, Ziggy in jail, and Nick has to run from city to city with his young family in witness protection. This spiral of descent is the show’s critique of an American dream ideology that posits an equal footing and access to a material and social existence that can only be maintained by a minority. The perpetual draw of this ideology and an inattention to or ignorance of the historical contingency and cost of this given social order is what allows the reproduction of the existing social relations.

#### “Hamsterdam” and Alternative Futures for Addiction

“Hamsterdam,” the episode we are concerned with in the third season, begins with a community meeting that serves as an informal symposium about and

assessment of the current progress of “The War on Drugs.” A young police officer conducting the meeting points to a series of charts documenting a set of nominal improvements, but an elderly woman from the neighborhood is having none of it: “My kids, they can’t play outside anymore...sometimes, when we hear those bullets, we have to sleep under the bed. When I get home from work, I can’t get up my front steps. Is that in that picture you got up there?” The young officer’s supervisor, Bunny Colvin (Robert Wisdom), tells the woman that he realizes that officers can really only move and detain individual persons, but that the larger drug trade will continue regardless of the efforts of any individual police officer or citizen. Colvin asserts the structural and historical circumstances that underlie what has shaped this woman’s contemporary social situation. She asks him what the answer is, how to reverse or stem those seemingly permanent social processes. Colvin responds that he doesn’t know, but the answer “cannot be a lie.” *The Wire’s* creators use season 3 and this episode in particular to explore the lie that underlies conventional approaches to addiction and law enforcement.

One of the consequences of the lie of conventional legal enforcement (a tenet being, for example, that addiction is a manifestation of criminality, instead of illness) is dramatized in the series’ use of the character Bubbles (Andre Royo). This character struggles with addiction throughout the five seasons and serves as a criminal informant for the police department for money on the side to fuel his habit. In this episode, detectives McNulty and Greggs ask him about his legitimate work history. Bubbles responds: “A long time ago, when I was still clean, I was a stock boy at one of those ‘cheapest guy in town’ places. One day I stole a clock radio. I didn’t

even need a clock radio, but that's me, a born fuck up." In the social environment that Bubbles inhabits, a youthful mistake began a process that closed down all avenues of meaningful employment. Thus we see that the world of the urban poor is not some utopia free of responsibilities that respectable citizens instead shoulder but instead a world of limited opportunities where the price of a mistake is much harsher than will ever be experienced by a "respectable" person. Such a myopic and incorrect view of the inner city also ignores the structural and medical problem of addiction, treating it instead as a manifestation of willful, individual behavior. This view sees drug addiction as a problem that can be solved simply by penalizing those currently addicted; such a view remains ignorant to the historic and structural problem of addiction and also ignores how "legitimate" and "illegitimate" addictions are enforced.

The show attempts to force the viewers to envision a city where addiction is understood realistically as an illness and as a recurring structural problem that affects a variety of classes, ethnicities, and so on. The show does this rather fantastically by having Colvin legalize drugs in a section of his district. Colvin finds three blocks of (mostly) vacant housing and forces drug traffic into those areas and does not enforce crime in those areas. It is his attempt to move the drug violence out of the residential and business areas into the abandoned, vacant areas of the neighborhood. The results are compelling: there are needle exchanges, and crime drops 14 percent: but this comes later in the season. This particular episode also emphasizes the cost of such an endeavor. Colvin has to forcibly evict an elderly woman living in the (mostly) vacant houses in an odd and opposite exercise of

eminent domain. The creators of the show are under no illusions as to the costs of such an aggressive endeavor or to how long realistically such a program could last under current structural conditions: once Colvin's plan is discovered he is quickly sacked and the statistics game returns to normal. If the show were to propose an alternative future and be satisfied with that, it would have only achieved a temporary catharsis for its viewers. Drug legalization is something every good liberal considers in theory, but the show demonstrates the costs of such a measure, and also shows that the legal maneuver in itself is not sufficient to curb the problem of drug addiction. Again, such a view would treat addiction as simply an individual problem writ large. When "Hamsterdam" (a neologism coined by one of the relocated drug dealers) is a success during its brief window of operation, it is so because a variety of charitable, religious and public health organizations step into a gap abandoned by the "legitimate" authorities. In this way, the creators of *The Wire* avoid a libertarian solution whereby addiction is seen as something that can be legislated away on a private basis, rather than a communal and public health issue that is of concern to all citizens.

#### "Final Grades," The Carceral and Young Black Men

Shifting our focus to season four, the creators of *The Wire* focus on the effect of education on the children of Baltimore City. The main storyline of the season introduces four boys, Namond, Randy, Michael and Dukie, and follows them from the beginning of the school year until the end. This represents the show's critique of the "legitimate" education system. The viewer can also focus on the show's

assessment of the consequences of “illegitimate” education, or the outcomes of those that end up in the informal, illegal drug economy. The aforementioned Bodie, the drug lieutenant from the previous season who killed Wallace (in some ways the moral conscience from within the gang organization), now serves as the moral conscience from within the syndicate and provides a representative glimpse of the resources and avenues available to those young black men in the informal economy. The series thus shows the dire outcomes waiting for the young black men in the series, whether they are within the legitimate structure of the school or the illegitimate structure of the drug syndicate.

In keeping with the overall tragic critique of the series, these two avenues are not dialectically opposed to one another, separated by an absolute moral barrier, rather both paths are part of a larger societal structure, and the two systems depend on one another. We might begin by asking what is taught in school, and the aforementioned Althusser essay provides an excellent summary: “It drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology” (104). Althusser tells us that education is not neutral: its purpose lies in the inculcation and continuation of the ruling ideology. What happens if someone departs from this norm? We might read this in combination with the last chapter of his *Discipline and Punish*, where Michel Foucault argues that discipline begins in deviation from normality. Thus, the “legitimate” and “illegitimate” spheres of cultural activity are not equal, but rather are connected. Indeed, it is the failure to follow the “legitimate” path that opens up a subject to the consequences of the “illegitimate” path:

The continuity of the institutions themselves, which were linked to one another (public assistance with the orphanage, the reformatory, the penitentiary, the disciplinary battalion, the prison; the school with the charitable society, the workshop, the almshouse, the penitentiary convent; the workers estate with the hospital and the prison). A continuity of the punitive criteria and mechanisms, which on the basis of a mere deviation gradually strengthened the rules and increased the punishment. A continuous gradation of the established, specialized and which, without resort to arbitrariness, but strictly according to the regulations, by means of observations and assessment hierarchized, differentiated, judged, punished and moved gradually from the correction of irregularities to the punishment of crime (1495).

Foucault thus argues that there exists a disciplinary mechanism that operates outside of any individual criminal act itself. Rather this disciplinary mechanism is a tool of normalization, and it is deviation from the norm that causes discipline rather than the content of a particular act itself. He identifies this disciplinary mechanism as the carceral, which refers to a disciplinary continuum that only has its end in prison. Foucault argues that being sent to prison isn't an aberrant act from a society that otherwise expects the best of all of its citizens, prison is rather an outcome to a life that has been prepared for confinement at its endpoint: "Prison continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of the society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline" (1497). Thus, even within the legal, formal, legitimate society, there does not exist this realm unaffected by criminality for those people responsible and hard-working enough to align by its principles. Rather, "normalization" or the "legitimate" lifestyle is made possible by a larger carceral continuum that relocates those that cannot conform to its dictates.

The consequences for not conforming to the norm in the illegitimate, informal drug world are much harsher, as exemplified by Bodie. Bodie has served

throughout the series as the drug lieutenant that rarely resorts to violence, does not “fuck up the count,” and does everything that is expected and required. For most of the series, Bodie is absolutely complicit and follows all orders. He does this because this informal, illegitimate system has served as the only means of subsistence for his family and for a few generations before him. He follows these orders presumably because his allegiance will be rewarded with a protection that the legitimate system of law enforcement has abdicated. When it becomes clear that he cannot expect this level of protection from his employer, he revolts.

Since we’ve last seen Bodie, things have changed. The Barksdale organization (run by a family) has been replaced by the Marlo Stansfield organization, which has no historical or familial ties to the larger network of crime. As we saw with the murder of Wallace, the Barksdale syndicate wouldn’t win any sort of humanitarian awards, but the Stansfield organization is particularly brutal. The syndicate comes up for an ingenious way of hiding the bodies from their violent activities: by stashing the dead bodies in abandoned and vacant row houses. As one of the lieutenants says, if the police even find the body, “they can’t tell one smell from another.” This method allows Marlo to hold prime, drug-dealing real estate without provoking the attention from the homicide department. In some ways, we might compare this to the aforementioned Hamsterdam experiment: Marlo moves his “activity” to where property values are non-existent, thus denying the reason for the police to take any interest in the area. I argue that this is the dark side of a libertarian initiative that would seek to cordon off areas of the city and leave them forgotten. Such a view saves economic resources that would be deployed against

incarceration or enforcement, but such a view again assumes that those that reside in the inner city deserve to be there, and thus, do not deserve the protection that people with property do.

Marlo's method has further enabled him to keep an iron grip on his organization, as he takes to executing anyone even suspected of speaking to the police. This is where Bodie meets his fate. At the beginning of the last episode of the season, "Final Grades," we watch as Bodie discovers that one of his fellow drug lieutenants was killed: "This dude [Marlo] is killing niggas just to do it, not cause they snitching, not cause its business, just cause this shit is natural. Lil' Kevin is gone! Fuck Marlo, man!" In his anger, he breaks a police car window and is taken into custody. McNulty, our former central character, has known Bodie throughout the four seasons and has taken a liking to him; there seems to be a mutual respect between two individuals caught within a system they is not structured entirely to their choosing. He bails Bodie out of jail, and gives Bodie a ride back to the neighborhood. While being released, one of Marlo's workers sees Bodie get into McNulty's off-duty vehicle. It is this sighting that seals Bodie's fate.

