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HARLEM REVERBERATIONS:
Sonic Landscapes and the Aesthetics of Sound in African-American
Literature,
1910 - 1940

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Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Research in
American Studies

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural and aesthetic significance of sound and silence in the literature of Harlem Renaissance authors, including; Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, and Zora Neale Hurston. It also takes into account literary contributions by Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison. In a recent study on the soundscape of modernity, musicologist Emily Thompson identifies technological changes, a surge in migration, the rising popularity of jazz, and changes in racial geography as factors that prompted a crescendo of the New York soundscape. In particular she suggests that African Americans migrating from the rural South to Northern cities experienced an aural transformation far more dramatic than that of any other group in American society, during the early part of the twentieth century. While the critical connection has been made between the influence of jazz and the literature produced during the Harlem Renaissance, this thesis explores the significance of Harlem's soundscape, and representations of sound in the novel through a sound*less* medium. Through the fictional writings of McKay, Larsen, Fisher and Hurston, focus is given here to the representation and reproductions of sound, cultures of sonic expression, and what it meant for Harlem to *be heard* above the "roar" of New York, particularly amidst a public city-wide campaign for the abatement of noise.

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At this point, I would like to channel the great Allison Janney in her Academy Awards speech and say: “I did it all by myself”. To quote the second part of Janney’s speech however, nothing could be further from the truth. This thesis reflects the academic support, personal encouragement, and thought-provoking conversations had with a team of wonderful people.

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I would like to dedicate this research to my late Aunt, who taught me the value of education and encouraged me to read voraciously. Her influence is in every page of this thesis. And finally, to my Grandmother, who taught me everything I know.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

We're passing through time and space. Our ears are in excellent condition.

John Cage, *Silence*

1. ‘Bonfires of Sound’: Sonic Expression and the Campaign for Noise Abatement in 1920’s Harlem

Throughout this thesis I will explore representations of sound in the novel, considering the extent to which the sonic environment influenced both the form and aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance during the early twentieth century. In the ensuing discussion I consider key literary contributions by Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher and Zora Neale Hurston, exploring the ways in which each author represented cultures of creating, listening to and responding to the soundscape of Harlem through the novel as a *soundless* medium. Contextualising the sonic environment of Harlem from the turn of the century is crucial to understanding the significance of the Harlem Renaissance as a cultural movement. Engaging with the Harlem Renaissance from a sonic perspective prompts a renewed reading of Harlem literature, and offers a new perspective on auditory aesthetics between 1910-1945.

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, “sound” should be considered as all-encompassing; comprised of musical sounds, environmental sound, the sounds of industry, the

daily sounds of social and domestic life, and the gaps and silences that form part of a broad soundscape. This is particularly important when attempting to contextualise a metropolitan soundscape like that of New York, throughout the historical period in question. Readers might also consider here that “to sound” something is also to gauge its validity and resonance. The “sounding” of Harlem in modern scholarship is indicative of the fact that it continues to resonate as a point of cultural and creative development in African American history. With sound as a focus, other themes emerge in Harlem’s social and cultural history, including discussions of race, gender politics, migration, and modernity. This thesis further explores the relationship between the spatial formation of Harlem, the external sonic environment and the presence of new acoustic technologies in internal spaces, namely the gramophone and radio. Sound is considered in a historical context as a driving force in the citywide noise abatement campaign in New York, which emerged in nineteen twenties, and continued for more than a decade.

The definition of ‘reverberation’ is considered here as a dual concept in relation to the Harlem Renaissance. The first is drawn from the aural definition of the term as the prolonged effect of a resonant sound or sound(s). This is explored further in relation to the environmental sounds of Harlem in the early twentieth century. ‘Reverberation’ is also considered throughout this thesis as a cultural and creative resonance best explored through the lasting impact and “echoes” of the Harlem Renaissance. In literature, this reverberative quality is particularly unique. From a formal perspective, this thesis gives primacy to the novel over that of the poem or short story. The novel offers an interpretation of a particular community, place and time, but in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, the novel also establishes a sustained representation of a sonic environment. In a study conducted and published for World Soundscape Project (WSP), Schafer posed the question: ‘Can the descriptions of sounds ever be adequate to their original stimulations? Probably not, although with a great writer they may serve to *evoke*

*reverberations in the imagination*¹. Schafer also positioned the writer as an *earwitness*². A writer, he suggested was ‘trustworthy only when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known’. The ‘authenticity of the earwitness’ he identified as a ‘special talent of novelists like Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy and Thomas Mann’, who ‘captured the soundscapes of their own places’³. Such descriptions, he suggests, ‘constitute the best guide available in the reconstruction of soundscapes past’. In this context, the writers considered throughout this thesis are positioned as ‘earwitnesses’ to the Harlem Renaissance – able to present convincing sonic fictions of Harlem as a result of their own aural experiences.

In his 1925 work of anthropology, *Black Manhattan*, James Weldon Johnson observed that ‘a visit to Harlem at night...gives the impression that Harlem never sleeps and that the inhabitants thereof jazz through existence’⁴. By the mid nineteen-twenties, Harlem had developed into America’s black ‘capital’. The gradual extension of subway lines and the elevated rail ferried crowds into the neighbourhood from lower and mid-Manhattan, making the expanse of land north of Central Park a lucrative space for business owners, property developers and entertainers. Yet, as Johnson observed, the population of Harlem was wide-ranging in its cultural heritage, drawing migrants from South America, the West Indies, and Europe⁵. The transformed cultural demographic had a significant impact on the developing soundscape of Harlem. In tracing the sonic identity of Harlem, scholars must consider the broader history and development of sound in New York.

As early as 1905, *The New York Times* had identified Manhattan as ‘the noisiest city on earth’⁶. Health Commissioner Darlington warned of the effects of city noise on the mental

¹ R. Murray Schafer, ed. *European Sound Diary* (Vancouver: A.R.C Publications, 1977), p. 81.

² R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), p. 8.

³ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁴ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), p. 160-161.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.153.

⁶ ‘New York the Noisiest City on Earth’, *The New York Times*, July 2nd 1905, p. sm3. [emphasis added]

health of New York residents, stating ‘the tides of sound are slowly eating – washing – every one of us away...we are municipally and nationally bent on making a noise in the world. We all want to be heard, and we regard the person who makes the most noise as the most successful’. Noise abatement had become a fixation for both residents and officials across the city, and a frequent feature of the press. The article declared that if ‘uproar’ was ‘the smoke of noise’, then the twentieth century metropolis could be summarised as ‘a bonfire of sound’ that was ‘rapidly spreading beyond control of any ordinary extinguisher’. It continued to state that ‘as year was added to year, invention to invention, noise to noise, a mighty pandemonium was born’, citing ‘trolley cars...elevated roads, subway trains, harbour sirens...steam whistles, riveting machines...milk wagons banging over the pavements in the small morning hours...phonographs with megaphone attachment’ and peddlers with ‘cowbell distractions’, as instruments of noise in the cacophonous pandemonium of the city.

The article concluded with a prediction on the inevitable increase in noise levels throughout the city; ‘Could we lift the veil and dip twenty years into the future we might contemplate a city of some 8,000,000 inhabitants...one million persons will live north of Harlem...whether – and to what extent – it shall be a *sounding* or *soundless* metropolis will, in this consensus of expert opinion, depend upon what moves are made now and within the next few years’. Over the course of the next two decades the thriving population of Harlem became important participants in ‘sounding’ the metropolis. The development of Harlem’s sonic identity was particularly prevalent in the interwar period when, as Clare Corbould asserts, residents were establishing themselves individually and communally as ‘sonic beings’⁷ amidst the broad soundscape of New York. Corbould suggests that Harlemites defined both themselves and the space they inhabited by an aural sensibility. To hear, rather than to see’,

⁷ Clare Corbould, ‘Streets, Sounds, and Identity in Interwar Harlem’, *Journal of Social History*, 40.4 (2007), p. 863.

Corbould argues, ‘was at once to pose a separate mode of existence, connected to a separate public sphere’⁸, resulting in an aurally-orientated self-definition and alternate sensory tradition(s). Although the sounds of Harlem were unique in their cultural resonance, such attitudes towards noise were not limited solely to African Americans. The amplification of noise was a widespread practice across several borough in the city, including the predominantly white midtown area.

In an anonymous letter published by *The New York Times* in June 1906⁹, one resident wrote of the ‘condition of noise and lawlessness’ that prevailed on the streets of the neighbourhood in the weeks leading to the Fourth of July celebrations, in which young residents of Harlem had developed a proclivity for small pyrotechnics. The correspondent suggested ‘were there no explosives allowed to be sold before the first day of July, that alone would prevent much unnecessary noise and suffering’. In 1908, city Alderman Marx put forward several edicts against noise pollution, proposing an amendment to the city ordinances which sought to silence directly the sources of repeated noise complaints in the neighbourhood. It stated; ‘No person shall beat or play upon any musical instrument unless licensed so to do hereinbefore provided, nor shall any person utter any cry, make any noise, or operate or cause to be operated any musical instrument, graphophone, megaphone, phonograph, bell, gong, horn, calliope, tick-tack device, or other machine or instrument for the production of sound’¹⁰. Additionally, the proposal called for the prohibiting of any noise caused for the purpose of attracting the attention of pedestrians or residents in any street or public place, for advertising shows, performances, or the selling of wares and merchandise. Attempts to abate noise in Harlem was seemingly a process of trial and error, the latter of which occasionally produced comical results.

⁸ Ibid, p. 872.

⁹ Anonymous letter, ‘The Woes of Living in Harlem’, *The New York Times*, June 16th 1906, p. 8.

¹⁰ ‘Anti-Noise Bills to Have a Hearing’, *The New York Times*, October 10th 1908, p. 20.

On July 5th 1912, at a pre-organised firework display at the far east corner of Central Park, Alderman Nathan Lieberman was in the midst of an address to a large crowd of Harlem residents, praising the neighbourhood for a recent succession of quiet, orderly behaviour. During the midst of this speech, from behind the back wall of the platform ‘there rose a burst of flame, a rapid succession of explosion [...] and then a perfect Vesuvius of radiant fireworks, whirring pinwheels, fountain-like Roman candles, and pyrotechnics of every other character imaginable’¹¹, quickly followed by the appearance of two horses, who reportedly ‘plunged into the street, dragging careening after them the truck that was the basis of all this display’. In a panic to avoid the stampeding horses and flaming carriage, several hundred spectators attempted to climb the platform, which subsequently collapsed under the strain, ‘...tumbling to the pavement [the] Aldermen, neighbourhood notables, citizens, and musicians, the latter with their instruments still ringing with the music of “The Star-Spangled Banner”, which they had played throughout all the trouble’. ‘After it was all over’, the report concluded, ‘it was the sentiment of the audience that it was a miracle no one was hurt, and that the display had been great while it lasted’. It was clear in the years that followed that measures to abate noise in Harlem were having little effect. In 1914, a short poem appeared in *The New York Times*¹² in which the author described the persistent sound of gramophone music emanating from a flat on a nightly basis;

*Were noble Shakespeare called from fields Elysian
To share a Harlem flat and earthly joys
Me thinks some lines he wrote would get revision
Inspired by graphophones and kindred noise
...
And when this mighty bard of apt expression,
Heard ragtime records din the sleepy ear
As our next neighbour held his nightly session
Of playing that we needs perforce must hear*

¹¹ ‘All the Fireworks Go Up in One Bang’, *The New York Times*, July 5th 1912, p. 1.

¹² John Laurence McMaster, ‘In Harlem’, *The New York Times*, February 1st 1914, p. SM5.

...
*No more would gloomy Hamlet need to ponder
On themes, to say the least, remote from cheery:
Instead on a lonely parapet he'd wonder:
"To sleep or not to sleep, that is the query"*
...

Scholars may well question to what extent the persistent sounds of 'graphophones and kindred noise' had an impact on the creative and cultural response emerging from the neighbourhood. While the intended sentiment was a light-hearted riff upon Shakespearian verse, the poem provided a timely commentary on the increasing problem of noise within the neighbourhood. It was an accurate reflection of the sentiments found in countless letters from disgruntled residents that appeared in the newspaper on a frequent basis. When Fats Waller later sang of the 'rent party' culture in Harlem, '*...the roof is rockin'/the neighbour's knockin'/we're all bums when the wagon comes/I mean, this joint is jumpin'*'¹³, he sang of a repeated occurrence in Harlem tenements, including rent parties, neighbourly complaints, and subsequent police presence. It was not only sounds from domestic spaces that irritated residents. Sounds emanating from cabarets, the rumble of the subway, rattle of the elevated rail, the cry of street peddlers and the shouts of sidewalk orators each vied to be heard amidst Harlem's unique sonic environment. Even sounds of worship incited criticism. In 1919, a local detective submitted formal complaints against the communicants of a Pentecostal church on 56 East and 131st street, claiming that the congregation 'acted like "holy rollers"', judging from the weird sounds coming from the edifice'¹⁴ and adding that the music rendered by organs, drums, and tambourines 'sounded like a jazz orchestra'. The pastor, a Reverend R.C. Lawson, was summoned to appear in front of a magistrate and charged with 'conducting a public nuisance', on the basis that local residents were being kept awake until the early hours of the morning.

¹³ Fats Waller, 'The Joint is Jumpin' (1941).

¹⁴ 'Complain of Church Noise', *The New York Times*, September 24th 1919, p. 17.

Between 1917 and 1920, Harlem also bore witness to several parades, expressions of both protest and pageantry. On July 28th 1917, 8,000 black protestors marched along Fifth Avenue ‘to the beat of muffled drums’, in protest against acts of discrimination, oppression and segregation that still plagued black Americans, particularly in the Jim Crow South. *The New York Times* reported on the silence of the parade, and the spectators who watched on ‘without a shout or a cheer’¹⁵. Nearly two years later, Harlem voiced their celebration as the 396th infantry made the same march along Fifth Avenue towards Harlem following their return from France. The *Times* reported, ‘When the soldiers finally arrived in their own part of Harlem the multitude went wild with joy. Each person in the throng seemed to be shouting to a particular soldier...until the unison of voices became a mighty roar such as Harlem has never heard’¹⁶. As the campaign for the abatement of noise persisted throughout much of the 1920s and 1930s, the ‘Black Mecca’ was experiencing a modern renaissance concerned with the uplift of African American culture, art, theatre and literature.

In its theoretical scope, the thesis will draw primarily upon the scholarly works of three acoustic historians: Robert Murray Schafer, Emily Thompson, and Sam Halliday. In chronological terms, they chart the progress towards modern scholarship on the subject, Halliday’s contribution being the most recent. More importantly however, they also reflect an important arc in acoustic history, ranging from soundscape(s) to sonic modernity. Initially derived from ‘landscape’, the term ‘soundscape’ was defined by Schafer during the 1970s as a sonic environment consisting of ‘events *heard* not objects *seen*’¹⁷. He begins his study by posing the question: what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change? For Schafer, the answer lies across a broad research area, the ‘home territory’ of soundscape studies occupying the ‘middle ground

¹⁵ ‘Negroes in Protest March in Fifth Av.’, *The New York Times*, July 29th 1917, p. 12.

¹⁶ ‘Fifth Av. Cheers Negro Veterans’, *The New York Times*, February 17th 1919, p. 1.

¹⁷ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), p. 8.

between science, society and the arts'¹⁸. The general acoustic environment of a society, he argues, 'can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society'¹⁹. Schafer outlined three key characteristics of a soundscape: *keynote sounds*, *signals*, and *soundmarks*. As a musical term, a 'keynote sound' is the note that 'identifies the key or tonality of a particular composition'. It is the anchor around which other sounds modulate, and as such 'does not have to be listened to consciously', rather they become 'listening habits'²⁰. In contrast, 'signals' require a conscious ear. Schafer distinguishes such sounds as acoustic warning devices in the form of bells, whistles, horns and sirens, which 'may often be organized into quite elaborate codes permitting messages of considerable complexity to be transmitted to those who can interpret them'²¹. In Harlem signals such as those outlined by Schafer were daily occurrences, referenced frequently throughout several of the texts discussed here.

The signals of Harlem were also adopted and interpreted in a musical format. In 1925, historian and sociologist Joel Rogers contributed an essay to Alain Locke's *New Negro*, entitled "Jazz At Home". He located the roots of jazz in African American musical tradition and spirituals, yet stated that in the move northwards, jazz had become a 'transplanted exotic'²², and an exponent of the 'American environment'. It is important too to recognise the different ways in which individuals react to signals within their sonic environment. Across the first three chapters of this thesis, I consider the literary works of McKay, Larsen, and Fisher, in which sonic signals are key to their characters' navigation of Harlem, and often instigate a form of reactionary flight from that space. A whistle, for instance, appears to be universally recognised in Harlem as the sound of police presence, often heard moments before the scene of a raid on

¹⁸ Ibid, p.3 - 4.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

²¹ Ibid, p.10

²² J. A. Rogers, 'Jazz At Home', in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 216.

a nightclub or cabaret. Signals are also representative of different dangers for both the male and female protagonists of these texts. For Larsen, noises heard on the street often represent danger for her female characters, prompting them to retreat back into the perceived safety of familiar, domestic spaces. The last of Schafer's elements is the term 'soundmark', which he defines as 'a community sound which is unique or possess qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community'²³. Along with signals, soundmarks are the most common feature of Harlem's soundscape. They are also the sounds that set Harlem's soundscape apart from the rest of New York, and (to return to Corbould) enabled Harlem residents to establish a unique sonic identity. A fourth and final element found of Schafer's analysis is defined as 'archetypal sounds', sounds which do not form part of the immediate soundscape, but inherited ancestral sounds 'often pertaining felicitous symbolism' that echo from past sonic environments into the present. In each of the narratives in question here, the archetypal sounds of slavery, folklore, and the Jim Crow South resonate. In the case of Hurston's folk operas, explored in the fifth chapter of this thesis, the sounds of the labouring South are actively transported to the metropolitan stage, invoking a resonant sonic memory. Crucially, Schafer presents the study of soundscape(s) as a method of thinking about sound across interdisciplinary forms of research, focusing on the relationship between the sonic environment and the listener.

Building upon Schafer's theory, Emily Thompson argues that new acoustic technologies were crucial in shaping the modern soundscape, and that any comprehensive understanding of modernism must incorporate sound. Scholars who 'assume that consideration of the visual and textual is sufficient for understanding modernity', she regards as drastically 'shortsighted'²⁴. To fully understand the sonic resonance of the Harlem Renaissance, she

²³ Schafer, p. 10.

²⁴ Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900 – 1933* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), p. 10.

suggests that scholars must look to a broader recognition of sound as it appeared in American and European forms of modernism, referring to Douglas Kahn's conclusion that historically, modernism '...has been read and looked at in detail but rarely *heard*'²⁵, despite the fact that the 'modern' experience of spatial displacement shaped new sonic environments, acoustic technologies, and transformed methods of *listening*. This, he argues, has largely been the result of sound being simply '...to brief and ephemeral to attract much attention'. For Thompson, 'soundscape' refers to an auditory landscape that is simultaneously a 'physical environment and a way of *perceiving* that environment'²⁶. She continues to suggest that it 'ultimately has more to do with civilisation than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change'. Her extensive study into the soundscape of modernity explores in detail the extent to which acoustic technologies influenced and changed the soundscape(s) of the early twentieth century and shaped a new culture of listening.

In turning to the concept of 'reverberation', this thesis finds itself closely aligned with Thompson's acoustical history. Her exploration into the New York soundscape identified the shifting acoustical environment as a fundamental part of the metropolis, and therefore crucial to any scholarly analysis of modernity. For Thompson, the 'business of sound control' was not simply a 'tale of technological triumph over noise'²⁷. By the late 1930s, the modern soundscape was characterized by a 'lack of reverberation', caused by the introduction of absorptive materials that created clear and direct sound with no subsequent echo. 'In a culture preoccupied with noise and efficiency', she writes, 'reverberation became just another form of noise, an unnecessary sound that it was inefficient and best eliminated'. Crucially, she outlines the negative implications in the propensity to define reverberation as excessive noise;

²⁵ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in Arts* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 4.

²⁶ Thompson, p. 1-2. [emphasis added]

²⁷ Thompson, p.171.

When reverberation was reconceived as noise, it lost its traditional meaning as the acoustic signature of a space, and the age-old connection between sound and space – a connection as old as architecture itself – was severed. Reverberation connected sound and space through the element of time, and its loss was just one element in a larger cultural matrix of modernity dedicated to the destruction of traditional space-time relationships²⁸

Where ‘reverberation’ had lost its meaning as the sonic signature of a space, it took on a new context as an aesthetic form. As this thesis explores at length, literary representations of Harlem’s soundscape offer a medium within the ‘larger cultural matrix of modernity’ where the sounds of the neighbourhood were not only resonant, but reinforced the acoustic signature(s) of the space.

By 1927, when Wallace Thurman declared that Harlem’s rhythms were the ‘...lackadaisical rhythms of a transplanted minority group caught up and rendered half mad by the more speedy rhythms of the subway, Fifth Avenue and the Great White Way’²⁹, he was making a direct comment on the relatively unsettled environment of the borough. ‘Transplanted’ minorities were key to shaping Harlem’s soundscape. The authors discussed throughout this thesis are key examples of figures who were both contributing to the Harlem Renaissance whilst being rooted within the neighbourhood, and those who contributed through more transient means, bringing influences to the movement from further field. As Thompson acknowledges, ‘the technological changes driving that crescendo were as disconcerting as was the new racial geography’³⁰ of the neighbourhood. African Americans, she recognises, ‘would have experienced an aural transformation far more dramatic than that experienced by virtually any other group of Americans at this time’.

²⁸ Ibid, p.172.

²⁹ Wallace Thurman, *Negro Life in New York’s Harlem: A Lively Picture of a Popular and Interesting Section* (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1927), p. 6.

³⁰ Thompson, p. 132.

Thompson posits that the ‘modern’ soundscape transformed the manner in which the listener interpreted and evaluated sonic signals. In the process, ‘the desire for clear, controlled, signal-like sound became pervasive’, and anything that interfered with this goal was swiftly ‘engineered out of existence’³¹. Despite early efforts, there is certainly evidence to suggest that the campaign for noise abatement and the technological control of the soundscape continued to increase across each of Manhattan’s boroughs. This was particularly prevalent between 1920 and 1930, when, as Thompson puts it ‘the Machine Age was simultaneously the Jazz Age’. ‘The city itself was an engine of changes both social and technological’, she observes, ‘and the agents within it, from jazz musicians to internal combustion engines, were what made the decade roar’³². The ‘roar’ of New York was precisely the problem that the city’s officials sought to tackle. In 1929 a new Noise Abatement Commission was established and led by Health Commissioner Shirley W. Wynne, whose mission was to save New York from its own ‘raucous din’³³. Between 1929 and 1931, the Noise Abatement Commission made concerted attempts to implement a “second wave” of legislative and social measures to prevent noise across the city. The committee published a comprehensive report in 1930 with the aim of ‘finding ways and means of eliminating unnecessary noise and of determining the effect of noise in general on the inhabitants of a metropolitan centre’³⁴. Between December 1929 and January 1930, Wynne commissioned several public radio broadcasts that discussed the progress of the Commission, informing New Yorkers on the ways in which noise could be measured, the legislative steps that were being taken to prevent it, and the ways in which they themselves could prevent and report noise.

³¹ Ibid, p. 3.

³² Thompson, p. 132.

³³ ‘Saving New York From Its Own Raucous Din’, *The New York Times*, August 3rd 1930, p. 113.

³⁴ ‘Noise Abatement Commission, *City Noise: The Report of the Commission appointed by Dr. Shirley W. Wynne, Commissioner of Health, to Study Noise in New York City and to Develop Means of Abating It* (1930), Brown, Edward F., E.B. Dennis Jr., Jean Henry and Edward Pendray, eds. Department of Health, City of New York [IRH 81-1092], Milstein Division of U.S., Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library.

The second of these broadcasts asked ‘Is There a Quiet Spot in New York?’³⁵, declaring that the city was situated in an ‘invisible jungle’ of sound. The engineer who penned the essay cited a trip to the theatre as an example of the external sounds of the city seeping into internal spaces. ‘When you go to the theatre here in New York, you hear only about 65% of the spoken words...our theatres are set down in the very heart of the noise jungle and street noises – like great tropic vines – find their way into the auditorium...’³⁶. Notably, his language indicated a racialization of noise – reinforcing the idea that noise originated in minority communities and seeped into other (white) areas of the city. The problem of street noise seeping into domestic space was a prominent theme, to which the engineer suggested two possible solutions. The first was the somewhat eccentric suggestion that in order to achieve ‘sound-proof construction the city should simply ‘do away with windows’. Failing this, the second suggestion was the implementation of a ‘window ventilator and sound muffler’ capable of blocking sound when a window was opened, ‘so as to shut out noises from the street – from our neighbour’s radio...as well as to confine the noises produced in our own rooms – such as piano playing and [the] radio loudspeaker’. Presumably, the irony was not lost upon the Commission, that their message was transmitted through the very same device they sought to restrict. The broadcasts illustrated city officials’ effort to silence the sounds that Schafer and Thompson have since identified as important signals of the New York soundscape. The sounds of the “L” train, street cars, boat whistles and ‘racing fire apparatus’ were listed as general noise nuisances across all five boroughs within the city, but these were also sounds that communicated messages and alerted New Yorkers across the city of potential dangers. Both a familiar and functional motif of the modern, urban soundscape, ‘gong clangs’, ‘siren howls’ and rumbling wheels resonated through William Carlos Williams’s ‘The Great Figure’ in 1921,

³⁵ ‘Is There a Quiet Spot in New York?’, Radio talks given by the Noise Abatement Commission, Dec. 17th 1929 – January 28th 1930, [*ZT-1052] Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL), New York public Library.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

[REDACTED]

Fig. 1. Charles Demuth, 'I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold' (1928)

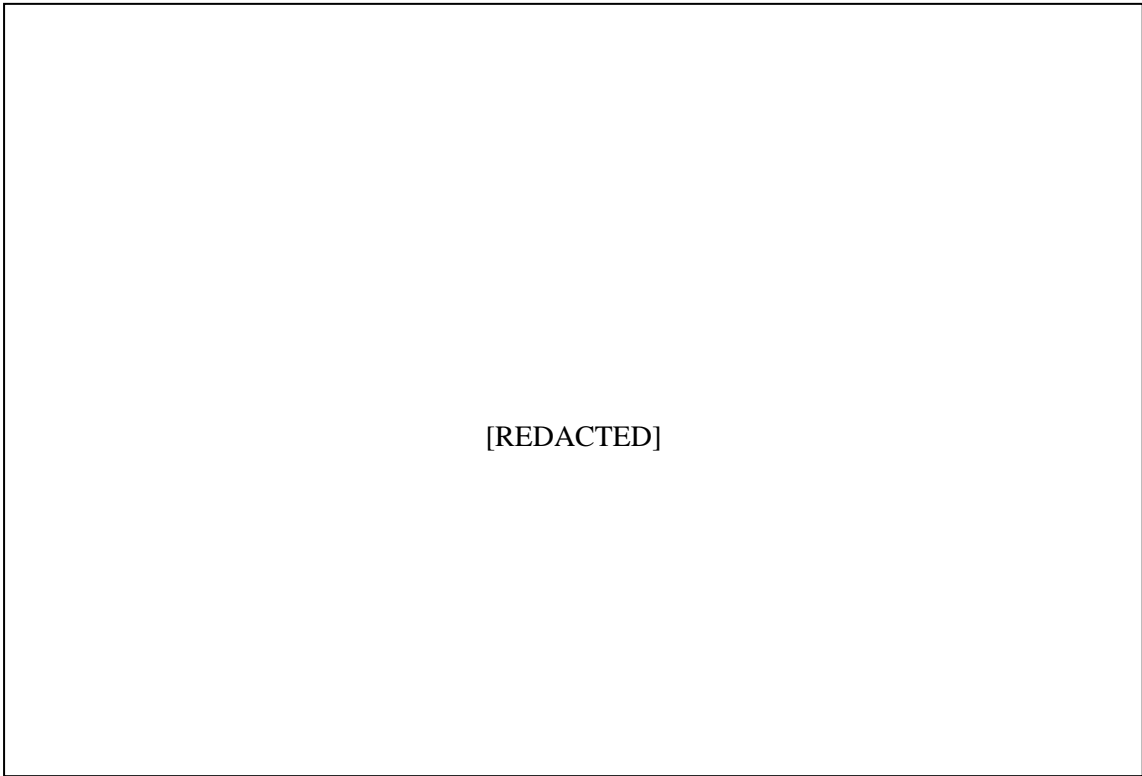


Fig. 2. Members of the Noise Abatement Commission operate noise measuring apparatus (December 1929)

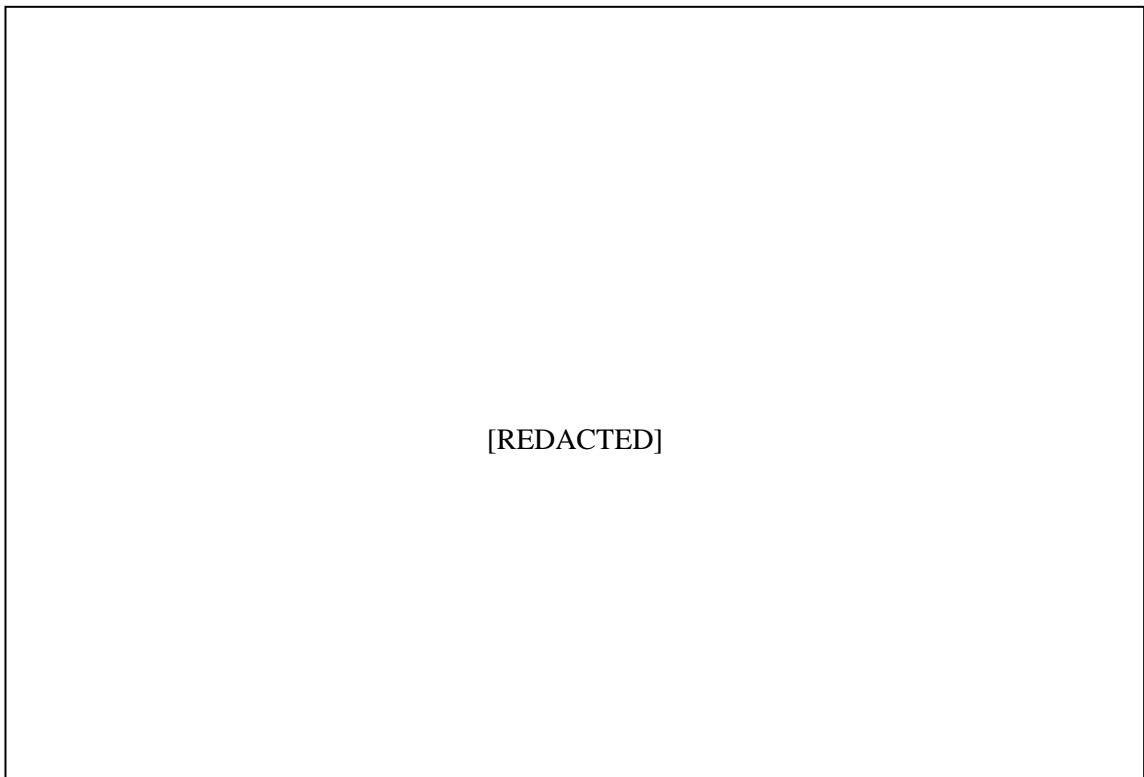


Fig. 3. Experts from the Noise Abatement Commission measure the noise level in Times Square (December 1929)

and were subsequently echoed in visual form in 1928, in Charles Demuth's interpretation of a fire truck racing through the streets of New York³⁷.

By January 1930, legislative measures had been implemented in order to prevent the disturbance of such signals. Section 229 of the new Sanitary Code declared that 'no person operating the management or control of any automobile or vehicle...shall use a horn or other device for *signalling* except in a reasonable manner as a danger warning'³⁸. In addition, these signals were not to be sounded in a manner that was 'unnecessarily loud or harsh' or for any 'unreasonable period of time'³⁹. In the words of Commissioner Wynne, the city had been turned into a 'gigantic experiment' in order to be rid of the relentless 'tintinnabulation of civilisation'⁴⁰. As part of the Commission's campaign, a noise measuring truck was sent out as the first 'roving noise laboratory' of its kind.

The vehicle, overseen by physicist Dr. Harvey Fletcher, was reported to have driven over 500 miles around New York, making over 7,000 observations at approximately 113 localities in the city. Following the experiment, the *New York Times* reported the findings, identifying 'blasting and riveting' as the loudest sounds heard throughout the city, measuring at around 100 decibels. Steamship whistles were identified as the second most audible sound, closely followed by subway trains, both of which measured in the region of 95 decibels. Automobiles and standard street traffic were measured at an average of 60 decibels, increasing during peak hours of commuting on main thoroughfares. As a result, the study identified the noise levels of an average conversation – measured at a distance of three feet – were also rendered at 60 decibels, forced into direct competition with the surrounding traffic noise. Key

³⁷ Charles Demuth, 'I Saw The Figure 5 in Gold' (1928), Alfred Stieglitz Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

³⁸ 'What Can I Do About Noise?', Radio talks given by the Noise Abatement Commission, Dec. 17th 1929 – January 28th 1930, SIBL, New York Public Library.

³⁹ The silencing of automobiles was particularly contentious. Manufacturers regarded noise as a marketable commodity integral to their brand: the louder the engine, the more powerful the vehicle.

⁴⁰ 'Why a Noise Abatement Commission?', Radio talks given by the Noise Abatement Commission, Dec. 17th 1929 – January 28th 1930, SIBL, New York Public Library.

findings by the Commission highlighted the extent to which certain city noises were cancelling out other forms of sound, stating that ‘...under normal conditions a sound must have a loudness of 50 to 55 decibels to be heard, and in maximum traffic this must be increased to 75 decibels’. Dr. Fletcher concluded: ‘It follows that if we are to decrease the noisiness of police whistles and other necessary sounds we must first reduce the level of the ocean of sound which threatens to drown them out even at their present high intensities’. In addition to the roving vehicle, the Commission circulated a questionnaire to members of the public, asking them to record the location and time in which they heard specific sources of noise.

The list included loudspeakers in the home and outside of stores, automobile horns and noisy brakes, elevated and subway trains, turnstiles, and traffic whistles, amongst others. The survey ended with the question: ‘What ONE noise is MOST annoying?’⁴¹. Overall, the commission found that traffic noise (consisting of trucks, automobile horns, cut-outs, brakes, buses, traffic whistles and motorcycles) were the sounds of greatest annoyance to New Yorkers, making up approximately 36% of the soundscape. Transportation (the elevated rail, subway trains and street cars) averaged at 16%, while radio noise from homes, streets and storefronts closely followed by 12%. Signalling sounds (the whistles and bells of fire trucks and locomotives, tugboats), which had been such a prominent prior focus of the commission, ranked at a relatively low rate of 8% by comparison. It is important to note, that there was some inconsistency to be found in the Commission’s classification of noise and signals, where certain sources of noise categorised as ‘traffic’ noises – traffic whistles and automobile horns for instance – could equally have been audibly perceived as warning or communicative signals under ‘whistles and bells’. The Commission’s survey of nuisance noises unique to the city can be applied to three of the Harlem-based narratives discussed throughout this thesis. A

⁴¹ Noise Abatement Questionnaire, *City Noise* (1930), Milstein Division of U.S., Local History and Genealogy, New York Public Library.

comparison of McKay's *Home to Harlem* alongside the survey's noise categories reveals a total of ten instances in the text where 'noisy parties' are heard, and at least two occasions where loudspeakers are present in the home. In addition, the novel includes three references to the sounds of the subway, two references to locomotive whistles and bells, and at least one reference to both the elevated rail and rattle of the milk cart. Similarly, Rudolph Fisher's 'City of Refuge' makes reference to loudspeakers in the home, automobile horns, truck motors, noisy mechanisms and brakes, subway trains, turnstiles, the elevated train, streetcars, porter cries, and traffic whistles. His novel, *The Walls of Jericho*, is noticeably quieter, containing only four references to noisy parties, three references to truck motors, as well as a series of automobile cut-outs, horns, and the sirens and bells of a fire truck.

Thompson observes that while most boroughs actively sought to eliminate noise, others were 'constructively stimulated by the sounds of the modern city'⁴². This was also the case for artistic responses to the soundscape. In 1932, illustrator Elmer Simms Campbell produced a map of Harlem's nightclub scene. The visual rendering was a playful detailing of the space surrounding Seventh and Lenox Avenues, but it also captured the collision of music and noise on Harlem's streets. The stars on the map indicated establishments that were open all night. Campbell noted that he had purposefully omitted the location of various speakeasies (secrecy being necessary to their operation) adding '...but since there are about 500 of them you won't have much trouble'. The illustration reverberates with sound. The words "HO-DE-HI-DE-HO" emerge from the Cotton Club, the letters misshapen to reflect the distinguishable vocal trills of Cab Calloway's hit "Minnie the Moocher". The eye is drawn to a figure at a piano, accompanied by the claim 'You've never *heard* a piano really played until you've heard Garland Wilson'. Outside the Lafayette Theatre, the automobiles of patrons collide with taxis and police, whilst inside the Log Cabin one woman demands to hear "BLUESSS!" and outside

⁴² Thompson, p. 130.

another yells, “TAXI!”. ‘Snakehips’ Earl Tucker “claps”, while ‘Bojangles’ Robinson “taps”, and in the midst of the pandemonium Gladys Bentley ‘tickles the ivories’, resplendent in her tuxedo and high hat. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes remarked that Bentley, was ‘something worth discovering’ as she sat and ‘played a big piano all night long, literally all night, without stopping – singing songs like “St. James Infirmary”, from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous under beat of a jungle rhythm’⁴³. According to Keren Omry, Small’s Paradise employed waiters who roller-skated between tables, and was considered one of the ‘hottest nightclubs in New York’⁴⁴. At the edge of Campbell’s map, peddlers hawk hot peanuts and the crab man loudly promotes his wares, and at almost every intersection gamblers repeatedly exclaim to one another, “What’s de numbah?!”, in reference to Harlem’s popular game of chance. He makes an important observation on the social nature of Harlem’s nightlife: that the street culture was just as important to the nightclub scene as the institutions themselves. The omission of structural forms; walls, doors, roofs, make for an open, communal scene. There is a clear distortion of the spatial geography of the neighbourhood, condensing the space ranging from 110th and 135th St. between Lenox and Seventh Avenues (the area discussed further in this thesis as the “H” of Harlem). As a result, the sonic environment is amplified even further resulting in a collision of both musical and environmental sounds. The illustration also includes visual representations of several “nuisance” sounds listed by the Noise Abatement Commission survey: most notably that of noisy parties, automobiles, traffic whistles and peddlers.

The map also confirmed the significance of Harlem’s nightlife as a profitable local economy. In his autobiography, McKay recalled that in the early 1920s ‘the hub of Harlem was

⁴³ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) p. 226.

⁴⁴ Keren Omry, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 74.