In keeping with the overall tragic critique of the series, Bodie is killed for no reason, as he makes it clear to McNulty at the beginning that he will not break his protocol: "I ain't no snitch, I ain't never said nothing to no cop." Bodie rather speaks about his new awareness of how the institution that he is so committed to will not return the favor: "I feel old. I've been out there since I was 13. I've never stolen from a package, and I've been straight up. But when shit goes bad, where they at? Where's my pay lawyer? This shit is rigged, just like those little bitches on the chess board."

Bodie's metaphor allows viewers to glimpse the reproducibility of workers like Bodie; he is not indispensable to the organization, even though he provides the work that should guarantee protection. Bodie argues that his position within the organization is based not on hard work, not on effort, but rather on a predestined, pre-assigned role that cannot be affected by individual action. Thus the creators of *The Wire* show us yet again that an individual register of acts and accomplishments does not serve to fully explain one's place or outcome within a wider social environment. When Bodie says he's a pawn, he refers to the fact that his life is dispensable in service of someone else, regardless of his own individual actions. This lack of movement, lack of options: these are the characteristics I associate with events coded "tragic." Marlo's assassins later in the episode murder Bodie on his own corner for accusation of collaboration with the police, a reflection and reminder of Bodie's own role in the same sort of murder of Wallace. Though separated by age, time, and rank within the organization, both Wallace and Bodie are fully replaceable, and this attests to a larger structure that views their lives as dispensable for a larger purpose or a more important person.

This larger structural critique of the education process does not cease with the informal, illegitimate spheres; we might expect Bodie's fate by virtue of his distance from teachers that could educate and protect him, but what about those young black men that by virtue of age or circumstance still find themselves within the educational system? The creators of the show are willing to grant that the four boys depicted in season four are undoubtedly safer (for now), but the main determinant of the success of the boys is not hard work, but rather luck. *The Wire*

does this by giving us four eighth grade boys in different circumstances, and none of them end up where we'd expect them.

Randy is the most charismatic of the boys, and has the most stable home life. He is in foster care with an attentive and loving parent, and has access to the most economic advantages, save Namond. Namond is the son of Wee Bay, a drug lieutenant from a previous season that is now in jail for life (for shooting Greggs in season 1). He lives with his mother and both partake of the material advantages of the drug trade, with nicer clothes, houses, and possessions in general than anyone else in their immediate environment. Michael's mother is a heroin addict, his father is absent, and he is in charge of a younger brother. Dukie lacks all economic security, having to move between houses multiple times during the season. He also lacks access to bathing facilities, which ostracizes him from all but the other three boys, who have some measure of compassion for him. Namond is by far the most intelligent and curious of the four, but his hygiene and social situation prevent him from fully taking advantage of such gifts: on the fourth episode of the season, Namond's mother won't even let Dukie in the house because of his supposed spoilage.

If school were a matter of hard work and effort, a mere matter of listening, we would expect Randy or Dukie to end up most successful at the end of the season, because they seem to have the personality traits that would make them malleable by the school; Randy and Dukie seem the closest to the behavior norm identified by Foucault and shown to be the true aim of school according to Althusser. If this were the path the series took, it would be a matter of morals whether they failed or not:

we could chalk it up to a bad teacher, a bad parent, a willful student etc. Or, alternatively, we could place success in the hands of a good teacher, an exceptional student, an involved parent, etc. Such a view would serve to affirm the larger societal system in either case: in the former, it is the aberrant individual that has failed to take advantage of an otherwise benevolent social opportunity, in the latter, we treat the success of the system as inevitable, ignoring the many people that do leave school for reasons not entirely of their choosing.

This is not what occurs: in a foregrounding of the role of luck in the outcome of many of these young men, the only boy that ends up “successful” (Namond) does so because of the good fortune of coming into contact with our disgraced former drug-legalizing captain, Bunny Colvin. But first we should talk about what happens to the others. Because of a disciplinary incident at school, Randy is forced to cooperate with the police and tell them the whereabouts of a particular drug lieutenant (the aforementioned, doomed, Lil’ Kevin). Word of his cooperation reaches the drug syndicate, which responds by throwing Molotov cocktails into the windows of his foster home. This event makes it impossible for his foster mother to continue to support him, so Randy is reabsorbed into the group home system, something he escaped a few years before. One of the police officers tasked with taking care of Randy as an informant is Sgt. Carver, who goes so far to keep him from the group home that he offers to adopt him himself. It would have been so easy as creators of the show to provide a moment of catharsis for the viewers and to let Carver’s individual actions triumph over a structural system, but that would allow viewers to leave with an understanding that individual actions can trump structural,

systemic difficulties. When Carver tries to adopt Randy, he is told “the list is the list,” and as someone from a group home that has had a chance to live in a foster home (and failed), he must reenter from the bottom of the list.

Similarly, Dukie’s fate is sealed by procedure. During his eighth grade year, he forms a special relationship with his teacher (the aforementioned Roland) and learns how to use computers, among other skills. His teacher also makes it possible for him to take showers at the gym in the morning, and to have regular meals. It is clear that a continued relationship with this teacher would be beneficial for Dukie, and he suggests as much when Dukie is forced by social promotion to go to the much rougher, far less nurturing high school. Again, it would have been so easy for the show to provide a temporary moment of catharsis for its audience by allowing the individual actions of a great teacher to make a difference involving structural difficulties, but such a move would demonstrate a moral critique (if all the teachers were like Roland we could salvage our structurally deficient education system) instead of systemic critique (that a broken education system specializes in swallowing precisely those individuals that make an attempt to deviate from the norm). Dukie is forced into high school and the bullying there, without support from his former friends and teacher, leads him into a group of harmless but severely addicted heroin addicts, and these are the only people that will accept him, so he becomes one as well.

The case is similar in some ways with Michael as well. He is the most responsible of the four, with childcare maturing him much more quicker than the others. As viewers we find out that he has been subjected to sexual abuse by a

stepfather that arrives home from jail at the beginning of the season. Michael's attempt to protect his little brother from similar abuse is what leads him to join the Stansfield syndicate. When this former stepfather comes home, Michael (who has shown no interest in being a part of the organization) implores Marlo to make the stepfather go away. He is killed brutally. Thus, like many of the other characters in the series, Michael is driven into participation with crime by necessity; as a means of protection when the legitimate authorities that would protect this child's don't bother. Michael's entrance into crime has nothing to do with a willful, premeditated and independent choice; it is rather the residue of a societal structure that leaves him few other options. It is Michael that ends up murdering Bodie for suspicion of collaboration during this episode.

Thus we see that those people that would seem to stand the best individual chance of succeeding and playing along with the system are those that end up precisely where did not want to end up. This role of luck is central to the one character that does end up in a positive situation. Namond, who seems to have the least potential, ends up by a strange coincidence under the care of Bunny Colvin. After the Baltimore Police Department fires him for legalizing drugs, he becomes an aide for the University of Maryland School of Education. They test a pilot program that seeks to remove some of the most disruptive children from normal classrooms and place them in a special class. This instance of tracking is uncommonly benevolent, though: these educators seek to try and socialize these students and try to avoid teaching to the standardized test as much as possible. It is Colvin that takes four of these students to what is obviously their first dinner in a "sit-down"

restaurant. Eventually Colvin comes to see that Namond's disruptiveness is a platform for expression and when Colvin shows him alternative academic avenues for that expression, something finally changes in Namond, and leads to reject the life of the drug dealer.

His mother, who is dependent on Namond to continue selling drugs so she can maintain her comparatively lavish lifestyle, does not receive this change kindly. Colvin convinces Namond's father, Wee Bay (an assassin from the first season now serving in jail) that Namond isn't meant for the life of the "game," and formally adopts Namond. We might ask why the show's creators choose to allow this "happy ending" to spoil what is otherwise a uniformly bleak critique of the education system. But this makes more sense when we realize the role of luck in the process (Namond ends up well off not only because of his individual actions, but because he comes in contact with an extraordinary person), and the knowledge that Colvin possesses about the systemic and structural nature of urban poverty. His actions in the Baltimore "Hamsterdam" reveal a knowledge of the historical and social contradictions of law enforcement and the legitimate public order give him a unique vantage point for understanding that sheer will is often not enough to conquer such an environment. This enables Colvin a measure of sympathy for Namond; even though Namond's disruptiveness seems like a willful act of defiance, it is rather the exercise of a limited range of expression that has been inculcated into Namond. It is this sympathy and understanding that allows his adoption of Namond to be something more than a cheap way to give viewers a light of hope.

### III. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AND TONI MORRISON'S *JAZZ*

#### History as Novel, Novel as History

If the previous chapter discussed the potential of narrative to illuminate and potentially transform its contemporary social situation, this chapter aims to situate the novel's role in understanding successive social situations. This chapter uses two novels (Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) to explore how narrative might help us understand history and transform our response to it. I rely on Jameson's definition of history from *The Political Unconscious*: "History is therefore the experience of Necessity" (1845). We might say that history is a way of organizing successive ways of understanding and dealing with necessity. If in the previous chapter we were concerned with how narrative technique revealed the problems of social necessity of the novel's contemporary environment, in this chapter we are concerned with how a novel can reveal the influence of previous resolutions to the problem of necessity on the contemporary moment. Jameson argues that this type of narrative revelation will enable us to understand the historical basis for our contemporary social situation: "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as

some reified force” (1846). In the same way that the full measure of our contemporary social situation is available to us only in incomplete fragments that are repeatedly reconstructed into a consistent narrative, “history” does not exist as some reified force” (1846). In the same way that the full measure of our contemporary social situation is available to us only in incomplete fragments that are repeatedly reconstructed into a consistent narrative, “history” does not exist as some unmediated force that we might directly consult as a means of understanding our contemporary social position. Apprehension of history must be in the same manner that we apprehend and make our present: through incomplete, and often contradictory, textual accounts of that history. I aim to use *Jazz* and *Invisible Man* to contribute to an incomplete understanding of the historical experience of necessity in black communities of the city in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before turning directly to the novels, we might ask how a fictional text like a novel could qualify as history. Indeed, it seems what makes history “history,” is precisely the lack of what makes a novel, a “novel.” Historical discourse is defined by its commitment to the truth, “the facts,” those realities that do not have the shade of imagination that the novel depends on. It is this commonsense division between the historical and the literary that Hayden White tries to dissolve in his essay, “The Literary Text as a Historical Artifact.” In this 1978 essay, White argues that this distinction between purely factual and purely fanciful discourse does not exist:

But in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences (1537).

Rather than occupying a separate realm from the imaginary, historical discourse depends on the same fictive tools that novels do. White argues that the very act of history-making, the organization of realistic information into meaningful and coherent narratives, is dependent on the realm of the fanciful that it takes as its opposite: “The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the *actual* by contrasting it with or likening it to the *imaginable*” (1551). History can only carve out a prospective space for its inquiry only after the merely “imaginable” has been defined; history needs the imaginary in order to begin.

Not only is history dependent on the literary for definition, it also needs those literary tools in order to construct the histories themselves. After we have isolated the “facts” from the “tales,” we need the tools of the tale to tell the stories of the facts: “The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play” (1539). Any historical narrative, no matter how dry, how myopically dependent on “the facts,” must spotlight some issues and ignore others, must settle on one particular timeline of historical reconstruction in the presence of many others. It is this contingency of both language and content that connects and unites the aim of both the novel and the history. Such an approach allows us, in White’s words, “to understand what is fictive in all putatively realistic

representations of the world and what is realistic in all manifestly fictive ones” (1543). This understanding helps prepare us for what novels like *Invisible Man* and *Jazz* might tell us about history.

### Types of Novels, Types of Histories

Both novels aim to understand the black experience in cities during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but go about that aim in a different manner. One might say that each author uses a different kind of novel to construct a different kind of history. We will later see specifically how each novel uses both structure and language to tell different histories, but we might begin first by suggesting a type for each novel. I argue that *Invisible Man* is best read as an *expressionist* novel, while *Jazz* is best understood as a *carnavalesque* novel. I borrow understandings for both words from other thinkers: Henry James in the former case, and Mikhail Bakhtin in the latter.

In his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” James defines the terms of fiction by emphasizing the essential formlessness of the novel: “They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression” (748). This focus on the individual character of the novel, of its shape having so much to do with its maker, and of its merit ultimately coming from the quality of that individual vision; these are the traits I associate with the term *expressionist*. In this interpretive framework, the most accomplished novel is the one that makes the individual vision

of its maker apparent; it is the novel that best expresses the mind of the novelist. Thus, we must allow the novelist as wide a latitude as possible in creation of his novel; to try and predetermine either form or content would be to the detriment of the result: "But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing we are most curious about" (748). The text as a revelation of the individual mind of the author is the characteristic feature of expressionist novels like *Invisible Man*.

Ellison himself expressed the centrality of the individual vision in the exercise of the craft of narrative; in response to a question during an interview (also entitled "The Art of Fiction") collected in his essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964) concerning the "provincialism" of minority literature, Ellison argues that the novel depends on the local, the provincial: "All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel—and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?—is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance" (212). Critics such as Gregg Crane (in his article "Ralph Ellison's Constitutional Faith") have connected Ellison's emphasis on the individual mind of the author and the freedom of creation with a larger genealogy of the autonomy of the individual contained in American tradition of jurisprudence: "In its embrace of change, improvisation, and revision, Ellison's conception of aesthetic and ethical judgment closely parallels a pragmatist strain of American jurisprudence" (111). Crane's use of the phrase "aesthetic and ethical judgment,"

highlighting the essential connectedness of the artistic and social realms, is congruent with Ellison's own reasoning on the matter. In the same interview, in response to a statement that would situate *Invisible Man* as "a purely literary work as opposed to one in the tradition of social protest," Ellison responds: "Now mind! I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest. Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* is, among other things, a protest against the limitations of nineteenth-century rationalism; *Don Quixote*, *Man's Fate*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Trial*-all these embody protest, even against the limitation of human life itself. If social protest is antithetical to art, what then shall we make of Goya, Dickens and Twain?" (212). For Ellison, freedom from prescription and requirement in the construction of the novel do not mean that narrative occupies a separate realm from the social. He situates himself in an artistic genealogy of thinkers that engaged both social and aesthetic concerns, coupled with a refusal to allow either generic or political concerns to encroach upon creation of art. It is this connection of freedom of creation and citizenship that allows Ellison to claim aesthetic individuality while still addressing contemporary social issues. Ellison creates a singular figure that is able to see social reality and render it in as free a method as possible. It is this expressionist method that Ellison uses in *Invisible Man* in order to relate the historical experience of black people in cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: through the highly individual and idiosyncratic lens of both author and singular protagonist.

Morrison, in *Jazz*, goes about rendering the historical experience of African-Americans in cities in a completely different manner. One might say that it is a completely different type of novel. In contrast to the singular voice of Ellison's

*Invisible Man, Jazz* moves freely between different speakers, never settling on an omniscient, central narrator. It is this combination and diversity of voices, coupled with a lack of a consistent, orienting voice that I associate with the term *carnavalesque*. I borrow this term from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose 1934 essay “Discourse in the Novel” attempts to account for the plurality of voices in narrative.

In opposition to the view of the novel that James purposes in “The Art of Fiction,” Bakhtin has little patience for an introspective, insular, and singular vision of the author. He associates a hermetic, private mode of creation with the term *stylistics*:

More often than not, *stylistics* defines itself as a *stylistics* of “private craftsmanship” and ignores the social life of discourse outside the artist’s study, discourse in the open space of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups...*Stylistics* is concerned not with living discourse but with a histological specimen made from it, with abstract linguistic discourse in service of an artist’s individual creative powers (1076).

James seemed to argue for an individual writer of such ability that he could single-handedly capture all these voices that Bakhtin lists in his own unique voice:

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing shapes of education...Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost! (750).

For Bakhtin, however, this ultimate emphasis on the genius and ingenuity of the author and the ability of singular protagonist to capture the diversity of the world is wrongheaded. Such a single-voiced, monologic discourse assumes both the “unity of language (in the sense of a system of general normative forms) and on the

other hand the unity of an individual person realizing himself in this language” (1079). In contrast to this exceptional individual voice, Bakhtin emphasizes the fundamentally multi-voiced, dialogic discourse that emphasizes the collision of dialects, classes, ethnicities and genders. Because this sort of mixture historically only occurred at non-official, non-sanctioned events such as the carnival, Bakhtin associates this polyphony of voices with the term *carnavalesque*.

This attention to the varied and diverse voices of the city also informs Morrison’s method of composition during *Jazz*. In the introduction, she describes how she gathered material for the novel: “I read issues of every “Colored” newspaper I could for the year 1926. The articles. The advertisements, the columns, the employment ads. I had read Sunday School programs, graduation ceremony programs, minutes of women’s club meetings, journals of poetry, essays. I listened to scratchy “race” records with labels like Okeh, Black Swan, Chess, Savoy, King, Peacock” (17). Rather than constructing an exceptional individual who might through “experience” (an important word for Ellison, James, and the larger aesthetic strain of pragmatism that Gregg Crane locates) each of these varied strains, Morrison instead creates a novel where these voices collide and interact in an uneasy mixture. These differences, between an individual, exceptional narrator and a discordant collection of varied voices are what separate an expressionist and a carnivalesque novel. Different types of novels engender different types of histories.

The Expressionist History

It is strange classifying *Invisible Man* as a history, especially since as a novel it is so stingy with the details. It is very difficult to establish “the facts” in *Invisible Man*: we have no name for our protagonist, whose voice we are totally dependent on. We know he is from an unnamed location in the South, and that he goes from attending a black college there to Harlem. Unlike Morrison’s very specific directions about time (“every newspaper from 1926”), we are forced to approximate such details from the introduction of other events of larger historical importance. For example, this is how the main character introduces himself and his family at the beginning of Chapter 1: “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having been ashamed. About eighty-five years ago they were told they were free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and, in everything social, separate like the fingers of the hand” (15).

This textual fragment tells us where the protagonist is situated within larger historical events such as slavery, historical figures such as Booker T. Washington, and social ideologies such as the hysteria over “social equality.” It tells us nothing about where the protagonist specifically fits within this structure, but gives us a large canvas, a detailed background, for understanding the context that gives rise to the protagonist. This is how we know, via the lineage of slavery, the protagonist’s race.

Paradoxically, in Ellison’s handling of the novel, the less we know about the protagonist himself, the more we know about the historical circumstance that gave rise to the protagonist. Robert Burns Stepto, in his 1979 study *From Behind the Veil*:

*A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, has speculated that this emphasis is firmly within the genealogy of African-American literature, and that its purpose is to foreground the moral, ethical, and philosophical import of the text instead of emphasizing an iconic and identifiable central character:

The classic ascent narrative launches an 'enslaved' and semi-literate figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North...As the 'articulate survivor' suggests, the hero or heroine of an ascent narrative must be willing to forsake familial or communal postures in the narrative's most oppressive social structure for a new posture in the least oppressive environment—at best, one of solitude, at worst, one of alienation (167).