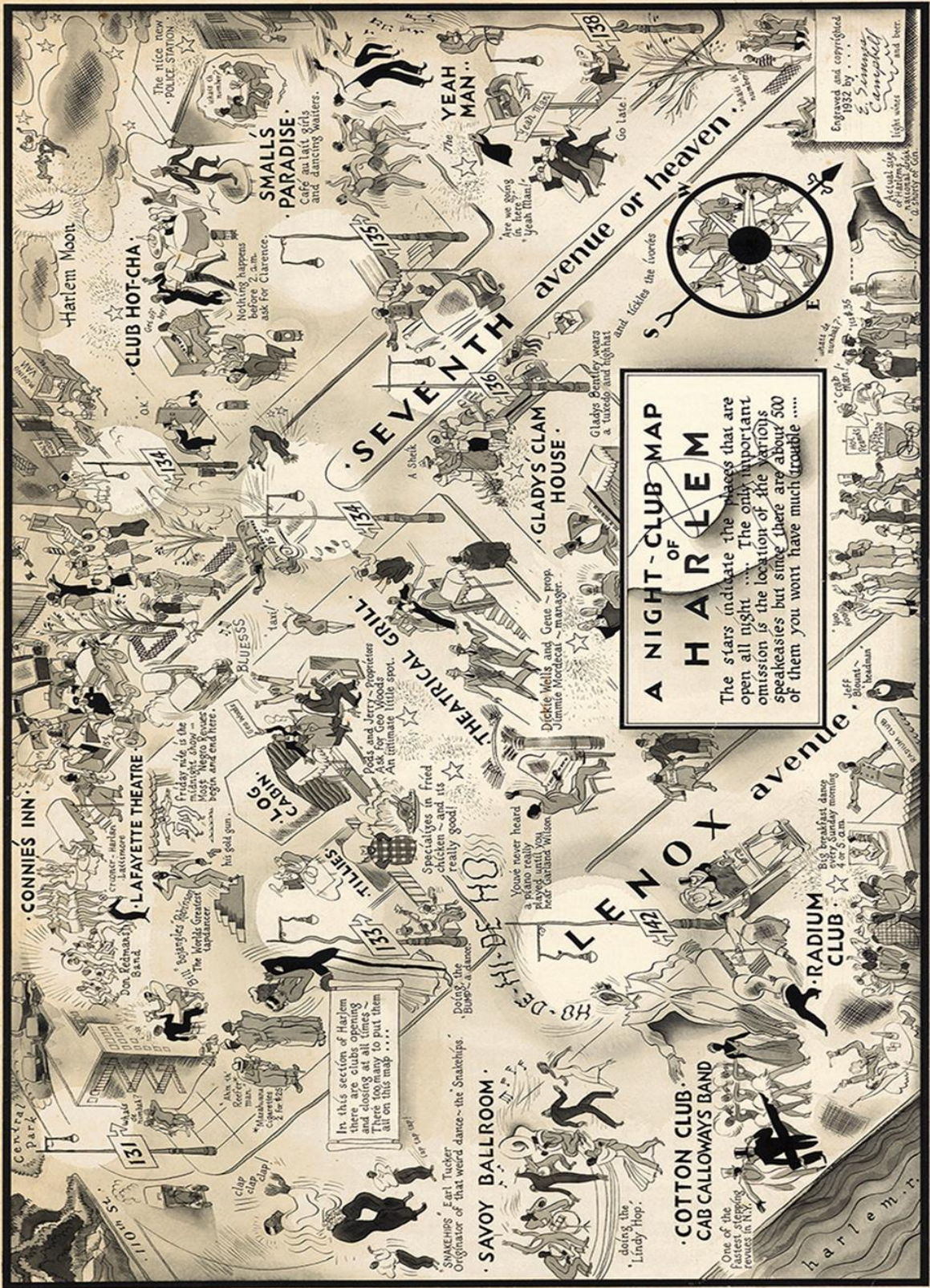


Fig. 4. E. Simms Campbell, *A Nightclub Map of Harlem* (1932), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

One Hundred Thirty-Fifth Street between Fifth Avenue and Seventh. Between Seventh Avenue and Eighth the population was still white⁴⁵. Nightclubs were a significant source of income for proprietors, both black and white, but also offered a vast economic investment in Harlem. In 1927, the *New York Times* ran an article discussing nightclub restrictions and reviews to curfew enforcement⁴⁶. The article noted that twenty-two nightclubs alone represented an investment of approximately \$5,000,000; employing 12,000 waiters, 19,000 musicians and 11,000 entertainers. Campbell's illustration also included the murkier side of Harlem's night-time economy. Examples of crime and corruption include the "reefer" man flogging marijuana ("2 for \$.25"), policemen shunning their duties for a round of the numbers game, a "hit and run" by a taxicab, and street corner prostitution. Their inclusion in Campbell's illustration reinforces the anarchic "primitiveness" of Harlem that the white patrons (a generous number of which are illustrated on the map) sought to participate in.

What Campbell's illustration visually exposes is the 'crescendo' of Harlem identified by Thompson. The third theoretical strand of this thesis considers how Harlem Renaissance authors represented this crescendo in textual form, and how sound was illustrated in the African American novel. Nick Yablon suggests that authors of the modernist soundscape frequently found themselves *sounding space*⁴⁷, mapping their sonic environment via the page and testing the aesthetic depth of the sonic environment. In the advent of new sonic technology, the various efforts to space sound were 'chronically disrupted by the echo, or sonic intrusion, of *other spaces*'. For Yablon, the disarray of sounds that contributed to the modern soundscape 'prompted the various attempts by both novelists and reformers to listen to the city – to sound its spaces – while also listening phenomenologically, that is, reflecting critically upon the very nature of their auditory experiences under conditions of urban modernism'. The unfamiliar

⁴⁵ McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1970), p. 49.

⁴⁶ 'Night Clubs' Curfew Enters Another Cycle', *The New York Times*, January 2nd 1927, p. xx6.

⁴⁷ Nick Yablon, 'Echoes of the City: Spacing Sound, Sounding Space, 1888-1916', *American Literary History*, 19.3 (2007), p. 652.

elements of the sonic environment prompted an aesthetic echo by writers, in an attempt to navigate the new technologies and acoustics of the modern soundscape. The concept of listening to and mapping a sonic space onto the page is theoretically framed through the concept of ‘sonic modernity’. Initially explored in relation to modernism by Juan Suarez, he reconsiders “noise” as ‘another name for the otherness that modernism, as an art of practice, discovered in the heart of the quotidian’⁴⁸. Modern textuality, Suarez argues, ‘got louder the more directly modernism tackled the everyday’⁴⁹. Literature, in other words, was not only responding to the sonic environment but also found itself in direct competition with it.

This extended not just to the novel, but to print culture as a broader medium. A close parallel can be drawn between the sonic print culture in Harlem, and that of other minority groups. Mary Chapman defines the relationship between social minority groups and printed material as ‘textual ventriloquism’, specifically in the case of US journal *American Suffragette*, which provided a collective voice for an interpellating community of like-minded women. In print, Chapman argues, the suffragist voice could be published under a pseudonym or anonymously, taking advantage of the performative opportunities of text. As discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, the silent elements of ‘textual ventriloquism’ also had ramifications on the representation of the female voice and detachment from the female body. “Silence” can be considered as something both empowering and enforceable. In the context of suffragist campaigns, Chapman argues for the former. The suffragist speaker could “shout”, “holler” and “declare”, remaining ‘rhetorically persuasive while her literal body remained invisible, acoustically silent, and therefore womanly and unassailable’⁵⁰. Suffragettes were described as ‘booming their own show’, drawing attention to the ‘homology between their

⁴⁸ Juan A. Suarez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Mary Chapman, *Making Noise, Making News: Suffrage Print Culture and US Modernism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford Scholarship Press Online, 2014), p. 3.

“booming” voices and the “booming” typefaces of the printed material the displayed’⁵¹. Chapman also identifies publications such as *BLAST*, a modernist magazine founded by Wyndham Lewis and aided by Ezra Pound, published in 1914. The magazine was confrontational in its affect, embracing a new aesthetic known as ‘vorticism’ that adopted a boldface type and bolder manifesto⁵². The political climate and social landscape that produced suffragist magazines and modernist publication such as *BLAST* was not dissimilar to that which Harlem Renaissance leaders sought to confront. In 1926 by an editorial group of Harlem’s young writers, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, John P. Davis and Aaron Douglas published *FIRE!!*, a literary journal. The cover, designed by Aaron Douglas, was of a similar style to the vorticist and cubist impressions of Lewis’s *BLAST*, in its bold simplicity. In the magazine’s foreword, *FIRE* was described as ‘a cry of conquest in the night, warning those who sleep and revitalizing those who linger in the quiet places dozing’⁵³.

The manifesto was primarily a creative, rather than political one. Only one issue was ever published, due to poor sales and a subsequent lack of funding⁵⁴. Nevertheless, the publication was an important platform for a select group of Harlem’s writers, as a collective “shout” or “holler” in textual form. Douglas subsequently illustrated covers *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazine(s), as well as covers for a number of Harlem Renaissance authors including McKay, Fisher, and Hughes, which echoed the style adopted for *FIRE!!* magazine. Notably, his design for McKay’s *Home to Harlem* included the bold typeface and ‘textual ventriloquism’ that Chapman refers to, and visible reference to music, with piano keys and musical notation behind the silhouette in the centre of the cover. The word “CABARET” is

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 17.

⁵² Ibid, p. 23.

⁵³ ‘Foreword’, *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1926), p. 7.

⁵⁴ The future of the publication also met a somewhat ironic fate, when the office building where copies of the magazine were being stored was destroyed by a fire, forcing the editorial group to end its’ operation.

partially visible, in reference to the novel's vibrant depiction of Harlem's nightclub scene. Of the novels examined here, *Home to Harlem* is perhaps the closest textual representation to Campbell's map.

To adopt Chapman's definition, the print culture of Harlem was representative of a 'booming' collective voice and sonic culture. Halliday argues that sonic textuality is unique to modernist texts. In his recently published exploration on the topic, he builds upon both Schafer and Thompson's conceptualization of soundscapes, considering what is 'modern' about sound, and the significance of sound in modernism. Beginning with the broad question: what has literature got to do with sound...?⁵⁵ he affirms the concept of sound as entangled in the same 'trans-sensory matrix of concerns'⁵⁶ as literature and the visual arts. He states that sound in modernism is 'irreducible' to sound alone, and instead 'is best conceived as a configuration, with 'real' sound at its centre...but other sense phenomena, such as touch and vision, rarely at more than one or two removes from its periphery'. From a broader perspective, Halliday asks: 'what has literature got to do with sound itself, given that in most contexts, at least in western culture...it is generally read in silence, on the page?'⁵⁷. In this context, literary works were contributing to the 'noise and racket of the times' that McKay identified, as much as they were responding to them. "Loud" textual material was increasingly shaping the new modernist landscape, and rhetoric of mass print culture, proving a particularly useful resource for those within the social or political margins – the periphery.

Crucially, Halliday concedes that no text can achieve an 'absolute identity'⁵⁸ with the sounds it seeks to capture or represent. Neither does this thesis intend to make the case for substitution of sound, in its examination of the sonic literature(s) of Harlem. Engagement with

⁵⁵ Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2011), p. 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 12.

sound through a soundless medium merely serves to reinforce the complex gap between hearing and reading sonic cultures. The novel is no substitute for sound, but rather an alternate medium through which it is perceived and reproduced. There is a detachment from the original sound source that inevitably changes the way the reader *perceives* sound on the page. Alexander G. Weheliye considers a specific ‘sonic *afro-modernity*’, in which he recognises the invention of new sound technologies of the early twentieth century, notably the phonograph and the subsequent mass distribution of music. As discussed in Chapter Three, the phonograph separated sound from its original source, and although it greatly increased access to popular jazz and blues recordings, it was often criticised for diminishing the authenticity found in the live performance of such songs. Weheliye claims that the phonograph created ‘a glaring rupture’⁵⁹ between sound and vision. In this detachment African-American authors sought to bridge the gap, arguing that the conjoining of writing and sound has significant ramifications for black cultural production, noting in particular the importance of orality as the ‘major mode of cultural transmission in this temporal setting’⁶⁰, and the African-American tradition of transposing and ‘sounding’ oral traditions and histories of black American culture onto the page. Similarly, Halliday echoes Thompson’s recognition of sound technologies and acoustic changes of the early twentieth century, and the subsequent shaping of the new modern soundscape. Literature is situated within the peripheral representations of the sonic environment, primarily because it challenges the traditional process of listening. It also occupies a marginal space in which the echoes of an original sound source may be reinterpreted and reimagined. For Halliday, literature;

...is especially well suited for revealing sound’s ‘configured’ quality, which is, again, sound’s imbrication in the non- or trans-acoustic. Correlatively, literature is especially well suited for revealing such para-sonic factors as sound’s social connotations, its

⁵⁹ Alexander G. Weheliye, ‘I am I Be; The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity’, *boundary 2*, 30.2 (2003), p. 100.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 102.

relationships with other senses, and...the qualitative dimension that means certain sounds are actually of interest to people, things they actively seek out or shun⁶¹

That Halliday acknowledges sonic literature(s) as texts that reveal ‘para-sonic factors’ and ‘social connotations’ is crucial to the ensuing discussion in this thesis, which ultimately considers the social connotations and resonant qualities of sound in Harlem as much as it does the sonic aesthetic of Harlem Renaissance literature. For writers, he suggests that sound is ‘subject to specific modes of production and dissemination that inform sound’s experience and understanding, in ways that feed back upon sound’s production and dissemination in turn. Both sound and hearing are historical’.

The textual rendering of sound was not limited to Harlem, or even solely to American modernist writers. As Halliday recognises, Virginia Woolf adopted elements of the soundscape throughout much of her prose, notably *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *Between the Acts* (1941). Similarly, James Joyce adopted a literary representation of music throughout his poetry, exploring the philosophical and cosmological dimensions of the audible and inaudible, drawing the conclusion that in conceptual terms, music need not be audible in order to be affective⁶². On Woolf’s use of sound, Halliday asserts that she constructed ‘...a ‘total’ or inclusive ‘sound-world’ where the sonic and the non-sonic, and the musical and the non-musical, occupy a common space’. He suggests that this space ‘is as much social as it is geophysical, as much conceptual as it is sensory, and as much imaginary, or subjective, as it is ‘real’’⁶³. Halliday makes the case for ‘sonic modernity’, which he defines as an artistic faculty that recognises the new technologies of the modern period, as modes of both reinforcing the distinction between the senses, whilst allowing for the artistic removal of such boundaries; the sensory ‘meeting-

⁶¹ Halliday, p. 12.

⁶² Ibid, p. 11.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 12.

points'⁶⁴ at which the juxtaposition between the audible and inaudible may be interpreted on an aesthetic level.

Halliday also recognizes the important connection between musicology and the modern soundscape. Specifically, he makes reference to Joyce, whose career he suggests maybe 'recognized as a sign of music's complex entanglement with literature'⁶⁵, and whose 'entire *oeuvre*' is marked by a 'sustained engagement' with nineteenth-century composer, Richard Wagner. It is to Wagner that this thesis turns as a point at which to begin discussion. Halliday points to Wagner's essay on Beethoven (1870), in which he identifies the existence of a 'world of sound' as well as a 'world of light', the former being 'revealed by sound and perceptible only through hearing'⁶⁶. Wagner claims that in sensory terms, the ability to produce sound enables an immediate manifestation of expression. But this also the case for establishing a sonic identities as the ones discussed here. Halliday questions:

...what if we were to extrapolate from Wagner's account, and say that such a world contained *all* sounds...including those of, say, nature or a city?' [...] 'what if this world could be shown to be decisively inflected by the appearance of new technologies...he emergence of new topographies and habitations...and the accumulated insights and deliberations of writers, artists, and other intellectuals for whom the senses were both incessantly receptive of new subject matter...?'⁶⁷

The inflection of the 'sound world' Wagner identifies is precisely the point at which new sonic identities emerge, the sonic environment having a direct impact on consciousness and subsequent modes of expression. Halliday also identifies the term 'soundscape' as it is defined by Schafer and Thompson, as 'para-Wagnerian', aimed at 'apprehending all sounds occurring in a given time and place as a totality'. He draws upon Wagner's definition of multi-sensory

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Richard Wagner, 'Beethoven', in *Richard Wagner's Beethoven (1870): A New Translation*, Allen, R. (Suffolk and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), p. 53

⁶⁷ Halliday, p. 5.

artistic mediums and his claim that ‘...the boundaries of the separate senses are also their joint meeting points’⁶⁸, by affirming that the ‘total’ work of art is ‘that which maximally stimulates each of the senses’⁶⁹. The discussion that follows in Chapter Two begins with Jamaican author Claude McKay’s return to New York, and approaches his debut novel, *Home to Harlem* as a para-Wagnerian text that represents the immersive ‘totality’ of Harlem’s soundscape, during the 1920s. In order to fully appreciate McKay’s contribution to the Harlem Renaissance, scholars must also recognise his frequent absence from it, maintaining a transnational approach to the movement. He completed *Home to Harlem* whilst in Antibes during the summer of 1927, and promptly fled to Marseilles, where he would soon develop inspiration for his second novel, *Banjo*. A review featured in *The Times* shortly after the publication of the novel claimed that it contained ‘the charm of the negro character’, an ‘un-worldliness, vitality, directness, and divine spontaneity’⁷⁰.

Halliday’s reference to Wagner and the conceptualisation of a ‘total’ sound world signals one of the key methodological considerations that underpin this thesis. Wagner is present in the theoretical works of Schafer, Thompson and Halliday, precisely because of his musical renderings and recreation of soundscape(s) within his operas, offering an example of the musicological interpretation of the sonic environment of the time. Although this thesis adopts a broadly historicist methodological approach in the examination of the social and political impact of noise and noise abatement in the early twentieth century, the field of sound studies also requires a consideration of musicological aspects of a soundscape. As defined in the conceptualisation of ‘Harlem reverberations’, in considering both the historicist and musicological aspects of Harlem and the novels examined in the ensuing chapters, this thesis recognises that there are metaphorical and qualitative factors in the study of sound. From a

⁶⁸ Halliday, p. 10.

⁶⁹ Halliday, p. 10.

⁷⁰ ‘Harper and Brothers’ (review), *The Times*, August 24th 1928, p. 14.

historicist perspective, the impact of sound can often be measured by its audible and social impact. A musicological perspective requires an understanding of the interpretation and recreation of sounds, through a different form. Both opera and jazz are musical forms that draw upon the sonic environment, and they are therefore explored in a formal and aesthetic context throughout this thesis.

From a sonic perspective, Harlem represents a place in which both the historical and musicological aspects meet. This thesis begins then at the musicological interpretation of the New York landscape (Chapter Two), exploring the ways in which both historicist and musicological references to sound shaped and influenced Harlem Renaissance literature. The musicological interpretation of the soundscape is revisited in Chapter Five, through the folk opera performances produced and performed by Zora Neale Hurston. Chapter Five also considers the formal influence of song – the railroad ‘lining tracks’ of Polk County – on the novel. Throughout, the thesis considers the musicological connection between Harlem’s soundscape and the jazz music composed and performed by jazz musicians. I consider both Fats Waller and Duke Ellington as examples of musicians who recreated the domestic sounds of Harlem – namely those emanating from tenement and apartment buildings.

Chapter Two explores the musicality of McKay’s writing, and the ways in which both his and his characters’ return to Harlem is mapped through a musical ecology. Continuing on from Halliday’s examination of para-Wagnerian interpretations of soundscape(s), the discussion begins with an analysis of a reference to Wagner made by the author himself, upon his own return to New York. Observing the skyline of Lower Manhattan from the approach along the Hudson River, he imagined the scene accompanied by a Wagnerian score (albeit, unspecified). In contextual terms there are vast disparities between each of their individual experiences. If, as Wagner identified, the ‘sound world’ represents the point at which new sonic identities and forms of expression emerge, then *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* are novels that

inhabit this space. In the second chapter, this is further discussed as a ‘collision’ of realms, which stands as a metaphor for the meeting point of a ‘New’ and ‘Old’ world aesthetic at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as the meeting of ‘audible’ culture(s) through an ‘inaudible’ medium. I also consider where Wagner has appeared in relation to an African American text in the past, specifically in W.E.B. Du Bois’s landmark sociological text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). McKay’s reference also affirms the dialogical nature of European and African American aesthetics, emphasising the extent to which the Harlem Renaissance drew upon a myriad of multicultural influences in its initial emergence. His reference to Wagner signals a resonance between the Old (European) and New (American) worlds⁷¹. Recalling his sojourn through Berlin and Paris in his autobiography, McKay later wrote ‘I believed there would be an American art and culture mainly derived from Europe and augmented by the arts and cultures of other countries...For America appeared to me pre-eminently a vast outpost of European civilisation’⁷². He also held a firm belief that an authentic African American aesthetic would survive long after the Harlem Renaissance. ‘I don’t minimize the danger of the obstruction of talent, and the destruction of art’, he wrote, ‘But if the works are authentic they will eventually survive the noise and racket of the times, I think’⁷³. Notably, McKay identified the potential for the Harlem Renaissance to maintain an aesthetic and cultural resonance.

In his rhetoric and in his literature, McKay presented a challenge to the cultural ideologue of the ‘New Negro’, put forward by Alain Locke in 1925. In presenting the ‘New Negro’ as a progressive figure free from the ‘distorted perspective of a social problem’, Locke positioned the young black male as a figure almost entirely detached from the racial, social and economic difficulties that had been the impetus behind his migration to Harlem. Yet as Eugene

⁷¹ Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, eds. *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries: Volume II, 1878-1883*, trans. by G. Skelton (London: Collins, 1980), p. 440.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 244.

⁷³ McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, p. 140.

Holmes iterated in a speech in 1968, the 'New Negro' had 'temporal roots in the past and spatial roots elsewhere in America', and the term had validity 'only when considered to be a continuing tradition'⁷⁴. McKay recognised the echoes of these temporal and spatial roots, but also recognised many of the new socio-economic and racial problems that confronted the young black male. In suggesting that the younger generation of African Americans was 'vibrant with a new psychology' and a 'new spirit...awake in the masses'⁷⁵, Locke rooted the Harlem Renaissance firmly in a transcendent narrative - a generational transformation 'into the progressive phases of Negro life'. For McKay, Harlem's Renaissance represented a bridge between 'old' artistic traditions, and a 'new' creative and cultural progressiveness. McKay also highlighted the class discrepancy in the shared rhetoric of Locke and Du Bois, when compared to the commonplace reality of the black American experience. In tying the cultural shift of the Harlem Renaissance (the 'new' world) to the 'old' European artistic traditions, McKay disrupted the transcendent narrative of the 'New Negro' rhetoric.

In 1928, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to McKay shortly after the publication of *Home to Harlem*, congratulating him on what he deemed to be '...one of the two most worthy American novels of the Spring'. He noted in particular a 'special emphasis on the recurrent key of Harlem's *motif* of dissipation'⁷⁶. Common conjecture places McKay within the realms of an improvised literary style that sought to echo and embody jazz cultures. The author himself went so far as to subtitle his second novel, *Banjo*, as an improvised 'story without a plot'. However Fitzgerald's reference to 'recurrent motifs' and 'dissipation' represents the inherent duality in McKay's formal style, which embraces both elements of composition and the improvisation symptomatic of jazz cultures. Where Fitzgerald recognised 'recurrent motifs' and themes of

⁷⁴ Eugene Holmes, 'Alain Locke and the New Negro Movement', *Negro American Literature Forum*, 2.3, Protest and Propaganda Literature (1968), p. 60.

⁷⁵ Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Postcard to Claude McKay, 18th June 1928, Claude McKay Collection, Box 3, f.80, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

‘dissipation’ in McKay’s novel, I argue that this is an echo of two compositional Wagnerian techniques, in particular that of the recurrent *leitmotif* developed across several of Wagner’s operas. Additionally, where Fitzgerald referred to the theme of ‘dissipation’ within *Home to Harlem*, a Wagnerian interpretation might identify this dissipation as the presence of the Tristan Chord – the intentionally disruptive tonal shift within the opera implemented as a way of changing the direction of the narrative. Re-reading both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* through this framework also affirms the developmental relationship between opera and jazz. As Derek Scott suggests, this discourse signalled a change in musical terrain. Jazz ‘offered a way out of the Wagner impasse – that is, it provided an answer to the question: Where on earth do you go next after scaling the grand heights of *Parsifal*?’⁷⁷. McKay’s initial association with opera over jazz also presents an important discussion point on the nature of these two musical styles as tools for storytelling, and the manner in which McKay employs both in tandem with one another. Opera is representative of the sheer magnitude and power of the city as a whole, but it is also developmental in its characterisation, often structured in a series of acts that lead to a climatic conclusion.

Where the second chapter explores the musical and literary construction of ‘sound-worlds’, Chapter Three considers the environmental impact and social connotations of silence throughout Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1928) and her short fictions. In order to appreciate the importance of noiselessness throughout Larsen’s narratives, it is crucial to understand the sonic environment in which her novels were formed, and into which both she and her characters were immersed. The noiselessness of *Passing* reveals Larsen’s own sense of conservatism, accurately capturing the sentiment towards noise expressed by those living in and passing through New York after the turn of the century. The chapter begins with the proposition made

⁷⁷ Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 179.

by Toni Morrison in a paper delivered in 1988, that the sound of the novel must be a sound ‘just beyond hearing’⁷⁸. In her own representation of Harlem’s soundscape, Larsen identifies a factor that formally distinguishes her from McKay, Fisher and Hurston, in that noiselessness was as much a part of the soundscape as noise itself. Notably, Larsen’s characters are not as frequently exposed to the same riotous, cabaret culture as McKay’s vagabonds. In simple terms, this might be attributed to a gendered experience. Despite the audacious female characters that pervade *Passing*, Harlem is represented as a distinctly male-dominated space. Sound is also considered throughout Larsen’s narratives as that which is heard *in passing*. The figure of the female listener is considered as a sonic flâneur, audibly mapping and making sense of her surroundings. For the novel’s protagonist, Irene Redfield, silence becomes both an empowering tool, allowing her to adopt the role of the listener, and immerse herself as both a participant and host of well-heeled Harlem society. It’s a form of silence that is resonant with the ‘stylized silence’⁷⁹ of suffrage that Chapman recognizes, but it also has a far more sinister consequences. For Irene’s counterpart, Clare Kendry, who unbeknownst to her husband is passing for white, silence signals an oppressive lack of voice and the repression of her “true” racial identity. Larsen’s characters also reveal a far greater sensitivity to nuisance sounds, engaging directly with the new acoustic technologies that both Thompson and Halliday identify as features of the modern soundscape. In contextual terms, the novel echoes the concerns and campaigns for noise abatement outlined earlier in this introduction. Sources of nuisance sounds throughout *Passing* include the telephone, phonograph, and radio – technologies that were representative of a detachment from the bodily voice, and the invasion of the loudspeaker in the home.

Understanding Larsen’s use of silence within her writing, scholars must first turn to a consideration of her experience as one of the few canonised female writers of the Harlem

⁷⁸ Toni Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, delivered at The University of Michigan, October 7th 1988, p. 160.

⁷⁹ Chapman, p. 9.

Renaissance. Following a small but respectable spate of short stories published for literary magazines, Larsen published her first novel, *Quicksand*, in 1928. Although reviews of her work appeared encouraging, they were relatively few and far between. The novel was somewhat overshadowed by McKay's *Home to Harlem*, published in the same year. Her second novel, *Passing*, proved far more popular with readers. In the foreword to her collected works, Charles Larson acknowledges that in attempting to piece together a chronology of Larsen's life and career, scholars of her work are often faced with distortions and enigmatic elements of her biography. He notes that her childhood, parentage, and date of birth were all incorrectly recorded. 'At the time of her death', he observes, 'there were no published obituaries'⁸⁰. In an article for Gloria Steinem's *Ms. Magazine* in 1980, journalist Mary Helen Washington stated that there were 'few clues about why Nella Larsen fell silent as a literary voice'⁸¹, speculating that events of 'public shame', including the breakdown of her marriage and accusations of plagiarism, drove an already fragile character into becoming a social recluse. If Washington's article was intended to paint a character portrait of Larsen, it seems she does the author little justice, although she addresses more accurately the themes of racial identity and marginality that pervade Larsen's novels. According to the substantial biography compiled by George Hutchinson, Larsen's invisibility stems from an element of self-censure, as a novelist who had little interest in leaving a legacy. He observes that she lived a life 'that should never have been, one that many seem to think *could not* have been. Briefly, she wrote about that life, and revealed part of what she perceived about the world and the people of her time'⁸². Hutchinson's depiction of Larsen as a social observer *passing through* the Harlem Renaissance is certainly accurate. She featured several characterisations of key individuals associated with the Harlem

⁸⁰ Charles R. Larson, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and The Stories* (New York: Random House, 2001), p.xi.

⁸¹ Mary Helen Washington, 'Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance', in *Passing: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Carla Kaplan (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2007), p. 352.

⁸² George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 1.

Renaissance throughout her work, dedicating *Passing* to Carl Van Vechten. In 1930 Larsen became the first woman to receive the Guggenheim Fellowship⁸³, intending to begin work on her third novel. In the same year, she was accused of plagiarism for her short story ‘Sanctuary’, which, far from contributing to the safe continuity of her literary career instead brought it to an abrupt end⁸⁴. While plagiarism might be considered as a silent form of literary theft, Hildegard Hoeller suggests that ‘Sanctuary’ was ‘consciously written’ in the context of modernist experimentation, incorporating familiar techniques of ‘borrowing, imitating, and masking’⁸⁵. According to Maria Balshaw, Larsen’s interest in modernist forms of literary experimentation engages directly with both the rapidly changing urban scene, and the subsequent effect on and possibilities offered to African-American women⁸⁶. If this is the case, it suggests that there is a reverberant quality to quietness and the *need* for silence in Larsen’s writing.

Chapter Four examines use of sound as a destructive force in Rudolph Fisher’s short story, ‘City of Refuge’ (1925) and his novel, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928). Fisher engages with both architectural, cultural and racial barriers. In the former, Fisher highlights the importance of sonic signals as crucial markers for naïve ‘jaybirds’ arriving in Harlem and emerging from the 135th St subway. In the opening scenes of ‘City of Refuge’, these sounds help newcomer King Solomon Gillis navigate a new and overwhelming environment. The story also emphasises the corrupt forces in Harlem that ultimately impede Solomon’s venture into the ‘promised land’. Confronting both his characters and readers with a series of moral questions that signal the development between ‘The City of Refuge’ and *The Walls of Jericho*, he echoes

⁸³ The Guggenheim Fellowship was established in 1925 as part of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Other figures associated with cultural arts in Harlem who became recipients of the award include; Langston Hughes (1935) and Zora Neale Hurston (1936).

⁸⁴ Larsen was accused of plagiarizing Sheila Kaye-Smith’s short story, ‘Mrs. Adis’.

⁸⁵ Hildegard Hoeller, ‘Race, Modernism, and Plagiarism: The Case of Nella Larsen’s *Sanctuary*’, *African American Review*, 40.3 (2006), p. 421.

⁸⁶ Maria Balshaw, ‘Passing and the Spectacle of Harlem’, *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African-American Literature* (London and Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 45.

Nietzsche's sentiment on the cycle of morality and moral prejudices in modernity, and the ultimate destruction of an ideal. Nietzsche questions;

...have you ever asked yourselves properly how costly the setting up of *every* ideal on earth has been? How much reality always had to be vilified and misunderstood in the process, how many lies had to be sanctified, how much conscience had to be troubled, how much 'god' had to be sacrificed every time? If a shrine is to be set up, a *shrine has to be destroyed*: that is the law...⁸⁷

If Harlem is the 'shrine' of black America, the dismantling of prejudices from the white residents bordering Harlem is an inevitable theme of Fisher's destructive narrative. Yet he also dismantles the 'lies' spread by Harlem's black residents, to those migrating from the South, particularly young black males. In establishing Gillis's gullibility, Fisher emphasises the use of audible signals within the soundscape as a tool for navigating unfamiliar terrain. From his arrival in Harlem to his eventual arrest, Gillis is guided predominantly by his sonic senses. Signals indicate potential dangers, but they also shape his vision of a future in Harlem, his attention being gripped by the sight and *sound* of a policeman directing traffic outside the 135th St. station. As discussed in the opening of the chapter, the sound of the whistle is a signal of influence and assertiveness that Gillis ultimately desires – but it is also a sound that he perceives as eradicating colour prejudices. In the *Walls of Jericho*, Fisher adopts similar sonic signals, using sirens as the indication of fire in the closing chapters of the novel, in a sonic association with the destruction that is subsequently left behind.

Where Larsen addresses the problematic act of passing over the colour line, Fisher draws a visible boundary in Harlem – a street marking the area where white residents continued to reside. Fisher accurately reflects the xenophobic attitudes of Harlem's white residents throughout the 1920s, as they began to recognise the enterprising spirit of Harlem's black

⁸⁷ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, 'On The Genealogy of Morality', in *Nietzsche: 'On The Genealogy of Morality' and Other Writings*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by C. Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 65-6.

population. By 1925, *The New York Times* reported that the ‘white resistance’ in Harlem had been driven out by the investment of a black middle class with “new money”;

With the war a black tide of labourers rolled in from the South and the West Indies to the metropolitan district, where work was waiting at wages beyond their rosiest dreams. The white resistance in Harlem broke. And then a strange thing happened. According to all popular legends, those negroes who were earning big money for the first time in their lives should have spent it all on silk shirts and white buckskin shoes. But they did no such thing. They bought real estate.⁸⁸

Fisher adopts the biblical tale of the ‘Fall of Jericho’ in order to express the destruction of architectural and cultural barriers in Harlem, using the sound of the trumpet (or horn) as the instrument of ruin. The theme of sonic destruction was also prevalent in several of Douglas’s illustrations that appeared in James Weldon Johnson’s book of sermons, *God’s Trombones*. The chapter discusses two of the illustrations, ‘Prodigal Son’ and ‘Judgement Day’, alongside one of Douglas’s more broadly recognised murals, ‘Song of the Towers’, which features soundwaves as a destructive force.

In Chapter Five, the thesis turns away from Harlem-based narratives, and follows Zora Neale Hurston’s path to Jacksonville and Polk County, Florida. Partially prompted by the Depression, which ‘did away with money for research’, Hurston turned her attention to writing *Mules and Men* in May 1932. ‘That is’, she wrote in her autobiography, ‘I edited the huge mass of material I had, arranged it in some sequence and laid it aside’⁸⁹. Split into two parts, the anthropological collection drew influence from the folklore of Florida, and Hurston’s experience of hoodoo and voodoo in New Orleans. In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston discussed the ‘big reason’ behind her choice of location. Eatonville was ‘familiar ground’ but it also provided a site in which she could break free of the urban identity she had

⁸⁸ Mary Ross, ‘Negro City In Harlem Is A Race Capital’, *The New York Times*, March 1st 1925, p. xx6.

⁸⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 173.

established in New York. ‘I didn’t go back there so that the home folks could make admiration over me because I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet’, she wrote, ‘I knew they were not going to pay either of these items too much mind...I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm or danger’⁹⁰. The conflict in Hurston’s implicit suppression of her Northern identity and her desire to “fit in” amongst the residents of Eatonville, was one that she was acutely conscious of. ‘If I had exalted myself to impress the town’ she wrote in the opening of the anthology, ‘somebody would have sent me word in a match-box that I had been up North there...and then come back with a lot of form and fashion and outside show to the world. But they’d stand flat-footed and tell me that they didn’t have me, neither my sham-polish, to study ‘bout. And that would have been that’. Her role as both participant of and anthropologist within the community is a delicate balance. One requires her to engage in audible cultural practices, yet the other requires her to take up the role of silent observer. The latter, Hurston continuously wrestled with. Scholars of her work have noted her apparent inability in *Mules and Men* to distinguish between author and narrator. As Hemenway observes, Hurston ‘tried to reconcile high and low culture by becoming Eatonville’s aesthetic representative to the Harlem Renaissance’.

The chapter is concerned with a series of recordings made by Hebert Halpert and Stetson Kennedy in 1939 that revealed Hurston’s engagement with ‘lining tracks’ – songs sung by railroad liners in Southern states. Hurston’s use of work songs within her collections of prose further reinforces her engagement with the sonic environment, and confirms the dialogical relationship between literature and music as central to understanding the sonic resonances in her textual work. In an essay originally written for *The Florida Negro*, Hurston identified the progress of sound in African American culture, from aural to literary form;

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 2.

Way back when Hell wasn't no bigger than Maitland, man found out something about the laws of sound...He found out that sound could be assembled and manipulated and that such a collection of sound forms could become as definite and concrete as a war-ax...So he had language and song. Perhaps by some happy accident he found out about tempo and rhythm and that *music and literature grew from the same root*. Somewhere songs for sound-singing branched off from songs for storytelling until we arrived at prose⁹¹

The comparison of sound to a 'war-axe' confirms Hurston's view of sound and language as a powerful cultural weapon. It further highlighted the Boasian influence of sound as an anthropological tool, an approach that Hurston developed under tutelage of Franz Boas. If Hurston's assertion is that music and literature have traditionally developed in parallel to one another, then she is the first of the Harlem Renaissance writers included here to actively acknowledge the influence of sound (and soundscape) in the literature produced during this cultural movement, and subsequently affirm the central proposition of this thesis. Moreover, the distinction between songs for 'sound-singing' and 'songs for story-telling' draw a clear line between rhythm and lyric. Hurston's use of lining rhythms places the songs firmly within both of these categories; they exist as both functional rhythms that set the pace and tempo for manual labour, and as an anthropological tool for story-telling, with an emphasis on lyrics and verse. Lynda Marion Hill argues that, for Hurston, 'sound [was] the evidence of something shared in common among all creatures of the natural world, as the basis for...lyrical articulations, for tones and rhythms'. Moreover, she suggests that 'in and out of synchrony with drum rhythms, the voice is a source of another tradition – literature, which 'grew out of sound'⁹². Hurston makes a clear and direct connection between vocal sound and literature; two "traditions" aesthetically aligned and co-dependent upon each other. Hill suggests that this is a 'conventional approach to defining the relationship between oral forms and literature, as a

⁹¹ Zora Neale Hurston, 'Folklore and Music', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 12.1 (1991), p. 184.

⁹² Lynda Marion Hill, *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1996), p. 79. Emphasis added.

progression from raw sound, to lyric, to epic'. Yet it also indicates why, as a text, *Mules and Men* is inherently engaged with and influenced by functional lining rhythms and shared ballads, as a mode of bridging both cultural and formal tensions.