Stepo argues that Ellison borrows the structure of a traditional slave narrative in that he transfers his character from a communal yet oppressive South, toward a cold and impersonal North. In shedding the familial ties that would normally situate our protagonist more precisely, the social milieu behind the shadowy protagonist moves into the foreground. Again, paradoxically, Ellison is able to couple the insularity of the first-person voice with a larger narrative structure that emphasizes the larger social consciousness of the environment that the protagonist moves within. Stepo argues that this method of emphasis enables him to avoid the practice of enshrining another "great man," a figure, that, as we will see later, Ellison openly satirizes: "the thrust of the narrative is not to replace these portraits with that of the Invisible Man as a heroic example. Rather, it is to *identify* Bledsoe, Norton, and the rest as varying fictions of reality and history which must be deposed or, as we will see later in this section, defiled in order for the fiction that is the narrative to be imagined. The narrative and the narrator, the "principle" and not the "men," and the frame far more than the tale collectively constitute the heroic example forwarded by Ellison's narrative and rhetorical strategies" (177). Stepo

argues that Ellison's use and foregrounding of an elaborate, narrative frame (the prologue and epilogue), even at the overshadowing of the main narrative of the novel, enables him to present a unified ideological and rhetorical narrative message. It is this de-emphasis on the "middle" and a corresponding emphasis on the larger "frame," or ideological message of the narrative, that aligns *Invisible Man* with the sort of narrative histories identified by Hayden White: "...all narrative is not simply a recording of "what happened" in the transition from one state of affairs to another, but a progressive *redescription* of sets of events in such a way as to dismantle a structure encoded in one verbal mode in the beginning so as to justify a recoding of it in another mode at the end. This is what the 'middle' of all narratives consist of" (1552). To harmonize Stepto's emphasis on the de-heroization of Ellison's frame along with White's explanation of history-making and narrative: it seems that we as readers are to take from our reading of *Invisible Man* primarily the ideological and rhetorical strategies deployed by the prologue and epilogue, in the same way that one constructs a history by constructing an ideological understanding of a set of events, and then proceeds to tell the story of the events in that pre-chosen mode, arriving at an rhetorical resolution, or "ending," which is the ideological result of the interaction of those chosen modes. As readers, we are not meant to study, memorize, valorize, lionize the "middle" actions of the protagonist; that protagonist was a tool, a conveyor of the voice of the author, constructed with the same narrative freedom and convenience that Ellison takes with the historical and social atmosphere that informs that protagonist.

Morrison goes about this same historical and rhetorical process in precisely the opposite manner. One way to see this is to see how Morrison and Ellison execute a “rhetorical strategy” that they both share yet deploy differently. We might examine how both authors use “jazz” as a discourse and a backdrop for understanding the historical experience of African-Americans in cities. It is an important cultural trope for both novels: Ellison’s rhythms of narrative, use of Louis Armstrong as a central figure in the prologue (one-half of the all-important “frame” that Stepto denotes); these narrative figures, along with Morrison’s decision to title her novel after the musical form, illustrate the importance of the music for both authors. The way that these authors use jazz in their novels is different, and is directly reflected in each author’s narrative technique.

One simple definition of jazz is the collaboration of individual players on a larger piece with room for individual solos. Thus there are (at least) two tensions at work in a jazz piece: the individual prowess and acumen of a performer as shown in his or her individual solo, along with that individual player’s larger contribution to a communal musical piece. It is my conclusion that Morrison and Ellison emphasize different aspects of jazz in their novels, and that this difference corresponds with the forms of novel previously discussed. Morrison’s carnivalesque novel emphasizes the larger communal interplay between individual “players” or “characters,” while Ellison’s novel highlights a central figure’s improvisational confession, a singular narrative told in the first person, a very “solo”/solitary explanation of an extraordinary life.

Because Ellison's protagonist is the sole receptor for the shifting geographical and social environments of the novel, we might ask the psychic cost on a character that must constantly live in flux, and feels so disconnected from his larger environment that "invisibility" is his central metaphor for his life. Anne Cheng, in her essay "Ralph Ellison and the Politics of Melancholia," connects this metaphor of invisibility with a larger racial and psychic instability. She focuses on the prologue, where we are first introduced to the protagonist through a confessional monologue, a dream, and a dream-like event. These fragments seem to make the tools of psychoanalysis appropriate, and Cheng uses this approach, borrowing from Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia." Cheng's analysis foregrounds the dream-like event, whereby our invisible protagonist bumps into a white man on the street. From the novel:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled (4).

This is Cheng's analysis of the passage:

From the narrator's perspective, we see the white man's 'insolence' as anger from having to confront what he presumably did not see. The white man's curse, upon being bumped, expresses a wish to deny the black man who is no longer 'invisible' and who is now actively demanding his right of way. The white man's resistance to this presence reminds us that 'black invisibility' grows out of dominant culture's privilege to see or to not see, a privilege substantiated by a history of longstanding material, legal, and social discrimination. The metaphor of invisibility thus alerts us to the repercussions of this long process of social and legal exclusion (121).

Ellison's passage uses an individual circumstance (our invisible protagonist bumping into a stranger) to dramatize a historical circumstance: the material and social "invisibility" of black people.

This substitution of individual detail at the expense of larger ideological and rhetorical themes is coded to the expressionist mode of novel that Ellison chooses, but Cheng helps us see the melancholic, psychic costs of that substitution:

This ambiguous scenario highlights the fraught consequences of the history of racism for both dominant and minority cultures. The point here is not to discount the invisible man's interpretation of the event, nor to dismiss the possibility of racism at work. The issue is, more crucially, the realization that because of the historic relation between whites and blacks in this country the possibility of a *racist* response haunts every potential *racial* encounter. A pre-written script compels, if not dictates, this confrontation. In this loaded exchange, mutual invisibility as the result of mutual projection seems unavoidable. Indeed, the incident becomes a racial one, not because a black man and a white man are involved per se, but because of the overdetermined history between them (122).

Cheng argues that in a racist social environment that has given rise to the invisible protagonist and his white counterpart, in these racial circumstances informed by historical and material concerns, that there always remains a racial discourse in the background that constricts the freedom with which different racial subjects can relate. Using the aforementioned Freud essay, Cheng argues that even the white subject, who benefits from an elevated social position as a consequence, nonetheless must continually account and address this social position delivered by racism, by birthright:

We might say that Ellison's scene of confrontation between the black and white men dramatized what might be called *racial melancholia* on the part of both characters. For the white man, the encounter means that he ran into a ghost of his own making – a ghost. Furthermore, whose ghostliness has historically guaranteed his social privilege and integrity. Part of the central

dilemma of white power in this country is that its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by the very other that it excludes. Racist discrimination is rarely about completely “losing” the racial other; it is often about keeping the other in some controlled, excluded space (124).

As we saw in earlier chapters concerning *The Wire*, those that benefit from white power are indeed spared material trauma, but not psychic trauma; they must try continually to avoid the fruits of Foucault’s carceral continuum. Whether this manifests itself as the numerous prisons or the prison-like schools of the inner city, or the prison-like atmosphere of police surveillance and violent crime that characterizes the neighborhoods of that city: these things remain visual reminders of the costs of racial privilege. These indicators of social inequality serve as visual examples of the contradictions and compromises that underlie American life, especially in the American city. The rest of this section addresses how Ellison’s novel situates such compromises and contradictions in historical perspective, using two examples from the first half of the novel, and finishing with an analysis of the epilogue, a complement to the analysis of the prologue, providing a full picture of the all-important “frame” that Stepto identifies and that surrounds the larger narrative.

The first, and perhaps most famous, episode of the novel is one of these dramatized contradictions. The “battle royal” section depicts our unnamed protagonist and his attempt to make a speech before the prominent white citizens of the (again, unnamed) Southern town he hails from:

It was in the main ballroom of the leading hotel. When I got there I discovered it was the occasion of a smoker, and I was told that since I was to be there anyway I might as well take part in the battle royal to be fought by some of my schoolmates as part of the entertainment. The battle royal came first (17).

The protagonist's strange willingness to consent to an impromptu gladiatorial event is all for the sake of not rocking the boat; our protagonist needs to make friends, for: "In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington" (17). After some sexual humiliation for good measure, several black young men (including our protagonist) are blindfolded and ushered into a ring where, for the eyes of the well-to-do white citizens (lawyers, preachers, politicians, etc.), a war of all against all is dramatized: "Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked" (23). As readers, we are appalled by the senseless violence, but our protagonist, at this early stage, sees this as another humiliation he must go through as a citizen of an unequal social order, and indeed begins to use the anarchy of the situation to his advantage: "I played one group against the other, slipping in and throwing a punch then stepping out of range while pushing the others into the melee to take the blows blindly aimed at me (23). Our protagonist is not sadistic: he does not enjoy this violence for its own sake, but sees it and the larger spectacle of humiliation as the price of recognition; despite the questionable character of those men that would allow such an event, the rewards desirable to our protagonist can only be earned through their approval: "The harder we fought the more threatening the [white] men became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me? (24). When the protagonist is drawn into single combat with another man and tries (unsuccessfully) to bribe him, all the protagonist can think about is not

that he is being forced to inflict carnage on another to gain approval, but only of the fruits of that approval: "I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability, and now this stupid clown was ruining my chances" (25).

In this example, Ellison dramatizes that it is not just whites that benefit from the structure of white power. Those minority subjects willing to comply and use such a system for one's own gain have the reward promised and dramatized here by Ellison: a bloodied conscience, and maybe even a bloody face. After another bout of humiliation involving an electric rug and fake money as a reward (also a war of all against all), our protagonist, spilling blood from his mouth, is allowed to give his speech. This humorous contradiction between his tattered, bloody appearance and the words of the protagonist's speech are put to rhetorical effect by Ellison:

To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is his next-door neighbor, I would say: 'Cast down your bucket where you are'—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded (30).

The price of the placation in the speech is shown when the protagonist's bloody mouth makes a social misstep: instead of hearing "social responsibility," the audience hears "social equality," that strangest of terms encapsulating anxieties about black male and female sexuality, white female chastity, and white male honor. The men spare the protagonist this misstep, but their hurried and anxious words reveal the undercurrent of violence at the ready: "Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (31). This subservient place, before mentioned by Cheng,

serves as a continual reminder of an uncertain social barrier that must continually be policed and negotiated. This is a psychic price that both races pay: those that benefit from white power must continually confront, or “bump into” that specter of fear that is the creation of the system that grants them power. Those black subjects that choose complicity with such a system are forced into an environment of violence and racial competition in order to partake of the leftover privileges bestowed by a condescending elite whose delight for tokenism they benefit from reinforces the larger social system necessitating this racial dance.