The chapter ends with a similar position to which the thesis begins, with a discussion of the connection between African American work songs and a series of 'folk operas', which Hurston produced upon her return from the South in the early 1930s. Here, I discuss the problematic process of removing work songs from their environment in order to adapt them for the stage. Whilst I acknowledge that Hurston succeeded in bringing the soundscape of the South to metropolitan audiences, in performance, the songs crucially lose their functional impact and instead became part of a commercially-driven musical programme. The chapter queries the decision to host the performances in predominantly white theatres of mid-town Manhattan, for instance. In retrospect, performances of *The Great Day* and subsequent adaptations through to *Singing Steel*, performed between 1932 and 1933, appear to be a significant contradiction of the authenticity that she attempted to retain within her literary and anthropological work. I also concede that in exploring Hurston as musical director, there is a sparse collection of material upon which to draw, compared to the plethora of scholarship on her literary works. As such, the discussion relies significantly on the personal correspondence between Hurston and her patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, to whom she wrote frequently, relaying details of musical arrangement, casting, scenery, and rehearsals in the period leading up to the first performance of *The Great Day*, in January 1932.

In contemporary scholarship, the field of American Studies has increasingly recognised the importance of listening to sound, and the various forms through which it is represented. A recent issue of *American Quarterly* recognised the inherent marginality of sound studies, and its markedly low publication record. Since its debut in 1949, the journal has published just

seven articles that consider the study and analysis of sound in its various guises⁹³. The field once dubbed as “always emerging, never emerged” is now recognised as an ‘interdisciplinary umbrella’ for scholars, having grown to become ‘hospitable to anyone interested in exploring sound’s social meanings, cultural histories, technological evolutions, political impacts, and spatial mappings’⁹⁴. The Harlem Renaissance offers a unique case study as a cultural movement at the forefront of change in the early part of the twentieth-century, and as such, it developed in tandem with new acoustic environments and technologies. Amidst the uproar of New York in particular, Harlem achieved the virtually impossible task of distinguishing itself as a space of uniquely sonic cultures and practices. Above all, in order to re-examine the Harlem Renaissance and recognise where aesthetic representations of sound appear in literary form, scholars must embrace a method of *listening* to the novel. As such, this thesis asks for its reader’s ear, and has been orchestrated accordingly.

⁹³ Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, “Introduction: Listening to American Studies”, *American Quarterly*, 63.3 (2011), p. 452.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 451.

2. Colliding Soundscapes and Leitmotivic Themes in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*

On January 15th 1921, Jamaican poet and author Claude McKay sailed up the Hudson River aboard the RMS Adriatic, bound on the transatlantic passage from Southampton to New York. In his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home*¹, he described the 'fixed mass sentinels' and 'pyramids' of Manhattan looming on the horizon. The city was a visual spectacle. Marvelling at the 'immense wonder of clean, vertical heaven-challenging lines', McKay declared the vast skyline a 'glory to the grandeur of space', a 'miracle of might'. The imposing scene stirred him to such an extent that he likened the impact to the 'banging music' of German composer Wilhelm Richard Wagner, the sight 'assaulting one's spirit and rushing it skyward with the pride and power of an eagle'. The sight of the Manhattan skyline not only inspired the operatic theme in McKay's mind, but also *required* it. The scene provided a moment of brief transcendence in which to observe the magnitude of the 'new landmarks' and spires from afar, safely distanced from the tumultuous experience of the city. For McKay, the city was

¹ Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, p. 95.

representative of both prosperity and peril, something that the characters of his first novel, *Home to Harlem*, experienced to alternating degrees.

As emphasised in the introduction to this thesis, this chapter seeks to consider the thematic and aesthetic resonances of Wagner present in McKay's literary return to Harlem, taking as a starting point the author's own return to New York. While he establishes a musical association with his approach to the city, McKay's reference is also exemplary of the developmental nature of the Harlem Renaissance. In his description of the journey between Europe and New York and his association with classical musical form over jazz, he captures the discourse between 'Old' and 'New' worlds. Mitchell Cohen suggests that Wagner's early political experience resulted in a 'colliding world motif' that appeared throughout his operas, each with 'divergent rules'². 'Divergence' and rebellion was a key characteristic of both McKay's literary style and his political engagement with the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, his political affiliation with Russian communism placed him in direct contention with Locke's 'New Negro' rhetoric. As a result, both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* represent the 'colliding realms' that Cohen identifies, not least in their mapping of both American and European space. In the case of *Home to Harlem*, the journey between Europe and New York further represents the transition between conflict and peacetime, and the socio-economic challenges of post-war readjustment. In formal terms the 'colliding world' motif may also be applied to representations of sound within textual form: the point at which sound meets a soundless medium.

Beginning with *Home to Harlem*, this chapter will examine the formal similarities between writer and composer, employing one of Wagner's most widely recognised compositional techniques – the leitmotif – as a framework for re-reading McKay's textual narrative. Moreover, by examining both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* as a series of leitmotivic

² Mitchell Cohen, 'To the Dresden Barricades: The Genesis of Wagner's Political Ideas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Thomas S. Grey (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 47.

statements, the ensuing discussion will consider where these motifs are drawn from Harlem's soundscape, where they represent character development, and where certain motifs from *Home to Harlem* subsequently reappear in a different contextual space throughout *Banjo*. Matthew Bribitzer-Stull notes that the 'leitmotif' has amassed vastly differing definitions by commentators since Wagner first adopted it in the latter part of the 1850s. The danger arises in mischaracterising the 'leitmotif' as a 'flat' audible device or marker. Despite being shaped through reminiscent themes, Stull recognises that nostalgic markers often came across as 'clunky and forced', lacking subtlety or fluidity. In contrast, the leitmotif is 'protean' and 'developmental in nature', and motivated by 'dramatic impetus'³. Furthermore, he argues that leitmotivic composition effectively allows for both contextual reinterpretation and associative transposition⁴. For McKay, the leitmotif not only provides a thematic structure for associative themes throughout *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* as separate narratives, but also connects both novels through the transposition and repetition of certain themes and characters, echoing a key function of the 'leitmotif' in 'layering' and re-stating narrative themes. According to Stull, this is fundamental to reading an environment, allowing for the possibility of 'accumulative association in which music, like language, becomes capable of modifiers'⁵.

Considering the development of leitmotifs throughout McKay's narratives, this chapter will challenge the assertion that McKay's novels offer an improvised style of narration representative of jazz, arguing instead that 'a story without a plot'⁶ in fact requires an element of preconceived composition. The leitmotif provides coherence to highly textured narratives that appear to otherwise maintain a chaotic and disjointed rhythm, subsequently challenging the supposed presence of improvisational techniques, particularly in *Banjo*. Drawing upon

³ Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 14-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Subtitle for *Banjo*.

another of Wagner's compositional statements, the latter part of the chapter will consider the function of the Tristan Chord, used as a method of prompting chromatic change or dramatic shift in narrative. It will argue that McKay's youthful vagrants embody the anarchic tendencies of the Tristan Chord - otherwise known as *diablos en musica*, or "The Devil's Chord" – by representing and creating moments at which the principal harmony and rhythm of the narrative is intentionally disrupted and dismantled. In reading both novels as narratives that embody the function of the Tristan Chord, a connection can also be drawn between Wagner's disharmonious compositional form and the 'flattened fifth' present in jazz and the Blues. In terms of the cultural narrative that McKay constructs, the presence of the Tristan Chord prompts a broader discussion on the cultural hierarchy and idealist narrative of Locke's 'New Negro' and the interrupted transcendence of the individual, the success of which relied largely on the assumption not only that young black males would gain access to an education and therefore be in a position to express themselves creatively, but also that their social and economic status would improve in tandem with the eradication of broader cultural prejudices.

McKay Contra Wagner

In a Wagnerian context, the towering skyscrapers McKay observed upon his own return to the city represented unearthly, mythical heights to mere mortals who viewed them. He wrote;

I wished that it were possible to know New York in this way only - as a masterpiece wrought for the illumination of the sight, a splendour lifting aloft and shedding its radiance like a searchlight, making one big and great with feeling. Oh, that I should never draw nearer to descend into its precipitous gorges, where visions are broken and shattered and one becomes one of a million, average, ordinary, insignificant.

The 'descent' he describes here is in fact a journey uptown by means of the elevated rail, the 'precipitous gorge' ultimately being Harlem. There is an evident ambiguity to McKay's Wagnerian reference, undeveloped and therefore open to his readers' interpretation. The imposing skyline described in *A Long Way From Home* echoes the second act in 'Das

Rheingold', the first of four cycles in Wagner's epic opera, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*⁷, in which the god Wotan admires from a distance a mountainous fortress built by giants, that he prepares to claim as his home;

Behold the unwithering work!
With heeding towers
The height is tipped;
Broadly stands
The stately abode!⁸

The opening of the *Ring* cycle epitomises all the adjectives McKay adopts in relation to Manhattan at the beginning of 1921: a grand composition of 'immense wonder', 'a miracle of might', 'heaven-challenging' in its mythical context and full of sweeping 'precipitous gorges'. The theme of New York as a monstrous 'spectacle' is repeated again, following McKay's initial return. 'Always I was inflamed by the vision of New York as an eye-dazzling picture', he wrote, recalling the mythical sensitivity that the city inspired;

One loves in New York its baroque difference from the classic cities, the blind chaotic surging of bigness of expression. I remember when I worked in the West Eighties and spent my rest time loitering along Riverside Drive, the black giants of the New York Central, belching flame and smoke and dust along the façades of the fine palaces, created a picture like a caravan of modern pirates coming home in a rolling cloud of glory. The grim pioneer urge of the great pragmatic metropolis was a ferment in my feeling...I was possessed with the desire to see New York as when I first saw it from the boat – one solid mammoth mass of spring steel and stone⁹

McKay's return is unique in the fact that the journey into Harlem is mapped first from the Hudson, then from the tip of Lower Manhattan in Battery Park. The passage therefore encompasses almost the entire expanse of the city before arriving in the 'Black Capital'. In October 1921, McKay would publish a poem in *The Liberator* entitled 'The White City', which

⁷ *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, otherwise known as 'The Ring', is a cycle of four epic musical dramas. The operatic piece was composed over the course of twenty-six years, and is loosely based on the Norse sagas. It includes one of Wagner's most recognisable compositions, *Die Walküre*, and was first performed as a full cycle in 1876.

⁸ Richard Wagner, 'Das Rheingold', in *The Nibelung's Ring: English Words to Richard Wagner's Ring des Nibelungen in the Alternative Verse of the Original*, ed. by Alfred Foreman (London: Schott & Co., 1877)p. 23.

⁹ McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, p. 133-4.

echoed his first impressions of the metropolis whilst also recognising the inherent ‘whiteness’ of the skyline, and reinforcing the image of the city as an industrial fortress;

...I see the mighty city through a mist-
The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,
The poles and spires and towers vapour-kissed,
The fortified port through which the great ships pass...

Harlem, by contrast, is ‘heaven in a white world’s hell’, suggesting that while the spectacle of Manhattan from afar may be a thing of ‘immense wonder’, the journey through the city towards Harlem is a form of purgatorial passage for the ‘grim pioneer’. There is little doubt that McKay’s use of Wagner’s music as a musical theme representative of the Manhattan skyline is unorthodox. To adopt the term outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the Wagnerian aesthetic provides a formal structure through which McKay constructs a series of ‘territorial motifs’ (*rhythmic faces or characters*) and ‘territorial counterpoints’ (*melodic landscapes*)¹⁰. The former ‘may be augmented or diminished by the addition or subtraction of sounds’, while a melodic landscape might transform into that which is ‘no longer a melody associated with a landscape’ but it in itself a ‘sonorous landscape in counterpoint to a virtual landscape’. McKay constructs this duality, purposefully layering a sonorous landscape over the skyline of New York, and establishing a soundscape that does not reflect his reality.

In the context of his return to the city, McKay’s analogous use of Wagner is better understood as a comment on the capitalized state of New York at the beginning of the 1920s. By 1921, when McKay arrived, the ‘boom’ of the nineteen twenties was in full swing and visible from the changes and new building’s that appeared on the city’s skyline. The same approach on the South Ferry route was captured on film by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand in the opening scenes of their 1921 film ‘Manhatta’¹¹. The playwright George Bernard Shaw

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by B. Massumi, 5th ed. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 351.

¹¹ *Manhatta*, Dir. Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler (1921) The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Film.

suggested that Wagner's *Ring* cycle was in fact 'a dramatized allegory of shareholders, tall hats, white-lead factories and industrial and political questions looked at from the socialistic and humanitarian point of view'¹². Similarly, Barry Millington observes that throughout the 1920s and 1930s, critics of the Frankfurt School interpreted the *Ring* cycle as 'a parable of social and cultural decline'¹³. Kirsten Paige consults Wagner's own writing(s), in highlighting the fact that his re-creation of imposing and phantasmagorical environments on the stage offered a 'didactic climactic confrontation' of intellectual and cultural concerns about the changes brought about by 'humanity, industry, and urbanization'¹⁴.

In the closing pages of *Banjo*, McKay's narrator, Ray observes that the 'grand mechanical march of civilisation had levelled the world down to the point where it seemed treasonable for an advanced thinker to doubt that what was good for one nation or people was also good for another. But he was never afraid of testing ideas...'¹⁵. In cadence the first cycle of Wagner's *Ring* cycle maintains a forceful ('banging') rhythm that McKay identifies, and in metaphorical terms provides a fitting theme for the modern metropolis in the early twentieth century, given its sheer scale and intensity¹⁶. The cyclical dramatic opera captured dilemmas of (white) power, vast corruption, the complexities and disparities of human experience, elements that remain synonymous with the city that McKay returned to, and the development of Manhattan throughout the nineteen-twenties¹⁷. These were also cultural and economic

¹² George Bernard Shaw, *Major Critical Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1932), p. 186.

¹³ Barry Millington, 'Der Ring des Nibelungen: Conception and Interpretation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Thomas S. Grey (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 81.

¹⁴ Kirsten Paige, 'Wagnerian Climatic Fantasies: Sound, Space, Breath', *European Romantic Review*, 28.3 (2017), p. 348.

¹⁵ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 335.

¹⁶ Wagner's wife, Cosima, wrote in her diary that he expressed pleasure at having provided in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* a complete picture of the curse of greed for money, and subsequent disaster.

¹⁷ Wagner sought to recreate a realistic industrial soundscape. The first of the four dramatic cycles, *Das Rheingold*, incorporated two important scenes of industry: the construction of Wotan's fortress by the giants Fasolt and Fafner, and the forging of the magical Ring by the Nibelung. This construction was represented by a host of eighteen anvils in the orchestral score; a tool commonly used by the blacksmiths and steel forgers in the widespread construction across Manhattan in the early part of the 1920s.

challenges that the young male characters of both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* frequently fall foul of, rendered as non-participants of an upwardly mobile society.

Jonathan Flatley sets a precedent for the formal connection between Wagner and McKay in his analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and its use of a Wagnerian aesthetic. Flatley focuses on an extract drawn from 'Of the Coming of John', in which a young African American male, John Jones, is suspended from College and sent to New York¹⁸ and inadvertently finds himself amongst the audience of a concert hall for a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, where he experiences a 'Wagnerian epiphany'¹⁹:

The infinite beauty of the wail lingered and swept through every muscle of his frame, and put it all a-tune...A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled...Then the movement changed, and fuller, mightier harmony swelled away...he felt with the music the movement of power within him...When at last a soft sorrow crept across the violins, there came to him the vision of a far-off home...his heart sank below the waters...only to be lifted aloft again with that last ethereal wail of the swan that quivered and faded away into the sky.²⁰

There is a distinct similarity in the response and transcendent feeling prompted by Wagner's music, in both descriptions by Du Bois and McKay. Flatley argues that the Du Bois's reference to Wagner affirms his celebration of African American cultural transcendence, with a rhetoric that sits "above the veil" of racism and prejudice. He acknowledges that 'the contradiction between the content of the aesthetic experience (liberatory, pleasurable, expansive) and its social location (exclusionary, racist) gives the event a critical edge', and that for a brief moment '...John Jones exists, emotionally speaking, in an alternate, freer world'²¹. Du Bois also makes an important statement on the power of sound as a colourless medium (in a tale of two "Johns")

¹⁸ Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, discussed in the Coda to this thesis, echoes Du Bois's short story.

¹⁹ Jonathan Flatley, 'Du Bois Contra Wagner', *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 139.

²⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Of the Coming of John', *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 146.

²¹ Flatley, p. 136-7.

firmly separated by the colour line) the transcendent scene being set within a gilded hall, a predominantly white space. Flatley argues that initially, the ‘dazzling welcome’ of the gilded hall reverses or challenges scenes of racial contempt experienced by both Du Bois and the figures throughout *Souls*. In McKay’s association of New York with Wagner as a transcendent theme appears to echo Du Bois’s initial representation of *Lohengrin*. Journeying into Harlem on the cusp of its cultural renaissance, it is somewhat unsurprising that his return was sounded by a transcendent theme reflective of the era of social transformation. The theme is reflective of a homecoming that “lifted” him aloft like the melodies of *Lohengrin* to which Du Bois refers in *The Souls of Black Folk*. To some extent, he was sounding his own ‘welcome’ to New York. The skyline of Lower Manhattan representative of his own ‘gilded hall’, as a transcendent space in which he was freely elevated above the ‘precipitous gorges’ of racism, cultural oppression, and economic hardship. The association with a sense of transcendence and social transformation may have also been prompted as a result of his experience in London. While McKay had nestled within radical circles, he nonetheless encountered extreme examples of racial prejudice that prompted criticism in response. In a letter published in Sylvia Pankhurst’s London-based *Worker’s Dreadnought*, he rebuked the openly racist prejudices of the editor of the *Daily Herald*, which had made sensationalist claims against the French employment of black troops in Germany, warning of a “black scourge”²² in Europe. In *A Long Way From Home*, McKay stressed that it was necessary to acknowledge that prejudices, however unreasonable, were tangible ‘individual, national, and racial’ preconceptions.

His audible rendering of the city sits between two musical interpretations of the soundscape outlined by Schafer as ‘absolute’ and ‘programmatic’ music²³. The former Schafer classifies as the method through which composer fashioned ‘ideal soundscapes of the mind’,

²² McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, p.74.

²³ Schafer, p. 103.

the latter being a musical score more ‘imitative of the environment’. In Schafer’s definition, ‘absolute music’ is prompted by a disengagement and disenchantment from the external environment and conceived symphonically for *indoor* performance. It also signals the point at which music moves into concert halls ‘where it can no longer be effectively heard out of doors’. McKay’s interpretation fashions an idealised soundscape *inspired* by but not imitative of New York, bringing the Wagnerian theme usually reserved for concert halls into the outdoor space.

In *Souls*, the Wagnerian aesthetic inhabits a duality – colliding cultural realms. At the close ‘Of the Coming of John’, the same strains of *Lohengrin* are heard as John is lynched by a mob, his mind returning to the transcendent moment in the gilded hall;

...as the sheen of the starlight stole over him, he thought of the gilded ceiling of that vast concert hall, and heard stealing toward him the faint sweet music of the swan. Hark! Was it music, or the hurry and shouting of men?...Clear and high the faint sweet melody rose and fluttered like a living thing, so that the very earth trembled as with the tramp of horses and murmur of angry men...he watched their shadows dancing and heard their horses thundering towards him, until at last they came sweeping like a storm...and the world whistled in his ears²⁴

The second refrain of *Lohengrin* is unable to transcend racial prejudice in the same manner as before, the ‘world’ instead breaking through the swan song with an incessant whistle. Recalling Schafer’s definition of sonic signals, the ‘whistling’ sound that John describes is also a clear indication of danger. The refrain in Dubois’s short story also makes an important statement on the futility of cultural transcendence. The ‘Wagnerian epiphany’ is fleeting and unsustainable. McKay’s associative use of Wagner acknowledges this fact. His formal and contextual use of a Wagnerian theme echoes the cultural duality present in *Souls*. He is fully aware that distance allows him a moment of transcendence, but that his return to the city (and to Harlem) will ultimately lead him into ‘precipitous gorges’ where ‘visions are shattered and broken’. Considering his revolutionary political stance, this perspective goes some way to helping

²⁴ Du Bois, p. 152-3.

scholars understand McKay's relatively detached participation in the Harlem Renaissance. While he embodied several characteristics of the 'New Negro', he was openly critical of Du Bois. In 1928, the pair quarrelled over the publication of two of McKay's poems in *Crisis* magazine, which he claimed not to have approved. In a letter to Du Bois, he accused his peer of unscrupulous hypocrisy, declaring; 'I should think that a publication so holy-clean and righteous-pure as the "Crisis" should hesitate about printing anything from the pen of a writer who wallows so much in "dirt", "filth", "drunkenness", "fighting", and "lascivious sexual promiscuity"²⁵. He continued by accusing Du Bois of elitism and the production of racial propaganda, concluding: 'Finally, deep-sunk in depravity though he may be, the author of "Home to Harlem" prefers to remain unrepentant in and unregenerate and he "distinctly" is not grateful for any free baptism of grace in the cleansing pages of the "Crisis". Yours for more "utter absence of restraint", Claude McKay'.

Interrupted Transcendence

In *Home to Harlem*, McKay's protagonists experience the a cyclical pattern of transcendence and disillusionment. As a result, Harlem is simultaneously depicted as a distant beacon of opportunity to which his characters strive to return, and as a locus of immorality from which they seek to escape. Initially intended as a cycle of short stories, *Home to Harlem* was eventually published as a novel in three acts. The narrative follows the parallel stories of two young men: Jake, a soldier returning to New York from post-war Europe at the beginning of 1920, and Ray, a young Haitian-American, whose desire to put his education to some use is repeatedly thwarted by a lack of direction and economic necessity, both of which drive him towards menial industrial work. In comparing McKay's own return to Harlem in 1921 to that

²⁵ 'Letter from Claude McKay to W.E.B. Du Bois' (June 18th, 1928), W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, (MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

which forms the first chapter of *Home to Harlem*, we find a vastly different sensibility between his physical return and his fictional one. The expansive journey between Lower Manhattan and Harlem is described by the novel's protagonist, Jake, in a single line; 'From South Ferry he took the express subway train for Harlem' – one vast leap across the city's "white" midtown boroughs. While Jake's initial arrival in Harlem echoes the transcendent experience of McKay's own return to New York, his enjoyment is in fact brought about by all the components that obstruct Du Bois's representation of a cultural experience "above the veil".

Jake immerses himself in Harlem's variety of excesses, including liquor, jazz, prostitution and gambling. He promenades along Lenox Avenue, visits a cabaret and later a 'buffet flat' party, enticed by the sounds of a phonograph 'grinding out' the blues²⁶. "Oh, to be in Harlem again after two years away", he announces, "the deep-dyed color, the thickness, the closeness of it. The noises of Harlem. The sugared laughter. The honey-talk on its streets. And all night long, ragtime and "blues" playing somewhere..."²⁷. He "thrills" to Harlem, awaking the following morning 'in a state of perfect peace'²⁸. "I ain't got a cent to my name", he muses, "but ahm happy as a prince...". In the following chapter, the same transcendental sentiment is expressed again, Jake's sense of elevation prompting an outward display of joy;

Good old New York! The same old wench of a city. Elevated racketing over you' head. Subway bellowing under you' feet...Same old New York. Everybody dashing around like crazy...Same old New York...the sun does better here than over there. And the sky's so high and dry and blue. And the air it – O Gawd it works in you' flesh and blood like Scotch. O Lawdy, Lawdy! I wants to live to a hundred and finish mah days in New York.²⁹

Jake's delight at being back in Harlem, and the emboldened feeling it offers makes an important statement on the inherent duality in Du Boisian cultural transcendence. Jake's transcendence

²⁶ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 14.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 15.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 25.

is achieved and reaffirmed by his full immersion into Harlem, rather than his detachment from it. To return to a Du Boisian interpretation, Harlem is Jake's 'gilded hall'. It spurs him to physically reach skyward, throwing himself up in delight 'as if to catch the air pouring down from the blue sky', before being enticed to descend into the transgressive pleasures Harlem offers. This refrain of interrupted transcendence continues;

Harlem! Harlem! Little thicker, little darker and noisier and smellier, but Harlem just the same. The niggers done plowed through Hundred and Thirtieth Street. Heading straight foh One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth. Spades beyond Eighth Avenue. Going, going, going Harlem! Going up!...Seventh Avenue done gone high-brown. O Lawdy! Harlem bigger, Harlem better...and sweeter.³⁰

A 'darker', 'noisier', 'smellier' neighbourhood might indicate an unpleasant assault on the senses, but for Jake it is an affirmation of Harlem's thriving population. The uplift that he experiences is prompted by the new spatial expansion of Harlem, but it is emphasised too by his sensory response to Harlem's growing population. 'Going up!' is a geographical reference to Harlem's expansion Northward, but it echoes the same feeling of uplift described by McKay upon his return to New York, the city 'assaulting one's spirit and rushing it skyward with the pride and power of an eagle...a masterpiece wrought for the illumination of the sight, a splendour *lifting aloft*'³¹. So too does Jake's return echo the Du Boisian interpretation of being physically lifted from cultural adversity. Where John is 'lifted aloft' by the sounds of *Lohengrin* out of 'the dirt and dust of that low life that held him imprisoned', Jake is released from the burden of a "white folks' war"³², where he was confined to constructing huts for white United States soldiers in Brest. "Toting planks ad getting into rows with his white comrades at the Bal Musette" was not the military adventure he had in mind, and only reinforced the cultural prejudices that he had sought to escape. In contest with Du Bois, Jake's sense of transcendence

³⁰ Ibid, p. 25-6.

³¹ McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 95. [emphasis added]

³² McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 8.

is not found 'above the veil', but rather in the participation of everyday life. "Harlem! Harlem!", he claims, "Where else could I have all this life but Harlem?". He repeats the familiar motif - "Harlem! Harlem" - frequently throughout the first section of the novel, the echo reaffirming the neighbourhood's tangible quality. When the transcendent motif is later repeated in the third and final section of the novel, in Jake's second return to Harlem, it highlights a changed attitude towards Harlem and a newfound romanticism on his part. Once more, the feeling of being 'lifted aloft' is palpable: 'The lovely trees of Seventh Avenue were a vivid flame-green. Children, light clad, skipped on the pavement...Far and high over all, the sky was a grand blue benediction, and beneath it the wonderful air of New York tasted like fine dry champagne...Oh, sweet to be alive in that sun beneath that sky!'

'Sugared Laughter'

The noises McKay associates with the Harlem street also represent both the human sounds that distinguished Harlem from the rest of New York, including 'sugared laughter' and 'honey-talk on its streets'³³. Laughter is a discernible motif throughout the narrative. In the first instance, the sound welcomes Jake back to Harlem as a part of his nostalgic promenade along Lenox Avenue. The laughter leitmotif is a crucial trope in African American literature. According to Mike Chasar, black laughter signalled an understanding of the power of humane expression in a "sound conscious" era³⁴. He asserts that it 'not only challenged the acoustics of white power and served as a weapon in the struggle for political and social justice', but also 'bodily sounded' that which Houston Baker defines as 'an African ancestral past'³⁵. Chasar recognises McKay's understanding of the fact that 'the noise of combative rather than

³³ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 15.

³⁴ Mike Chasar, 'The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes', *American Literature*, 80.1 (2008), p. 58.

³⁵ Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 71.

humorous, comedic, or funny black laugh could go where the physical black body in many cases could not, and thus uniquely challenged white control of public space'. In the context of Harlem, the sounds of black laughter not only represented a 'colliding realm' between white and black authority over the soundscape, but also represented the cultural paradox between historical associations of black laughter with minstrelsy, and the sounds of black laughter within the modern soundscape as free expression, as opposed to performativity. For Deleuze and Guattari, expressive 'refrains' indicate a level of autonomy. On one hand, they argue that 'expressive qualities entertain internal relations with one another that constitute *territorial motifs*; sometimes these motifs loom above the internal impulses, sometimes they are superposed upon them, sometimes they ground one impulse in another, sometimes they pass and cause a passage from one impulse to another, sometimes they insert themselves between them...'³⁶.

In text, the developmental nature of the "laughter leitmotif" is evident, although, as Chasar points out, tracing the sound itself is 'a necessarily incomplete and imperfect endeavour', the historical and literary representations being far removed from the original sound itself. 'The textual record', he acknowledges, 'can offer only an interpretive trace of the original acoustic phenomenon, transforming the temporal and historical bodily noise into an ongoing literary and rhetorical event'. He considers the poetry of McKay as registering a 'definite change in the cadence of black laughter', particularly during the 1920s, coinciding with the innumerable changes and transformations of the modern (urban) soundscape. In his 1923 poem, 'Subway Wind'³⁷, McKay positions the laughter leitmotif in direct contention with the mechanical sounds of the subway;

Far down, down through the city's great gaunt gut

³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 350.

³⁷ Claude McKay, 'Subway Wind', in *Selected Poems: Claude McKay*, ed. by Joan R. Sherman (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1999), p. 43.

The gray train rushing bears the wear wind;
In the packed cars the fans the crowd's breath cut,
Leaving the sick and heavy air behind
And pale-cheeked children seek the upper door
...
Their laugh is swallowed in the deafening roar
Of captive wind that moans for fields and seas

It is important to note that the laughter McKay describes here is that of a white child, unable to contend with the 'roar' of the subway. Chasar recognises that McKay's early representations of sound were far less politically engaged than his later efforts, which had developed significantly. Compared to 'Subway Wind', the representation of laughter in *Home to Harlem* signalled a 'modern, social, classed, colored...contemporary sound heard on the streets'. The subway transports Jake right into the heart of Harlem, yet he makes little reference to the sensory experience of travelling on or emerging from Harlem's subway – the point of focus in several Harlem-centric texts. While this confirms both his haste to return to, and his familiarity with Harlem, the presence of laughter against the absence of subway sounds confirm that for Jake, the soundscape of the neighborhood is shaped by a human presence capable of being heard above the mechanical, industrial noise of the city. These sounds also permeate Jake's auditory experience to the same extent as music. 'Sugared' laughter and 'honey-talk' merge into ragtime and the blues, heard 'all night long' throughout the neighborhood. Where the laughter leitmotif appears a second time, it signals the beginning of Jake's detachment from the city. At a buffet flat in Brooklyn he describes the laughter of a 'putty-skinned mulatress' as that of 'an old braying jenny'³⁸, audibly confirming his unattraction to her.

Later, the motif is present in Ray's narration, in which he likens the sounds of black laughter to the 'melancholy-comic' of the Blues, 'rising out of a Harlem basement before dawn'. 'That was the key to himself and to his race', he observes, 'That strange, childlike capacity for

³⁸ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 60.

wistfulness-and-laughter...'³⁹. Through Ray's narrative, McKay attributes laughter not only to the emotional development of his characters, but to the broader feeling of cultural uplift and interrupted transcendence of African American experience. Laughter is not only an expressive sound but is inherently rooted in emotion; 'Maybe his own being was something of a touchstone of the general emotions of his race. Any upset – a terror-breathing, Negro-baiting headline in the metropolitan newspaper or the news of a human bonfire in Dixie – could make him miserable and despairingly despondent like an injured child. While any flash of beauty or wonder might lift him happier than a god...'. While Ray accurately describes the emotions of Jake in his return to Harlem, he acknowledges that laughter is embedded within a myriad of other audible signs of Harlem life – the 'brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness' of Harlem that he actively rejects. On the other hand, laughter is present in the most communal acts of black expression, in the 'warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitfulness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its blues'⁴⁰. The sound of Ray's own laughter is referenced in the final section of *Banjo* recollecting a letter of introduction drafted for him by a friend. 'He did not write: I think you will like to meet this young black intellectual', he recalls, 'but rather, I think you might like to hear Ray laugh'. The reference is heartfelt, affirming for Ray that while his education is an 'intellectual acquirement', his laughter is an 'instinctive gift'⁴¹. Much of the final section of *Banjo* is subsequently mapped with the sounds of black laughter.

The reappearance of the motif in *Banjo* signals an important development in the cultural narrative continued from *Home to Harlem*. The 'loud, ready-made laughter'⁴² in the bistros and cafés of Marseilles represents a multicultural claiming of sonic space, but it also signals an artificiality that echoes historical associations of minstrelsy and a stereotypical portrayal infantilised ignorance. Ray expresses an awareness, 'that whether the educated man be white

³⁹ Ibid, p. 266.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 267.

⁴¹ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 333.

⁴² Ibid, p. 309.

or brown or black, he cannot, if he has more than animal desires, be irresponsibly happy...Any man with an observant and contemplative mind must be aware of that'⁴³. If an element of performance remains in black laughter, for Ray, it is also present in the theatrics of black intellectuals. Men, he observes, who toted books 'to protect themselves from being hailed everywhere as minstrel niggers, coons, funny monkeys for the European audience – because the general European idea of the black man is that he is a public performer'. Echoing Wagnerian sentiments of concern over the industrialised development of modern life, he continues to muse over the 'rude anarchy' of the black seamen of the Ditch, whose audible 'loafing, singing, bumming, playing, dancing' represents for Ray a deeper connection to the 'irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race', questioning how that very same vitality would fare under the 'ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life'. Despite its broad social echoes, laughter and happiness in their simplest forms, represent for Ray the 'highest good'. He offers insight to this concern comes through the form of "*Home to Harlem Jake*", whose appearance in *Banjo* provides Ray with a connection to Harlem. In post-Prohibition New York, Jake makes clear that the 'Block Beautiful' had undergone a significant expansion, the 'race line of demarcation' (Eighth Avenue) pushed way back by 'invaders armed with nothing but loud laughter'⁴⁴, thanks in part to black realtors.

Railroad Refrain

The corresponding leitmotif to the sound of black laughter directly represents the concerns Ray expresses over the expression of black culture against the 'weight of the machine'⁴⁵. Against the sounds of black laughter and human expression, McKay accurately captures the sonorous conflict between the human and mechanical noises of New York's soundscape. When Jake

⁴³ Ibid, p. 333.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 303-4.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 335.

audibly perceives the elevated train “racketing” overhead and the subway “bellowing” beneath his feet, he positions Harlem as a place of transience, through which people are physically transported. In the broader examination of the leitmotif as a form of composition, the assaulting sounds of the elevated rail and subway are representative of chromatic variation, sitting on an audible scale both above and below the sounds of Harlem’s streets. The sounds of Harlem’s elevated rail and subway were as familiar to Harlem Renaissance writers as they were to their characters, and arguably formed one of neighborhood’s most recognizable literary leitmotifs. In Harlem, the railroad was a prominent historical feature. The development of Harlem in the late 1800s was ostensibly a direct result of the railroad being extended to the upper area of Manhattan. By the early 1900s, the sounds of the elevated rail were commonplace in the city. An article published in 1894 charts the progress of building the elevated tracks near the upper end of Manhattan and Central Park. The tracks were elevated to specific heights above water level. The article sheds some light on the immensity of the task, and the route the elevated rail would take. The article stated; ‘From the end of the tunnel at Ninety-sixth Street there is now a down-grade to One-Hundred and Sixteenth Street. The new grade will begin at One Hundred and Sixth Street...When completed, the new tracks will be about sixteen feet above Park Avenue’. The new tracks were reportedly built ‘with little noise and no fuss’⁴⁶, a far cry from the “racket” and “rattling” sounds frequently used to describe the elevated rail, particularly throughout the 1920s.

The presence of the ‘machine’ in the new industrial cityscape was an element which transformed the sonic environment of thousands of transient migrants and workers. Drawing upon this motif in the Wagnerian context, the presence of the railroad creates an expansive environmental setting for McKay’s narratives. Leo Marx declared the locomotive to be an ‘iron

⁴⁶ ‘Railroad Engineering in Harlem: Progress of the Work of Elevating the Central’s Track in Central Park’, *The New York Times* August 23rd 1894, p. 6.

horse' and a 'fire-Titan'. The railroad was the embodiment of the industrial age, he claimed, and an instrument of 'power, speed, noise, fire, iron [and] smoke'⁴⁷. The stark contrast between the natural landscape and urban cityscape, was first recognised much earlier than the Harlem Renaissance, as part of the pastoral ideal. By 1844, Leo Marx argues that the machine had 'captured the public imagination', and while the invention of the steamboat had been exciting, it was 'nothing compared to the railroad'. The shift towards the pastoral signalled a withdrawal from the complexities of the urban cityscape, in favour of a natural, unspoiled terrain. Marx addressed the interruption of the locomotive in physical and literary landscapes in his seminal study *The Machine in the Garden*, in which he states that the 'ominous' sounds of machines 'reverberate endlessly in our literature'⁴⁸. According to Marx, the presence of the machine was impossible to ignore, interrupting the idyllic vision of the natural landscape. He draws an image of the pastoral writer, 'sitting in his green retreat dutifully attaching words to natural facts, trying to tap the subterranean flow of thought and feeling and then, suddenly, the startling shriek of the train whistle bearing in upon him, forcing him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream'⁴⁹. He references the works of writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Sleepy Hollow*; 'But hark! There is the whistle of the locomotive – the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony...in short of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumberous peace...'⁵⁰.

Despite writing several years after the interruptions of the railroad on America's natural landscape, McKay places significant emphasis on industrial forms of travel. In *Home to Harlem*, the opening paragraph of 'The Railroad' echoes the description of the locomotive set out by

⁴⁷ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 191.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 15-16.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 14-15.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, p. 13-14.

pastoral writers: ‘Over the heart of the vast gray Pennsylvania country the huge black animal snorted and roared, with sounding rods and couplings, pulling a long chain of dull-brown boxes packed with people and things, trailing on the blue-cold air its white masses of breath’⁵¹ until the locomotive eventually ‘...whistled sharply and puff-puffed slowly into the station of Pittsburgh’⁵². The narrative shift depicts a period in which Jake is continuously in transit – working on a railcar travelling in a monotonous cycle between New York and Pennsylvania. Despite Jake’s insistence that he had had taken up the job on the railroad ‘just to break the hold that Harlem had on him’⁵³, he later claims to fellow nomad Billy Biasse that his time on the railroad had been spent “...running wild in the paddock of the Pennsy”⁵⁴. Jake’s repeated journey on the railroad to and from New York lacks in the same carefree spontaneity said to have driven his previous nomadic wandering. It is geographically a linear journey between two specific points of reference – a mode of travel along parallel steel tracks. He appears to seek a sense of stability not previously found in ‘ship-and-port town’ journeys, outlining his intention to spend just ‘One or two nights a week in Harlem. And all the days on the road. He would go like that until he grew tired of that rhythm...’⁵⁵. In the closing chapters of the novel, second protagonist, Ray, also recognises the limitations of railroad travel. McKay describes that Ray had ‘reached a point where going any further on the railroad was impossible’⁵⁶. Despite these restrictions, it is not surprising that in a novel so preoccupied with the rhythms of jazz, McKay recognises the sonic effects of the railroad, and the interactions between humanity and the “machine”. He begins his own autobiography with a description of his work as a waiter on the railroad, much like several of his characters. And, much like his fictional narratives, there is very little description of visual landscapes.

⁵¹ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 123.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 139.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 215.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 126.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 263.

For a young McKay, the sounds of the steam engine signify his return to New York, and only serve to intensify his desire to be in the city: ‘Roar louder and louder, rushing train and whistle, beautiful engine whistle, carry me along, for I myself am a whistle tuned to the wind that is blowing through me a song of triumph...’⁵⁷. On this subject, Schafer directs his readers to the observations of his colleague and contemporary of the *World Soundscape Project*, Howard Broomfield. According to Schafer, Broomfield observed a direct connection between the railroad and the development of jazz, claiming that ‘blue notes’⁵⁸ (slides from major to minor thirds and sevenths) could be heard in the wail of a steam train whistle. Moreover, Broomfield noted a distinct similarity between the ‘clickety-clack of wheels over track ends and the drumbeats’ claiming that such sounds (particularly the flam, the ruff, and the paradiddle) were simply too obvious to go unnoticed. Whether deliberate or not, references to jazz throughout McKay’s depiction of the railroad exemplify what Broomfield posits here. In Philadelphia, a piano player wanders into a tune that carries a distinctly monotonous rhythm, a sharp ‘tum-tum...tum-tum...tum-tum...tum-tum...’ reflective of the ‘clickety-clack’ sounds of the steam engine that Broomfield and Schafer allude to.

The formal influence of the railroad was also present in musical representations of Harlem. The circumstances that led to the composition of George Gershwin’s masterpiece *Rhapsody in Blue* often spark some debate and controversy, but the tale is frequently quoted as a significant event in the timeline of Gershwin’s work. In early January 1924, Gershwin came across an advertisement in the *New York Herald Tribune*, promoting a high profile concert to be held by Paul Whiteman and his Palais Royal Orchestra, at the Aeolian Concert Hall in New York, scheduled for Tuesday February 12th. The concert, titled “An Experiment in Modern Music”, was set to include new music by Irving Berlin and a new jazz symphony composed by

⁵⁷ McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Schafer, p. 113.

Gershwin. Gershwin would later claim that he had forgotten entirely about the concert, and the anticipated new symphony, until stumbling upon the newspaper advert. So it came to pass that *Rhapsody in Blue* was composed whilst Gershwin was travelling on a steam train bound from Boston to New York. In an interview, Gershwin would later state that he had been inspired by the mechanical rhythms of the steam train, ‘with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer’ that had spurred him to visualize the piece, adding, ‘I frequently hear music in the very heart of the noise’⁵⁹. Despite the “lore” surrounding the exact circumstances of the composition of *Rhapsody in Blue*, for the listener, the piece does seem to fit with the context of composition that Gershwin reports. Opening with a distinctive clarinet glissando, the symphony is made up of repetitive musical patterns that evoke the galloping pace of a steam engine, signalled in the musical notation as *moderato assai* (moderate tempo). The tempo then fluctuates, alternating between an exhausting and wild pace (*tempo giusto*) and a pace that gradually slows the rhythm (*poco rit.*). The solo piano at times seem discordant, the harmony arrives when the rest of the jazz ensemble bursts into life, interrupting the steady rhythm at intervals by a diatonic scale that ends in a high-pitched trill - or whistle. Notably, musical notation also directs the musicians to play *con moto* (with movement) suggesting the piece was intended to evoke some form of journey or physical motion.

For McKay, the transition between landscapes was a recurring formal feature of his narratives. In both the novels in question here, journeys are frequently made by railroad or sea. Much of Harlem and Marseilles are explored through the itinerant movements of McKay’s characters. Yet the presence, and in some case absence of the machine pervades both *Banjo* and *Home to Harlem*, positioning the presence of the machine at the heart of the jazz aesthetic. In ‘Jazz At Home’, Joel Rogers located the roots of jazz in African American musical tradition

⁵⁹ George Gershwin, in *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s*, Carol J. Oja (Oxford, New York; Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 65.

and spirituals, yet stated that in the move northwards, jazz had become an exponent of the “American environment”⁶⁰. In the modern and industrialised New York, Rogers argued that jazz had lost its uniqueness, and had instead become ‘...a safety valve for modern machine-ridden and convention bound society’⁶¹. In the urban shift, jazz had seemingly morphed into a musical form now distinctly detached from its African American roots; ‘with its cowbells, auto-horns, calliopes, rattles, dinner gongs, kitchen utensils, cymbals, screams, clashes, clankings and monotonous rhythm it bears all the marks of a nerve-strung, strident, mechanized civilisation’, Rogers concluded, ‘It is a thing of the jungles – modern man-made jungles’. Jazz had ostensibly seeped so far into urban consciousness, and had become so deeply inter-twined with the soundscape of the city, that it was virtually impossible to distinguish to whom this musical idiom belonged. Rogers claimed that the African-American could no longer claim ownership of it, and that ‘the Caucasian could never have invented it’. Jazz instead represented something elusive; absorbed into the environment in which it was produced, listened to, danced to, yet ultimately captured New York’s ‘tremendous sprit of go, the nervousness, lack of conventionality, and boisterous good-nature characteristic of the American, white or black’. The sentiment of this ‘nerve-strung’ mechanized metropolis is eloquently captured by Haitian migrant Ray, as he plans his departure in the closing chapters of *Home to Harlem*; “I’m getting sick of it”, he declares, “It’s a crazy, clattering, nerve-shattering life”⁶². In contrast, by the closing pages of *Banjo*, Ray expresses a desire to maintain the transient life of the railroad. He tells Jake, “I like this rolling along, stopping anywhere I’m put or thrown off”⁶³.

For young, transitory migrants, navigating new landscapes and sonic environments was crucial, and often necessary in economic terms, for those searching for work. As Thompson asserts, the technological changes driving Manhattan’s crescendo would have proved as

⁶⁰ Rogers, p. 216.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 217.

⁶² McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 239.

⁶³ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 316.

‘disconcerting’ for migratory residents as the ‘new racial geography’⁶⁴ of New York. She suggests that for African-American migrants from the South, the aural transformation would have been far more dramatic than ‘virtually any other group of Americans at this time’, echoing somewhat Alain Locke’s views in *The New Negro*, a seminal social text of the Harlem Renaissance, where he stated that the migrant masses moving from countryside to city during the early twentieth century not only negotiated new environments, but hurdled ‘several generations of experience at a leap’⁶⁵.

The transition between spaces is emphasised by the migrations made by characters throughout McKay’s narratives. The journeys, often made by large Atlantic freighters or via the railroad, present a distinct contrast between rural and urban landscapes, acting as a symbol of the industrial sonic environment, one that was perpetually in motion. In keeping with the displaced and transient rhythms of industrial and urban soundscapes, both *Banjo* and *Home to Harlem* are novels set in a continuous ebb and flow of motion. Notably almost all of the Harlem ‘literati’ were urban transients, and for many, Harlem was a ‘rather brief hegira’⁶⁶. John Lowney posits that the patterns of movement throughout McKay’s prose tend to vary, with Harlem as a ‘(sometimes) centrifugal and (sometimes) centripetal center’⁶⁷. This is certainly true of *Home to Harlem*, in which the neighbourhood features as the central cultural point of the novel, but is not the central feature of the narrative structure, being interceded by a section simply titled ‘The Railroad’. In 1922, journalist and writer, Burnet Hershey, published an article entitled ‘Jazz Latitudes’, in which he posited that jazz had set a new line of latitude around the globe, and could be traced as far as Calcutta and Cairo. Its location, he declared, ‘is reckoned by the degree of its jazz and computed exactly by the number of minutes and seconds it is

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 132.

⁶⁵ Locke, p. 4-6.

⁶⁶ Sidney H. Bremer, ‘Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers’, *PMLA*, 105.1 (1990), p. 49.

⁶⁷ John Lowney, ‘Haiti and Black Transnationalism: Remapping the Migrant Geography of *Home to Harlem*’, *African American Review*, 34.3 (2000), p. 423.

distant from its meridian – Tin Pan Alley⁶⁸. Whilst Harlem can be pinpointed as the ‘meridian’ of McKay’s fiction, his characters are frequently *en-route*, usually by industrialized modes of travel on the railroad or large transatlantic freighters.

The itinerant nature of McKay’s narrative is no more evident in his writing than in the opening scenes of his first novel, *Home to Harlem*. From the outset, his readers are unceremoniously dropped into the displaced rhythm that sets the tone for much of the narrative, tracing the trans-Atlantic ocean crossing made by Jake as he journeys on a freighter towards Harlem. The ocean provides a neutral landscape, a space in which Jake is one of several migrants, open to a wealth of different accents and dialects. From the outset, the Atlantic crossing is a sensory experience. The novel begins with a dialectical mix of Arabian and white sailors, opening with the statement; ‘All that Jake knew about the freighter on which he stoked was that it stank between sea and sky’⁶⁹. The distinctive ‘ship and port’ environment is perhaps best depicted throughout McKay’s second novel, *Banjo*. Here, migratory journeys are shaped by the rare availability of work on a ship, rather than the destination of the ‘regular broads’⁷⁰, in a somewhat similar story to that of the railroad workers of *Home to Harlem*.

The international presence in the port is described as producing a ‘roar and rush’, a ‘...babel of different dialects’⁷¹. The Quartier Réservé is in essence a slum; a haphazard series of alleyways into which Banjo and his dock-worker comrades frequently ‘descend’⁷². The Rue de la Reynarde is described as ‘...a loud jarring cluster of colored lights...shouting is trade’⁷³. In her reflections on modernism and its ‘imagined geographies’⁷⁴, Jessica Berman asserts that the key words of cross-cultural geographies are that of *relationship* and *change*; implying that

⁶⁸ ‘Jazz Latitude’, *The New York Times*, June 25th 1992, p. sm5.

⁶⁹ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 1.

⁷⁰ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 40.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 53.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁷⁴ Jessica Berman, ‘Modernism’s Possible Geographies’, in Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, eds. *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 281.

the connection between geographical impulse and human-landscape interrelations relies on the fact that the physical environment and landscape is never a static element; it is something which moves in both directions be it via forms of spatial mapping, visual, literary or sonic representation. This is particularly apt when considering the trajectory of popular jazz music, seemingly not limited to any singular direction. Berman notes that often, geographical concerns in modernist fiction form part of a ‘complex interdisciplinary conversation’⁷⁵, and that the bidirectional human-landscape relationship ‘becomes a multitudinous array of intersecting vectors that undermine the determinative power of any one set of borders or identities’⁷⁶. Much like Harlem, Marseilles is a relatively interstitial space – a place in which residence is relatively temporary, playing host to a multitude of people from all cultural backgrounds.

These spaces provide natural destinations for the international drifter, being inextricably linked as marginal spaces, or places of the *in-between*. Eric Prieto outlines this in spatial terms as that of the *entre-deux*; being somewhere that ‘designates that many different kinds of sites that fall between the established categories that shape our expectations of what a place should be’⁷⁷. As a result of their deviation from social norms, Prieto asserts that such places ‘are all too often thought of in terms of what they lack or what is wrong with them – as defective variants of more-established, better understood places’. Noelle Morrisette has recently explored the soundscape of James Weldon Johnson’s literary work, and recognises the various ways in which music fuels the formation of new social networks. In terms of jazz this not only provided agency for new production and collaboration, but signals music as being located in a broader environment, the ‘unstable or ambiguous boundaries’⁷⁸ of black

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 286.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 295-6.

⁷⁷ Eric Prieto, *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 1.

⁷⁸ Noelle Morrisette, *James Weldon Johnson’s Modern Soundscapes* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), p. 97.

internationalism. McKay himself describes the ‘barbarous international romance’⁷⁹ of Marseilles as being ‘significant of the great modern movement of life’, positioning the port as something of a paradox; the last Frontier between Europe and the rest of the world, and yet the dumping ground for global drifters;

Small, with a population apparently too great for it, Europe’s best back door, discharging and receiving its traffic to the Orient and Africa, favourite port of seamen on French leave, infested with the ratty beings of Mediterranean countries, overrun with guides, cocottes, procurers, repelling and attracting its white-fringed vileness under its picturesqueness, the town seemed to proclaim to the world that the grandest thing about modern life was that it was bawdy.

The presence of freighter ships travelling into and out of the port is virtually the only consistent element in the entire narrative of *Banjo*. The dock workers are later described as having a ‘canny’ ear for the sounds of ‘good’ ships;

They knew them by the note of their horns...They might be bunging out a barrel of wine, or picking up peanuts, or lying on the breakwater when one of the good ships (ships whose crews were friendly and gave the beach boys food) signaled its coming in. One would shout, tossing his cap into the air, “Oh boy! That theah’s a regular broad coming in!” And it would surely be one of their ships...

Here, the sounds of the ships represent both commercial prospects and social reunions with fellow workers or acquaintances. For several of the dock workers, the note of the horns also brings back memories of past journeys, ships that they had last seen in Pernambuci, or had ferried them from Casablanca. *Banjo* depicts a scene of ‘Indescribably happy surprise reunions, and stories reminiscent of how they got messed up with wine, girls, and police and missed their ships’. Freighters are frequently described by McKay by the goods they are transporting, cementing the image of the ship as a machine that transports commerce, even in the form of a fully formed orchestra, mentioned earlier in this chapter, which *Banjo* happens upon as they alight from a cargo ship recently arrived in Port Vieux. In this sense, we might return to Burnet Hershey’s ‘Jazz Latitude’, in which he pointed out that freighters were crucial in the

⁷⁹ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 71.

transportation (and subsequent transposition) of jazz. ‘Jazz follows the flag’, he wrote in 1922, ‘Ships freighted with jazz – “Made in America” – form the newest product of export to the Orient. Cargoes of jazz are laden on all vessels passing through the Golden Gate. To the Orient they sail, carrying the jazziest song hits, the latest dance steps and the phonograph records, stopping sometimes to unload some of the cargo of choice tunes at Honolulu’⁸⁰. Freighters were capable of bridging the gap, geographically transporting jazz and musicians between America and Europe. For the characters of Marseilles, the unique sounds of the ships’ horn signals an arrival in port, but the cargo and passengers of each ship contribute new sounds, dialects and forms of music to the soundscape of the port town, and The Ditch.

‘The *Mélange* of Disorder’

In *Banjo*, McKay also offered an aesthetic *entre-deux*, as a plot-less narrative that challenges the reader’s expectations of what a novel should be. Operatic themes are also more pertinent in both the form and plot of the novel. He refers to George Bizet’s *Carmen*, through the narrative of Haitian migrant, Ray who describes a young girl singing the Habanera - “*L’amour est un oiseau rebelle...*” (“love is a rebellious bird”). He observes that the girl’s voice is ‘incapable of holding a note or ascending very far’, although theatrically adopts the part of a vivacious Spanish gypsy with impeccable aplomb. The opera is the embodiment of ‘colliding realms’ and by extension, the perfect metaphor for the chaotic nature of Ray’s life. He notes his own position as a ‘black spectator of the drama’ in French newspaper columns filled with stories of *crimes d’amour et de la passion* and stories of revenge, typical to an operatic plot. The novel itself draws to a close with the passionate murder of a misogynistic Chauffeur by his young Arab lover, who produces a revolver from the folds of her skirt and shoots her former

⁸⁰ ‘Jazz Latitude’, *The New York Times*, June 25th 1922, p. sm5.

love in the middle of a café, before cradling him on the floor and ‘keening’⁸¹ her immediate remorse.

In the following chapter, the “revenge” murder of a policeman occurs, shot by a ‘Ditch-dweller’ released from prison. He observes the funeral procession as a ‘lugubriously comic procession’⁸². In particular, Ray considers ‘comic opera’ to be ‘ever a great thing of joy’, offering ‘such a perfect illusion of a crazy, disjointed relationship of all the arts of life. Singing and acting and orchestra and all the garish hues. Fascinating *mélange* of disorder. No one part ever equal to the other...All the world on a stage just wrong enough to be right’⁸³. He recalls how he ‘ascended the gods’ to attend a performance of *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York;

Going down from coloured Harlem to the opera then was a stealing away from his high home of heavenly “blues” and rag-time to taste some exotic morsel brought from a faraway other land of music...He felt a little lonely going, but was compensated afterward by the blood-tingling realization of how much the composite life of Harlem was like a comic opera. He had travelled far since those days, yet no scene had ever conveyed to him such a sensuous impression of comic opera as Harlem

If Wagner provided McKay with a musical association for encapsulating the length and breadth of Manhattan in its entirety, Bizet’s opera appears to offer a characteristically chaotic yet intricate depiction of everyday life that McKay sought to represent within narratives often led by rebellious, transient characters. The Habanera refrain enters the narrative again, through the verse; “*L’amour est enfant de Bohême, Il n’a jamais jamais connu de loi*” (“Love is a gypsy’s child, it has never, ever known the law”). In “the Ditch” of Marseilles, Ray observes that an operatic tune was not so out of place, nor as ‘exotic’ an occurrence as in Harlem;

Such airs flowing through the alleys were as natural as rain water washing down the gutters. It was often a delicious experience for Ray suddenly to hear a girl whistling or singing such a fascinating old favourite as “Connais tu le pays ou fleurit l’oranger...” or “Oui! On m’apelle Mimi...” or a fleeting fragmentary lilt from “La Flute Enchantée.” It was nonetheless lovely if the melody was broken by a volley of bullets

⁸¹ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 310.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 312.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 180.

tearing down some dark alley and scaring the Ditch to cover. That enhanced the color of the place as a theater. That endeared the Ditch to him

In a formal sense, the arias that Ray refers to here indicate ‘thematic statements’ common to the structure of the leitmotif. To paraphrase Stull, these themes are memorable and resonant *because of* their reoccurrence. Like arias, Stull argues that thematic statements ‘commonly sound during moments-out-of-time – moments of emotional and dramatic intensity ...as in opera, thematic transformations effectively accompany and communicate moments of transition’⁸⁴. The ‘airs’ and ‘gutters’ of the Ditch encapsulates both the heavenly transcendent and the temporal. McKay deftly bridges the concept of ‘colliding realms’. Ray positions the arias of Thomas, Puccini, and Mozart⁸⁵ in direct contention with the sounds of gunfire, heard elsewhere in the Ditch. The operatic refrains offer a transcendental feeling of freedom, away from the violent conflicts of the port town. He observes that the ‘poor overplucked chickens who loved to jazz all night to American rag-time and the music-hall hits of Mistinguett also had an ear for other kinds of music’. Like jazz, opera provided a form of music that was transportable, the embodiment of the transient listeners, dancers and performers that it attracted. With a surge in African-American Northern migrations, so too did the musical traditions developed from the oral folktales, folk songs and Dixieland jazz of the South migrate Northwards - carried by travelling orchestras and transient performers - morphing into classic Blues, Ragtime, and eventually, the ‘city blues’, Swing, and the polished big-band jazz heard in the cabarets of New York and Chicago. Michael Fowler suggests that *listening communities* are primarily defined through ‘...geographical, cultural, historical, and aesthetic territories and thus the use of key soundscape terms in describing such relationships is relative to the group’s mobility or transience within the landscape’⁸⁶. Representations of Harlem as Black America’s

⁸⁴ Stull, p. 104.

⁸⁵ In this extract, McKay includes extracts from Ambroise Thomas’s *Mignon*, Giacomo Puccini’s *La Bohème*, and Wolfgang Mozart’s *The Enchanted Flute*.

⁸⁶ Michael Fowler, ‘On Listening in a Future City’, *Grey Room*, 42.0 (2011), p. 31-32.

cultural “home” did not necessarily equate to a sense of rootedness. For many, Harlem symbolised distinctly metaphorical dimensions, being ‘not so much a *place* as it was a *state of mind*’⁸⁷; a synecdoche for the racial uplift that black intellectuals and artists envisioned throughout the 1920s and a substantial way into the 1940s.

McKay’s choice to weave the refrain from *Carmen* into the narrative of *Banjo* also acts as a retort to the critical reception of his work. Following its debut performance in 1875⁸⁸, Bizet’s opera was broadly considered as shocking and risqué, a critical reception that would be echoed by readers responding to the sexuality and debauchery of *Home to Harlem* in 1928. Du Bois was the most outspoken critic of the novel, declaring that McKay had appealed to the “prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilisation holds white folk back from enjoying [...] As a picture of Harlem life or Negro life anywhere, it is, of course, nonsense”⁸⁹. *Banjo* proved to be no less risqué than *Home to Harlem* in its content. In his reference to *Carmen*, deftly woven into the former narrative, McKay makes an important statement on his own radical nature – an open rebellion against Du Bois’s elitism and the ‘New Negro’ rhetoric.

Ray’s auditory recollection of spontaneous operatic arias mirrors the interweaving of popular jazz and Blues songs that appear intermittently throughout both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. For the most part, the songs are never “complete”, a reflection of the transience of McKay’s characters, who seemingly never remain in one place to hear a song in its entirety. It also offers an accurate reflection of the speed with which popular jazz songs became outdated, in favour of new sounds and dance crazes. The gypsy-like jazz and operatic refrains provide a formal framework through which to examine the extent of narrative improvisation, particularly in *Banjo*, which McKay subtitled ‘a story without a plot’. I argue here that, as opposed to free

⁸⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ‘Harlem on Our Minds’, *Critical Enquiry*, 24.1 (1997), p. 10-11. [emphasis added]

⁸⁸ Bizet was also criticized for being “too Wagnerian”.

⁸⁹ Manning Marable, ‘Marxism, Memory, and the Black Radical Tradition: Introduction to Volume 13’, *Souls*, 13.1 (2011), p. 9.

improvisation, McKay composes dramatic and sudden shifts within both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, echo the metaphorical and historical function of the ‘Tristan’ chord, intentionally creating the ‘mélange of disorder’ to which Ray refers.

This also prompts a comparison of jazz improvisation, against classical musical form. Arguably, even in improvisation there must be an underlying form of composition. Anthony Reed posits that while the improvisory act is spontaneous, improvisation itself remains ‘a repetition or re-articulation of what has come before ... Suspended between the known and unknown, the familiar and the strange’⁹⁰. In his introduction to Ralph Ellison’s *Jazz Writings*, Robert O’Meally comments that improvisation encourages the ‘individuality of sound’⁹¹, suggesting that jazz is an institution in the sense of that word’s Latin root, *statuere*: “to put in place” or “to stand”, as in *statue* and *statute*⁹². This exposes a stark contradiction between the perceived spontaneity – or improvisation – of a jazz performance, and the jazz aesthetic in recorded, or written, form. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, broadcast and print technology were fundamentally rooted in production of material for the masses; a shared consumer experience.

The positioning of jazz as something which is *rooted* also appears inconsistent with the notion that popular jazz songs, despite their origin in American culture, travelled across continents with immense speed. Attention might be drawn once more to Jake’s enthusiasm for the popular songs played in the cabarets of Harlem, or the popular version of the *Jelly Roll Blues*, repeatedly requested by the diverse crowd of the Marseilles port and willingly played by the orchestra of *Banjo*. In this sense, O’Meally’s suggestion of jazz as something *statute* highlights a duality. The origins of jazz were “put in place” and “rooted” in America. In this

⁹⁰ Anthony Reed, ‘A Woman Is A Conjunction: The Ends of Improvisation in Claude McKay’s *Banjo*: A Story Without A Plot’, *Callaloo*, 36.3 (2013) p. 761.

⁹¹ Robert G. O’Meally, *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), p. xii-xiii.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. xiii.

sense, America was the axis around which jazz continued to circulate. But an increasingly transposable sound and jazz aesthetic would inevitably have an effect on notions of improvisation and individuality. As Gary Giddens remarks, ‘The one truth of jazz...is that it incarnates liberty, often with a perversely proud intransigence, merging with everything and borrowing anything, yet ultimately riding alone’⁹³. According to Rogers, jazz signalled the ‘transplanted exotic’⁹⁴ of mundane world capitals; humble, hardy, contagious, and was noticeably more ‘at home’ in Harlem than in Paris, where it was ostensibly the sheer ‘epidemic contagiousness’ of jazz which made it so effective. He commented that in Harlem jazz music could ‘...like the measles, sweep the block’. As for jazz in the era of Harlem’s renaissance, Rogers declares this to be distinctly African-American, manifesting in something he terms as ‘jazz proper’⁹⁵. He states;

In its elementals, jazz has always existed. It is in the Indian war-dance, the Highland fling, the Irish jig, the Cossack dance, the Spanish fandango, the Brazilian *maxixe*, the dance of the whirling dervish, the hula hula of the South Seas, the *danse du ventre* of the Orient, the *carmagnole* of the French Revolution, the strains of Gypsy music, and the ragtime of the Negro...It is a release of all the suppressed emotions at once...It is hilarity expressing itself through pandemonium; musical fireworks.

His reference to ‘the strains of Gypsy music’ and the release of ‘suppressed emotion’ is closely echoed in Ray’s description of hearing arias drift through the Ditch. McKay similarly captures the transnational impact of jazz through the image of Banjo’s orchestra, which, while structured around the dominant sound of the banjo itself, nevertheless play the popular jazz standards of the moment. For McKay, this is inherently connected to a far broader context, beyond that of the band’s performance. He declares that the ‘...sharp, noisy notes of the banjo belong to the American Negro’s loud music of life – an affirmation of his hardy existence in the midst of the

⁹³ Gary Giddens, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.8.

⁹⁴ J.A. Rogers, ‘Jazz at Home’, in Locke, Alain, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 216.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 219.

biggest, the most tumultuous civilisation of modern life⁹⁶. The act of forming and performing as an orchestra is not necessarily a spontaneous action. An orchestral performance, as the one Banjo aspires to, requires some element of rehearsal. Notably, as an orchestra, and his band repeatedly perform the same song; ‘Shake That Thing! That jelly-roll Thing!’. It is not the tune that constantly changes, but the places in which they play it. The popular jazz bands of Harlem and Paris frequently played songs that merely had the *effect* of improvisation, but were not necessarily wholly improvised pieces. In fact, the song is played so often, that the distinction between narrative and song appears to merge; ‘Jungle jazzing, Orient wriggling, civilised stepping. *Shake that thing!* Sweet dancing of primitive joy, perverse pleasure, prostitute ways, many-colored variations of the rhythm, savage barbaric, refined – eternal rhythm of the mysterious, magical, magnificent – the dance divine of life...Oh, Shake That Thing!’⁹⁷

As Townsend initially notes, jazz is a musical idiom which despite its long-lasting legacy and popularity, remained a fluctuating and unstable form of music throughout much of the twentieth century. The rhythmic basis, instrumentation and the nature of jazz ensembles and their repertoires have ‘constantly changed’, the rate of which ‘has been comparable with that of other forms of art and entertainment in the twentieth century, subject to pressures of the market and responsive to changes of technology and public taste, as well as to the explosive creativity of its performers’⁹⁸. Townsend later remarks that the inherent instability and lack of control allows for greater aesthetic freedom and function, resulting in ‘innumerable variations of time, place, function, dialect, idiolect...At the extremes of the music there are styles between which the variation is so great that there are few common components left’.

Reflecting on the dominant theme of international mobility and diaspora throughout *Banjo*, Brent Hayes Edwards recognises a shift in political focus from that of the proletariat to

⁹⁶ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 51.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 60.

⁹⁸ Peter Townsend, *Jazz in American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 1.

a fleeting cosmopolitanism, and identifies the presence of the ‘international vagabond’⁹⁹ in the European port town of Marseilles. Ultimately, this label is not a comfortable one. Edwards remarks that, in *Banjo*, ‘...the “vagabond existence” does not fit – it lives its own logic and will not be passive...Ray regards it neither as a lifestyle choice nor as a passing fancy, but as the most crucial tool of survival in the modern world’. Joel Nickels asserts that, far from celebrating patterns of transnational interaction and cultural hybridity, the political undertones of McKay’s narrative serve as ‘...partial examples of an as yet unrealized political project’¹⁰⁰, establishing an ideological vision of African self-governance within a larger multi-ethnic international. He later argues that the inherent multiculturalism of the group dynamics in *Banjo*, ‘evoke the rudimentary structures of local negation that would constitute the building blocks of any decentralized, global democracy, along dissident international lines’. If this is the case, it would seem that there is a fundamental visionary structure behind McKay’s plot-less narrative. In the case of *Banjo* in particular, he simultaneously undermines his improvised narrative, whilst highlighting the usefulness of this illusive narrative device. The debate over the improvised nature of the jazz style that McKay adopts in his writing, is crucial to this aspect of supposedly ‘plot-less’ storytelling. Leland Chambers recognises improvisation as a mechanism for resolving fears and anxieties, on both a personal and collective level. He posits that ‘just as it is with jazz, to participate in in the inventing of these morbid, comic stories is to plunge into an expressive medium in which the playfulness masks the serious while allowing it to take voice’¹⁰¹.

What is clear throughout each of the texts examined here is the varied effects and inconsistencies that appear beneath a supposedly ‘improvised’ narrative. The representation

⁹⁹ Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘Vagabond Internationalism in Claude McKay’s *Banjo*’, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003) p. 198.

¹⁰⁰ Joel Nickels, ‘Claude McKay and Dissident Internationalism’, *Cultural Critique*, 87 (2014), p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Leland H. Chambers, ‘Improvising and Mythmaking in Eudora Welty’s “Powerhouse”’, in *Representing Jazz*, ed. By ed. by Krin Gabbard (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 66.

and use of the jazz aesthetic throughout both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, serves as an agency for new forms of spatial and sonic mapping, and new ways of highlighting the political and economic pressures of an uprooted and displaced African diaspora. Whilst in a formal sense his narratives reflect the vagrancy of the ‘Tristan’ chord, McKay’s cultural and political attitudes also struck a dissonant chord in the broader context of the Harlem Renaissance.

Erika Reiman defines the ‘Tristan’ chord as ‘dissonant by the general standards of mid-nineteenth century musical aesthetics’¹⁰². ‘Though its sonority is delicious’, she observes that as part of a broader composition the chord ‘begs for resolution’. She notes that in Wagner’s opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, the ‘Tristan’ chord is immediately followed by a dominant seventh. Instead of resolution, the dominant seventh chord ‘is simply left hanging’, a ‘musical symbol of the unsatisfied longings of the principal characters in the drama’. The perpetual irresolution of characters’ desires is a repeated trope of McKay’s narratives, marking the end of both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. If the leitmotif signals character development for his male protagonists, the ‘Tristan’ chord embodies the unresolved aspects of their progress and intermittent departures from the narrative. While Jake departs *Home to Harlem* bound for Chicago, his reappearance in *Banjo* reveals that his plan for a new life was provisional. In the latter, Ray and Banjo similarly depart for an unknown destination, Banjo making the vague declaration to Ray; ‘Come on, pardner. Wese got enough between us to beat it a long ways from here’¹⁰³. Ray’s final question acknowledges the futility of finding resolution in the relentless ‘march’ of modern civilisation; ‘...in this great age of science and super-invention’, he asks, ‘was there any possibility of arresting the thing unless it stopped of its own exhaustion?’.

Reiman refers to Arnold Schoenberg’s suggestion that there is ‘no rule that governs the chord’s existence and resolution’, but that it is a ‘vagrant’ chord which can ‘freely come and

¹⁰² Erika Reiman, ‘The Tristan Chord as Music-Historical Metaphor’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 67.4 (1998), p. 768. (768-73).

¹⁰³ McKay, *Banjo*, p. 336.

go'¹⁰⁴. However, she also recognises the 'Tristan' chord as that which provides a 'multifarious emotional resonance in line with its harmonic context'. In a jazz context, emotional resonance is communicated through fluctuating tempos and rhythms, a formal influence that provided McKay with an element of *disharmony* reflective of the precarious prosperity and numerous adversities of his male protagonists. While the initial dissonance of the chord contributed to its 'association with desire'¹⁰⁵, in connection with the emotional resonances of jazz and the Blues, it also incorporated the tri-tone featuring the 'flattened fifth' and its harmonic equivalent, the 'augmented fourth' – major and minor chords resulting in the same chromatic interval. The chromatic positioning of this tri-tone also echoes the theme of interrupted transcendence discussed earlier in this chapter, as the point at which the sound produced is neither ascending to a major chord, nor descending to a minor one.

His candid depictions of black life – particularly the lives of young black males – emphasised forms of self-expression and experiences of interrupted transcendence that went against the grain of Harlem's elitist rhetoric. He acknowledged that he was seemingly a product of the Harlem Renaissance, but was not of Harlem. 'The idea', he wrote, 'that I am an enemy of polite Negro society is fixed in the mind of the Negro elite. But the idea is wrong. I have never had the slightest desire to insult Harlem society or Negro society anywhere, because I happen not to be of it'¹⁰⁶. In writing narratives that recognised interrupted experiences of cultural transcendence, he reflected the fluctuations, desires, and morality in human nature. Langston Hughes praised McKay's difference in an unpublished review of both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, which he later sent to McKay. The review was seemingly in response to Harlem's black elite. He wrote:

In spite of the devastating criticisms which the Negro press gave 'Home to Harlem' and 'Banjo' ... I have always believed Claude McKay to be the greatest living Negro writer

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 771-2.

¹⁰⁵ Reiman, p. 769.

¹⁰⁶ 'A Glimmer of Their Own Beauty: Black Sounds of the Twenties', Box 13, f.425, Claude McKay Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

in creative literature today...there is about his poetry a singing beauty and depth of emotion that I find in no one else...most Negro book reviewers seem to feel that authors should write only about mulatto doctors, school teachers, or lawyers; and then only about such phases of our life as would do us no harm in the eyes of white people – as though poor Negroes were not human, as though all Negroes, unlike other races, had no faults...Claude McKay however, writes of life as he knows it...¹⁰⁷

In his frequent periods of exile from Harlem, McKay significantly broadened his aesthetic scope. Both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* offer an important discussion on the transnational impact and itinerant culture of Harlem, but in a formal sense, indicated the external influences and aesthetic “echoes” that inflected the literary works of African American writers. McKay’s construction of ‘colliding’ sonorous landscapes also signals the Harlem Renaissance as a movement in which new aesthetics of the early 20th century were not altogether detached from the aesthetic resonances of the 19th century – a ‘collision’ as opposed to a rupture of two artistic realms. As John Cage described, instead of offering ‘new sounds’, 19th century composers had stagnated in ‘endless arrangements of the old sounds’¹⁰⁸. ‘We have turned on radios and always known when we were tuned into a symphony’, he wrote, ‘the sound has always been the same...for interesting rhythms we have listened to jazz’. This is seemingly where McKay’s colliding soundscapes exist, in the liminal space between opera, jazz and modern “noise”. In the following chapter, I turn to the distinctly quieter melodrama of Nella Larsen, examining the impact of silence as part of Harlem’s literary soundscape.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Langston Hughes to Claude McKay, Box 13, f427, Claude McKay Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹⁰⁸ John Cage, *Silence* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 87.

3. ‘Like a Muted Violin’: *Passing* and the Quiet Fictions of Nella Larsen

In a lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in 1988, author Toni Morrison stated that the sound of the novel, ‘often cacophonous and at times harmonious’, must, above all else, be ‘an inner-ear sound, or a sound just beyond hearing’¹. In a wider context, the paper sought to examine and reinterpret the canon of American literature, positing that the ability of African-American authors to address that which is often left unspoken or silenced in narration has had a profound effect on nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction. In her approach, Morrison acknowledged that silences are not representative of a hollow void in the narrative. On the contrary, gaps and silences were often representative of profound, carefully constructed absences ‘...so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose’². In the plethora of fiction that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance, little of it was silent.

¹ Morrison, p. 160.

² Ibid, pg. 136.

In an interview published for *The New York Telegram* at the height of Larsen's career in 1929, a journalist commented that the author's voice sounded 'like a muted violin'³, adding 'You have to listen for it'. The same should be said of her fiction. This chapter will place Larsen's second novel, *Passing* (1929), at its centre, considering the formal and cultural connotations of textual silence. In a broader communicative context, textual silence is seemingly conflicted with the rich vernacular traditions of African American folklore. Larsen actively avoids the same colloquial discourses adopted by McKay, and in presenting a distinctly cosmopolitan narrative, so too does she eschew any engagement with folkloric modes of storytelling sought by Hurston. In formal terms however, *Passing* employs a pattern of 'carefully constructed absences' that Morrison recognises. Contextualising Larsen's fiction alongside Morrison's statement prompts the question; what constitutes a sound 'just beyond hearing'? Primarily, the sounds and silences of *Passing* provide a revealing commentary on social adjustment and cognitive dissonance. In the context of the novel, the recognition of sound just beyond the boundaries of aural perception might be interpreted in the literal sense, as a reference to the noises heard *in passing* – peripheral sounds and snippets of conversation overheard as the protagonist moves through a space. The silence of Larsen's narrative also allows for the development of an internal dialogue that is characteristic of Larsen's female protagonists. There is little doubt that the constructed silences within the novel are charged with all the 'intentionality and purpose' to which Morrison refers. It is worth too considering the inherent duality of silence. While McKay's youthful vagrants sought to create noise as a form of cultural expression and disruptive social protest, the sound of silence (in particular gendered silence) should sometimes be read as a sign of both rebellion and repression. The active silencing of female characters by their male counterparts is indicative of a repressive

³ Mary Rennels, 'Behind the Backs of Books and Authors', *The New York Telegram* (April 13th, 1929), in *Passing: A Norton Critical Edition*, by Carla Kaplan (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2007), p. 150-51.

domestic setting, yet the practice of silence as a form of masking provides her female characters with the agency to shape both their social and cultural identities. The gaps and silences that pervade her narrative provide a powerful message on racial marginalisation, but also amount to a shrewd observation of the society into which the novel was to be published and a perceptiveness of her own position and experience as an author of Harlem's Renaissance.

It is worth considering the ways in which a pattern of sonic signals drives the narrative towards its tragic end, resonating with Schafer's theoretical view of conscious listening and vulnerability. To some extent, this is intertwined with the changing position of the listener. From a phenomenological perspective, Don Ihde observes that in order to hear best, the individual instinct is to seek or call for relative silence. The call for silence is not capable of *producing* silence, but instead shuts out extraneous noise in order to hear better a single sound that calls for more concentrated attention⁴. This chapter will further posit that Larsen's characters practice a habit of conscious listening, and the careful curation of sonic identities in order to mask their racial identity and reinforce their social status. As Larson suggests, silence or invisibility 'is often one's only guarantee of survival'⁵. The very act of "passing" is represented by the recurrent silencing of Larsen's female protagonists, Clare and Irene, as a matter of both necessity and aversion to the act. Jonathan Sterne suggests that the practice of listening became a symbol of modernity, carrying with it 'a great deal of cultural currency'⁶. For Larsen's prudish protagonist, Irene Redfield, her ability to listen acutely to her environment and shape the conversation around her is vital to the maintenance of her social status amongst Harlem's bourgeois circles. New acoustic technologies meant that the sonic experience could be one of both collective and individual listening. By the nineteen-twenties there had been a

⁴ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 222-23.

⁵ Larson, p. xxi.

⁶ Sterne, p. 137.

re-shaping of auditory fields throughout both internal and external spaces across the city⁷. Increased levels of noise led to the subsequent silencing of space. Irene is an accurate reflection of a listener who actively rejects certain aspects of the modern auditory fields. As Emily Thompson indicates, ‘the majority of those who engaged with noise sought to eliminate it’⁸. When Irene recognises the blare of a radio she demands to know: “Why must they always have more noise?”⁹.