This uncertain and contradictory bargain is also the subject of the second compromise discussed in the novel: that of the compromise of black uplift exemplified by the Southern, traditional black college. We can assume that Ellison’s experience at Tuskegee has something to do with this scene, but the expressionist mode of his novel compels him not to reveal such details or situate his protagonist in such a specific manner. Instead, we are given historical images that are meant to suggest a larger social environment. For example, on the campus of the college our protagonist glimpses a statute that is clearly meant to be Booker T. Washington, but his withholding of that specific name allows the image to speak for a larger tenuous historical situation in which material progress often means social regression:

I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding (36).

We might try and harmonize the insights of Cheng and of the dramatized uncertainty of social and material progress by arguing that in the social

environment that the novel depicts, having both of these attainments for black people was simply not possible at that conjuncture. This is one way of understanding this image and the contradictions of black uplift personified by Booker T. Washington without being too hasty and comfortable from our (relatively) safe vantage point of history. If we indeed see the founder figure as binding the recently freed slave from the full social reality of his circumstance, perhaps the best defense we can give for this is that the founder operated in an environment that precluded material success and social equality. This formulation recognizes an uneasy compromise that had to be made in an environment when the threat of violence precluded a full assertion of individuality and identity.

This does not absolve those white subjects that worked in service of that power, nor does it absolve those black subjects that accept an uncomplicated alliance with such power. Ellison demonstrates this in a scene involving the protagonist, a white wealthy benefactor that represents the money that underwrote such collegiate institutions, the image-obsessed college president, and that most scrutinized and demonized of social institutions: the black family. The protagonist has been instructed to drive the wealthy benefactor, Mr. Norton: "A Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled scientist, director, philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white man's burden, and for sixty a symbol of the Great Traditions" (37). As readers, we can see that Ellison is having fun with and caricaturing the concept of white guilt, and Norton does not disappoint: choosing to engage in preachy pontification about the mutual reliance of the races, our protagonist is forced to hear the confessions of a man trying to throw

money at the psychic problem that Cheng illuminated before: "I had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me" (41). Norton's confrontation with Cheng's "racial melancholy," with his complicity in a racial situation that privileges his skin but also continually reminds him of this superiority and the price of it drives his desire to use a success of the college as a balm against his psychic disruption.

Norton's fascination with black people is not wholly in service of mental health; the circulation of power among black leaders and their subjects remains a pastime for an elite that has already accomplished the usual rewards of the white world: "But that's only part of it, young man. I have wealth and a reputation and prestige—all that is true. But your great Founder had more than that, he had tens of thousands of lives dependent upon his ideas and upon his actions. What he did affected our whole race. In a way, he had the power of a king, or in a sense, of a god" (45). This fascination with the adoration of the masses, of the desire to be loved by all, is not surprising, but the doubling back of this collective fantasy onto the psychic disruption that this dream is supposed to cover is jarring. Norton continues: "That, I've come to believe, is more important than my own work, because more depends on you. *You* are important because if you fail *I* have failed by one individual, one defective cog; it didn't matter so much before, but now I'm growing old and it has become very important to me" (45). As with many naïve and well-meaning people, Norton is both correct and incorrect: he is correct that a failure by our protagonist would very much have something to do with the white power that Norton

represents and benefits from, but he is incorrect in that he perceives that the reason for this complicity would be for the failure of his paternal efforts to set things right. Even in his desire to redress the mechanisms of power, Norton remains ensnared in a power structure in which he must assume his responsibility and superiority over black subjects whose dejection allows and engenders his authority. That Norton doesn't even notice this second and hidden implication of his words is caught by the protagonist, who correctly identifies the contradictions of Norton's previous diatribe: "But you don't even know my name, I thought, wondering what it was all about" (45).

What it might be all about is a scene of even greater psychic disruption: the incestuous relationship with his deceased daughter that is implied by the text. It is beyond the scope of this paper to try and parse the often bizarre statements that Norton makes about his daughter, but it is clear that Norton connects his endeavor with the college with his relationship with his daughter: "I also construct a living memorial to my daughter. Understand? I can see the fruits produced by the land that your great Founder has transformed from barren clay to fertile soil" (45). Ellison is careful to leave whether this memorial is in service to a sexual relationship or not in the shadows, but in following this scene with the actual incest of the sharecropping family, the author is clearly drawing attention to a racial situation that compels psychic disturbance in both races.

The protagonist and Norton end up in the dejected rural poverty of the sharecroppers by accident; the protagonist fulfills the benefactor's wish to see something other than the college and its immediate environment. Our protagonist

realizes his error and in his assessment of the difference between upward blacks such as himself and the forgotten and rejected sharecroppers such as Trueblood, he reflects the fears of a black elite that must also continually confront the contradictory racial situation that confers upon them temporary power:

I didn't understand in those pre-invisible days that their [the black college establishment] hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the 'peasants,' during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down (47).

The central issue is that Trueblood has raped his daughter and now has children from both his daughter and his wife. Trueblood explains that this disreputable social situation draws the expected ire from those at the college:

We ain't so bad, suh. 'Fore they heard 'bout what happen to us out here I couldn't git no help from nobody. Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help. Even the biggity school folks up on the hill, only there was a catch to it! They offered to send us clean outta the county, pay our way and everything and give me a hundred dollars to git settled with. But we likes it here so I told 'em No (52).

Again Ellison dramatizes the costs of racial uplift on those black subjects that benefit from those unequal circumstances: the blacks try to move and negotiate that rejected, "immoral" family into a separate and distinct space, namely not anywhere near them. This is a direct continuation and replication of the racial situation that endows white elites with powers and necessitates the separate black spaces of the black college. Elite minority subjects are forced to recapitulate and reinforce the same social situation that denies them the highest rewards, even as it guarantees and enables a tokenism engendering success for some. Trueblood's defiance of such an attempt demonstrates his awareness of the mechanics of race that those at the college, with all of their formal education, lack. Trueblood is under no illusions as to

how race works in society: "I went to the jailhouse and give Sheriff Barbour the note and he ask me to tell him what happen, and I tole him and he called in some more men and they made me tell it again. They wanted to hear about the gal lots of times and they gimme somethin' to eat and drink and some tobacco" (52). When the black elites of the college attempt to force him off his land, Trueblood goes to those that are actually in power: the white elites of the town. Refusing the self-delusion that temporary material success has fostered in the elites at the college, Trueblood recognizes that the only people that can enable someone to stay or leave the land are those whites that have the power of legitimate violence represented by the sheriff: "It just goes to show yuh that no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down" (53).

Our protagonist is certainly not privy to such realism about his social situation. As Trueblood describes the rape and incest to a suspiciously transfixed Norton, the student can only think about his reputation: "How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things?" (58). This pressure to conform one's lifestyle to an image acceptable and beneficial to the race as a whole is another consequence of the prerogatives of black uplift, where the realities of black material reality must be hidden in service of a black gentility manufactured to be respectable to whites.

This bleaching of vice, this erasure of the problems of black life engendered by an unequal social system, is emphasized and satirized in the next section of the scene. In response to the psychic disturbance of Trueblood's story, Norton feels faint, and needs a drink. The only place to get a drink in the area is a bar ("The

Golden Day”) that on this day just happens to be hosting its perennial festival hosting shell-shocked military veterans and mental patients. This event is often given to violence and debauchery, and has provoked the ire of the school, but again, as Trueblood so presciently pointed out previously, the whites wanted the party to continue and so it continued: “The school had tried to make the Golden Day respectable, but the local white folks had a hand in it somehow and they got nowhere. The best the school could do was to make it hot for any student caught going there” (72). Ellison demonstrates the restricted sphere of the school’s power; the administrators can only police and perpetuate a respectable image in their socially constructed and constrictive separate space of the college, and lack the real power to eradicate those factors beyond that contradict and affect that image.

Ellison uses this scene at the bar to indulge a carnivalesque spirit that I argue characterizes Morrison’s style (more on that in the next section). The diversity of The Golden Day’s patrons is wide: “Many of the men had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service workers; there were several cooks, a preacher, a politician, and an artist. One very nutty one had been a psychiatrist. Whenever I saw them I felt uncomfortable. They were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times I vaguely aspired myself, and even though they never seemed to see me I could never believe that they were really patients. Sometimes it appeared as though they played some vast and complicated game with me and the rest of the school folk, a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties I could never grasp” (73). We can harmonize this image of uncertain conventional success with the psychic racial situation that shapes the novel by

returning to the image of The Founder and the veil. That image showcased the contradictions of the success in the social world that the novel depicts: one could choose a struggle for social equality with the consequence of consistent and complete racial violence, or one could choose material success and practice a voluntary “blindness” to the contradictions of this social position. One very simple and generic definition of madness is a failure to reconcile and accept the contradictory demands of life on the “outside,” and it seems that Ellison uses these diverse characters as a means of showing the psychic cost of black conventional success in a social environment that prevents and discounts such achievement at every turn. These “crazy” shades represent possible outcomes for the protagonist, and their discourse, though coupled with the irrationality particular to those mentally ill, contains hard-won, hard knocks sort of historical truth; one of these patients is convinced that the still unconscious Norton is his grandfather: “I should know my own grandfather! He’s Thomas Jefferson and I’m his grandson—on the ‘field-nigger side” (76). This allusion to the often hidden history of white violation of black female sexuality is a fragmentary, but prescient summation of a history that the protagonist, with his commitment to success in the conventional white world, cannot afford to fully confront, as these patients have.

One of the wiser patients forces Norton to confront this history directly. After they revive him with the help of a former doctor, this doctor gives Norton an unsolicited view of how he appears from those black subjects that he is supposedly fully committed to: “To some, you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come into the Golden Day!” (92). The doctor’s

refusal to separate these different aspects, different roles of nonetheless the same racial discourse provokes the expected embarrassment of the protagonist, who doesn't want his benefactor to confront the unseemly side of his benevolent role. The doctor correctly diagnoses our protagonist's anxiety, and connects this anxiety with the constriction of personality necessitated by a complex racial and psychical situation. Addressing Norton about our protagonist and the latter's dependence on the former, the doctor says: "Behold! A walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but also his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (92). This is the first allusion to the narrator's invisibility in the text that has its origins in someone other than the invisible man himself. This allusion helps us situate the *social* consequence of his invisibility, rather than simply on the *material* and *bodily* curiosity compelled at first consideration of the concept of "invisibility." That this doctor can visibly recognize the protagonist's invisibility shows that this invisibility, rather than being primarily a personal trait, is rather an invisibility that is conferred from without. This conferral takes a variety of forms, from the overt malevolence of lynching mentioned first by the doctor, but also of the uneasy compromise of white philanthropy and black uplift that Norton represents. Norton appeals to the beneficial aspects of this racial system, and connects his lot with his black counterparts, seeking to elide and conceal the maintenance of the racial system that even his well-meaning money cannot staunch: "Out of sense of my destined role, Mr. Norton said shakily. 'I felt, and I still feel, that your people are in some important manner tied to my destiny'" (93).

The doctor is too smart to accept either Norton's justification or the protagonist's complicity:

But seriously, because you both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see—and you, looking for destiny! It's classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force—“ (93).

Though Norton protests, it is worth nothing that the philanthropist just previously described his adoration for the college founder in terms of the god-like stature he had among black people. He used the word “god.” The psychic cost of this system of worship and beneficent mercy compelled by the social and racial situation also has its effects on those degraded devoted of the underclass, trying to earn the approval of these elites. Concerning the protagonist, the doctor says: “He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you *his* destiny. He'll do our bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset” (94). The protagonist's willful blindness, the necessity of the absorption and internalization of a social discourse whereby white must be right, is the social cost of a system whose full truth cannot be told in the maintenance of an easy status quo.

The tenuousness and uncertainty of compromise between the degradation of the patients at the Golden Day and the college is dramatized as the protagonist drives Norton back to the campus. The state of the patients has reminded our protagonist the fate of the many that are not privy to the privileges of the college, and it is the possible loss of these elite privileges that occupies his mind as he returns a visibly traumatized Norton to the college the benefactor erected as a

screen against the very truth he was forced to glimpse at the Golden Day. The anxious protagonist:

My predicament struck me like a stab. I had a sense of losing control of the car and slammed on the brakes in the middle of the road, then apologized and drove on. Here within this quiet greenness I possess the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it. In this brief moment of passage I became aware of the connection between these lawns and buildings and my hopes and dreams (97).

This image spatially illustrates the very limited sphere of influence for even the elite blacks represented by the protagonist. Without a larger, white-approved, social structure, our protagonist has only the violence of the battle royal and its audience waiting for him back South. This prospect sends the protagonist into a thought panic, where he demonstrates his willingness to do whatever it takes to remain in this small, protective sphere of achievement:

I wanted to stop the car and talk with Mr. Norton...to denounce all we'd seen and heard; to assure him that far from being like any of the people we had seen, I *hated* them, that I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul, and that I believed in his goodness and kindness in extending the hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness (97).

That success and the approval of Norton are dependent on allegiance to an ideology that recognizes the protagonist only at the degradation of most of the population of black people, that the protagonist must internalize this ideology to the point of hating black people, that the principles of the Founder and the money of Norton are dependent on the preservation of false and pernicious racial structure; all of these issues are not foremost in the protagonist. It is the trauma and shock of the prospective loss of these things that occupies his mind: "I would do his bidding and teach others to rise as he wished them to, to teach them to be thrifty, decent,

upright citizens, contributing to the welfare of all, shunning all but the straight and narrow path that he and the Founder had stretched before us. If only he were not angry with me! If only he would give me another chance!" (97).

This status that the protagonist is anxious of losing is occupied at its upper end by the president of the college, Bledsoe. Mr. Bledsoe, well, has it all, and the protagonist wants to be smiled on so he can have it too:

He had been kind to me from the first, perhaps because of the letter which the school superintendent had sent to him when I arrived. But more than that, he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife (98).

That these represent the material and social ideal and summit of this uneasy racial environment showcases that those minority subjects determined to profit from racial inequality must remain not only blind to their own contradictory complicity, but must also actively maintain and enforce the lines of racial demarcation that created the need for the unequal position to begin with. All of Bledsoe's "successes" that the protagonist lists are contingent on the approval of a larger social structure. The "influential men" that our protagonist mentions are influential because they have influence over people like Bledsoe: his role as a race leader triumphantly hides the condescension and tokenism that such a position suggests. His multiple Cadillacs reiterate that he must present an image of white wealth and success by funding those material enterprises that remain out of reach of most of his peers (and must continually and enthusiastically showcase this difference that secures his position and prohibits these privileges to a large number of his peers). His "soft" wife is forced to conform to an ideal of black gentility

derived from racist and sexist ideals of femininity, anxious ideals that were often reused in the service of white violence against black men, while her “soft complexion” signals Bledsoe’s complicity in a system that privileges white images of beauty, and that his wife’s beauty comes at the cost of continually affirming a narrow system of acceptance that remains blocked to most of his peers. These are the dirty contradictions that Bledsoe’s slick image and conventional success cover over, and it is the confrontation between the protagonist and Bledsoe concerning the ramifications of Norton’s rare glimpse of the racial realism of *Golden Day* that demonstrates the incommensurability of true racial freedom and the racial uplift that Bledsoe and his college represent.

Bledsoe is astonished at the naivety of the protagonist, appalled that the student would actually take the benefactor at his request outside the certain, policed, white-washed, and sterile campus world: “Damn what *he* wants,’ he said, climbing in the front seat beside me. ‘Haven’t you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don’t you know that? I thought you had some sense” (100). To achieve the level of success that Bledsoe has, one has to not only ignore one’s own position in this contradictory racial landscape, but also actively reinforce such boundaries by perpetuating a myopic and self-interested view of that landscape. To achieve Bledsoe’s success, one must continue building and preserving the very degraded zone that most of one’s racial peers are subjected to. It requires a conscious awareness of the boundaries of this racial zone, something that the protagonist’s temporary absent-mindedness precluded. It is this constant awareness and active

maintenance of an unequal social order that the protagonist failed to accomplish with Norton, and that an impassable and forbidden racial line (maintained and encouraged by the college) has been crossed is depicted symbolically by Ellison by a brief image concerning a portrait of the Founder, the first perpetuator of this compromise. Waiting for Bledsoe to return from Norton's room, the protagonist glimpses the figure: "Above a spacious fireplace an oil portrait of the Founder looked down at me remotely, benign, sad, and in that hot instant, profoundly disillusioned. Then a veil seemed to fall" (101). That this symbolic veil, long a painful and prescient metaphor of the racial separation of this country, has been jarred and unmoored in the environment of the Founder is unacceptable. The protagonist is given the same fate that Trueblood only avoided by cooperation with the town whites: he is forced out, and forced from his communal Southern environment to a cold, impersonal, but more individually free Harlem. It is the negotiation of this more nominally free environment, complete with a savage inner city that is the cost of the relative freedom enjoyed by the protagonist, which occupies the remainder of the novel.

The uncertainty of the individuality achieved by the protagonist is not lost on Ellison, even as his beloved and singular protagonist is able to achieve a contemplative isolation and independence by the epilogue. That this individuality is uncertain and incomplete is signaled by the protagonist's willingness to actively entertain and address these contradictions on the final page of the novel:

Ah, I can hear you say, 'so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!' But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do?? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when

your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak to you? (28).

These concluding words of the novel, with their acknowledgement of the insularity and solipsism of his expressionist narrator, showcases Ellison's willingness to address the limitations and complications of an individuality and security that were indeed exceptional and not open to many of his racial peers. But even as this voluntary social and racial myopia does not provide a redress to the real material dejection suffered by many of his racial peers, it nonetheless provides a unique perspective that proves more universal and wide-ranging than it first appears. In Ellison's formulation of triumphant and hard-won individuality represented by his protagonist (and historically appraised by a strain of American thought beginning with Emerson), he constructed an individual with as wide a canvas of "experience" as possible; in this way, Ellison is able to couple the privileges of negotiated and narrow security given to the black artist and college-educated elites as exemplified by his protagonist (and in many ways, Ellison's own white-appraised success) but denied to many of the ordinary blacks with a individual narrator who is nonetheless able to capture and depict many of the ideological and historical contradictions of that racial environment to the elite white audience often removed from the material and social consequences of those effects. In this way, following Henry James's formulation of the perceptive artist and author "on whom nothing is lost!" Ellison is able to use a lucky, elite, and exceptional narrator to try and capture the wider social trends that give rise to and preserve his uniqueness, his individuality that he is so afraid of losing. These contradictory aims

are at the heart of the expressionist novel, and the expressionist history that *Invisible Man* is endowed with the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

### The Carnavalesque History

These weaknesses are certainly not lost on Toni Morrison, who addresses the limits of the individual, expressionist, and transcendent narrator both in practice in *Jazz* and in theory in her 1992 collection of essays, *Playing in the Dark*. However, before we turn to that, we might note that some of Ellison's more perceptive critics have noted the limitations of his particular novel and of its individual, expressionist protagonist. One of these critics is also one of Ellison's biographers, and thus is able to show us how Ellison's all-encompassing commitment to artistic and social flexibility, how Ellison's determination to be free to construct his novel as he pleased, free from social encumbrance, was intimately connected with his desire to construct and conduct his personal life in the same manner, free from social and political obligation.

Lawrence Jackson, in his essay, "Ralph Ellison's Invented Life: A Meeting With Ancestors," discusses this connection between principles of artfulness that appraise individuality and self-determination and a social order that appraises and awards the affirmation of such an ideology, even as it privileges these unique and exceptional individuals at the cost of the masses whose inaccessibility to such privileges endows those privileges with their desirous worth. Jackson asserts that Ellison's prestige rests on the fact that he constructed his persona at least partly from an American Dream ideology of the self-directed and triumphant individual,

and that the fitting of his personal details to this appraised and approved form of the artist was what enabled the continuance of this ideology: “Ellison’s contemporary reputation rides high in part because he is thought to have pulled himself up by his own bootstraps and to have been self-reliant – Americans’ fondest idea of themselves. Ellison is understood as the chief architect of the individual identity and he devoted considerable energies to that image of himself (13). It is no surprise that this ideology finds its way into the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, who is very much the product of a beneficial, and lucky, path through the various and narrow avenues of black success.