In the coinciding prominence of new radio technology and publication date(s) of Larsen’s work, the lack of radio and gramophone noise in her fiction is a noticeable omission. In both of her novels there appears to be very little engagement with new sound technologies or sonic realism. In *Passing* in particular, mechanical and recorded sources of noise are registered as the title of the novel suggests, merely heard *in passing* and therefore actively rejected as a nuisance and interruption to Irene’s discourse. Larsen’s omission draws into question the significance of recorded sound devices, and their subsequent demands on the listener. The shift from external mechanical sounds to mechanical sound-producing devices present in domestic spaces transformed the process of listening, and the type of listener. For many of Harlem’s residents, the phonograph was an affordable and accessible alternative to speakeasies or cabarets. For the first time, they were able to listen to songs played by well-known figures of the jazz scene who played almost exclusively for jazz venues owned by white patrons, from which the majority of Harlem’s residents were barred. Recorded music could cross boundaries of geography, class and race. In the upsurge of rent parties and the “buffet flat” culture in Harlem, the presence of a player piano¹⁰ or a phonograph was an appealing factor to visitors seeking music and liquor, returning a greater profit for hosts. The Victor Talking Machine Company began producing commercial records in the Spring of 1925, and

⁷ Ibid. p. 161.

⁸ Thompson, p. 6.

⁹ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 270.

¹⁰ Tim Armstrong, ‘Player-Piano: Poetry and Sonic Modernity’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 14.1 (2007), p. 16.

designed a new microphone-based electrical system called ‘Orthophonic Victrolas’ - designed to play the records they produced – which promptly became one of the most popular brands of the 1920s. Traditionally, funnel-like metal horns directed sound waves onto a recording diaphragm, but without a microphone, the sounds produced had no means of amplification. By 1927, the market was experiencing a shift between upright standing gramophones popular in the home, and those that were more portable. The Columbia Phonograph Company produced several models, namely the 153 Console Grand Grafonola, and the 111GP Luxury Portable Gramophone, which was small and constructed inside leather-covered briefcase for portability. Advertisements in *The New York Times* in December 1927 include elaborate seasonal promotions for the latest in ‘fool-proof and trouble-proof electric receivers’, in the form of the latest Stromberg-Carlson models sold by Davega, a radio dealership owning several stores across New York, including 125th Street, Harlem. Other adverts include promotions for the ARGUS all-electric radio, and the latest luxury models of the Brunswick Panatropé Radiola, available to shoppers on Fifth Avenue and set into an ‘exclusively designed cabinet’ designed to mirror the artistry of earlier period reproductions, worthy of the ‘perfectly appointed home’. For David Hendy, recorded music largely shaped the distinctive soundscape in the ‘Age of the Machine’. He suggests that recorded music had just as much of an impact on the soundscape as the railways and factories of the Industrial Revolution had, almost one hundred years prior. Recorded music, he posits, ‘contributed to the background rhythm of city noise that was busy, human-made, repetitive – and which, increasingly, was thought of as ever present’¹¹. In *Passing*, the omnipresence of this sound is precisely the source of Irene’s annoyance, but it also signals a specific distortion of the voice.

The sound of the gramophone created a sense of sonic detachment that continued into the era of portable devices and the advent of radio. According to Theodor Adorno, the

¹¹ David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2013), p. 265.

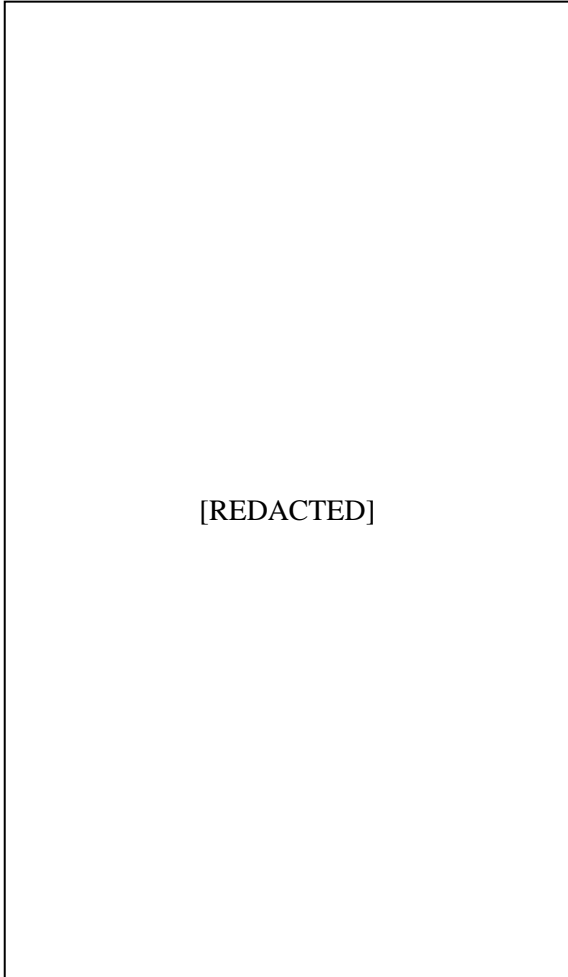


Fig. 5. *The New York Times*, December 2nd 1927

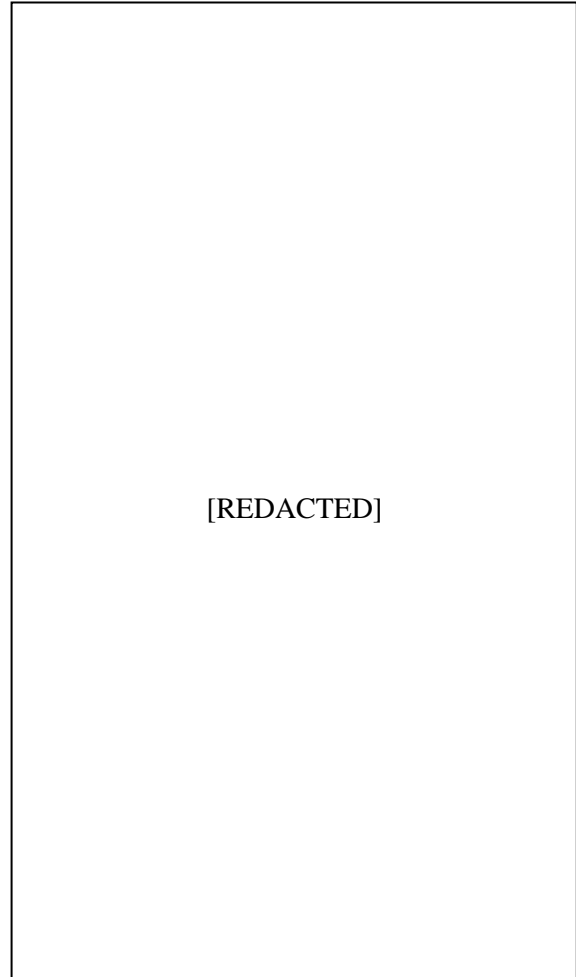


Fig. 6. *The New York Times*, December 2nd 1927

‘abstract’¹² form of sound prompted a reliance on additional sensory qualities – primarily visual - of both listener and performer if it were to continue to be related to the object that it sought to reproduce. His premise is rooted in the conflict between audible sounds and the bodily image, although it lacks validity somewhat when deeming the male voice to simply be ‘better suited’ to reproduction for gramophone records, than that of the female Blues singer, whose voice often sounded ‘shrill’. This issue, he suggests, was not the result of tonal or acoustic problems with new-fangled gramophone technology. The conflict lay in the fact that a male voice did not require validity when heard via means of a recorded device, but ‘in order to become unfettered’ the female voice required ‘the physical appearance of the body’ that carried it, in order to be deemed legitimate by the listener. He continues to assert that, in eliminating the visual image of the female body, the gramophone subsequently gave every female voice a sound rendered ‘needy and incomplete’. ‘Only where the body itself resonates’ he posits, ‘where the self to which the gramophone refers is identical with its sound, only there does the gramophone have its legitimate realm of validity’. At this point, readers of Adorno may well question the validity of his proposition, one lacking in any form of acoustic experimentation and rooted in erroneous gendered stereotypes. A more concessionary position might consider the visuals of phonograph record sleeves or promotional posters, in which the female body was depicted. The songs of artists such as Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith suffered little by means of popularity. Released in 1920, Smith’s “*Crazy Blues*” sold at the impressive rate of around 8,000¹³ copies a week. In Harlem, access to recordings enhanced the communal and social aspects of listening. Hendy notes that residents would travel to Seventh Avenue record stores close to Union Square, to meet, socialise, listen to and compare new music and recordings¹⁴.

¹² Theodore W. Adorno, ‘The Curves of the Needle’, in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert, trans. by S. H. Gillespie (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 273.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 264.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 263.

On a wider scale, Irene's question – 'Why must they have more noise?' - implies a rejection of the listener as part of a growing consumer culture. She struggles to distinguish whether the sound is that of the phonograph, or the radio, revealing a lack of familiarity with either of these sonic devices, and an indifference to the source of the sound itself. Returning to Adorno's theoretical observations, the gramophone was representative of a deliberate shift in bourgeois attitudes, as the 'fanfares of the street' proceeded to make their way into private apartments, the 'downtrodden gramophone horns' reasserting themselves as 'proletarian loudspeakers'¹⁵. By the turn of the century, the event of "listening" was increasingly advertised as a distinctly feminized activity, one that could be enjoyed in the privacy of the home, particularly in the case of musical records. Women became the target consumer market for the pianola and the phonograph; machines rendered in elaborate, hand-carved wooden cabinets, designed for the bourgeois home, completing the transformation of the piano from a musical instrument into an item of furniture. The relevance of these 'talking machines' is examined closely by Adorno, as a regulating aspect of music in the late nineteenth century, due in part to the 'spatially limited effect' of the machines. In the domestic scene of the 'late bourgeois family' gathered around a gramophone, he observes '...the diffuse and atmospheric comfort of the small but bright gramophone corresponds to the humming gaslight and is not entirely foreign to the whistling teakettle of bygone literature'¹⁶. His theory is challenged somewhat with the introduction of portable devices in the mid-late 1920s, which once again returned the "loudspeaker" to its exterior function.

In *Passing* Larsen engages with the domestic scenes of the black urban bourgeoisie with a distinct conservatism. Irene's association with domestic space is cultivated through familial relations, her husband and two sons. Her children follow a reversal of the familiar

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 273.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 272.

Victorian edict; that children should be “seen and not heard”. In contrast, Irene’s children are heard, but rarely seen, the occasional outburst of tussling and commotion from an upstairs playroom being the only indication of children in the house at all¹⁷. If, as Adorno suggests, the act of gathering around a sonic device within the home was marketed as a familial occupation, then this image too is absent. Irene’s rejection of the sounds emitted via radio is indicative of a renunciation of the domestic association with sonic technology. She is not a consumer of these new technological devices. Radio noise is noted as a source of sonic annoyance and disruption, crucially highlighting the discordance of the loudspeaker within the interior domestic space. The matter of conflict between the bodied (human) and disembodied (mechanical) voice heard via means of the gramophone is nevertheless a prudent observation. Where Larsen places the female voice in direct contention with the male voice, both are “bodied” sounds. In contrast, disembodied and abstract forms of sound, such as that overheard by her characters via gramophone or radio, remain free from gendered distinction. Sonic devices embedded within literature prompt a further level of detachment. Where the novel refers to acoustic technology or a form of loudspeaker, the reader is prompted to not only perceive the sound produced by such a device, but also the visual image of the device itself.

The source of sound here is not only reproduced and disembodied, but is embedded within a *soundless* form, and so enters into a further sphere of sensory detachment, one which both relies upon and challenges visual imagination and auditory perception. Despite the determined focus on the visual perceptions of modernism, the end of the nineteenth century marked an era of autonomy for both the eye and the ear. Sara Danius conceives that new technologies enabled a ‘perceptual matrix’, transmitting and reproducing both the acoustic and the visual. Such a ‘pronounced desire’, she remarks ‘to represent what is heard and, furthermore, to represent it in a register that is radically separate from what is seen, must be considered in

¹⁷ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 223 – 224.

light of those late nineteenth-century acoustic technologies that mediate the new matrices of perception, readily turning the sense of sight and that of hearing into autonomous activities'¹⁸. These new modes of perception extended, not only to the senses, but to the social perceptions of listening.

The interruption of technological sound is reinforced by Irene's aversion to the telephone, her preferred method of communication being by means of the more traditional, handwritten letter. The novel begins as Irene sits alone, sorting through a small pile of morning mail. The act of writing is a quiet, personal, and solitary task. Upon receipt of a letter from Clare, she notes that even the envelope – long, thin, Italian paper – appears 'out of place and alien', implies a distinct furtiveness; the envelope 'a thing sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender'¹⁹. Recalling her re-encounter with Clare Kendry, Irene's increased disdain prevents her from drafting and sending a reply, initially tearing the letter in half before flinging it into a nearby scrap basket. In a calmer moment of reflection, she chooses instead to use the social implications of silence as an indicator of her rejection; '...better to answer nothing, to explain nothing, to refuse nothing to dispose of the matter simply by not writing at all. Clare, of whom it couldn't be said that she was stupid, would not mistake the implication of that silence...The whole thing would be very easy. The basket for all letters, silence for their answers'²⁰. As a method of communication, the letter carries certain expectations upon both the sender a receiver; indicating an unspoken demand for engagement on the part of the recipient, and the quiet assurance on the part of the sender that he or she will receive some form of response. In the opening of the third chapter, Clare's demands are signalled through the 'insistent jangle' of the telephone. 'For hours', she claims, 'it had rung like something

¹⁸ Sara Danus, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 156-7.

¹⁹ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 171.

²⁰ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 222.

possessed'²¹. Fragments of conversation follow Irene's answering of the phone, her readers overhearing only the interrupted portions of Clare's responses; 'It's Clare, 'Rene...Where *have* you been?...Can you be here around four?...What?...But 'Rene you promised! Just for a little while...you can if you want to...I am *so* disappointed...'. Here, the figure of the listener shifts and an additional demand is placed upon the reader. Irene's indirect discourse is a form of self-censorship, omitting her own responses in the conversation between herself and Clare. The reader is positioned as the eavesdropper, forced to make presumptions as to what Irene's subsequent responses are, and to fill in the gaps visually represented by ellipses in Larsen's prose.

Irene's evident antipathy towards the telephone is distinctly at odds with her societal position; the main function of the device being to provide instantaneous communication as part of a collective network, with virtually unlimited horizons. As Sterne writes, telephony 'not only increased personal agency as a kind of fixed capital – "the multiplication of power" but also provided a kind of audible immediacy at a distance previously reserved for the telegraph'²². He persuasively argues that sound-producing technologies developed and embodied a diverse range of auditory practices and techniques. For Irene Redfield, her aversion to answering telephone calls, or listening to the 'blare' of the radio, seems as much to do with the overwhelming influx of auditory technologies, as it does her uneasy relationship with the woman on the other end of the telephone. These 'salient' features, the 'connection of listening and rationality; the separation of the senses; the segmentation of acoustic space; the construction of sound as a carrier of meaning in itself; and the emphasis on physical, social epistemological mediation'²³ were shaping and re-shaping the traditional methods of the listener, and the social conception of listening, established in the 19th century. An advert for

²¹ Larsen, *Passing*, p.193.

²² Sterne, p. 168.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 175-177.

the American Telephone & Telegraph Company, dubbed “The Instantaneous Answer” sought to enforce the importance of both sending a message, but also gaining a response without delay²⁴. As with radio, the telephone challenged colour prejudices, frequently marketed as a device for the democratic age, connecting all. As Sterne remarks, ‘the ability to *hear* in new ways was a hallmark of progress and modernity’²⁵. Hanging up the telephone receiver with an ‘emphatic bang’, Irene’s annoyance is evident, having accepted an invitation for afternoon tea - one that she had so strenuously tried to avoid – convinced merely by the tone of Clare’s voice on the opposite end of the receiver; ‘What was it about Clare’s voice that was so appealing, so very seductive?’²⁶. The incessant ringing of the telephone is repeated at several moments throughout the novel, through the description of Clare’s voice. As in McKay’s narrative, Larsen attributes laughter to a form of expressive ownership, a signal for Irene of Clare’s dominance in her own discourse. Here too, the laughter motif is heard. Jennifer DeVere Brody suggests that in laughter Clare ‘sounds alarms’²⁷ to Irene. In her initial encounter with Clare, Irene likens the sound of her laugh to ‘a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling’²⁸. At hearing the laugh a second time, Irene perceives the trill of notes as being ‘small and clear and the very essence of mockery’²⁹. During another encounter, the ‘ringing bells’ of Clare’s laugh adopt a different tone, a ‘hard metallic sound’³⁰. Later, the distinctive musical trill is heard again, ‘following one another in sequence after sequence’³¹ and signalling Clare’s presence to Irene amongst a room filled with guests. For Irene, the sound of Clare’s voice is paradoxical. Whilst she does not wish to hear Clare over the telephone, there are moments in which she seems actively attuned

²⁴ Ibid, p. 169.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 168.

²⁶ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 194.

²⁷ Jennifer DeVere Brody, ‘Clare Kendry’s “True” Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*’, *Callaloo*, 15.4 (1992), p. 1056.

²⁸ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 180.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 183.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 189.

³¹ Ibid, p. 230.

to the sound. She repeatedly notes Clare's voice above others in a crowded room, and displays both a scorn and admiration for Clare's conversational skill as a hostess. Following Clare's death, Irene recalls the sound of her laughter again, equating it with a beauty that 'had torn at [her] placid life'³².

'The Cocktail Party Effect'

Larsen's female characters embrace both the visual and auditory capabilities required to immerse themselves as both participants in and hosts of Harlem society. These traits are no more evident than in *Passing*, through the characterisation of Irene Redfield as socialite, whose success as a hostess relies primarily on her capabilities as a listener, the sound of polite human "chatter" in a room being the mark by which she measures the success of a party or social gathering. She frequently relies on her auditory senses to measure the volume and manner of conversation at her parties, distinguishing between idle gossip and more intriguing fragments of conversation heard as she circulates the room, timing each event according to the chiming of a clock resounding from a nearby room. This process of listening to two sounds simultaneously ("shadowing") has been identified by Peter Cherry and Neville Moray as 'dichotic listening', or 'The Cocktail Party Effect'. Moray suggests that in 'selective listening', certain sounds break through the auditory 'block'. He suggests that '...a subject will respond to his own name even though the signal/noise ratio is low, as at a cocktail party...'³³. For Irene, the sound that breaks through her auditory block is not the sound of her own name, but the sound of Clare's voice. At the same time, she continues an inner-voice narrative, for the benefit of both the reader and her own subconscious thought process. Amidst these scenes of polite

³² Ibid, p. 272.

³³ Neville Moray, "Attention in Dichotic Listening: Affective Cues and the Influence of Instructions", *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 11.1 (2008), p. 57.

social ‘chatter’, the crackling noises emitted from the radio, gramophone, or phonograph are observed by Irene in much the same manner as an unwanted guest.

Seeking a moment of solitude in the midst of a tea party in a Harlem apartment, Irene notes the ‘familiar little tinkling sounds of spoons striking against frail cups’ and ‘the soft running sounds of inconsequential talk, punctuated now again with laughter’³⁴ as providing a form of equilibrium and familiarity in her immediate aural surroundings. The description of internal social settings are central to Larsen’s narrative. According to Irene’s auditory perception, this form of sonic activity achieves a certain balance, a natural ebb of chatter ‘disintegrating, coalescing, striking just the right note of disharmony [and] disorder’ in the room. Into this sonic equilibrium the noise of an indistinctive machine is overheard: ‘Someone in the room had turned on the phonograph. Or was it the radio? She didn’t know which she disliked more. And nobody was listening to its blare. The talking, the laughter never for a minute ceased. Why must they have more noise?’³⁵.

Attempting to move further away from the source of noise, Irene is confronted with another, equally unappealing proposition from a fellow party-goer: ‘Come along and talk to me, or listen to me gabble’. The party continues, the disembodied voices of the radio are lost, and the ‘gabble’ of bodied human sounds take precedence. The disconcerting blare of the radio and low sounds of conversation are promptly interrupted by the ‘roar’ of Clare Kendry’s husband, John Bellew, heard ‘above all the other noises of the room’ as he discovers the truth of his wife’s deception and racial passing, his voice ‘a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and pain’. The modernist rhetoric and the familiar pattern of city noise is subverted; mechanical noise is effectively “drowned out” by unrestrained human expression, as opposed to a machine-driven suppression of the sound(s) of human conversation. In Irene’s audible awareness, there

³⁴ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 252.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 270.

is little distinction between music and noise. The distinct rejection of radio noise throughout *Passing* seems to have a dual effect.

Primarily, Larsen highlights a culture of abating noise, capturing the on-going campaign of many New York residents, as an agency against the production of noise in all forms; be it audible disruptions by human, mechanical, or technological sound. The interruption of the radio blare causes Irene irritation, because it interrupts her internal thought process, and preference for silence and solitude. This sonic shift in the room also proves to be the signal for a distressing culmination in Larsen's narrative, as moments later, Clare Kendry falls silently to her death from the upper-floor window of the apartment. In this moment, the only sounds heard are several gasps of horror, punctuated by Bellew, who is heard above all emitting a sound 'not quite human, like a beast in agony'³⁶. The incident is captured momentarily; 'One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone'. Here, there is a notable shift, as Larsen's narrative relies almost entirely on the use of sound expressing the immediate reactions to Clare's death. The audible response is heard from other guests present in the crowded apartment. At the moment of her fall, Clare emits no scream, and in the moments afterwards, Irene is rendered silent. The incident is followed by gasps of horror, and 'a frenzied rush of feet down long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors. Voices'³⁷. Retreating, Irene once more seeks a solitary room, making her way 'noiselessly into the bedroom and closing the door softly behind her', listening fearfully to the voices and commotion below the open window. Joining the other guests on the street, the conversation takes place in hushed tones and whispers, '...the awed, discreetly lowered tones adapted to the presence of disaster'³⁸. The sound emitted by Bellew is also symbolic of the imbalance between the vocalisation of male and female voice throughout the

³⁶ Ibid, p. 271.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 272.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 273.

narrative. Clare's dying moment is "voiced" by Bellew in a sound entirely uncharacteristic of her seductive, 'tinkling' expression.

The silencing of women by their male counterparts is a familiar trope throughout Larsen's fiction. In looking beyond the visual binaries of the colour-line in *Passing*, the sonic differences are shaped by gender binaries, rather than racial ones. Irene and Clare are frequently silenced or interrupted by their husbands. Bellew's presence is often accompanied by loud expressions, heard above others in a crowded room. More than once in the narrative, his voice "roars" above others in expressions of laughter or anger, and it is difficult not to notice the close similarity in "Bellew" and "bellow", seemingly reflective of the way in which he expresses himself and gesturing to an intentional double meaning on Larsen's part. This is also an echo of Clare's childhood, in which her drunken father, 'raging up and down [a] shabby room, and bellowing curses'³⁹ at her. Upon her first encounter with Clare Kendry, the unidentified man that Clare sits with is described as 'booming', in contrast to Clare's 'slightly husky' tones⁴⁰. Yet for Larsen, it seems that "loudness" does not automatically equate to "masculinity". Irene's husband, Brian Redfield is far from outspoken. Both his movement and speech seem to be intentionally subdued, entering a room in such a 'noiseless' way that Irene finds disconcerting in spite of numerous years of marriage. Yet repeated silences in their communication with one another reveals the fragility of their relationship, and frequently Irene is silenced under the 'lash' of her husband's words.

The women of Larsen's novels repeatedly reject the popular need to create "noise", or to establish themselves as sonic beings. To some extent, the silencing of both Irene and Clare reveals the oppressiveness of their respective relationships. Yet silence can also act as an agency for empowerment. At the closing of the novel, when Bellew confronts Clare about her

³⁹ Ibid, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 176.

racial passing, his rage is met with silence by his wife. Clare offers neither confirmation nor explanation of her actions, while Bellew's expressive rage is met instead with a quiet, defiant composure. For Mary Chapman, silence was a defining concept for female empowerment in the campaign for suffrage. She cites Carla Peterson's suggestion that African American women tried to emphasize 'the quietness of [their] bod[ies], the chastity of [their] language and the purity of [their] voices...in order to avoid censure'⁴¹. Chapman continues to observe that 'although African American women participated alongside their male counterparts in silent stunts such as the 1917 silent parade...they stayed clear of noisier spectacles in the public sphere'⁴². To some extent, Larsen's novel has the same functional effect as the printed suffrage material that Chapman refers to, as a form of 'stylized silence'⁴³ that embodies the political, domestic, and racial voicelessness of her female characters. However, Clare's death is also an act of ventriloquism, which removes the power of her silent defiance towards Bellew. As Chapman suggests, ventriloquism served 'either to depict women as spoken for by men...or to imagine how women can reverse this ventriloquism by rewriting patriarchal statements that deliberately or unconsciously exclude them'. For Irene, the silence of Clare's fall and the ventriloquist response by Bellew is also an advantage, precisely because it renders the event and her involvement in it, ambiguous to both onlookers of the scene and Larsen's readers. In the immediate aftermath, Irene's state of shock heightens her aural sensibilities. She hears the 'frenzied rush of feet down long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors. Voices'. Initially retreating from the sounds that signal the presence of other partygoers, Irene listens 'fearfully', eventually making her way down the stairs to join the circle of strangers around Clare's body; 'They were all speaking in whispers, or in the awed, discreetly lowered tones adapted to the presence of disaster'. Similarly to Bellew the last sounds emitted from Irene are

⁴¹ Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African American Women Writers and Speakers in the North (1830-80)*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p.122.

⁴² Chapman, p. 7.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 9.

merely expressions of pain, her words cut short: ““She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I-”. Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again’. Unable to express herself, the narrative closes with the sound of an unidentified male voice defining the reason for Clare’s sudden passing: “Death by misadventure I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look at that window”. ‘Misadventure’ is unwittingly the term applied to Clare’s “unspoken” racial passing that surreptitiously plagues the narrative.

In her female characters, Larsen frequently highlights an antipathy towards the open discussion of race. Meeting with Clare and a mutual friend, Gertrude, at Clare’s apartment, the three women discuss the topic of racial passing. In the presence of Clare’s white husband, the conversation threatens to reveal Clare’s own passing, unknown to her husband. Bellew’s own racist sentiments are met by an uneasy mixture of shock and laughter by the three women, and the conversation is eventually suppressed altogether; ‘From Gertrude’s direction came a queer little suppressed sound, a snort or a giggle. Irene couldn’t tell which’⁴⁴. It’s an unwanted topic of conversation, navigated by Clare’s ability to steer the conversation away from race, and other ‘thorny subjects’. For Irene, this proves to be ‘the most brilliant exhibition of conversational weight lifting that [she] had ever seen’, Clare’s words ‘swept over them in ‘charming well-modulated streams. Her laughs tinkled and pealed. Her little stories sparkled’⁴⁵. The silence associated with talk of race places a much greater emphasis on the risks involved in racial passing, particularly for Clare. For a short while, the sound of Clare’s voice transports Irene away from the immediate sense of danger; ‘...her voice, her gestures, coloring all she said of wartime in France, of after-the-wartime in Germany, of the excitement at the time of the general strike in England, of dressmakers’ openings in Paris, of the new gaiety of Budapest’. In this instance voice is gendered, the “roar” of Bellew overpowering the delicate ‘ringing bell-

⁴⁵ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 199.

like laugh' of Clare. Into this medley Gertrude's 'shrill' laugh can be heard, followed by Irene's, giving way to 'gales of laughter' at Bellew's expense, followed by an abrupt silence; 'She [Irene] laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided...catching sight of Clare's face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her. At once she stopped'⁴⁶.

In Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, Helga Crane's apparent aversion to the topic of race is even more profound than that of Irene:

The tea to which she had so suddenly made up her mind to go she found boring beyond endurance...The aimless talk glanced from John Wellinger's lawsuit for discrimination because of race against a downtown restaurant and the advantages of living in Europe...to the significance, if any, of the Garvey movement. Then it sped to a favourite Negro dancer who had just then secured a foothold on the stage of a current white musical comedy...Then back to racial discrimination⁴⁷

In two novels in which race "creeps in" as a dominant theme, the less that is openly said about the topic, the more the issue is apparent. What she highlights through her female characters, is the dangers of remaining silent on the issue of race. Crucially, Larsen also draws a distinction between what is *heard* when discussing race, in comparison to that which is *seen*. During Helga's time in Copenhagen, she sits in the audience at a vaudeville show, in which two black minstrel performers sing old American ragtime song – "Everybody Gives me Good Advice" - to a European audience. For Helga the song is nostalgic, dredging up suppressed childhood memories. Yet, sat amongst a predominantly white audience, it also confronts her with a visual perception of race. Shocked, she remains 'silent and motionless' as the performers are met with rapturous applause. Filled 'with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage', she instead describes unvoiced feelings of shame and betrayal, 'as if these pale pink and white

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 201.

⁴⁷ Larsen, *Quicksand*, p. 83.

people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget'⁴⁸. Left 'profoundly disquieted' by the incident, Helga nevertheless returns '...again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator'. Seemingly, it is not the performance itself that she is watching, but the reaction of the audience, providing some measure of the reaction to her own presence in Copenhagen, in which her white relatives and their wider social circle elevate her as something of a racial "Other". To some extent, this passage serves to emphasize Helga's own crisis of identity. She does not actively "pass" in the same manner as Clare Kendry, yet her association throughout much of *Quicksand* is with the Harlem bohemia, and white European socialites. Having initially scorned the downtown areas of a repressive white Manhattan upon her arrival in the city, Helga soon finds herself venturing outside of the confines of the neighbourhood. The swarming streets of Harlem become an affront to the senses, and she eventually recoils in aversion from 'the sight of grinning faces and from the sound of easy laughter of all these people who strolled, aimlessly now, it seemed, up and down the avenues'⁴⁹.

While Helga Crane's aversion to the topic of race resides mostly in the visual confrontation of the topic, then the clandestine nature of *Passing*, the silences associated with discussions of race and the silencing of the black female voice emphasises Larsen's wider commentary on racial and social inequality. For Rafael Walker, Irene is 'overwhelmingly characterized as a punctilious woman intent on colouring inside the lines', and therefore 'makes the perfect vessel for exploring the stranglehold that racial binarism exerts on social thought in the United States'⁵⁰. In contrast, Clare carries a distinctly 'disruptive potential', that threatens to deconstruct the rigid social and cultural boundaries that structure Irene's life.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 112-13

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 79.

⁵⁰ Rafael Walker, 'Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in *Quicksand* and *Passing*', *MELUS*, 41.1 (2016), p. 179.

Despite Larsen's vein of conservatism, Sinéad Moynihan, argues that she sought to reveal the 'arbitrariness of whiteness as a racial category'⁵¹. Exploring the parallels between Clare Kendry and Daisy Buchanan, the wealthy young flapper at the heart of *The Great Gatsby*, Moynihan makes the persuasive case for examining *Passing* as a 'veiled engagement'⁵² with Fitzgerald's distinctly white American novel, suggesting that Larsen's "blackening" of *Gatsby* 'works to radically destabilize any secure sense of Daisy Buchanan's whiteness by linking her quite emphatically with Clare Kendry'⁵³. Moreover, Moynihan argues that in questioning Daisy's whiteness, Larsen succeeds in 'exploding the idea of normative whiteness altogether'⁵⁴. Moynihan notes that there are key connections in the racist sentiments expressed by Daisy's husband, Tom Buchanan, and John Bellew, but observes that the most compelling similarity is found in the audible resemblances between Clare and Daisy. The voices of both Daisy and Clare are repeatedly described as 'husky', the sound of their laughter also carrying musical connotations. Moynihan refers to Nick Caraway's observation of Daisy's voice as being 'the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again'⁵⁵. While Daisy's voice is charming, Nick observes that the sound is also 'full of money...the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it'⁵⁶. As Moynihan suggests, Nick's perception of the 'basic insincerity' in Daisy's voice is echoed in Irene's aural perception of Clare's laugh - 'the very essence of mockery' - and her words, which Irene notes have a tendency to sound "harsh" or take on a cold, metallic quality.

⁵¹ Sinéad Moynihan, 'Beautiful White Girlhood?: Daisy Buchanan in Nella Larsen's *Passing*', *African American Review*, 47.1 (2014), p. 42.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 37.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 38.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 42.

⁵⁵ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2001), p. 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13.

Voice, in this instance, provides a revealing insight into the perceived shallowness of both women. For readers of *Gatsby*, the sound of the insincere female voice is an intentional reference by Fitzgerald to the cultural perceptions of superficiality and ‘vast carelessness’ attached to the figure of the flapper. Daisy Buchanan lacks (or is concealing) a certain level of complexity. In Irene’s opinion, Clare, much like Daisy, is a ‘careless’ and concealed figure. Yet the insincerity of Clare’s voice and laughter are subject to Irene’s description. Larsen’s readers “hear” Clare through Irene’s aural perception, eschewed somewhat by her feelings of both antipathy and desire towards Clare. The “queer” narrative has been the topic of repeated scholarship on the novel. Deborah McDowell suggests that given the numerous racial and cultural ambiguities in *Passing*, sexual ambiguity and desire is a conceivable point with which Larsen can ‘flirt’⁵⁷. McDowell also observes that the “queer” narrative is ‘buried’ behind a narrative already filled with silences and the unspeakable. The ‘erotic subplot is hidden beneath its safe and orderly cover and the radical implications of that plot are put away by the disposal of Clare’, her ‘vitality and passion’ permanently silenced⁵⁸. Crucially, Moynihan acknowledges the fact that whilst there is no firm evidence to suggest Larsen had read *Gatsby*, the novel was virtually impossible to ignore, given its broad cultural impact. She points to the mutual friendship of Carl Van Vechten as a key social link between the two authors. The connection is supported by the selected diary entries of Carl Van Vechten, which reveal that Larsen and her husband, Elmer Imes, were moving in the same social circles as the Fitzgeralds. A diary extract dated 29th March, 1927, suggests that Van Vechten, Nella, Scott and Zelda were all in attendance at a party hosted at the home of Lawrence and Armina Langner⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ Deborah E. McDowell, ‘Black Female Sexuality in *Passing: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by C. Kaplan (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2007), p. 371.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 377.

⁵⁹ Carl Van Vechten, ‘Nineteen-Twenties: Days and Nights’ [selected extracts], *New England Review*, 24.2 (2003), p. 129.

The Blues Aesthetic

That Clare has been “passing” for a substantial period, would suggest that she is not as careless as Irene would have readers believe, but rather treads a carefully constructed path in hiding her black identity from her husband. For Lori Harrison-Kahan, Larsen ‘applies musical form to her writing so seamlessly that critics have largely missed its significance as a structuring device’⁶⁰. In the structure of *Passing*, Kahan notes a twelve-bar blues aesthetic, the novel’s three parts – “Encounter”, “Re-encounter”, and “Finale” - each consisting of four chapters, mimicking a twelve-bar rhythm ‘spread across three lines with four measures to a line’⁶¹. Furthermore, the article signals the variations and repetitions commonly used in classic Blues songs by singers such as Ma Rainey, strategies of repetition resembling riffs, ‘short musical phrases that are sounded over and over to create faint echoes of one another’⁶². In its aesthetic comparison between the structure of *Passing* and the influence of the Blues, the article paints a convincing picture. Thematically, blues singers such as Rainey and Bessie Smith sought to make their work accessible to black working-class audiences. Angela Davis notes that Smith’s songs ‘...at once reflected and conferred order upon the social experiences of black women and men in their emotional responses to those experiences...the myriad emotional qualities with which her voice transmitted these themes – pathos or humour, aggressiveness or resignation, irony or straight-forwardness – were the various ways in which her working-class sisters and brothers lived the realities of these themes’⁶³. These themes included the daily struggle of black women’s lives, work, crime, and domestic abuse inflicted by male partners. Writing for *Vanity Fair* in 1925, Van Vechten wrote of the Smith’s performance;

...she began her strange rhythmic rites in a voice full of shouting and moaning and praying and suffering, a wild, rough, Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, but seductive

⁶⁰ Lori Harrison-Kahan, ‘Structure Would Equal Meaning: Blues and Jazz Aesthetics in the Fiction of Nella Larsen’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 28.2 (2009), p. 268-69.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 271.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 272.

⁶³ Angela Y. Davis, ‘Up In Harlem Every Saturday Night’, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 142-3.

and sensuous too...Now, partly inspired by the expressive words, partly by the stumbling strain of the accompaniment, partly by the powerfully magnetic personality of this elemental conjure woman with her plangent African voice, quivering with passion and pain, sounding as if it had been developed at the sources of the Nile, the crowd burst into hysterical shrieks of sorrow and lamentation. "Amens" rent the air.⁶⁴

Similarly to the female subjects characterised in Blues songs, Larsen's female protagonists are lonely, isolated, and express concerns that the men in their lives may stray. *Passing* was not directed towards radical working-class women, Irene's middle-class life closely mirroring Larsen's own experience. Brody highlights the fact that Larsen's 'watchwords' are those affirming her "security" and 'status quo'⁶⁵. In considering revealing Clare's passing to Bellew, Irene positions this as a choice between two allegiances; 'herself' (in other words, her status) and 'her race', the thing that 'bound and suffocated' her. She expresses deep remorse at being 'unable to disregard the burden of race'⁶⁶, considering it 'enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well'. Irene 'embodies numerous stereotypical middle-class values', and according to Brody's reading, subsequently firmly established the figure not only of the "exotic" but of the radical "other", in both her perception of Clare and in her attitudes towards the black working class⁶⁷. In attempting to dissuade Clare from attending a Negro Welfare League dance, Irene reveals her pretentiousness, stating; '...you couldn't possibly go there alone. It's a public thing. All sorts of people go, anybody who can pay a dollar, even ladies of easy virtue looking for a trade. If you were to go there alone, you might be mistaken for one of them, and that wouldn't be too pleasant'⁶⁸. The lack of colloquial language in Larsen's prose also signals an aversion to representing black working class individuals to the same extent as Hurston, McKay or Fisher. For Harrison-Kahan, Clare's voice is 'bluesy' in both style and subject matter, citing her

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 147.

⁶⁵ Brody, p. 1055.

⁶⁶ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 258.

⁶⁷ Brody, p. 1055.

⁶⁸ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 230.

opening to letter to Irene, in which she writes pages of lamenting prose "...For I am lonely, so lonely [...] It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases"⁶⁹. While she attributes the traditions of the "speakerly" text to Hurston, Kahan also recognizes Larsen's novels as residing 'in the *realm of the unsaid*'⁷⁰, through characters' interior consciousness and free indirect narrative discourse. Further, she suggests that Larsen's novels actively employ expressive black oral traditions, usually reserved for folklore, in order to 'convey the machinations of her characters' minds, achieving a narrative voice that is at once both 'singular and plural, private and public'. The article constructs a parallel between the vernacular culture of Larsen's writing and the Blues aesthetic, suggesting that *Passing* 'engages in give-and-take with other black cultural producers', and subsequently 'carving out a space between literacy and orality'.