In a strange confrontation between life and art, Jackson uses his skills as Ellison’s biographer to make a startling claim: that Ellison engaged in some artful manipulation of the details of his own life, using an invented birth date to smooth over his lack of finishing college, his time spent in the Midwest during his mother’s death, and his wandering path back to New York. Jackson sees this artificial adoption as a means of agency that would permit Ellison to begin a new history in the freer North, unencumbered by the scars and marks of the South: “Clearly the adoption of the new birth date is an important moment in the arrangement of the writer’s life and in the construction of precisely what Ellison supposed a writer in New York City would be: urbane, avant garde, sapiently literate and, importantly, unintimidated by the terror of white malice” (19). Jackson seems to assert that Ellison engaged in some voluntary blindness of his own, choosing to treat his move to New York as a reset button, obliterating his uncertain Southern past. Jackson shows that Ellison had a willingness to eliminate even the links of his literary

genealogy in service of the recognition of his own uniqueness: “his later self-revision had less to do with his own lived past than with the issue of who had been his artistic forebears, the creation of his literal and figurative genealogy” (21). Jackson refers to an essay in Ellison’s essay collection *Shadow and Act*, in which he states that fellow black writers such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and James Baldwin are his relatives as opposed to his influences. The shared racial legacy of the writers is involuntary, and thus does not have the same agency that the self-appointed, self-chosen veneer that a voluntary influence has. This inevitable, conscripted, and communal aspect inferred by the concept of “relative” is contrasted to the freedom of choosing one’s influences, one’s ancestors: “On the other hand, Faulkner, Eliot, and Hemingway –who in their writing achieved a universal statement of unquestionable artistic value – were his ancestors, the progenitors of literary forms and stylistic originality whom he hoped to join at the table of high culture” (21). Besides the involuntary nature of shared racial legacy of the black writer, the black artist is often ghettoized, figured as someone who “merely” speaks for a specialized, inevitable, and readymade audience. Ellison wanted to avoid the association of his gifts with the provincial status of a “race writer” or a “race man.” He wanted to achieve the universality of those aforementioned white authors. The price of social and racial environment that keeps alive the very system of distinction that Ellison sought is the myopia that the protagonist of *Invisible Man* personifies and the novel ultimately ends up succumbing to. We are given an extraordinary account of the wide ranging experience of a remarkable black elite, but what of the ordinary stories that Ellison has had to background in order to foreground this

exceptional individual story? It is the experience of these ordinary people, these non-elites, that Toni Morrison is committed to depicting in her carnivalesque novel, *Jazz*, and it is her commitment to showing the theoretical contradictions of an ideology of individuality that Ellison appraises that occupies her essay collection *Playing in the Dark*.

Morrison's novel, like Ellison's, is subject to a contradiction in its method of historical and narrative depiction. As stated before, in contrast to Ellison's shadowy depiction of a world without firm historical and personal parameters, Morrison picks the very specific year of 1926 and thoroughly immerses herself in the everyday, quotidian, ordinary textual artifacts of that historical experience for blacks living in the city. Paradoxically, even as this larger historical and social environment is situated more explicitly and directed, the larger ideological concepts that underlie this specific historical situation fades to emphasize the social aspects of specific characters in the novel. Unlike the unnamed protagonist from nowhere of *Invisible Man*, we are given detailed histories of all of the major characters, and some of the minor ones as well. It is embedding of larger historical themes inside of the everyday experience and relationships of the working class that continue to make up the majority of black Americans that distinguishes Morrison's carnivalesque novel and Ellison's expressionist novel, and thus influences the sort of history that she tells. I argue that Morrison's carnivalesque novel represents the foregrounding of those ordinary people that Ellison had to background in order to tell the story of his most extraordinary protagonist. Other critics, such as Shirley Anne Stave in her article, "*Jazz and Paradise: Pivotal Moments in Black History*," have shown that her

focus on the working class, ordinary black Americans marks a shift towards subjects not conventionally addressed in the artistic literature of black elites:

While the splendor of the city and the sophistication of the lives of the middle class are well known, what has remained unspoken have been the other lives, the less-than-splendid existence teeming with economic uncertainty, internal color-line issues, sexism, depression, and the violence people assumed they had left behind (61).

Stave shows how the fantasy of unencumbered and equal freedom in North is complicated by a racial situation just as complicated if less violent than the South and how this contradictory and painful reality is played out by the ordinary people depicted in *Jazz*.

Morrison herself shows a theoretical commitment to the telling of histories that have been heretofore blocked and hidden by the affirmation of an ideal of triumphant black individuality that Ellison's novel depends on. To say the least, Morrison is suspicious about the concept of the socially independent, socially immune, individual. Though this triumphant individualism is often put in service of the denial of the effects of racism, Morrison argues, in first essay of *Playing in the Dark*, that such an ideology is in fact dependent and constructed out of the very racial space that it denies:

These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with the figurations of death and hell—are not in fact a response to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence (5).

Morrison's analysis anticipates the psychical costs explored by Cheng; both note that racial compromise affects the psyches of both races. So rather than the robust, masculine, aggressive, individualism appraised by the majority strain of

American literature representing and signifying a triumph over those elements of barbarism and degeneracy that is now “outside,” it rather represents a psychic compromise between white power and black servitude that manifests itself in precisely those social institutions that were designed to eclipse and hide such a racial order.

Morrison further argues that underneath the maintenance of ostensibly neutral concepts as the individual lies a self-interested process of individual identity formation at the cost of undifferentiated, degenerate, captive Africanist mass that served as a convenient repository for traits of barbarism and unseemly behavior that were antithetical to the enlightened, free individual white male. Morrison traces this distinction to the very historical origins of the country: “For excellent reasons of state—because European sources of cultural hegemony were dispersed but not yet valorized in the new country—the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony” (8). This positive identity via negative contrast was a means of exploiting the geographic isolation of the new country by means of creation of a new, more triumphant identity. This self-formation always hides some sort of troubled and undesirable history, as it did with Ellison. Morrison identifies this impulse to be relieved of the burden of history as fundamentally tied up with the idea of the individual, even as that very idea seems to efface the importance of a predetermined, socially contingent history. For Morrison, the formulation of the individual does not absolve or remove the subject from history, but simply hides it: “Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the ‘clean slate’ variety, a once-in-a-

lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes, as it were (34).

These new immigrant citizens were excited to be born anew, because in the world they left behind, they largely occupied subservient roles. But with the advent of a new land and a subject black population forcibly enlisted not only to bear the labor of the new society, but also the status of the bottom rung, the social pariah of the new American society; with these things, Morrison notes, it was possible to reinvent oneself from the server to the served, the meek to strong: “The habit of genuflection would be replaced by the thrill of command. Power—control of one’s own destiny—would replace the powerlessness felt before the gates of class, caste, and cunning persecution. One could move from discipline and punishment to disciplining and punishing; from social ostracism to social rank” (35). Morrison further notes that the contradictory cost of such a social system is manifested in how it conceives of history. Rather than seeing personal history as the uninterested catalogue of events in a person’s life (which would include the dejected past of servitude), the self-interested ideology of the individual allowed new white immigrants to both cast off history and to assume a new history: “One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed. Much was to be written there: noble impulses were made into law and appropriated for a national tradition; base ones, learned and elaborated in the rejected and rejecting homeland, were also made into law and appropriated for tradition” (35). Morrison argues that the “noble impulses,” those guarantees of democracy and freedom that aren’t explicitly racist in intent, are

nonetheless contingent on those racial realities that seem contradictory and antithetical to such noble ideals: “The rights of man, for example, an organizing principle upon which the nation was founded, was inevitably yoked to Africanism. Its history, its origin is permanently allied with another seductive concept: the hierarchy of race...we should not be surprised that the Enlightenment could accommodate slavery; we should be surprised if it had not. The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not create it—like slavery” (38). The very concept of “freedom,” of exercising rights thought given to all, does not function except as contrast to an unfree population, those people that are not privy to such rights. A privilege is only a privilege if it is first denied to others, and Morrison argues that this denial to black Americans was not simply a negative reaction, a measure of cruelty, but was rather essential to the construction of both national and personal identity to the new Americans:

I want to suggest that these concerns—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only became the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity” (44).

Thus the ideal of the self-directed, self-influenced, and socially independent individual was in fact a coping mechanism for the inequality of power compelled by the material and social ideology of the new Americans. It is the consequences of and responsibility for this constructed racial order that people seek to avoid when asserting an individuality that attempts to bleach historical and social contingency from personal history. Morrison notes that the promise of autonomy and the

seductive appeal of immunity from history was a consequence of the contradictory social situation that gave rise to a servile population, wholly determined by race:

Autonomy is freedom and translates into the much championed and revered 'individualism'; distinctiveness becomes difference and the erection of strategies for maintaining it; authority and absolute power become a romantic, conquering 'heroism,' virility, and the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others. All the rest made possible by this last, it would seem—absolute power called forth and played against and within a natural and mental landscape conceived of as a 'raw, half-savage world' (45).

It is an attempt to escape this unseemly history, this contradictory behavior from those thought to love freedom most, that underlies the security of the concept of an independent, socially distanced individual: "Eventually individualism fuses with the prototype of Americans as solitary, alienated, and malcontent. What, one wants to ask, are Americans alienated from? What are Americans so insistently innocent of? Different from? As for absolute power, over whom is this power held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed?" (45). Morrison's determination to explore the social and historical consequence of this hidden compromise is fulfilled in her telling the stories of those people whose histories are often hidden by virtue of their membership in the working class: those of that working class that Ellison's protagonist miraculously (and some would say implausibly) managed to escape.