At no stage throughout *Passing* do Irene or Clare "shout" their lamentations, nor would they seem to have appealed to the empathy of working-class audiences. Although Irene's past is somewhat ambiguous, Clare's childhood is marked by an alcoholic and physically abusive father. In adulthood, both women exercise quiet caution within their marital relationships, yet their perspectives of abuse greatly differ. Irene's inconsistent empathy for Clare fluctuates between sorrow for the fact that she should have to "pass", and jealousy of the life she has established. Similarly, Clare expresses a yearning for Irene's life in Harlem and Chicago, which she perceives to be untroubled. Despite the physical abuse she experienced, Irene remarks that there had been 'nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire'⁷¹.

In *Quicksand*, the narrative of abuse is also present. Crucially, this theme is evident immediately after Helga Crane's only act of free expression throughout the novel, when Helga finds herself amongst a church congregation. Singers repeat the line, '*...Showers of*

⁶⁹ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 174.

⁷⁰ Harrison-Kahan, p.269. [emphasis added]

⁷¹ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 172.

blessings/Showers of blessings... . The appropriate nature of the song strikes her as humorous, and as in *Passing*, the sound of female laughter is immediately followed by a ‘shocked silence’, for ‘at the first hysterical peal the words of the song had died in the singers’ throats and the wheezy organ had lapsed into stillness’⁷². The song begins again, a ‘low wailing thing’ with ‘endless moaning verses’ that send members of the congregation into a Bacchic trance. Helga describes the ‘echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart...she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about’. Overwhelmed, she proceeds to yell and shout repeatedly; “Oh, God mercy, mercy. Have mercy on me!”. The scene itself appears as a stark anomaly in Larsen’s work. As Harrison-Kahan posits, traditions of folklore and spirituals appear most frequently in Hurston’s writing. For Helga Crane, her inherent restlessness derives from a sense of un-rootedness, and a lack of connection to any home. As such, this scene would appear to be Larsen’s attempt at drawing a deep-rooted, spiritual connection to Helga’s historical black ancestry – one that stretches far into the past. This encounter does not lead Helga to a secured sense of rootedness, or identity. In contrast, the experience is the catalyst for a series of events that lead to her marriage to the Southern preacher of a small, oppressive community, where her voice is ultimately silenced.

Within modernist narratives, the figure of the visual observer is inexorably intertwined with the auditory listener. Yet criticism of *Passing* reveals a substantial focus in favour of visual analysis, particularly via images of race, and the restrictions of the socially imposed colour-line between white and black. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson examines visual sensibility and the figure of the mulatta in a ‘painterly rather than writerly reading’ of Larsen’s prose, arguing that her ‘textual tableaux contains passages or frames so visually evocative that they demand a visually informed consideration’⁷³. Larsen not only subverts these visual narratives,

⁷² Larsen, *Quicksand*, p. 139.

⁷³ Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, ‘A Plea for Color: Nella Larsen’s Iconography of the Mulatta’, *American Literature*, 76.4 (2004), pp. 836.

but shifts the sonic perspective within the African American *female* narrative, one in which the focus does not reside in producing sound or noise, but in listening for it. Larsen encourages her readers to challenge the traditional sensory modernist narratives, predominantly focused on what Guy Debord defines as the ‘society of spectacle’⁷⁴, looking beyond the visual borders of race and the colour line. In exploring *Passing* alongside the paradigms of modernism, the argument inevitably arrives at a juncture in critical thought, between the visual dimensions and aural perceptions of the modernist novel. According to Bachelard in his account of the dialectics of external and internal space, terms and associations of the terms “outside” and “inside” prompt an inescapable division or rupture in critical analysis. It ‘has the sharpness of a *yes* and *no*’⁷⁵, grounded in a dialogue which presumes that the two spaces signal both a metaphorical and geographical divide, in the sense of being either *here*, or *there*.

The Silent *Flâneur*

The need to withdraw from the crowded sidewalks of the city is apparent in the movements of both Irene Redfield and Helga Crane. Drawing upon Deborah Parsons’ perception of gendered urban space mapped by the female modernist writer, there is a clear repetition, throughout Larsen’s fiction, of female characters seeking quiet solitude in interior, rather than exterior spaces. Her novels map a marginal experience of the metropolis in a topographical, as much as a cultural sense. For Parsons, women’s urban fiction at the turn-of-the-century was centred on tales of ‘pilgrimage’ – the process of moving away from home, decentralising the traditional patriarchal narratives of social privilege and power. For African American women, the ‘pilgrimage’ was primarily made from the rural South, into Northern cities, destabilising not only patriarchal narratives, but narratives of racial segregation also. It was, to some extent,

⁷⁴ See definition of this term in Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Eastbourne: Soul Bay, 2009).

⁷⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Toronto: Grossman Publishers Inc., 1969), p. 211.

representative of “passing through” or beyond a particular space, transitioning from one space to another. In contrast, in the urban narratives penned by women of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Parsons suggests that the ‘pilgrimage seems to reach an impasse and the dominant metaphor changes to that of being lost in a labyrinth, constantly retracing one’s steps over the same sterile ground’⁷⁶. The previous need to experience the ‘open space of the street’, she posits, ‘is countered in the inter-war period by a desperate attempt to retreat from it’.

The exception to this conscious suppressing of the external sonic environment appears in Larsen’s second novel *Quicksand*. Stepping out of a taxicab – ‘rattling things which jerked, wiggled, and groaned’⁷⁷ - Helga identifies several sources of noise heard on Harlem’s streets. Pausing for a moment on the sidewalk, Helga is acutely attuned to the noises that surround her; ‘The night was far from quiet...Clanging trolley bells, quarrelling cats, cackling phonographs, raucous laughter, complaining motor horns, low singing, mingled in the familiar medley that is Harlem’⁷⁸. The plurality of sounds listed here is an indication of the sheer volume found on a single sidewalk alone. The auditory field is noticeably more tumultuous than the transcendent sounds of ‘sugared laughter’ and ‘honey-talk’ initially found on McKay’s Harlem streets⁷⁹. Helga perceives trolley bells, phonographs, motor horns; mechanical devices capable of *producing* noise, into which organic forms of sound (raucous laughter, low singing, quarrelling alley cats) become indistinguishable from one another, indicating the direct competition between human and mechanical sounds in the city. The linguistic form and alliteration lends itself to the medley of sounds described; “cackling”, “clanging”, “complaining”, “quarrelling”. According to Harrison-Kahan, the repetitive use of a hard “c” sound ‘reproduces the cacophony of city noise’⁸⁰. Descending from the sidewalk into an underground cabaret, a blare of jazz

⁷⁶ Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 124-5.

⁷⁷ Larsen, *Quicksand*, p. 88.

⁷⁸ Larsen, *Quicksand*, p. 89.

⁷⁹ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Harrison-Kahan, p. 282-3.

“splits” Helga’s ears as she transitions from one auditory field to another, the discordant sounds heard on the sidewalk replaced by the ‘crooning melody’ and ‘streaming rhythm’ of the jazz band. In Larsen’s fiction, these bursts of noise are fleeting. Her characters are not unaware of the noises around them, but are attuned to quietness and moments of solitude found in interior spaces, where they are able to shut out the exterior rush of the city.

The focus on internal spaces is not to suggest that her characters are immobile. Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga Crane is endlessly moving between cityscapes, and continents. Searching for a place of permanence and formulating plans to travel from Harlem to Copenhagen, her ‘anticipatory thoughts’ waltz through her mind ‘to the sweet silent music of change’. Yet, the metaphor of the city as a “labyrinth” is evident. Grey Chicago “seethes”, “surges”, and “scurries” about Helga upon her arrival, and she is unprepared for ‘the noise, the dash, the crowds’ that greet her. Helga’s arrival in the great, windy city, is not so much a pilgrimage, as it is a homecoming, although she admits to feeling a stranger in the place of her birth. Deeming the safest place from which to retreat from the ‘dirty, mad, hurrying city’, Helga takes up residence in the Young Women’s Christian Association, and in the ‘bare silence’ of her room, observes the city below; ‘...the glimmering street...swarming with people, merging into little eddies and disengaging themselves to pursue their own individual ways’⁸¹, and the following morning is woken to the sound of rain pattering against the glass. Despite her disdain for Chicago, Helga’s active *need* to work signals a change in the economic position of women. Traversing the streets of Chicago in search of work, Helga is indignant, but nonetheless offers a symbol of female emancipation. In Harlem, for a brief time, she is comfortable on the city streets, the ‘teeming’ neighbourhood briefly lulling her into a sense of ‘peace and contentment’. In distinct contrast, Irene Redfield appears far more comfortable within the city, than her latter counterpart. Her traversal of the city streets is similarly one of predominantly commercial

⁸¹ Larsen, *Quicksand*, p. 62.

engagement. Unlike Helga, Irene's retreat from the sidewalks into internal spaces is a move made distinctly through individual choice, rather than force.

In both *Quicksand* and *Passing*, observations of the street are made from interior spaces; a framed view of the city passing by doorways and windows. Scenes that capture the visual rush of the city, yet muffle the sounds of its characteristic "roar". In *Quicksand*, the first observations made via means of window-gazing look out onto the quadrangle of the Southern college in Naxos - notably not an urban scene. Helga notes the interruption to her quiet solitude, watching as students stream through the quadrangle below, the mass of crowds accompanied by 'a depressing silence, a sullenness almost, until with a horrible abruptness the waiting band blared into "The Star-Spangled Banner"'⁸². In Naxos, Helga has already established a room of her own, large, and 'eerily quiet'⁸³, but a clear signal of economic independence in the tasteful décor and material possessions. The silence of the space provides a conflicting commentary between the sought out space of intentional solitude, and the oppressiveness of the Jim Crow South. Helga craves the tranquillity and the quiet that the room provides, yet the necessity for such a space is driven by the 'rigidity of conduct' at the Naxos college, a need to escape the opinions exercised by her African American peers at the school, the Southern patrons and 'the holy white man', all persistent in their pointing out that so-called 'Naxos Negroes', as products of the South, should be 'satisfied in the estate to which they had been called'⁸⁴ but refrain from striving for more. Of her room, and intentional isolation, she states; 'She loved this tranquillity, this quiet, following the fret and strain of the long hours spent among fellow members of a carelessly unkind and gossiping faculty...the strenuous rigidity of conduct required in this huge educational community of which she was an insignificant part'. Acutely aware of any disturbances to her solitude, she finds the feminine sounds of her fellow colleagues irksome,

⁸² Ibid, p. 46.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 36.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 37.

noting beyond her door a ‘...medley of noises...foolish giggling, indistinguishable snatches of merry conversation, distant gurgle of running water, patter of slippers feet, low-pitched singing, good-natured admonitions to hurry, slamming of doors, clatter of various unnameable articles, and – suddenly – calamitous silence’⁸⁵. This is a remarkably different form of silence to that experienced following the urban shift in the narrative. Reaching Chicago, Helga is restless in the ‘bare silence’ of her room, and once again observes the scene from the window, ‘intently looking down into the glimmering street, far below, swarming with people, merging into little eddies and disengaging themselves to pursue their own individual ways’⁸⁶. Moments later, she is stood in the doorway of the Young Women’s Christian Association hostel, ‘drawn by an uncontrollable desire to mingle with the crowd’. In this instance, Helga’s ‘pilgrimage’ is not one of escape. The window provides the observation of something she has not yet experienced; a scene of rushing crowds rendered noiseless through the glass, which she has a yearning to experience. The window no longer provides a view of an oppressive environment, in which her solitude is interrupted by sound. Rather, she is drawn to the street itself, seeking a freedom not previously experienced in Naxos.

In *Passing*, the importance of rooms from which to retreat from the city is evident. The lack of city noise throughout the novel indicates a concerted effort to silence the sonic environment. The second chapter opens on a stifling hot day in Chicago, in which Irene describes the infrequent breeze like the ‘breath of a small flame fanned by slow bellows’. There is a certain ecology present, in which the stifling heat brings about a muted distortion to the sonic environment. In order to escape street level, Irene hails a cab that “grates” and “rattles” its way to the ‘Drayton’ hotel, where she finds a rooftop café. To some extent, the scene echoes the transcendent nature of Jake’s arrival in *Home to Harlem*, albeit a figurative transcendence

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 47.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 62.

prompted by a complete immersion into the city. In *Passing*, Irene literally ascends above street level by way of the elevator, which she likens to ‘being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, *quiet*, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below’. From her noiseless, high-rise haven, she gazes down upon ‘the specks of cars and people creeping about in the streets...thinking how silly they looked’. The interior, raised location of the space allows Irene a freedom from her experience of powerlessness in the street below, a position that allows her to see beyond the skyscrapers of the city, towards the ‘unstirred blue of the lake reaching away to an undetected horizon’. A natural, and undisturbed landscape. Crucially, the windows that Larsen’s female characters gaze through, perhaps symbolically, remain closed, shutting out the dangers of the street. To some extent, the women here echo the sentiments expressed in Virginia Woolf’s feminist polemic, *A Room of One’s Own*, as women who seek their own “rooms” as a means of escape from the patriarchal space of the metropolis. The limitations of interior spaces also signals a shift in their visual and aural perception(s) of the urban soundscape. Published just one year prior to the publication of *Passing*, in 1928, Woolf’s essay identified that it was virtually impossible for a woman to have a room of her own, ‘let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room’⁸⁷. The exception, in most cases, was the presence of wealth, meaning that such rooms were accessible only to a woman of upper social class, whose parents or spouse could provide such a space for her. Moreover, depending on the location of these hypothetical “rooms”, the soundscape changed dramatically, the rooms differing to such extent that they may be ‘calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard’⁸⁸. Woolf’s female characters often seemed attuned to their sonic environment. Clarissa Dalloway accurately depicts the sonic environment of a London street, sparked by her audible perception of the echoing boom of Big Ben striking the

⁸⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2000), p. 54.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 87.

hour, yet marking a clear distinction between visual and sonic perception; ‘In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June...’⁸⁹.

On an October morning in 1928, Woolf observed the view from the window of her own room, onto a Bloomsbury street, noting the hum of traffic, the stirring of machinery, drifters ‘rattling sticks upon area railings’⁹⁰, men hailing to each other as they passed in their carts, listening to the early morning movements of London in the process of ‘winding itself up again’. Observing the streets of Harlem from the window of her apartment on West 135th street, Larsen perceived a somewhat less romanticised scene, stating in a letter to friend Dorothy Peterson; ‘Right now when I look out into the Harlem streets I feel just like Helga Crane in my novel. Furious at being cornered with all these niggers’⁹¹. The comparison here is not an attempt to seek a connection in the social or even cultural experiences of these two female writers. Between 1928 and 1929 specifically, Bloomsbury and Harlem are paradoxical spaces; the former being a firm location of white privilege (which Woolf was often quick to recognise) and the latter a metropolitan neighbourhood of vast social and cultural inequalities, albeit a ‘mecca’ for black creativity. The intention rather, is to highlight that ways in which female writers – regardless of place, race or social privilege – were re-appropriating the notion of listening as a feminized activity, thereby challenging the visual cultures of modernity, and narratives of exterior urban spaces witnessed through the eye of the *flâneur* or *flâneuse*.

For Larsen, *flânerie* centres on the black female experience within the cityscape. Jeanne Scheper argues that through narratives of modernist mobility, Larsen ‘delineates the material

⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 4.

⁹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2000), p. 94.

⁹¹ Letter from Nella Larsen to Dorothy Peterson (July 19th 1927), in Kaplan, C., *Passing: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2007), p. 163-4.

complexities of that quintessential figure...[the] public stroller and mobile observer of modern effects'⁹². She examines the skittish nature of Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, highlighting the progressiveness of the modern, female flâneur, holding out on the 'promise and possibilities of moving away, into, and between communities and locations'. Yet, understanding the role of the flâneur is crucial to understanding the ways in which Larsen subverts this form of *external* visual observation. Cemented in critical thought by Walter Benjamin, the flâneur is the *unobserved* male observer of the city; the loiterer positioned simultaneously amongst the crowd, yet altogether separate from it. In Benjamin's observations of this figure, the flâneur 'stands on the threshold'⁹³ of both the metropolis and the middle class. Being at home in neither, the crowd provides a refuge, 'the veil through which the familiar city beckons'. The anonymity of the unnamed mass being a necessity, the observations of the flâneur are predominantly formed in exterior spaces, at street-level. This, Benjamin argues, is fundamental to both visual and historical perspective, conducting this figure into 'vanished time'. For the *flâneur*, 'every street is precipitous. It leans downward – if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his, not private...in the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance'⁹⁴.

Most importantly, the flâneur is a silent figure; one who bears witness, but is not heard. The reliance upon one sensory function over the other, creates an inherent imbalance. Benjamin refers to remarks made by German sociologist Georg Simmel, who indicates a detachment in the senses of the urbanite; '...the one who sees, without hearing, is much more...worried than the one who hears without seeing. This is important in understanding the sociology of the modern city. Social life in the large city...shows a great preponderance of occasions to see

⁹² Jeanne Scheper, 'The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *African American Review*, 42.3/4 (2008), p. 679.

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 416.

rather than to hear people'⁹⁵. This detachment is no more evident than in Poe's account of the *flâneur*, 'The Man of the Crowd'⁹⁶, as the narrator observes from a London coffee shop – through smoky panes of glass - the large crowd on the street, visually able to observe their restless movement, gesticulations and mutterings, but unable to audibly perceive that which is said. In Larsen's narratives, the female *flâneur* not only occupies an internal, position – therefore remaining entirely unobserved – but does so from an elevated position, far above the patriarchal urban space. Returning once more to Parsons's, suggestion, this subversion of the *flâneur* also resonates with the notion that the modern urban female can gaze upon the city, whilst remaining shut-away, or shutting-out any potential danger. As discussed previously in this chapter, the open window proves fatal for Larsen's female characters. The physical movement between the interior and exterior space proves to be the ultimate peril, Clare Kendry rendered permanently silent as she falls to her death through the open casement window onto the street below. For Washington, the melodramatic ending of Larsen's novel is the inevitable fate of two heroines who are 'finally destroyed somewhere down the paths they choose'⁹⁷. Larsen repeatedly alludes to the possibility of a romantic affair between Clare and Irene's husband, Brian. Arriving at the party, Irene observes Clare 'looking at him with that provocative upward glance of hers', his eyes similarly 'fastened on her face with what seemed to Irene an expression of wistful eagerness'⁹⁸. The "finale" then, ending with the dramatic death (and possible murder) of Clare echoes the same tropes of an operatic plot that McKay outlines in *Banjo*, a concluding act fraught with crimes of passion and revenge.

To return to Morrison's statement in the opening of this chapter, that the sound of the novel, must, above all else, be 'an inner-ear sound, or a sound just beyond hearing'⁹⁹, Larsen

⁹⁵ Georg Simmel, *Mélanges de philosophie relativiste: Contribution à la culture philosophique* (Paris, 1912), p. 26-27.

⁹⁶ Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840).

⁹⁷ Washington, p. 354.

⁹⁸ Larsen, *Passing*, p. 268.

⁹⁹ Morrison, p. 160.

it seems, achieves what few other writers of the Harlem Renaissance did. The posthumous resonance of her literature in the canon of Harlem literature is undoubtedly a testament to the effectiveness of the ‘muted’ aspects of her writing – racial masking, disembodied voice, and the active suppression of the sonic environment. The silence of *Passing* is profound, representative of both the necessity and palpable danger associated with the act of racially passing for white. Clare succeeds for so long in her own racial passing because the truth of her identity is not only beyond the sight of her husband, but also remains unspoken, ‘just beyond’ his earshot. When it is revealed, that same silence is retained as she passes through the window between life and death, falling beyond his reach. Silence proves to be a simultaneously empowering yet devastating force within the narrative. The ‘ruinous’ aspects of the soundscape, are explored further in Chapter Four, which considers the equally earthshattering force of sound in the fiction of Rudolph Fisher.

4. Trumpets and Tremors: Ruinous Sound in Rudolph Fisher's Harlem

In the introduction to a collection of Rudolph Fisher's short stories, editor John McCluskey positions him as one of the most promising young writers to emerge during Harlem's renaissance era, observing that at a time when urban fiction required '...wailing jazz, bad gin, or flashing razors – a new style minstrelsy', black writers were 'once again challenged to peel away the old clothing of stereotypes and project the complexity and variety of black Americans'. Fisher, he asserts, was one of several young writers in his generation who 'met this challenge squarely', demonstrating the ability to 'affirm the complexity of black urban culture while steering clear of exotica and oversentimentality'¹. Fisher's literary career began with the publication of his short story, 'City of Refuge', which appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in early 1925. He produced a large body of short stories throughout his career, and prior to his untimely death in 1934 had published two novels; *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), a modern re-imagining of the New Testament tale in the Book of Joshua, and *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), widely regarded as one of the first black detective novels. Langston Hughes declared him to be

¹ John McCluskey Jr. ed. *The City of Refuge: The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. xi – xii.

among the shrewdest of Harlem's 'New Negro' set. '[He] always frightened me a little', Hughes remarked, 'because he could think of the most incisively clever things to say – and I could never think of anything to answer'². Leonard Deutsch has since hailed Fisher as the 'principal historian and social critic of the Harlem Renaissance'³, bolstering Fisher's own explanation of his intentions during a radio interview in 1933; "I intend to write whatever interests me. But if I should be fortunate enough to become known as Harlem's interpreter, I should be very happy"⁴.

The acknowledgement of fiction as 'interpretation' is key to Fisher's aesthetic approach. James De Jongh observes that by the mid-nineteen twenties, Harlem itself had become the 'embodiment of an idea'. In fiction, the neighbourhood was subsequently often 'interpreted rather than described'. Yet this also posed a challenge to 'contemporary limits and cultural terms within which personal being for both blacks and whites were imagined and defined', a culture in which "going to Harlem" was an act 'fraught with connotations and implications'⁵. While Fisher sought to represent the social issues of Harlem, the interpretative style of his writing freed him from the burden of authenticity felt keenly by writers such as Hurston or Hughes. This is particularly prevalent in the sonic representations of his narratives, in which the sounds heard within Harlem often have broad metaphorical and historical echoes.

While Fisher's localized Harlem tales often avoid the expansive, transnational scope favoured by some of his peers, his ability to create seemingly accurate spatial narratives littered with fictional streets and places allowed him to explore, deconstruct and criticise those cultural and topographical borders closer to home. The fluidity between real and fictional spaces subsequently allows for shifting metaphorical and temporal frames of reference in his writing.

² Ibid, p. xvii.

³ Leonard J. Deutsch, 'The Streets of Harlem: The Short Stories of Rudolph Fisher', *Phylon*, 40.2 (1979), p. 159.

⁴ John Louis Clark, 'Mystery Novel Writer is Interviewed over the Radio', in John McCluskey Jr. ed. *The City of Refuge: The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher*, p. xxxix.

⁵ James De Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 15.

He scrutinised the spaces and practices of both white and black New York with equal parity, derisive of the socio-political boundaries imposed by “colour lines” and class divisions. In this same manner he challenged the very notion of topographically and culturally segregated spaces: the characteristics of black saloons, white residential avenues, the individuals who inhabited them and the environmental traits (both architectural and sonorous) that mirrored and aided the social characteristics and imposed restrictions of each place. The border between Fisher’s Harlem and white Manhattan is intentionally enigmatic – a comment on the futility of both spatial and racial segregation. Fisher’s reconstruction also signals a development from the representations of Harlem constructed by both McKay and Larsen.

While Fisher resonates to a greater extent with McKay’s representation of the neighbourhood, throughout *The Walls of Jericho* in particular, he establishes the parallel soundscapes of both black and *white* Harlem. In establishing silence or quietness as an attribute of the white spaces bordering Harlem, Fisher echoes Larsen’s narrative silence. So too does he create female narratives that address aspects of both privilege and minority identity. For Deutsch, Fisher provides a comprehensive ‘verbal map’ of Harlem; reconstructing the black community ‘block by block’, and revealing those streets to the reader ‘in both geographically realistic and metaphorically imaginative terms’, his personified analogies imbuing each street ‘with a precise and appropriate life of its own, ranging from glamorous to sordid’⁶. There are resonances of the ‘verbal map’ of Harlem in Hurston’s attempts throughout the 1930s, to map Harlem’s “slang” and linguistic expressions. In both ‘A Story in Harlem Slang’ and the accompanying list of colloquialisms, ‘Harlem Slanguage’, she outlined the phrases most commonly heard along Harlem’s main avenues.

⁶ Deutsch, p. 160.

Illusive Refuge

The ‘walls’ of Fisher’s Harlem are as much cultural as they are architectural constructions. His depiction of the neighbourhood is undoubtedly one of the most diverse illustrations to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance. He deftly captured the ‘proscription and prejudice’ that underpinned the structures of segregation in the borough, and sought to use his writing as a means of dismantling them. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the sonorous function of Fisher’s writing in two parts, beginning with his first short story, ‘City of Refuge’ (1925) and his novel, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928). Through these texts, I will consider the impact of conceptual “walls” (architectural, social, and psychological infrastructures) and the powerful dimensions of sound as a means of breaking through these imposed barriers. Like Larsen’s, Fisher’s characters actively practice the art of conscious listening. Both of the texts examined in this chapter are mapped by a series of sonic signals and acoustic warning devices. Yet whereas Larsen employs acoustic signals of danger in a domestic and gendered acoustic sphere, Fisher implements a series of sonic signals in order to indicate the imminent dangers for newcomers of the city, as well as intra and interracial conflicts. He also uses a series of soundmarks representing the unique communal sounds of the neighbourhood. Soundmarks are crucial to the deconstructive themes in Fisher’s writing. Deployed strategically throughout both ‘City of Refuge’ and *Jericho*, they are key to the deconstruction of architectural and social-politics barriers, whilst also maintaining a resonant historical quality. Fisher simultaneously draws upon the power of the sonic environment in Harlem, and exposes the impermanence of socially enforced structures of oppression, even those so engrained in cultural attitudes that they may as well be rendered in stone.

In a broader sense, the dismantling of social structures was a pervasive theme in modernist literature. In her analysis of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, Kate Marshall offers an important critical framework on the elements of

‘crumbling’ infrastructure, which she identifies as ‘domestic America’s favourite cliché’ during the first half of the twentieth century. The first aspect, she suggests, is that ‘when invoked, the reference to infrastructure always refers to physical structures and to the collectives conjoined by them, that there is always something metaphoric about infrastructure’. The second, she argues, is that ‘these structures tend to remain invisible until blocked, broken, or struck by catastrophe’⁷. To this end, I argue that both short story and novel follow this deconstructive metaphor according to the three distinct parts that Marshall identifies: blockage, breaking, and eventual catastrophe, recognising Fisher’s use of sound as the agent of destruction.

Published in 1925, ‘City of Refuge’ is a narrative in which the illusion of Harlem as a utopian sanctuary is constructed and subsequently shattered. Despite De Jongh’s assertion that the promotion of Harlem as a site of refuge ‘was still a relatively novel one’, the Babylonian narrative was a repeated trope of the Harlem Renaissance and complexly tied in literary tradition. Commonly used in the religious sense, ‘sanctuary’ is defined in several ways; as *any* place of refuge, as the holiest inner sanctum of a church or temple, and as a sacred place in which fugitives were formerly entitled to immunity from arrest⁸. In the New Testament ‘Book of Joshua’, cities of refuge are defined as communities of asylum in which ‘anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee...and find protection from the avenger of blood’ - precisely the manner in which Fisher’s protagonist comes to Harlem. The title, of Fisher’s short story is a clear paradox, playing to the hopes and dreams of newcomers to the neighbourhood, erstwhile highlighting the fact that little refuge could be found in what many deemed to be an urban “hell”. In sonic terms, each of these definitions also implies a space of concealment in which it is imperative to make as little noise as a possible. The contrasting

⁷ Kate Marshall, ‘Sewer, Furnace, Air Shaft, Media: Modernity Behind the Walls in *Native Son* and *Manhattan Transfer*’, *Studies in American Fiction*, 37.1 (2010), p. 56.

⁸ Since 1989, New York has maintained its status as a ‘sanctuary city’, limiting its cooperation with National government to enforce deportation and immigration laws.

discourses of Harlem constructed a superficial sanctuary, one that demanded its inhabitants remain shrewd and quick-witted, traits that Fisher's susceptible protagonist King Solomon Gillis ultimately lacks. A Southern labourer who has fled from North Carolina 'with the aid of prayer and an automobile'⁹, Gillis arrives in Harlem having escaped the threat of lynching, following the fatal shooting of a white man. As Deutsch remarks, Gillis 'is neither powerful nor rich nor wise' but remains 'simply green around the gills and easily gulled'¹⁰. Similarly to the fate of numerous 'jaybirds' migrating to Harlem from the South in search of prosperity and social justice, Gillis's site of sanctuary provides little shelter. Behind the façade of this "heavenly" Harlem lies a corrupt criminal and capitalist system that will inevitably prove to be his downfall. Manipulated by gangster Mouse Uggam and dismissed as 'a baby jess in from the land o' cotton', he is unwittingly used as a drugs mule for a cocaine ring and later arrested. The profitable 'land of plenty' in which he perceives residents (both black and white) to have rights and privileges 'protected by law' is instead a 'dubious refuge', sheltering Gillis 'only to sacrifice him later'¹¹. In his anthropological observations, James Weldon Johnson sought to highlight the struggle of those who had made the journey to Harlem, many of whom who 'had never seen the inside of a nightclub' and were instead 'confronted with the stern necessity of making a living'¹². 'It is a task in which they cannot escape running up against a barrier erected especially for them', he wrote, 'a barrier which pens them off on the morass – no, the quicksands – of economic insecurity'. In such instances, the myth of Harlem as a "sanctuary" was swiftly dismantled. Deutsch echoes this same sentiment, observing that the eventual arrest of Gillis proves 'symbolic of all his dashed hopes, for while the appearance of freedom is

⁹ Fisher, 'City of Refuge', in *The Collected Short Stories of Rudolph Fisher*, ed. John McCluskey Jr. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 35.

¹⁰ Deutsch, p. 160.

¹¹ De Jongh, p. 18.

¹² Johnson, p. 161.

greater in Harlem, the instruments of oppression are more subtle and frustrating, and they make justice more achingly allusive’.

For many migrating toward Harlem, the journey into the neighbourhood required a burrowing below the city before their emergence into the black “mecca”. Yet the subway train was an unfamiliar mechanical beast. In line with Marshall’s suggestion that the ‘crumbling’ of infrastructure begins with a form of blockage, Gillis initially describes the physical obstruction of subway passengers ‘caught up in the jaws of a steam shovel, jammed together with other helpless lumps of dirt, swept blindly along for a time, and at last abruptly dumped’. There is a distinct implication of ‘waste’ that, whilst reflective of structural problems with the city’s network of sanitation systems, also emphasizes the uncomfortable cultural dichotomy of a borough framed as both sanctuary and social scrapheap. The congested subway lines reveal high noise levels and a lack of communication that subsequently causes Gillis’s disorientation, as he is ‘hurled into the depths’¹³ and disgorged onto the streets of Harlem:

There had been strange and terrible sounds: “New York!” Penn Terminal – all change!” “Pohter, hyer, pohter, suh?” Shuffle of a thousand soles, clatter of a thousand heels, innumerable echoes. Cracking rifle-shots – no, snapping turnstiles. “Put a nickel in!” “Harlem?” Sure. This side – next train.” Distant thunder, nearing. The screeching onslaught of the fiery hosts of hell, headlong, breathtaking. Car doors rattling, sliding, banging open...Heat, oppression, suffocation – eternity – “Hundred ‘n turdy-fif’ next!” More turnstiles. Jonah emerging from the whale.

Clean air, blue sky, bright sunlight.

For Gillis, the assault on his auditory senses bring to the surface traumatic memories of the South – the first in a number of sonic events that shatter his illusion of Harlem as a place of sanctuary. The sonorous adjectives Fisher adopts here – ‘clatter’, ‘screeching’, ‘rattling’, ‘sliding’ – provoke feelings of confusion and bewilderment, emphasising the representation of

¹³ Jonah 4:11.

New York as a machine-driven city, to which Gillis is unaccustomed. In an immediate context, ‘shuffle of a thousand *soles*’ might be understood as a reference to purgatory, pre-empting Gillis’s fate. In a more resonant context this might be misheard as ‘shuffle of a thousand *souls*’, summoning an ancestral image of chain gangs and the resigned slow march of men shackled at the ankles. The snapping turnstiles misheard as ‘cracking rifle-shots’ resonate as the sounds of white authoritarianism and racial violence - just one of the ‘innumerable echoes’ that reach Gillis in this state of transit, stretching far beyond his own experience of the Jim Crow South. His auditory memories of the South as a ‘hell on earth’ give way to a larger force of ‘distant thunder, nearing’. As Schafer posits, the ominous sounds of thunder are universally feared for their ‘great intensity and extreme frequency range’, being far beyond the ‘human scale of soundmaking’¹⁴ and verging on the apocalyptic. Elaborating upon the most common association with thunder as a symbol of divine power - a sonic signal of the ‘gulf’ between men and the Gods. For Gillis, the distant rumbling of thunder is a portentous signal of his fate and a clear indication of his powerlessness, not against the Gods, but against coercive individuals that ultimately shape his experience in Harlem.

The opening passage also emphasises the theme of displacement that underpins much of Fisher’s writing, Gillis overlaying displaced sounds onto a new and unfamiliar environment. In her analysis of shifting temporalities and the process through which cities can ‘slide between the material and the perceptual’, sociologist Fran Tonkiss suggests that sound memories act as ‘aural postcards’¹⁵. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s analysis of auditory cultures, Tonkiss proposes that the relation of sound to memory ‘is audibly present in the moment of ‘recall’, the melding of space, sound and memory there in the concept of ‘resonance’; a movement in the air like sound you can touch’¹⁶. In Gillis’s recollection, displaced sound (although familiar to

¹⁴ Schafer, p. 25.

¹⁵ Fran Tonkiss, ‘Aural Postcards: Sound, Memory, and the City’, in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. by Michael Bull, and Les Black (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 303-310 (p. 303).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 307.

him) signal the Southern dangers that lingers constantly in the periphery of the narrative. The sonic environment resonates with him in an archetypal context through *inherited* sound memories. As Tonkiss notes, sound has the ability to ‘deceive and displace’ by opening out spaces to ‘imaginative translations’¹⁷. Gillis’s response certainly follows Tonkiss’s assertion, confirming Fisher’s use of sound as a tool for displacement and deception. Yet his sonic association does not derive from imaginative translations, but from a lived experience shaped by past trauma. Moreover, his recollection appears to extend far beyond his personal memory, broadening in a historical context. To this effect, Benjamin’s conceptualisation of auditory memory as a form of sonic *dejà vu* seems far more appropriate in this context. ‘One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call’, he observes, ‘a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of a past life...a word, tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo’¹⁸. If a soundscape has the unique capability of conjuring up ‘innumerable echoes’ and links to the past, then Fisher’s opening scene establishes Harlem as a site of difficult cultural transition between the Old and the New world. The subway train hurtling into a present landscape as the soundscape draws individuals back to the past.

If these sonic references enforce Gillis’s inherent powerlessness, they also serve as a stark reminder that his journey is not unique. He is merely one of a thousand souls emerging from the subway steps at 135th street, each arriving in Harlem disorientated, full of optimism and intent on forging new opportunities. The emergence from the hellish subway provides him with his first glimpse of the sanctuary he seeks: a community offering *immunity* from his crimes in North Carolina and a prosperous future. His expectations of Harlem and its reputation

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 306.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 345.

as a place of “refuge” have been formed prior to his arrival, through the oral folktales of a travelling preacher in the South. As a result, the young ‘jaybird’ arrives in the borough entirely ignorant of its potential dangers and entranced by the spectacle of the Harlem street. If, as Schafer asserts, the ear’s only protection is ‘an elaborate psychological mechanism for filtering out undesirable sound in order to concentrate on what is desirable’¹⁹, then here too, Gillis’s sensory responses reveal his vulnerability. Where his auditory perception of displaced sounds enhance his levels of disorientation and fear, his visual observations reinforce his ‘desirable’ expectations of Harlem, establishing the natural reliance on sight over sound. Here, Schafer turns to the claim by Wagner: ‘To the eye appeals the outer man, the inner to the ear’²⁰.

The display of the 135th Street and Lenox Avenue intersection in particular was representative of the prosperity and hope that Harlem afforded to newcomers. Broadly defined as a visually striking display or public performance, the term ‘spectacle’ fails to incorporate the fact that a visual display must also have an audible impact on the observer. For the benefit of discussion throughout the remainder of this chapter, it will henceforth be employed here in reference to an event of equally imposing visual and sonic proportions. Put simply, a spectacle is rarely a silent occurrence. Clare Corbould paints the scene that Gillis would’ve experienced on the northeast corner of 135th street and Lenox Avenue, pointing out that in its ‘heyday’ this area was known as “The Campus”²¹, a prime spot for the soapbox and stepladder orators of Harlem’s streets. According to Corbould, this area was also lined with ‘mystics and quacks’ who styled themselves as Oriental doctors ‘peddling cures for ailments and potions remedying unrequited love’ and predicting numbers for punters of local “policy” games, each party reinforcing the spectacle of Harlem through their own manifestations. To some extent, Gillis’s observation is not dissimilar from the scene that Corbould depicts. Awestruck by the throng of

¹⁹ Schafer, p.11.

²⁰ Richard Wagner, ‘Artistic Man, and Art as Derived Directly From Him’, *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works*, trans. Ellis, W. Ashton (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 91.

²¹ Corbould, p. 98.

‘lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones; men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattle-trapping about the sidewalks’, he declares himself ‘mystified’ by the inside of New York and ‘amazed’²² by the outside of it. For Yolande Daniels, the spectacle has an inherently public nature, in that ‘it must be viewed and, by its nature, involves an “other”’. At the point of his arrival in Harlem, Gillis’s method of sonic association and navigation establish him firmly as the ‘Other’, while his vision is drawn to another marginal figure. Of all the innumerable elements that make up the spectacle of Harlem, none captivate Gillis as much as the ‘cullud’ policeman in the middle of the intersection, controlling the ‘unnumbered tons’ of automobiles, trucks, wagons and streetcars, reprimanding drivers with the authority of a ‘shrill whistle’ and ‘gruff reproof’²³. Entranced by the ‘magnificent figure in blue’, Gillis notices the power wielded by the whistle - the harsh, high-pitched sound prompting one vehicle venturing across the intersection too soon to ‘draw back like a threatened pup’.

For Gillis, the sounds of the black police officer’s whistle and authority represent a racial equality previously unknown to him. The sound emitted is a “colour-less” noise, an recognisable signal of authority allowing the officer orchestrate and the “stop and proceed” structure of the intersection much like the conductor of an unruly ensemble. Yet the vision of the ‘brass buttoned giant’ is also a fragile one. McCluskey suggests that whilst through Gillis’s perception this figure is a symbol of masculinity, it also stands as a comment on authority and racial discrimination. In order to maintain recognised influence, the officer must adorn himself with both visual (uniformed) and audible symbols of power. ‘Black might be white’, Gillis muses, ‘but it couldn’t be that white!’. The sight appears so preposterous that he repeats the vision aloud to himself, as though to enforce its authenticity; ‘...as if the wonder of it were too

²² Fisher, ‘City of Refuge’, p. 3-4.