One of the many separations between Ellison's extraordinary, expressionist narrator and the characters that people Morrison's *Jazz* is the unnamed protagonist's avoidance of military service. It is no secret that such an avenue has been disproportionately forced on those of limited material means, including poor black men and (later) women. The higher probability of military service and its interaction with poverty and a paucity of opportunity for meaningful domestic

employment are not lost on Morrison, who sets a central scene of the novel at the occasion of a march by returned black fighters from World War I: “The slumped spines of the veterans of the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion betrayed by the commander for whom they had fought like lunatics. The yes of thousands, stupefied with disgust at having been imported by Mr. Armour, Mr. Swift, Mr. Montgomery Ward to break strikes then dismissed for having done so. The broken shoes of two thousand Galveston longshoremen that Mr. Mallory would never pay fifty cents an hour like the white ones” (33). Rather than focusing on the triumphant democratic ideals located in the national documents (such as Ellison does), Morrison instead focuses on those responsibilities of national citizenship borne by those that don’t have the opportunity for further education or for equitable work. Instead of the college-educated elites of the Harlem Renaissance (contemporaneous with the action of the novel, but in an elite Harlem far away from our characters), we instead hear the stories of those that perhaps served and waited on those elites; critics such as Stave have remarked on this decidedly working class emphasis: “Choosing to use the Harlem Renaissance as the backdrop for the novel’s diegesis, Morrison interrogates a cultural space that has heretofore been regarded as a cultural Mecca for Americans of African descent focusing the text...on the lives of very ordinary people who work hard at commonplace jobs to provide for themselves” (60). Morrison’s novel engages larger historical issues just as Ellison’s does, but an important difference is Morrison’s situating of the center of black consciousness among the working poor and working middle-class.

One way that Morrison couples the experience of ordinary life with the relevance of larger historical trends is through the scene in which Alice silently watches an anti-lynching protest. She contemplates both this parade commemorating battle and the jazz music that gives the novel its name, trying to find a common thread for each: "Alice thought the lowdown music (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two thousand dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. So many whites killed the papers would not print the number" (57). This unrest, signified on multiple levels, first, by Alice's personal trauma in losing her relatives in an event of larger historical importance, and also encapsulated in the unorthodox and irregular rhythms of the black music of the moment, are meant to construct a multi-faceted, fragmentary, and carnivalesque narrative and history that gives voice to a variety of discursive registers. Even when Morrison engages in more distanced historicizing, the reader still feels the tinge of larger events that nonetheless directly affect characters that we have become intimate with:

Some said the rioters were disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the YMCA, over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was pitiless and totally without honor. Others said they were whites terrified by the wave of southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live (57).

The penultimate scene of *Invisible Man* was also a riot, but because our protagonist has remained either separate or exceptional in Harlem, it is difficult to connect him to the carnage and material reality of a neighborhood affected by a race

riot. Morrison's characters in *Jazz* are people that not only live in ordinary neighborhoods there, but also staff and work at the businesses devastated by such a riot. Both authors use the race riot, a recurrent event in American history, as a means of telling a particular sort of narrative history, but only in Morrison's narrative do we intimately know characters that would be directly affected by such a traumatic event. This is a direct result of the carnivalesque mode in which she writes her narrative history.

For all of her focus on the carnivalesque, the communal, the dialogic varied voices of narrative as opposed to the singularity of dialogic discourse, Morrison also is attentive to the individual and distinguishing differences of her individual characters. One of these characters, Joe Trace (one-third of the love triangle that forms the narrative focus of the novel), is even given a miniature, expressionist, individual history in the narrative. It is as if Morrison wanted Trace to be a more plausible, more common, less invisible man. This section is driven by Joe Trace's "change-ups" or fundamental shifts in his personality and/or geographic location. It is a miniature chronicle with the geographic and personal shifts that characterized *Invisible Man*. The primary difference is Morrison's deploying of this rhetorical and narrative strategy in service of a character that is not immune to the labor and material conditions of the majority of the black populace.

Like Ellison's protagonist, Joe Trace begins without a name. But a nameless protagonist will not do for Morrison, so his first change is his voluntary taking on a name: "Before I met her [Dorcas, another third of the primary love affair] I'd changed into new seven times. The first time when I named my own self, since

nobody knew what it could or should have been” (123). The nameless, rural black poverty that Trace is born into prevent him the security of a name and a communal structure signified by that name. Joe chooses a name of his own choice, but this triumphant self-determination hides a history of namelessness and a social situation in which he is literally dependent only on himself: “The second change came when I picked out and trained to be a man. To live independent and feed myself no matter what” (125). This toughness, like the street smarts of the black men in the inner city addressed in previous chapters concerning *The Wire*, was a necessary social and protective mechanism in a restrictive social environment characterized by unprovoked and random white violence: “Eighteen ninety-three was the third time I changed. That was when Vienna burned to the ground. Red fire doing fast what white sheets took long to finish: canceling every deed; vacating each and every field; emptying us out of our places so fast we went running from one part of the country to another—or nowhere” (126). This inability to live a secure life in the face of white violence continues: “Then I got a job laying rail for the Southern Sky, I was twenty-eight years old and used to changing now, so in 1901, when Booker T. had a sandwich in the President’s house, I was bold enough to do it again: decided to buy me a piece of land. Like a fool I thought they’d let me keep it. They ran us off with two slips of paper I never saw or signed” (126).

Morrison dramatizes the incongruity of the tokenism that enabled Washington to intimately dine with the President while ordinary citizens couldn’t properly reap the fruits of the work that was the base of his gospel. The societal contradictions of the uncertain compromise represented by Washington and other

models of black uplift are further detailed as Joe and his wife continue to make their way North: "I changed up again the fourth time when I took my wife to Rome, a depot near where she was born, and boarded the Southern Sky for a northern one. They moved us five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law" (127). Upon arrival in the city, unlike the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, who after a short time in menial work is able to find his way into the intellectual and political vanguard of New York, Morrison's Trace continues to work, as most of his black peers did:

We lived in a railroad flat in the Tenderloin. Violet [the final third of the love triangle] went in service and I worked everything from whitefolks shoe leather to cigars in a room where they read to us while we rolled tobacco. I cleaned fish at nights and toilets in the day till I got in with the table waiters. And I thought I had settled into my permanent self, the fifth one, when we left the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa, then the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third and moved uptown (127).

At first, they occupy desirable houses, but such luxury is quickly removed as an early glimpse of gentrification forces Joe and Violet from these dwellings to the inner city of most of their peers: "When the rents got raised and raised again, and the stores doubled the price of uptown beef and let the whitefolks' meat stay the same, I got me a little sideline selling Cleopatra products in the neighborhood" (128).

Even as the North is presented as a haven from the violence of the South, and Morrison's characters undoubtedly have more freedom of movement in the city than they did in the rural locale of their childhood, the undercurrent of violence is simply more muted and repressed and subtle in the North. It is not eliminated. Morrison shows this in Joe's explanation as to the cause of a race riot, this second

example signifying the unfortunate and persistent violence that characterizes these largely minority inner cities:

I don't know exactly what started the riot. Could have been what the papers said, what the waiters I worked with said, or what Gistan said—that party, he said, where they sent out invitations to whites to come see a colored man burn alive. Gistan said thousands of whites turned up. Gistan said it sat on everybody's chest, and if the killing hadn't done it, something else would have. They were bringing in swarms of colored to work during the War. Crackers in the South mad cause Negroes were leaving; crackers in the North mad cause they were coming (128).

It is the pain of displacement and continual current of violence that characterizes black life that forms the hidden history behind the triumphant self-invention that Joe lays historical claim to. Even when his reinvention is motivated by positive activities, such as his final change based on the triumphant celebration of black bravery in World War I, the constrictive, uncertain, and unequal terms of Joe's reinvention are directly reflected in the uncertain, unequal and constrictive freedom granted to those black soldiers that returned from warfare: "I walked all the way, every goddamn step of the way, with the three six nine. Can't remember no time when I danced in the street but that one time when everybody did. I thought that change was the last, and it sure was the best because the War had come and gone and the colored troops of the three six nine that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two" (129). This passage at first seems triumphant, as it couples personal change with a positive larger historical event, but an attention to the costs of that triumphal reinvention (the need to risk one's life to prove one's eligibility for human rights, and then the denial of those rights when soldiers returned home) shows that such a victory is, as always in an unequal racial environment, incomplete and partial. Joe himself is alert to the personal trauma of having to reorient major

parts of one's life to accommodate and try and stay under the tide of racism: "I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many. You could say I've been a new Negro all my life" (129).

This clever allusion to the "New Negro" ideology, a component of black gentility and uplift, signals the strange and often contradictory path forced on those black Americans forced to negotiate an unequal, uncertain, and contradictory racial system. Because Morrison's novel locates the consequences of these ideas in the consciousness of the working class, one is able to see more directly how freedom and mobility were compromised for black Americans, because we are made to connect with that majority left behind by the ideology of black uplift, not those exceptions that escape this social fate, we are forced to confront the difficulties and contradictions of our system that privileges tokenism while leaving in place social structures that compel the majority of black people (like Joe Trace) living in inner cities to maintain an uncertain and often unsafe existence and future.

To emphasize these communal, carnivalesque aspects of Morrison's novel is not to diminish focus on her individual characters or the merit of the extraordinary expressionist history given to us by Ellison. In some ways, with the character of Joe Trace, Morrison has signaled the importance of multi-faceted, individual, and often contradictory characters to a full understanding of black life. That Morrison is able to depict working class characters with an eye towards the complexity and fullness of their individual humanity, that she is able to encapsulate, go further than, and ultimately transcend Ellison's narrative history demonstrates that the black literary

tradition continues to demand that its novels, readers, and histories become more truthful and nuanced.

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## **VITA**

Wayne Spencer Coffey was born in Austin, Texas, on April 19, 1986, the son of Wayne Everett and Natalie Guyton Coffey. After finishing high school at LBJ High School in Austin, Texas, in 2004, he entered American University in Washington, D.C. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Literature from American in 2008. In 2009, he entered the Graduate College at Texas State University-San Marcos.

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