²³ Fisher, ‘City of Refuge’, p. 4.

great to believe simply by seeing, “Cullud policemen!” he said, half aloud; then repeated over and over, with greater and greater conviction, “Even got cullud policemen – even got cullud-”. There is some dexterity to the climatic end of the short narrative, when the sound of the whistle precedes the arrival of the very same police officer who arrests Gillis amidst a brawl in a cabaret. Even under the threat of incarceration, he fails to believe the existence of the officer without audibly reinforcing the spectacle before him; ‘For a moment he simply stared. Into his mind swept his own words, like a forgotten song suddenly recalled: “Cullud policemen! [...] Even-got-cullud-policemans-”²⁴. The whistling sound that once affirmed Gillis’s hopes and aspirations, subsequently signals his arrest. The mythical vision of Harlem as a sanctuary inadvertently collapses as Gillis realises that the ‘land of plenty’ has provided him with little. ‘City of refuge’, he muses, ‘ – city of refuge. If you live long enough’²⁵.

There is much to be drawn from Fisher’s depiction of the spectacle of the Harlem. The intersection connecting 135th street and Lenox Avenue is one of complex narratives, particularly in the discussion of Harlem as a dubious refuge. In her exploration of the visual cultures of the Harlem Renaissance, Maria Balshaw identifies this space as a site of continued importance throughout Fisher’s short stories. Re-reading ‘Blades of Steel’, a short story by Fisher published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1927, Balshaw suggests that Harlem’s main highways, Lenox and Seventh form the “H” of Harlem, being ‘united a little above their midpoints by east-and-west 135th’²⁶. Crucially, 135th street binds the two avenues to one another. The social differences, according to Fisher’s narrator, are exemplified through the different sounds that can be heard along each street. Lenox Avenue is characterised as a site of danger, the ‘boulevard of the unperfumed’ along which the ‘quick succession of pistol shots, the scream of a police-whistle, or woman’ are frequently heard. In contrast, Seventh Avenue is deemed to

²⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁶ Rudolph Fisher, ‘Blades of Steel’, in *The Collected Short Stories of Rudolph Fisher*, ed. John McCluskey Jr. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 132.

be ‘the promenade of the high-toned dickties and strivers’ with a sonorous environment that ‘breathes a superior attitude, sings superior songs, laughs a superior laugh’. In between these ‘frontiers of the opposed extreme of dark-skinned social life’, 135th street occupies the space as an ‘intermediate any-man’s land...the heart and soul of black Harlem...it neutralizes, equilibrates, binds, rescues union out of diversity’. For Balshaw, ‘...Fisher traces the shape that is Harlem’s physical reality and signature...he marks out the cultural and class dimensions of the race capital and marries social institutions, material location and social aspirations’²⁷. She further suggests that Fisher does not actively seek a city ‘polarised along genteel versus primitive lines’, but rather that ‘his urban aesthetic is unique in that it draws life-blood and inspiration from across the Lenox and Seventh Avenue divide, drawing together usually divided realms of popular and high-brown African American culture’²⁸. Yet 135th street also signals the intersection at which his new life may take either path, Seventh or Lenox. When provided with directions from Mouse, the location is meaningfully vague; “See that second corner? Turn to the left when you get there. Number forty-five’s about halfway [down] the block”²⁹.

The implication here is that where the two roads diverge, Gillis is directed down the ‘less travelled’³⁰ Lenox Avenue, which ultimately makes all the difference to his fate.

Inside close-quartered lodgings, Gillis’s eye once more gives way to the ear as his sense of fear is heightened. In a room ‘half the size of his hencoop back home’, the internal space of the tenement building is mapped through a series of isolated noises that represent a form of unknown threat, leading to a heightened sense of anxiety similar to that experienced on the subway: ‘The doorbell of the apartment rang. A crescendo of footfalls in the hallway

²⁷ Balshaw, p. 32.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

²⁹ Fisher, ‘City of Refuge’, p. 5.

³⁰ Robert Frost, ‘The Road Not Taken’, 1916.

culminated in a sharp rap on Gillis's door. Gillis jumped. Nobody but a policeman would rap like that. Maybe the landlady had been listening and had called the law. It came again, loud,

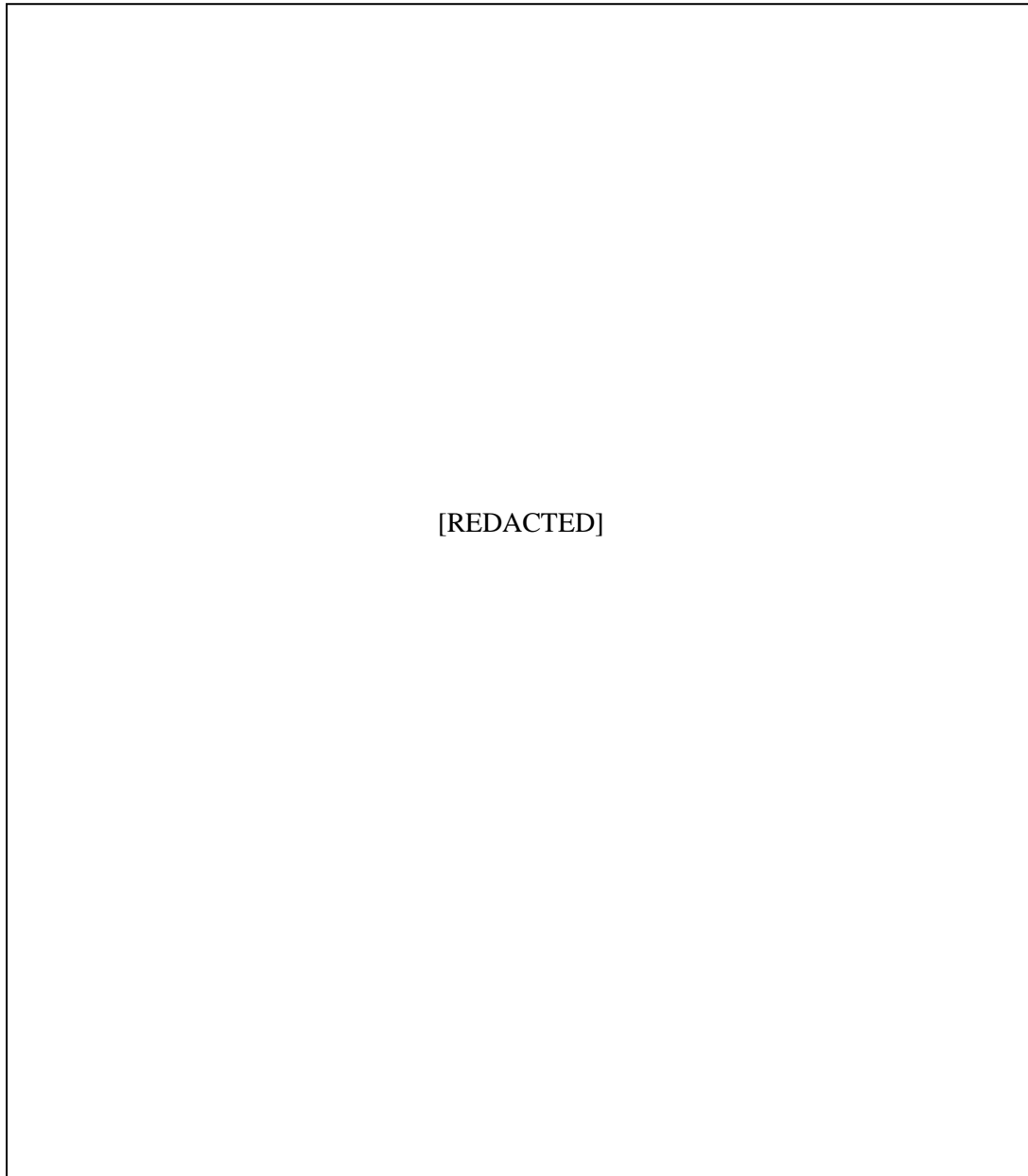


Fig. 7. View of the northwest corner of West 135th Street and Lenox Avenue, with the West 135th Street Branch of The New York Public Library (Schomburg Center), left, 1920s.

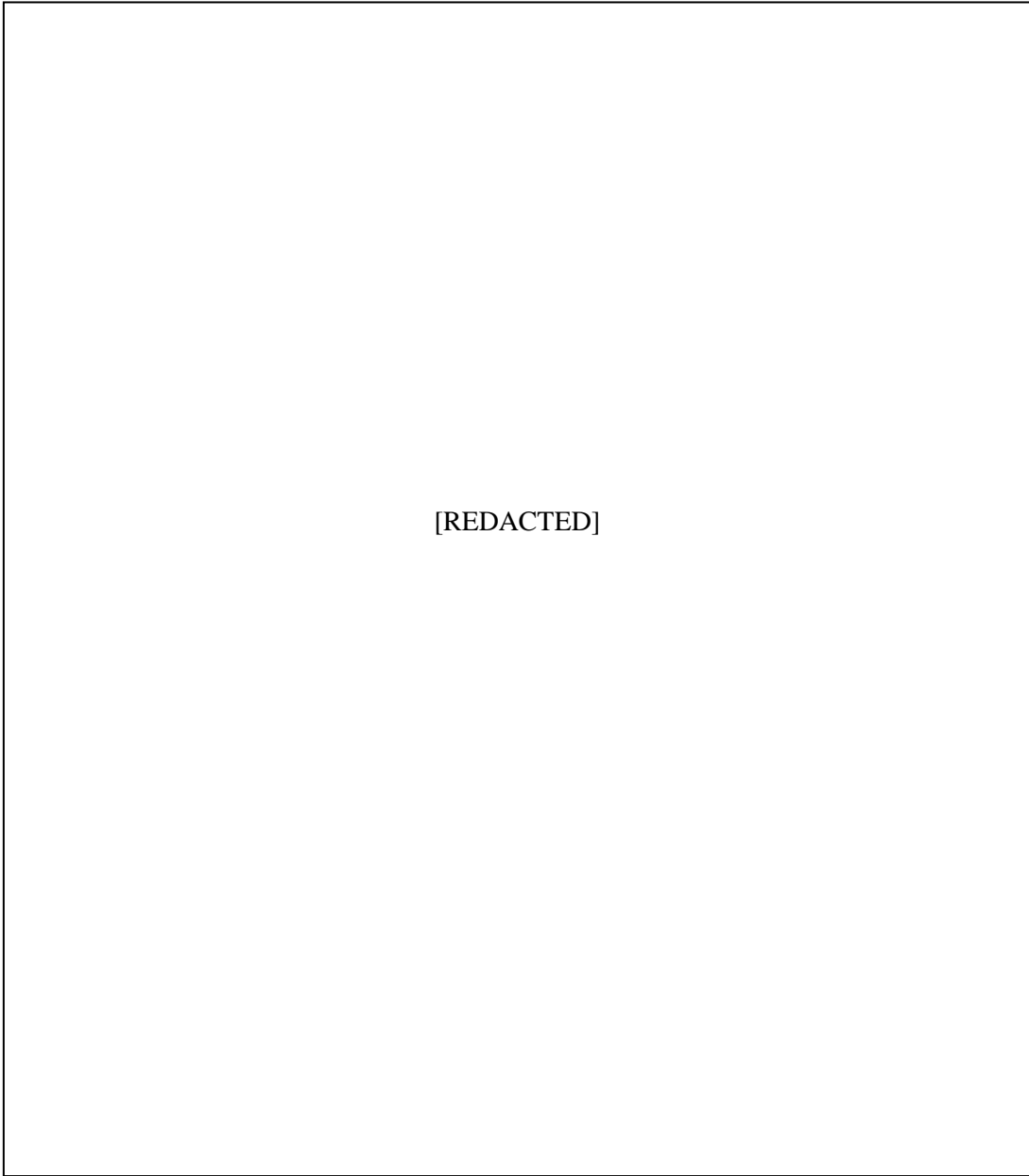


Fig. 8. Policeman directing traffic on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem (approx. 1930-35)

quick, angry'. It is important to recognise that in the move from external to internal space, Gillis continues to consciously listen for signals of law enforcement. As in the opening of Fisher's story, the soundscape of this restricted space reveals another fissure in the construction of Harlem as a site of sanctuary. If, as Schafer asserts 'the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it', then Fisher's depiction of a Harlem tenement provides a crucial commentary on the poor living conditions of those living behind the curtain of the "Black Mecca".

As Marshall affirms, boroughs across Manhattan contributed to an environment in which 'stopped pipes, traffic, congested ventilation and jammed signals [revealed] the complex, communicative relays systematically connecting persons and spaces that would otherwise work undetected'³¹. This sense of congestion was particularly prevalent in the poorer zones of New York; Harlem, the Bronx, and the lower East side, destinations for increasingly high numbers of migrants in which domestic living conditions were made significantly worse by poorly constructed, close-quartered tenement buildings. In Harlem, the lack of windows and the narrow spaces between buildings caused the sounds of separate domestic lives to overlap. Aided by the architectural design of the airshaft, a narrow channel separating the walls of one tenement building from the next, resulting in 'a sewer of sounds and smells'³². From within his apartment, Gillis describes the audible activity; 'An airshaft...chitterlings cooking...onions sizzling, sputtering; three player-pianos out-plunking each other; a man and a woman calling each other vile things; a sick, neglected baby wailing; a phonograph broadcasting blues; dishes clacking; a girl crying heartbrokenly; waste noises; waste odors of a score of families, seeking issue through a common channel; pollution from bottom to top...'. In a study of the construction of these spaces, Kate Marshall identifies the aesthetic significance of the airshaft, which

³¹ Marshall, p.56.

³² Fisher, 'City of Refuge', p. 6.

became a requirement of mass housing tenement laws in 1879. Following the surge in demand for domestic housing across Manhattan either side of 1900, ‘...the scale of building meant that not all rooms touched the outside walls of the building, and provision had to be made to provide ventilation for inner rooms’³³. The solution to this problem was to incorporate vertical passages through the centre of tenement buildings. The closed space, designed to separate bodies, subsequently led to a paradoxical relationship between ‘combustion and ventilation’. Far from providing any positive benefits for tenants, in the event of fire the channel of oxygen in the narrow airshaft space often caused the swift spread of flames, aiding the destruction of tenements and domestic walls.

According to Roi Ottley, the living conditions for migrants from the South varied in Northern cities. By the late nineteen twenties and early nineteen thirties, many of those who came to Harlem occupied unheated railroad flats³⁴. ‘Ever present’, Ottley recalls, ‘was the cacophony of grinding jukeboxes, squalling infants, and angry arguments...everywhere signs ballyhooed the dismal poverty’³⁵. The airshaft is an affront to Gillis’s senses, a form of subverted sanctuary shielding him from the dangers encountered on the subway, but nonetheless a revealing portrayal of bleak socio-economic deprivation. Benjamin recalls that these spaces created a uniquely contained sonic environment. ‘There is in tenement blocks a music of such deathly-sad wantonness’, he wrote, ‘that one cannot believe it to be for the player: it is music for the furnished rooms where on Sundays someone sits in thoughts that are soon garnished with these notes like a bowl of over-ripe fruit with withered leaves’³⁶.

³³ Marshall, p. 67-8.

³⁴ According to Roi Ottley, by the 1930s the combination of poor domestic circumstances, chronic unemployment, dependency, discrimination, delinquency, disease, and death would lead to a condition known as “slum shock”. Several of these factors – most notably unemployment and discrimination – were underlying causes of the Harlem Riots throughout this decade.

³⁵ Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1943), p. 154.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 78-9.

The music overheard by Gillis – three competing player pianos and a phonograph blaring the blues – provides an interlude from the noises of human domestic activity, yet it is not a harmonious or melodic sound. Instead, it merely highlights the cramped domestic conditions in tenement buildings, and the often contentious relationship between instrumental music and phonographic technology within domestic spaces. The airshaft was a space that appealed to various media sensibilities, although notably, representations of the airshaft appear frequently in the fiction and music of Harlem, than in the visual arts. This may have been attributed to its visually restrictive architectural design. In 1940, Duke Ellington released his popular composition “Harlem Air Shaft”, which drew upon and attempted to emulate the sounds similar to those listed by Gillis. Ellington drew the connection between the narrow space, the noises it produced, and the inadvertent communication between the bodies it sought to separate, features which gave the air shaft a sustained character: “So much goes on in a Harlem air shaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one big loudspeaker”.

The irony, according to Edward Green, was that in the composition of “Harlem Air Shaft”, Ellington adopted ‘an abstract design analogous to a concrete experience: namely, reading a book’³⁷. Green identifies a series of chapter “titles”, ‘the opening 16 measures of the composition considered as four separate 4-bar units’, followed by the “chapters” themselves. ‘Nothing’, he states, ‘in all of previous jazz composition compares to this audacious structural plan’. Most importantly, he posits that in “Harlem Air Shaft”, Ellington ‘gave technical coherence and unity to the startling diversity of living experience’. The airshaft stands as a perfect representation of a space in which individuals live in close-quarters, but often with fractious communications. As conveyed through both Gillis’s description and Ellington’s recollection, the noises heard through these channels remain unrestricted by the straight narrow

³⁷ Edward Green, ‘Harlem Air Shaft: A True Programmatic Composition?’, *Journal of Jazz Studies* (2011), p. 28.

walls that define them. In Ellington's music, Harlem is depicted as a 'tonal jumble'. "Airshaft" is full of vibrations in various forms – using the sounds of both piano and drum to gain form an expressive sound. Green finds several specific examples of the sounds Ellington recalls hearing via an airshaft, remarkably similar to those described by Gillis. Yet the infrastructure of the piece essentially lacks any stable foundations. In the second chorus for instance, Green notes that 'drums make a sudden, crashing re-entry, as the unsupported saxophones totter high above, desperately seeking a solid beat beneath'. This he likens to Ellington's description that in an airshaft, "the man upstairs' aerial falls down and breaks your window", a revealing observation of both the structural and social instability of tenement dwelling. The audible expressions of instability within an airshaft are crucial. In terms of Fisher's narrative arc, this signals the move towards the second element of Marshall's theory of dismantled structures: from blockage to breakage. If 'City of Refuge' addresses the blockage(s) of Harlem's social structures, it also develops the groundwork for the theme of broken or crumbling structures that Fisher would expand upon in his first novel.

"Sounding" the Trumpets in Harlem

A modern adaptation of the biblical tale of Jericho's destruction, *The Walls of Jericho* explores in greater depth the crisis of black masculinity and emergent social unrest within Harlem on the cusp of the social and economic oppression of the 1930s. The narrative follows the lives of removal men Joshua "Shine" Jones, Jinx Jenkins, and Bubba Brown, three figures who represent Harlem's working class. Their stories are intertwined with the wealthy black lawyer Fred Merrit, who moves to a white residential street adjacent to Harlem, neighbouring the home of Miss Agatha Cramp, an elderly white spinster. Cramp's maid, Linda, eventually falls in love with Shine, and although the novel is a witty comedy, it is also offers a shrewd commentary on

the racism, social segregation, and miscommunication that keep the two lovers apart for the majority of the narrative. Exemplifying the same racist attitudes that Fisher sought to shed light upon, one *New York Times* reviewer referred to ‘Darkest Harlem’ as the ‘negro colony’ conveniently separated from the rest of Manhattan by the expanse of Central Park. The article framed Fisher’s Harlem as an ‘urban jungle of...standardized tenements – a jungle which hides under the deadly monotony of its outside, lurking places...for colonies...of most of the races under the sun’³⁸. The review aptly exemplified the xenophobic sentiments that Fisher so often highlighted, and which *Jericho* sought to dismantle. This is not to suggest that Fisher himself was unaware of the internal conflicts of the borough, both participating in and ridiculing the culture of the ‘New Negro’ in equal measure and with great effect.

Whereas Gillis deems Harlem to be a refuge shielding him from law enforcement and from the disorientation he faces in the modern city, the characters of *Jericho* view Harlem in paradoxical terms: as a space to be claimed. From the outset, it is clear that the borough provides little sanctuary for those living within its borders, let alone those who sought to claim space within it. Here, “crumbling infrastructure” represents the demolition of Harlem’s social hierarchies in the most literal sense. Racial segregation and intra-racial prejudices are positioned as equally destructive as those *inter-racial* fractures within the neighbourhood, in keeping with the biblical legend upon which the novel was formed. According to the Old Testament tale³⁹, the Battle of Jericho was one of the first attempts made by the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan. The Israelite, Joshua, and his followers were given divine instructions to march around the outside perimeter of the walls surrounding the Palestinian city. For six days, they were to march in silence. On the seventh day, seven Israelite priests were instructed to issue a long, loud blast on their trumpets of rams’ horns, thus demolishing the city

³⁸ ‘*The Walls of Jericho* and Other New World Fictions’, *The New York Times Book Review*, August 5th 1928, p.6.

³⁹ Joshua 6:1 – 27.

walls with the force of the sound, allowing Joshua's army entry and free reign to pillage the city and slaughter its inhabitants;

When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city [...] Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze into the treasury of the Lord's house [...] So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land⁴⁰

The dismantling of Jericho's walls creates something of a moral conflict. Despite Fisher's intention to find a fictional basis for dismantling social and cultural walls, the tale of Jericho simultaneously constructs a narrative of good versus evil, raising principled questions over the power of divine intervention and the claiming and conquering of cultural space. The plight of Jericho and 'red hot papa' Joshua is retold by Shine after he joins the congregation to hear a preacher's sermon:

Take it or leave it, this crack army of Joshua's don't do a damn thing but walk around that wall once a day for a week... On Sunday they walk around seven times and on the last go around, the way they blow them horns is too bad, Jim. Sounds like a flock of steam-boats lost in a fog. Then every son-of-a-gun and his brother unhitches a hell of a whoop and, take it or leave it, *that wall comes tumbling down the same as if it was trained*. Dynamite couldn't a done it no better⁴¹.

In his re-telling, Shine relates the sound of ram horns to a noise he is more familiar with, 'steam-boats lost in a fog', a displaced signal of industrial modernity and the mechanical sounds of the city⁴². Like Gillis in his arrival to New York, Shine attempts to broach a temporal distance by likening the event to a sound he is familiar with.

Fisher's contextualisation of the image of Joshua breaking through the city walls is a reflection of black migration into the city, and the subsequent white exodus. The metaphor of *Jericho* indicates the widespread struggle and prejudices underpinning the social mobility and

⁴⁰ Ibid. 6:1 – 27.

⁴¹ Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho* (London: The X Press, 1995), p. 99. [emphasis added]

⁴² This reference also grounds the story firmly in New York, where the sounds of steamboats signalling along the River Hudson made up a significant proportion of early noise complaints, prior to 1919.

economic progress of black workers. As Shine recalls: “this burg has walls around it so thick that the gals could have their jazz houses on top...The birds on the inside have been laughing at Joshua for a week – damn fool trying to blow a wall down tooting a few horns. The brass-band army...but now they ain’t even got time to pull up their pants, and what happens to their hinies is a sad, sad story, no lie”. The sound of the trumpet (or ram’s horn) is representative of the power of noise as a fundamental soundmark of Harlem’s identity. The repeated representation of the horn also serves as a reminder of the forceful manner in which jazz broke through the consciousness of white New York. Paul McCann remarks that for many at the beginning of the nineteen twenties, jazz ‘reflected a wider decay of the natural social and moral order’. In short, the “cracks” were already appearing in the moral fabric of the early twentieth century. Yet the sounds of jazz also broke through a previously dominant musical aesthetic. As McCann asserts, ‘the increasing popularity of jazz reflected a wider decay of the natural social and moral order – an order maintained by European aesthetic values that governed the previous century’⁴³.

‘Like Seven Peals of Thunder’

Fisher’s novel would not be the last representation of a black, modern-day Joshua breaking through the city walls using sonic force. The image was a repeated trope of the Harlem Renaissance, and later reappeared in the 1950s and 60s. Notably, the artist Aaron Douglas illustrated the cover for the first published edition of *Jericho* in 1925. There are no “crumbling” structures on the book jacket, but the image of a tall, black male silhouette dominates the centre of the landscape, a familiar trope of Douglas’s work. The figure, almost as large as the buildings on the left side of the image, mirrors the description of Shine as a tall ‘supremely tranquil young

⁴³ Paul McCann, “Performing Primitivism: Disarming the Social Threat of Jazz in Narrative Fiction of the Early Twenties”, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 41.4 (2008), p. 659.

Titan'⁴⁴. To the right-hand side of the illustration, buildings loom tall in the foreground, gradually receding in size. On the left, the silhouette profile of a large face looms menacingly, to which the central figure seems to be turned with clenched fist – a reminder of the inner crisis of black masculinity that pervades the narrative. Following the publication of Fisher's novel, a similar image to those that captured the biblical Fall of Jericho appeared in Aaron Douglas's *Song of the Towers*, one of four paintings in his mural series *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934)⁴⁵. The silhouette of a jazz player dominates the centre of the painting, playing a saxophone (the modern equivalent of the ram's horn) from which concentric circles represent reverberating soundwaves. The "walls" in this representation, do not fall, yet in the middle of the mural a substantial split appears between the skyscrapers of the city, through which the Statue of Liberty can be seen in the background – the enduring symbol of American freedom and opportunity.

The towers themselves are a stark reminder of the growing infrastructure of capitalism. The symbolic structural construction and dismantling of walls is one that appears frequently throughout New York's history. In Douglas's *Towers* mural, the representation of a second figure 'dashes up a giant cog of industry'⁴⁶, amidst billowing smoke from industrial New York, reminiscent of the 'colossal set of clockworks'⁴⁷ perceived by Henry James in 1907. Tinged with smoky hues of blue, green and grey, there is the sense that obscure ties to the South still linger (although green may also be symbolic of wealth), dominating the partition between skyscrapers. According to Kirshcke, the figure on the right of the mural is one 'fleeing from the hand of serfdom, symbolic of the migrations of Negroes from the South and the Caribbean into the urban and industrial North'. Yet while the breaking apart of the skyscrapers indicates

⁴⁴ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Commissioned for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library.

⁴⁶ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), p. 123.

⁴⁷ Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd, 1907), p. 75.

the black migrant “breaking through” the walls of the city, the figure of the worker on the mechanical cog indicates quite the opposite – the monotonous cycle of the industrial worker. By his own admission, Douglas suggests that the commission of the four murals that formed *Aspects of Negro Life*, were bound by the restraints of an invisible infrastructure – capitalism – restricting the aesthetic freedom of the artist. “Under our present system”, he explained, “the artist must paint what his employer wants...while trying to maintain a certain honesty and present the picture as he sees it”⁴⁸. For James, the emerging structures of the early 20th century constructed from concrete and glass represented little more than a hollow impermanence, ‘consecrated with no uses save the commercial at any cost’. Commercial skyscrapers were representative of ‘the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively provisional’⁴⁹ upon which New York was orchestrated. Echoing Fisher, Douglas adopts the force of sound as a means to break through the physical structures that represent capitalism and white urbanism. The saxophone represents jazz as fundamental to African American identity and black urban modernity, but in the context of Douglas’s image, it is also representative of jazz music as a prosperous commodity for those migrating to cities.

Jazz was a uniquely American product, yet as McCann asserts, ‘the primitive status of the music was linked to racial identity rather than formal structures or national origin’. ‘Writers’, he argues, ‘used jazz to reinforce common racial stereotypes’, which in turn led early narratives to provide indirect links to colonialism. The repetition of brass instruments – trumpets, trombones, and saxophones – as a force for destruction throughout Fisher’s narratives is noteworthy, not least because of the distinct lack of jazz influencing the formal rhythm narrative. Compared to the narratives of McKay for example, the sounds of jazz in both “Refuge” and *Jericho* are incredibly sparse, even within cabaret settings, arguably subverting

⁴⁸ Kirschke, p. 123-4.

⁴⁹ James, p. 77.

the stereotypical depictions of jazz followed by several Harlem Renaissance writers. This is largely symbolic of Fisher's aim of dismantling the social and cultural barriers present in Harlem, which, as McCann suggests, were undoubtedly reinforced by the reception and perceptions of this new musical aesthetic. Jazz, he suggests, was an artefact of *populist* rather than popular culture. As a result, the praise or condemnation directed at this new musical tradition was linked to a larger debate regarding national identity⁵⁰. For white Americans, jazz carried the threat of dismantling social order. As McCann concludes, there was a distinct fear of the emerging cultural authority of African Americans, and the subsequent departure from an Anglo-American aesthetic. As the United States became increasingly more diverse, jazz became a forum in which notions of 'race, class, and gender were questioned and either reinforced or disrupted'⁵¹.

It is notable therefore that Fisher repeatedly associates the sound of the horn with a religious, rather than musical context. This motif is also evident in Douglas's illustration *Prodigal Son*, which featured in James Weldon Johnson's novel *God's Trombones*, a book of spirituals based on the sermons delivered by an African American preacher whom Johnson recalled as possessing a voice akin to a 'marvellous instrument', with the unique ability to modulate 'from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap'⁵². Again, the significance of the horn is crucial. For Johnson, the preacher upon which the verses are based held a voice 'not of an organ or a trumpet, but rather of a trombone, the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wild and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice – and with greater amplitude [...] He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded – he blared, he crashed, he thundered'⁵³. Despite the title, Douglas chose to forego biblical imagery in this particular

⁵⁰ McCann, p. 674.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 674.

⁵² James W. Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 5.

⁵³ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, p. 7.

illustration. As Powell emphasizes, ‘rather than painting the biblical account of an inheritance-squandering wayward youth, Douglas’s protagonist is the silhouette of a modern man, surround by billboard-size versions of every jazz-age vice imaginable... [it] throbs with the relentless beat of snare drums and the feet of shuffling dancers, accentuated by soulful trombones and the high pitched clinking of gin bottles’⁵⁴. There are no visible walls within the illustration, although the ‘billboard-size’ versions of jazz vices: gin, trombones, money, gambling dice and cards –frame the three figures in the centre, indicating a distinct sense of entrapment. In another illustration from the verses, *The Judgement Day*, the silhouette image of a figure playing a horn is repeated. As in Douglas’s *Song of the Towers* the figure is surrounded by concentric circles a visual reverberation of sound emanating from the instrument. The figure in this instance is not Joshua, but Gabriel, but the instructions given by God in Johnson’s sermon to sound the horn as a call-to-arms, echoes the tale of Jericho in the use of sound as a destructive force. In this instance, the destruction is not in the form of a crumbling city wall, but the breaking up of the Earth itself by the sounding of a silver trumpet:

And Gabriel’s going to ask him: Lord
How loud must I blow it?
And God’s a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
Like seven peals of thunder.
Then the tall, bright angel, Gabriel,
Will put one foot on the battlements of heaven
And the other on the steps of hell,
And blow that silver trumpet
Till he shakes old hell’s foundations.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Richard J. Powell, ‘Paint That Thing!: Aaron Douglas’s Call to Modernism’, *American Studies* 49.1/2 (2008), p. 111.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, p. 54.

[REDACTED]

Fig. 9. Aaron Douglas, *Song of the Towers*, 1934.

[REDACTED]

Fig. 10. Aaron Douglas, *The Prodigal Son*, 1927.

[REDACTED]

Fig. 11. Aaron Douglas, *The Judgement Day*, 1927.

In ‘Revelation’, the biblical passage declares that Gabriel’s horn was heard across the world⁵⁶, bringing ‘flashes of lightening, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake...’⁵⁷ In the bottom left-hand corner of Douglas’s illustration of this scene there is a visible crack in the earth’s foundations, signalling the “shaking” and imminent breaking-apart of the earth between heaven and hell. Crucially, Johnson’s spirituals adopt the sonic influence of the rural South and re-root them in an urban space. In a 1959 recording of the sermons, the words were set to instrumental sounds that represent them, the “seven peals of thunder” for instance are accompanied by the roll of a drum snare. In reference to teeming Harlem, the preacher claims “you can always join a crowd in Babylon, young man [...] you’re always in a crowd in Babylon” – to this the sound of a brass band and drums provide a soundscape to the space of sin.

‘The Walls Come Tumblin’ Down’

The myth and image of Jericho in the context of black identity was one that would be repeated throughout black culture for years to come. In 1964, the artist Romare Bearden created a photomechanical piece entitled *Sermons: The Walls of Jericho*⁵⁸, which sought to highlight the internal self-reflections of black culture in the early 1960s. Ancient architectural ruins are visible within the collage, and Bearden sought to question whether or not that which had fallen could be rebuilt. The title of Fisher’s novel also echoes that of ‘Joshua Fit The Battle of Jericho’, a popular African spiritual performed and recorded during the 1920s as a black gospel song. The tune was believed to have originated from slaves during the early 19th century, “fit” being a colloquial mispronunciation of “fought”, which eventually remained in the title⁵⁹. At the

⁵⁶ Otherwise known as ‘Torricelli’s Trumpet’. In relation to the sound being heard across the world, as stated in the Bible, it has since been proven that that the shape of the trumpet compromised an infinite surface area but a finite volume.

⁵⁷ Revelation, 11: 19.

⁵⁸ Romare H. Bearden, ‘Sermons: The Walls of Jericho’ (1964), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁹ In 1922, the song was first recorded by Harrod’s Jubilee Singers, an acapella ensemble from Fisk University. In 1925, a second recording was released by the bass singer Paul Robeson, and surged in popularity again in 1958,

closing of Mahalia Jackson's take on the song, the drum and piano reverberate together. Set to the words "And the walls came tumblin' down" the rhythm slows and the notes fall dramatically to a far deeper tonal sound than is heard throughout the rest of the piece; a rhythmical representation of the apocalyptic crumbling of the wall surrounding the city⁶⁰.

In Johnson's sermons, the line 'pin his ear to the wisdom post'⁶¹, stresses the importance of listening. In Fisher's narrative, Shine's moment of revelation comes at the point in which he hears the words of a preacher. While his internal, emotional "wall" must be broken down in fragments, the words of the spiritual cause a significant rupture. "You, my friend, are Joshua" the preacher declares, "You have advanced through a life of battle...On you march...and then you find yourself face to face with a solid blank wall – a wall beyond which lies the only goal that matters – the land of promise [...] Do you know what that blank wall is? It is the self-illusion which circumstance has thrown around a man's own self"⁶². The fragmented sense of self-reflection counteracts Shine's outwardly physical strength. The result is not necessarily a singular and momentous collapse as much as it is a gradual chipping-away at his sense of identity, and masculinity. The preacher's observation "You, my friend, are Joshua", is certainly more than accurate in this sense. Fisher's initial depiction outlines a silent, composed figure of intimidating size towering above others; '...a young man so tall that, though he bent forward from the hips in a posture of easy nonchalance, he could still see over every intervening head...a supremely tranquil young Titan, with a face bronze, hard, metallic, lustrous, profoundly serene'⁶³. The most significant fissure in Shine's wall appears at the point

with a version performed by the gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, who performed it in a jazz-style in accordance with popular musical tastes of the time.

⁶⁰ The best example of this can be found in a recording of Jackson performing on the Nat King Cole Show, in 1957.

⁶¹ Johnson, "Listen, Lord – A Prayer", *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1927), p. 14.

⁶² Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 100.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 6.

in which the preacher urges his congregation to consider and call into question the crumbling of a city wall – brought down by sound of horns – alongside the course of racial history:

What is our Self, our true knowledge of our self, if not Jericho – chief city of every man’s spiritual Canaan? And how can we strip off illusion and take possession of our own soul save by battle? [...] It is easier to believe, I think, that the blast of rams horns and the shouting of a mob could cause a stone wall to crumble than that you and I should hope to find ourselves – to take our Jericho – by some brief event that shatters in a moment what self-deception has built up only over the course of years [...] To follow the counsel of that Truth and beset the wall of self-deception. So will towering illusion tumble. So will you straightaway enter triumphant into the promised land.⁶⁴

As in ‘City of Refuge’, the constructed “myth” of a black utopia is effectively dismantled. In reference to the black “self”, the preacher also bolsters one of the novel’s key themes of internalised racial barriers being as much a threat as those raised by external forces. The “wall” in this sense is one constructed from of a long history of racial, social, and economic inequality for African Americans. For Shine, the sound of the ram’s horn and the shouting of the mob must first dismantle internal barriers, before the towering ‘illusion’ of self-deception may fall.

The sounds of a sermon are unfamiliar to Shine, whose closest comparison is that of the Lafayette Theatre. Inevitably, he requires the visual scene to reinforce his audible perception. ‘It began with music’, he recalls, ‘a chorus singing far away behind the audience outside the church, it seemed. The singing came nearer and entered at the rear, and Shine obeyed the impulse to turn and look’. The soundscape of the South is here transplanted to Harlem. Compared to the theatre, Shine finds fault with the unfamiliar performance and ‘mysterious diversions’; ‘...the leading man singing a solo with the whole chorus coming to his rescue every time he paused for breath or seemed to falter. The leading man was alright, but he sure couldn’t sing. More singing – this was better – with the audience joining tardily in. Much jumping up and down on the part of everybody. And now the taking up of

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 101.

admission...this marked the end of the first act'⁶⁵. This transplantation of soundscapes is recognised by Andy Oler, whose study of Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* argues for an accumulative rural modernity. He suggests that 'people and spaces – rural and urban alike – dwell in the coexistence of fragments and the ambivalence of their relations'⁶⁶. This is based on the premise that soundscapes are not geographically exclusive between rural and urban spaces, essentially undermining the spatial and narrative conventions of the Harlem Renaissance. While Shine attempts to relate the sounds of the sermon to something more audibly familiar, the repeated sounds from which he gains comfort, and which for him represent the city, are the roaring, rumbling noises of his beloved four-ton truck, Bess.

It is not only the preacher's sermon that has a profound effect on Shine throughout the narrative. At several moments his emotional barriers are shaken by Linda's words, causing him to question his own sense of identity. Her voice seems to resonate with him above all others, and in the first instance, merely the sight of her is enough to render all else 'abruptly distant – people, laughter, shouting, music – while this dark eyed girl in her gypsy attire, scarlet, gold, and black, became and remained the center and the reason of it all'⁶⁷. When Linda accuses Shine of being little more than 'a dirty rat', the language she chooses has a profound affect; 'At first, the words merely stuck in his ears unrealized and meaningless, like the monotonous pulse of the orchestra's bass drum. The suddenly, as if their beating had finally broken through a wall, they burst full into consciousness'. This is repeated again in the final section of the novel, when Linda highlights his internal identity crisis and echoes the words of the preacher; "There's a wall around you. A thick stone wall. You're outside, looking. You think you see yourself. You don't. You only see the wall. Hard guy – that's the wall. Never give in, never turn loose. Always get the other guy. That's the wall". Only when Shine admits his love for

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 98.

⁶⁶ Andy Oler, "Their Song Filled the Whole Night: Not Without Laughter, Hinterlands Jazz, and Rural Modernity", *College Literature*, 41.4 (2014), pp. 95.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 43.

her, is she able to say, with a 'halting laugh', "The walls must be tumbling down". This moment of internal soul-searching, which for Shine is as unfamiliar as the preacher's sermon, is subsequently interrupted by the recognizable and comforting sound of Bess's horn being lain on from the street below, 'faint but clear' through the open window. Shine, recognizing this as the moment in which his walls have been demolished, perceives this as the symbolic sound of the ram's horn. While Bess's horn is for Shine synonymous with the sound of the city as he knows it, the sounds of the truck are eventually transplanted to the South, the dim roar of the engine accompanying Linda and Shine as they drive over the horizon and 'into another land'⁶⁸.

While the soundscapes of the polarized spaces of Fisher's novel remain unique, throughout *Jericho* the traditional trajectory of the South to North migration is subverted. The novel opens with a South to North trajectory within New York itself. The opening paragraphs of *Jericho* begin outside of the borders of Harlem, at the point at which Fifth Avenue, harbouring 'an aristocracy of residence already yielding to an aristocracy of commerce', runs northward into the neighbourhood. 'Has any New Yorker confessed to the rest', the narrator queries, 'that when Fifth Avenue crosses One Hundred Tenth Street, leaving Central Park behind, it leaves its aristocracy behind as well?'⁶⁹. This is an intentional topographical choice by Fisher, opening the novel with the narrator and readers already in-motion, moving uptown towards Harlem. As a result, the readers themselves must make the same migration into the neighbourhood that is so often described in the fiction of Harlem Renaissance writers.

Moving along this trajectory, the sonic and spatial landscape shifts. Structures of white commercialism gradually disappear to reveal Harlem's 'bargain stores, babble, and kids, dinginess, odors, thick speech'. This path is designed to highlight visual changes in the landscape, the majority of the city's skyscrapers and towering construction being within the

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 157.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 1.

confines of mid-town, but also emphasises the decline in socio-economic position of the neighbourhood, despite its close proximity to Fifth Avenue:

Fallen from splendour and doubtless ashamed, the Avenue burrows into the ground and plunges beneath a park which hides it from One Hundred Sixteenth to One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street. Here it emerges moving uncertainly northward a few more blocks; and now – irony of ironies – finds itself in Negro Harlem...a city jungle this, if ever there was one, peopled largely by untamed creatures that live and die for the moment only⁷⁰.

As the narrator is quick to establish, Fifth Avenue, for all its superiority, has seemingly skipped the ‘so-called dicky sections’⁷¹ of Harlem belonging to the promenading walkers of Seventh Avenue on a Sunday, and the affluent residents of Striver’s Row. Fisher describes the Avenue as being deeply entrenched in the unknown ‘backwoods’ of Harlem: ‘Accordingly, here strides melodrama, naked and unashamed’⁷².

Seventh Avenue – that ‘most versatile of thoroughfares’ – is characterised as ‘Harlem’s Broadway’ during the week and ‘its Fifth Avenue on a Sunday’. Seventh, Fisher’s narrator remarks ‘remains for six days a walk for deliberate shoppers, a land for tumultuous traffic, the avenue of a thousand enterprises and the scene of a thousand hairbreadth escapes; remains for six nights a carnival...alive with darting cabs...with music wafted from mysterious sources, with gay talk and loud African laughter’. In contrast, on Sundays the transformed Seventh Avenue ‘becomes the highway to heaven, reflects that air of quiet, satisfied self-righteousness peculiar to chronic churchgoers’⁷³. Whilst Harlem is geographically situated north of Central Park (traditionally referred to as “uptown”) Fisher’s narrative traces a geographical and figurative *descent*, Fifth Avenue burrowing into the ground before emerging tentatively into

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

⁷¹ In a list of appendices (An Introduction to Contemporary Harlemites), Fisher defines the term “dicky” as slang for a ‘high-toned person’.

⁷² Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 2.

⁷³ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 102-3.

the ‘dark kingdom’s backwoods’. To some extent, this echoes the purgatorial passage undertaken in the opening of ‘Refuge’ – the suggestion that arriving in Harlem is a form of emergence into a new world. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the image of Harlem as an urban “hell” is a familiar trope of Fisher’s work. The burrowing of Fifth Avenue also implies an alternate tale to that of Joshua triumphantly climbing over the wreck of Jericho’s walls and conquering the city. Rather, it is Harlem that has here been infiltrated by an avenue of white capitalism, which in turn acts as a catalyst for socio-economic inequality.

There are two places around which *Jericho* revolves, Henry Patmore’s Pool Parlor (Fifth Avenue) and the white residential street, Court Avenue. While each space may be polarized in a social sense, geographically they are not so far apart. Nevertheless, their sonic landscapes are seemingly at odds with one another, creating a sense of disharmony upon which the narrative revolves. Patmore’s Pool Parlour is described as an establishment holding ‘no pretenses’⁷⁴ over its function or architectural design. Occupying the remodelled ground floor of a ‘once elegant’ apartment-house, the saloon consists of two simple rooms, one a bar and the other filled with green pool tables. It serves as the focus for the novel and the central communal space for the black workers in this section of Harlem, a place where ‘you met real regular guys and rubbed elbows with authority’, and although fictional, harks back to the “best” of establishments that Fisher recalls from his early days in Harlem⁷⁵, refusing to pander to well-heeled white attendees venturing from downtown Manhattan. This is where readers are first introduced to Shine, and the employees of Isaac’s Transportation Company; Jinx Jenkins and Bubber Brown, an erstwhile comical duo with a ‘habitual dissension’. In contrast to the pool parlour, Court Avenue is described as a quiet road and the ‘most exclusive of the residential streets’ adjacent to Harlem, characterised by the residents it harbours as ‘a straight, thin spinster

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Rudolph Fisher, ‘The Caucasian Storms Harlem’, in *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Nathan Huggins (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 74.

of a street'⁷⁶. The dwellings of Court Avenue (much like Joshua's Jericho) are seemingly impenetrable, being pale grey in colour and '...all essentially alike, four stories tall, thin to gauntless, droop-eyed with drawn shapes, stood shoulder to shoulder in long, inhospitable rows. Stone stoops, well withdrawn from the sidewalks, lend an air of inaccessibility, and the tiny front yards that might dispel this illusion by only a bit of grass or a flower are instead uniformly laid away beneath slabs of expressionless concrete'. 'In short' Fisher's narrator quips, 'Court Avenue is a snob of a street...somewhat to be pitied in its pretence at ignoring the punishment [at] hand: the terribly sure approach of the swiftly spreading Negro colony'⁷⁷. It is on this Avenue that black lawyer Merrit purchases a new home, employing Jinx, Bubber and Shine to move his household goods, believing them to be the 'toughest furniture movers in Harlem' and heeding the warning of white prejudice from his colleague; "...when you move up there on Court Avenue, you're opening up to all those old scars...they'll resist. They'll warn you with threatening notes. They'll try to buy you out. If these don't work, they will probably dynamite you"⁷⁸. This method of threat was not uncommon. In several Northern cities, racial prejudice and the property war between white and black residents had led to a considerable outbreak of violent attacks. As James Weldon Johnson would later reflect, violence had increased in large cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, where houses purchased by black property owners were frequently bombed or raided⁷⁹.

Each of these spaces is eventually destroyed, a physical representation of the dismantling of social and racial segregations within the novel. Their destructions are also inherently linked. Despite Merrit's swift social rise and residency on Court Avenue, his house is eventually destroyed under the orders of Henry Patmore, by a racially fuelled arson attack. Here, the imagery of the demolished wall(s) dominates the narrative;

⁷⁶ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 24.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.24-25.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 23.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, p. 155-59.

Every pane had been bashed in with flood, every window frame charred with fire, each of the gray stone window margins frayed and blackened with smoke...The place had been gutted, heart and bowels. Its vitals all had been hopelessly battered and crushed till they'd shrunken out of sight. One could stand on the sidewalk and see the sunset through and beyond the rear wall – a hard, broad grin of a sunset, which transilluminated the flame sacked dwelling, mocking its emptiness without pity, deriding its devastation...The house stood stark as a corpse in the shrouding dust.⁸⁰

For Shine, the 'unsparing destruction' of Merrit's home – 'ceilings black, walls gray and water soaked, woodwork a burnt caricature, patches of plaster fallen away baring the carbonized understructure' – shocks him to the core, and subsequently redirects his anger. The destruction of Merrit's home also infringes on Cramp in her own domestic space. The 'shattering ordeal', beginning with smoke filling the neighbourhood, is closely followed by 'the shriek, roar and clangor of arriving fire trucks, men shouting, thumping her own front door, yelling for admittance, dragging hose line through her house to the roof...' ⁸¹. As is the pattern throughout the novel, one destruction leads to another. Shine, partially fuelled by his horror at the 'looming gray carcass' that was once Merrit's home, visits the Pool Parlor in search of Patmore. Accordingly, a mass fight erupts in the saloon, a 'senseless twist and tangle' accompanied by 'grunt, curses, thwacks, hisses...a deep background of sound against which stood out an occasional wooden crash'. The fight is brought to an abrupt end by the shattering of glass, resonant of that found amidst the ruins of Merrit's house, as one customer hurls a pool ball at a large glass mirror; 'The crash and jangle of the falling glass wall was all that snatched Shine out of madness. The sound transfixed him as if all the walls of the place had tumbled instead of just one' ⁸².

Unlike 'City of Refuge', the imagery of Harlem as a crumbling Jericho is repeatedly reinforced by sonic representations. Those same sonic moments of "crashing re-entry" that

⁸⁰ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 130.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 152.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 148.

Green identifies in Ellington's composition and which occur in the closing of 'Refuge', repeatedly re-appear throughout the narrative. These are audible signposts of a significant shift in the narrative. Commonly, this motif occurs in a physical breaking or shattering of items. During the destruction of the Pool Parlor, it is the words of Henry Patmore (bragging about his revenge on Merrit) that sparks Shine's lack of control, and brings him to the realisation that Patmore has been the cause of bringing deplorable destruction on another of his own race. The effect is instantaneous, but also culminates in an outpouring of the racial and social prejudices that Shine has grappled with; '...his hatred of the asylum superintendent, of the fay who had called him Shine, of all fays, of the evil thing he'd escaped in pianos, of dickties in general and the blameless dickty Merrit in particular – all these now gathered in one single wave, advanced in one tidal rush'⁸³. The physical structures of Fisher's novel are (architecturally) the largest to fall, but the destruction of Patmore's Pool Parlour and that of the white residential Court Avenue, ultimately forms the basis of Fisher's commentary: that neither black nor white can succeed on a socio-economic level, or develop in the cultural sense, without the other. Their rise and fall ultimately coincide.

This is no more evident than in the repeated metaphor of the falling piano. As a removal man, Shine continuously dismantles and reconstructs domestic spaces and the objects that fill them. At this it is evident that he excels, his knowledge of the 'mysterious anatomy of furniture' described as 'wholly adequate'⁸⁴. In the moving and removal of pianos, he likens himself to 'a tamer of beasts' handling his living archenemy'. The piano, he notes, is 'a malicious thing, it loves to slip out of your grip and snap at your toes, with an evil chuckle inside...touch it and hear it rumble or whine. Ponderous, spiteful, treacherous live thing...'⁸⁵. The moving of the

⁸³ Ibid, p. 145.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 25.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 12.

instrument initially reveals the weaknesses of architectural structures, as Shine recalls a near-incident during a household removal;

Only today they were putting a piano into a third-storey window of a house on a busy street. They had used hooks over the cornice, and the cheap rotten cement crumbled. Cornices aren't supposed to bear weight – an inferior mixture will do. One hook came through just as Shine was reaching out of the window to catch hold of the suspended instrument and guide it through the frame. He heard the crackle of broken cement above, saw the instrument sag a little while it showed crumbs of broken cornice.

The closely avoided destruction of the piano here sets the precedent for the remainder of the narrative, and has several connotations. Firstly, it foreshadows a further incident, revealing flaws in Shine's professional ability and fracturing his own sense of pride and masculinity. Secondly, it highlights the poor construction of housing and once more draws on the rhetoric of Jericho's collapse. As seen in the depictions of the airshaft in 'Refuge', Fisher's initial reference to the poor construction of the house in question here signals the persistent problems of Harlem's domestic conditions. Although the building here is not a tenement block, it does emphasize the poor quality of construction across the neighbourhood. The extension of the railroad at the turn of the century allowed business and residents to flow from downtown and mid-town Manhattan, and construction subsequently became a profitable trade. Yet as Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts highlights, topographically the neighbourhood was 'haphazardly annexed' from the rest of the metropolis until 1880, after which sparsely built houses began to appear as mere 'speculative enterprises'⁸⁶. In an attempt to counter-act the racial prejudice of white real estate companies, the Harlem Property Owners' Improvement Association instead gathered savings in order to establish black property agencies. Once again, capitalism intervened. When the Pennsylvania Railroad Company selected a sight for a new central terminal, upon which had previously stood one of the oldest African American congregations in the city, Saint Philip's

⁸⁶ Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, *Harlem is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (New York, Boston, and London: Back Bay Books, 2013), p. 9-10.

Protestant Episcopal Church, residents were offered large sums of cash to fund new building projects in Harlem, which would later become desirable tenements.

Returning to Ottley's social account, in the early part of the 1900's white residents of Harlem began to flee 'as from a flood, leaving house after house, and block after block, in yawning vacancy'⁸⁷. Existing property was sold far below its value, and by 1910, large numbers of labourers from Southern cities were being shipped North en masse, in an attempt to prevent the shortage of construction workers in the race to build new urban homes. Construction was quick, but of poor quality, and walls were literally crumbling. In March 1905, a total of nine houses located in Harlem and the Bronx collapsed. According to the report in the *New York Times*⁸⁸, the contractors had 'erected two full stories in less than three days', using freezing mortar, which was in violation of building regulations due to its tendency to melt in increasingly warmer temperatures. The report continued; '[At] about 9 o'clock yesterday morning the neighbourhood in West One Hundred and Thirty-Fifth Street was aroused by a great rumbling noise. The crowds rushing into the streets found that in a row of eight new houses, four had collapsed...The rear walls of two fell out completely...'. Over the course of several hours, buildings constructed by the same contractor throughout the two neighbourhoods continued to collapse. In one, a six storey building with a frontage of eighty-five feet, 'the entire interior of the house collapsed, falling into the cellar and leaving the outer walls practically unsupported...the rear walls, about 11 o'clock last night, gave way, falling with a great crash'.

Fisher's preoccupation with the ability of sound to damage or destroy a space invariably echoes the concerns of noise within the city, discussed in the previous chapter. However, acoustic architecture had become a key component of construction throughout the city. As

⁸⁷ Ottley, p. 33.

⁸⁸ 'Tenement Walls Fall in Harlem and Bronx', *The New York Times*, March 20th 1905, p. 1.

Thompson observes in her study of the modernist soundscape⁸⁹, by 1930 companies were manufacturing a vast array of acoustical products: felts, artificial masonry, sound-absorbent tiles, wallboards, plaster, floorboards, soundproof doors, and mechanical devices capable of isolating the acoustics of floors, windows, walls and ceilings. This was also an exploration in new construction materials. In 1928, Macoustic Engineering Co. claimed to have developed a “triple acting mechanical-aero-chemical process”⁹⁰ which, according to Thompson was designed ‘to effervesce plaster into porous, sound-absorbing surfaces’ via ‘pressurized guns to spray acoustical insulation onto and into walls’. A surge in popularity led to high demand for sound-absorption materials and expertise, and whilst Thompson observes that the marketing of these products was somewhat overzealous, they were used in a number of high profile buildings, including the New York Life Insurance Company. They were especially in demand in any office space where the noises of typewriters and telephones were persistent. This may appear as a diversion from Fisher’s narrative. The novel, after all, focuses on biblical imagery, and the use of sound as a tool for apocalyptic destruction. What renders Fisher’s novel significant is the context in which it is re-framed, the destructive force of sound being depicted at precisely the time in which sound-absorbent materials were being incorporated as part of the very construction of the walls that Fisher suggests might be destroyed. Thompson suggests that new forms of acoustic architecture led to a change in the way in which individuals responded to spaces and to the wider soundscape. Acoustical design, she states, ‘came to be seen as “sound” economic practice and the practice proliferated [...] whereas people had previously only visited acoustically designed spaces, they now began to inhabit them’⁹¹.

The final and most prominent resonance of the falling piano, is undoubtedly the metaphor through which the social and cultural barriers that stand between the black and white

⁸⁹ Thompson, p. 190-1.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 191.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 207.

characters of the narrative effectively fall in tandem. The destruction of buildings occurs twice throughout Fisher's narrative, but it is the destruction of the piano which initially foreshadows each of these occurrences, and, continuing with the novel's biblical theme, mirrors the function of the ram's horns in the destruction of Joshua's Jericho as a sonic signal of crumbling infrastructure. The aforementioned scene in which a cornice gives way under the weight of the instrument, mirrors a second incident in the closing chapters, during which a piano slips from the belt securing it. Crashing to the pavement the instrument erupts with an 'explosion, groan, and whine thick wood, coarse metal, taut wires – a noise that struck and shattered itself, then rose, spread, and hovered...as if a corner of hell had been blasted off and a thousand souls swarmed out, wailing'⁹². Sound maintains a dual resonance here. Notably, the sonic behaviour of the 'malicious' instrument *before* it has fallen - the 'evil chuckle' and 'rumble' - threaten potential destruction. Yet it is the sound *after* the fall that resonates most with Shine. The piano being the cornerstone of many jazz ensembles, the destruction of this instrument in particular is far more resonant than others. The noise emitted during its destruction reverberates with those who hear it, precisely because it is so far removed from the sounds usually produced by the piano keys. In social terms, the fall follows the pattern of Fisher's 'crumbling' rhetoric. The piano being the only instrument in which ebony and ivory keys – black and white – reside as neighbours, the instrument reflects the topographical framework of *Jericho*, and the intertwined narrative of Fred Merrit and Agatha Cramp.

For Merrit, wealth and heightened social status allow him access to Court Avenue, a fact that causes unease amongst both the white residents of the street and the regulars of Patmore's Pool Parlor, by whom he is perceived as a "dicky"⁹³. Cramp, an ageing spinster and the resident upon whom Court Avenue is modelled, is defined by three characteristics: 'a large

⁹² Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 123.

⁹³ At the end of his novel, Fisher provides a glossary of slang terms, or 'Harlemese', that appear frequently throughout the novel. "Dicky" is defined as a reference to a 'swell' or 'high-toned person'. Despite Fisher's optimistic social commentary, he was not afraid to highlight both internal and external racial prejudices.

store of wealth', a 'sufficiently small store of imagination'⁹⁴, and an unyielding but misguided devotion to "Social Service". In his move to Harlem, the lives of Merrit and Cramp are inexorably intertwined, and in the destruction of the piano, their architectural and social positions are reflected. Principally, it affirms Fisher's call for social equality. The black and white keys of the piano must be used in conjunction to create a melody. The function of the instrument is lost without this partnering. Yet this destruction also mirrors in some detail the aforementioned relationship between Court Avenue's residents, each of whom occupy an elevated social position which is subsequently torn down – Merrit through the physical destruction of his home, and Agatha Cramp through the ruin of her reputation.

Court Avenue is particularly compelling, as the sort of street which demands privacy but in which none of the resident's affairs remain private. Hana Wirth-Nesher argues that in the modern urban novel, the public and the private sphere are conflated, and that the 'opposition of parlor and street has been eroded'⁹⁵. This especially true of private dwellings. For Nesher, 'even when the setting is the interior of a "private" home, its dwellers are exposed to the gaze of the stranger'. In *Jericho*, windows take on a character of their own, the personification of Agatha Cramp's inquisitiveness, seemingly speaking to the external space; Twice a day, when the sunlight touches the windows of this side in the morning and again of that side at night, Court Avenue smiles a chilly, crystalline smile...the sort of smile that goes with the words, "My dear! Can you imagine such a thing!" and you might suppose that the street was returning even the sun's genial greeting and warm farewell with a disapproving sneer⁹⁶. Nesher continues to state that 'what modern urban novels [...] share is a predominance of these indeterminate public and private spaces, and a construction of self that is more dependent on the "street" than it is on the domestic resources. In fact, it also has the effect of domesticating the street, of

⁹⁴ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p.31.

⁹⁵ Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 20.

⁹⁶ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 24.

making the city a wellspring of desire and identity'. This may not be accurate for the majority of the characters that appear throughout *Jericho*. For Agatha Cramp in particular, the domestic space provides for her an infrastructure from which she can shelter from the advancing 'Negro colony'⁹⁷ – a reversal of the image of "sanctuary" sought by Gillis in 'City of Refuge'. Yet for Shine, houses are directly connected to employment. They offer him economic stability, but readers are not privy to witnessing Shine in his own domestic space. His "walls" are not architectural, but are formed by his outwardly tough exterior and gradually deconstructed throughout the narrative.

In constructing and deconstructing the polarized spaces of Court Avenue and Patmore's Pool Parlor, Fisher ultimately ridicules the concept of physical and social "walls" altogether. The space that acts at the common ground uniting them is General Improvement Associations Annual Costume Ball (an organisation for African American social advancement) and the singular occasion in Harlem during which 'everybody is present and nobody minds'⁹⁸. This public affair is brief, and strategically placed at the beginning of the narrative. Yet, even here, the space is configured to enforce a particular social hierarchy, the dance floor, 'large as a city block', bordered either side 'by railings...extending the length of the building between the dance floor and the lateral walls, a raised level...So swept the scene from black to white through all the shadows and shades. Ordinary Negroes and rats below, dickties and fays above, the floor beneath the feet of one constituting the roof over the heads of the other'⁹⁹. The open space gives the illusion of accessibility, but definitively separates elite black and white spectators from those on the dance floor below. For Hana Wirth-Nesher, this is a familiar theme in the discourse between the topographical and social make-up of the city. Drawing upon Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Nesher notes that architecture can give way to a superficial

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 25.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 38-9.

sense of social mobility. This, she argues, is ‘made possible by high density, highrises, and the newly fashionable plate-glass windows, transparent walls inviting the outsider to enter and to partake of the interior’¹⁰⁰. In *Sister Carrie*, Neshier argues that a familiar rhetoric can be found, as the city ‘seduces its dwellers with visual plentitude and then mercilessly shuts them out’. As in Fisher’s narrative, the novel reveals a formidable socio-economic structure, maintained and reinforced by those already born within the walls of privilege and wealth. As in the case of Dreiser’s novel, ‘the only impassable wall [...] is mental, and internalization of economic barriers that is as solid as any medieval wall that protected its inhabitants from intruders’. The climatic end of *Jericho* reveals a neighbourhood so damaged it is impossible for the novel’s protagonist to remain. He too, has broken through the personal barriers that previously hampered his departure.

Traditional literary scholarship of the Harlem Renaissance has had little room for the inclusion of Fisher. Despite his significant contribution to short fiction publications and periodicals, his lengthier literary work often falls by the wayside in scholarly memory. In part, this might simply be attributed to the tragic shortness of his life. However, the sounding of his fictional trumpets also heralded the stark fragility of Harlem, and the internal contradictions that threatened the idealisation of Locke’s ‘New Negro’, inconsistencies not compatible with celebratory scholarship of Harlem’s Renaissance. His place in this thesis has been specifically selected as the midpoint for this very reason. He bridges a gap, not only in broader discussions of the Harlem Renaissance but in the discussion and framework of the thesis itself. His adoption of sound as a destructive tool signals a departure from McKay’s associative use of sound to map the spaces that his characters traverse, and the establishment of characteristic soundmarks upon which *Home to Harlem* is constructed. There may be closer comparisons drawn to Larsen,

¹⁰⁰ Hana Wirth-Neshier, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 66.

in the practices of conscious listening adopted for both her female characters and the vulnerable Gillis in 'City of Refuge'. Yet here too, there is a distinct disparity. Where Larsen's narratives adopt silence as a means to reveal superficial identities, Fisher reinforces the spectacle of Harlem through misleading sonic signals. In the wake of Fisher's forceful deconstruction of Harlem, this thesis hereafter must retreat from the Black Mecca into 'another land'¹⁰¹. In the following chapter, I turn to the 'lining tracks' of Zora Neale Hurston, considering her experiences in the railroad and sawmill camps of Florida, and the subsequent transposition of this Southern soundscape onto the metropolitan stage, in her return to the North.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.157.

5. “Can’t You Line It?”: The Southern Soundscape in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *The Great Day*

On the 18th June 1939, Zora Neale Hurston visited fellow anthropologists Herbert Halpert and Stetson Kennedy at the Federal Music Project office in Jacksonville, Florida. Halpert and Kennedy had been tasked with compiling a collection of traditional mid-Atlantic folk songs, funded by the Works Progress Administration¹. Hurston had already accrued over a decade of experience in anthropological fieldwork; experience that had informed several of her published folkloric collections. The Jacksonville recordings provided the opportunity to communicate her anthropological material and personal recollections through an alternate auditory medium. Songs sung by workers in railroad camps in Florida between 1931 and 1935 were a key feature, emphasising the importance and function of works songs in Southern communities. The taped interview also revealed the extent to which Hurston drew upon the ‘lining tracks’ in her literary

¹ The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a work-relief program created in 1935 by President Franklin Roosevelt's administration. It incorporated material from the Joint Committee on Folk Art, The Federal Writer's Project (of which Hurston was a member), and the Federal Music Project.

and theatrical works. One month prior to her recorded conversations with Halpert and Stetson, she submitted a proposal to Henry G. Alsberg, director of the Federal Writer's Project, detailing the benefits of a 'recording expedition in the Floridas'². In the request, she outlined North East Florida as 'a conglomerate of many cultures', noting that the Jacksonville-Callahan area was 'full of railroad songs, chants, and stories'. "Lining tracks" were the functional rhythms of railroad workers, featuring rhythmical intonations that mimicked the physical movements of the railroad gangs and the method in which each individual piece of steel track was laid along sections of the Florida East Coast Railway. The songs maintained a dual resonance, echoing a historical legacy as adaptations of African American slave songs and gesturing towards a contemporary form of sonic modernity, one which reflected the developments of the modern age whilst remaining in contrast to the discordant, industrial soundscape of Northern cities.

While Hurston's second publication, *Mules and Men*, is interspersed with lyrics and folksong, this chapter argues that the lining rhythms and work songs of the railroad had a far greater aesthetic influence on Hurston's writing than previously acknowledged in scholarly analysis of her work. Moving beyond Fisher's deconstructive soundscapes, the first part of this chapter will offer a re-reading of *Mules and Men*, considering lining rhythms as a formal framework for the construction of the anthropology. The second part of this chapter considers the aesthetic fluidity of these rhythms, and the way in which Hurston adapted lining tracks from the page to the metropolitan stage. This adaptation also prompts further questions regarding the development of the songs, which undergo a formal shift from aural to textual representation, before reverting back to aural performance, where the element of originality (or authenticity) is inevitably lost. Above all, the work songs lose their functionality. The ensuing discussion will examine a lesser-known folk opera, *The Great Day*, produced by Hurston and performed under various titles in Washington, Chicago and New York. In its final adaptation,

² Zora Neale Hurston, 'Proposed Recording Expedition into the Floridas' (May 1939), Library of Congress.

it was entitled *Singing Steel*, in a direct reference to the liners and their labour. In the move between textual and musical form, Hurston took up the challenge of transporting the ‘soundmarks’³ of Southern labouring communities into a new environment. In *Dust Tracks*, she reflects on her decision to bring “lining tracks” and folk song to the theatre, stating ‘I just wanted people to know what real Negro music sounded like’⁴. The dramatic shift from rural scenes of labour to urban theatre performance indicates a layering of one soundscape upon another.

Hurston’s decision to present her anthropological material in an alternate form further emphasises the aesthetic fluidity of the Harlem Renaissance, as identified in the opening of this thesis. For Daphne Brooks, Zora the ‘anthropologist’ has often overshadowed Zora the ‘vocalist’⁵. ‘Bessie Smith she was not’, Brooks adds. Yet, if Hurston’s anthropological work is to be read in the context of sonic modernity, it is vital to understand the ‘playful, spirited, and earnest’ influences of performance in her writing, which ‘spurred her ethnographic work forward for more than a decade’. At the core of her anthropological practice was her ability to be both a participant of, and a listener to the sonic culture of the communities depicted within her narrative(s), a technique developed in her training under Franz Boas whilst studying at Barnard. Hurston affectionately declared “Papa Franz” to be ‘the greatest Anthropologist alive’, and a ‘genius for pure objectivity’⁶. As early as 1904, Boas defined anthropology as a form of scientific research, situated between the branches of biology and the ‘mental sciences’ but developed from a historical curiosity of ‘New World’ civilisations. Anthropologists, he affirmed, occupied themselves with ‘problems relating to the physical and mental life of

³ Schafer, p. 9.

⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks On A Road* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 280.

⁵ Daphne. A. Brooks, ‘Sister Can You Line It Out?: Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood’, *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 55.4 (2010), p. 617.

⁶ Hurston, *Dust Track on a Road*, p. 143.

mankind as found in varying forms of society...and in all parts of the world'⁷. At the core of anthropology was the power to make the individual understand the roots of civilisation, and the 'relative value of all forms of culture'. Under Boas's tutelage, Hurston considered anthropology to be an invaluable 'tool' in her observation of Southern culture. However, her intention to *preserve* folkloric cultures and oral traditions in textual form indicated a departure from the developmental nature of anthropology that Boas outlined. The Southern communities represented in *Mules and Men* in particular are static societies, non-participants of the mass mobility of the early twentieth century.

Throughout much of Hurston's career, her attitude towards primitive 'curiosities' remained highly ambiguous. On one hand she sought an authentic representation of the Black South, on the other, she frequently embellished anthropological accounts, and repeatedly emphasised her cosmopolitan "otherness" amongst those she claimed as her "own" people. If, as Boas suggested, anthropological framework served 'as a check to an exaggerated valuation' of the anthropologist's own period, then Hurston's application of anthropological methods in her exploration of Southern folkloric culture appears at times to be used as an exaggerated valuation of her own development and success. In several instances throughout *Mules and Men*, Hurston notes the material aspects of her success compared to the individuals she is observing. In Polk County, she remarks on the significance of her '\$12.74 dress from Macy's'⁸ amongst the '\$1.98 mail-order dresses' of other women, although there is little to suggest that the women in question notice any distinction. While she pledges to make amends to her physical appearance, the scene is an intentional recognition of her difference in status, amongst a community into which she is attempting to assimilate.

⁷ Franz Boas, 'The History of Anthropology', *Science* (American Association for the Advancement of Sciences), 20.512 (1904), p. 513.

⁸ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 63.

According to Leigh Anne Duck, Hurston ‘describes the spectacle of herself in what seems an incommensurable intersection of temporalities – the modern social scientist in a hoodoo trance’⁹. In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, she observed that folklore fit her ‘like a tight chemise’ that required a cognitive distance in order to be fully appreciated. ‘It was only when I was off in college’, she recalled, ‘...that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass on Anthropology to look through at that’¹⁰. There are questions raised throughout this chapter, over the nature and intention of Hurston’s methods. In the opening of *Mules and Men* however, her perception of anthropology as a ‘spy-glass’ indicates a level of detachment seemingly at odds with her subsequent attempts to immerse herself within communities. Moreover, ‘spying’ implies a reticent practice of observation more closely aligned with that of the voyeur rather than the anthropologist, encouraging readers to look towards Hurston herself, rather than at the communities she intends to depict – a recurring theme throughout *Mules and Men* in particular. One reviewer for *The New York Times* remarked that Hurston invited her reader’s to ‘listen in’, continuing ‘...those of us who have known the Southern Negro from our youth find him here speaking the language of his tribe as familiarly as if it came straight out his own mouth and had not been translated into type and transmitted through the eye to the ear’¹¹. Like Hurston’s comparison of anthropology to a ‘spy-glass’, the act of ‘listening in’ might well be considered as a form of sonic voyeurism. As discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, ‘listening in’ was a practice frequently adopted by both Irene and Clare in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. If the voyeuristic gaze was a traditionally male one, the method of gaining a sense of gratification and agency through eavesdropping was seemingly a feminine preoccupation. Whereas for Larsen the practice of listening was used by her female characters in order to gain a social

⁹ Leigh A. Duck, ‘Go there tuh know there: Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of Folk’, *American Literary History*, 13.2 (2001), p. 275.

¹⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 1.

¹¹ ‘The Full True Flavor of Life in a Negro Community’, *The New York Times*, 10th November 1935, p. br4.

currency, for Hurston the practice was not only part of her anthropological methods, but resulted in a direct challenge to her audience to shift their method of reading. To an extent, the practice set Hurston apart from her male counterparts. The *North American Review* declared that *Mules and Men* was ‘a social study with the gusto of a story’, adding, ‘the southern raconteur who justly prides himself upon his large store of stories about the coloured man will here find himself beaten on his own ground...’¹².

Robert Hemenway poses the question: ‘Is *Mules and Men* about Zora Neale Hurston or about black folklore?’. He acknowledges that the deficiencies in Hurston’s anthropological approach are the result of a ‘two-fold purpose’. On one hand, he asserts, ‘she was trying to represent the artistic content of black folklore, on the other, she was trying to suggest the behavioural significance of folkloric events’¹³. Similarly, where *The Great Day* succeeds in capturing the culture(s) and folkloric practices found in Floridian railroad camps, as discussed later in this chapter, the concert also culminated in a problematic recreation of Bahamian dance, the visual ‘primitive’ aspects of which were seemingly emphasised for white metropolitan audiences. This too, appeared partially to be a result of Boas’s influence. In a letter from October 1929, Hurston wrote to her mentor: ‘I thought you might be interested in the Bahamas. The Negroes there are more African, actually know the tribes from which their ancestors came. Some still speak the dialects’¹⁴. While Boas adopted recorded sound as a means of preserving folklore and folksong in the late 1930s, the use of recorded sound as a means of preserving folkloric culture appeared first through the establishment of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879. As Charles Hofman highlights, prior to the unification of collecting material under the BAE, earlier efforts to preserve folksong ‘resorted to the method of writing down melodies “by

¹² Thomas .C. Chubb, ‘*Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston’, *The North American Review*, 1st March 1936, p. 181.

¹³ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p.167-68.

¹⁴ Letter to Franz Boas, October 20th 1929, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. by Carla Kaplan (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 150.

ear””, an inadequate process that only revealed the ‘limitations of transcriptions’, and the ‘necessity of the singer having to repeat a song many times’¹⁵. In 1907, anthropologist Frances Densmore began collecting recorded material for the Smithsonian Institution and the BAE, as a means to preserve American Indian music. There are resonances of Densmore’s practice in Hurston’s recorded materials, particularly in the functional concept of folk songs. Densmore recognized that Indian tribes ‘used songs as a means for accomplishing definite results’¹⁶. Singing was used for ‘every undertaking which the Indian felt was beyond his power as an individual [...] the essential medium of putting forth this “more than human” power’.

For Hurston, the Jacksonville recordings of 1939 provide a significant insight into her anthropological methods, although still allowed for some element of curation in the representative scenes of Floridian life she discussed. As Pamela Bordelon acknowledges, ‘Hurston’s particular selection of folk songs...showcases those she believed most representative of Florida black folks’ life, work, and recreation’. The songs frequently overlap in these categories, performed and overheard by Hurston in railroad and sawmill camps, jook houses, and on porch steps. For Bordelon, lining rhythms ‘...express perfectly the communal nature of both work and music’¹⁷. In a recording of the folk song “Halimuhfack”¹⁸, Halpert can be heard asking Hurston to elaborate on her method of learning songs. ‘I just get in the crowd with the people if they are singing, and I listen as best I can’, she replied, ‘and then I start to join in with a phrase or two and then finally I get so I can sing a verse, and then I keep on until I learn all the sounds and all the verses, and then I sing them back to the people until they tell me that I can sing them just like them’. Before the recording concluded, Hurston stressed the

¹⁵ Charles Hofman, ‘Frances Densmore and the Music of the American Indian’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 59.231 (1946), p. 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Pamela Bordelon, ed., *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston From the Federal Writers Project* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 157.

¹⁸ Stetson Kennedy, Herbert Halpert, Zora Neale Hurston, ‘Halimuhfack’ (1939), Audio Recording, Library of Congress.

mobile nature of folksong, adding simply; ‘I learn the song myself and then I can take it with me wherever I go’. Crucially, Hurston’s comment is indicative of the universal recognition of song as a form of cultural expression and communication. As an anthropological tool, lining rhythms such as “Halimuhfack” and “John Henry” enabled Hurston to establish a sonic identity amongst the black communities of South Florida, even where her social and economic status differed. They also provided a distinct rhythm that could be built upon throughout both her fictional and anthropological work.

For Rachel Farebrother, *Mules and Men* is an anthropological work with a distinct ‘collage aesthetic’. Examining the literary patterns of synthesis and fragmentation in Hurston’s formal structure, Farebrother suggests that where Hurston ‘constructed relationships between parts to reveal aesthetic impulses that give African American culture coherence’¹⁹ she also identified improvisation as the ‘guiding principle of black cultural expression’²⁰. As a result, she argues that *Mules and Men* employs a consistent ‘rhythm of segments’ in order to create a coherent whole. She refers to Hurston’s essay, ‘The Characteristics of Negro Expression’, in which she stated; ‘The presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, but there they are...There is always rhythm, but it is the *rhythm of segments*. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. But easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so that he adjusts himself to the new tempo’²¹. Farebrother also acknowledges the fundamental tension between Hurston’s folkloric writing and anthropological practice, asserting that if Hurston ‘seeks to document a process of cultural development whereby ‘foreign’ elements are incorporated into a pre-existing cultural whole (without altering its underlying structure), these pronouncements

¹⁹ Rachel Farebrother, ‘The Rhythm of Segments: Zora Neale Hurston’s Collage Aesthetic in *Mules and Men*’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 22.4 (2011), p. 329.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 330.

²¹ ‘The Characteristics of Negro Expression’, in *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, by Lynda Marion Hill (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1996) [appendix] p. 243.

are unsettled by her jagged collage forms, with their jarring arrangements of cultural referents and voices'. She recognises however, that Hurston's collage aesthetic 'restlessly crosses disciplinary boundaries'²². This being the case, the 'rhythm of segments' present throughout *Mules and Men* is herein considered and theoretically applied as a sonic, rather than visual concept, through which to consider both the form and function of lining tracks in her textual and theatrical work.

Lining Rhythms

Hurston first encountered lining tracks in Polk County in the early 1930s, describing the area as home to the 'poets of the swinging blade'²³. To fully understand the formal influence of lining rhythms and work songs on the narrative of *Mules and Men*, it is important to turn first to Hurston's experience of the railroad camps, and the contextual relevance of railroad blues in the black female experience. The railroad was a powerful representation of newfound freedoms, particularly for women. As Angela Davis posits, 'for people of African American descent who were emerging from a long history of enslavement and oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexuality and travel provided the most tangible evidence of freedom'²⁴. Much of Hurston's own itinerant experience was shaped by train travel. In *Dust Tracks*, she recalls her first experience of the railroad, when travelling to Sanford with her father. 'I had seen trains often', she wrote, 'but never up so close as that... We heard the train blow, leaving Winter Park, three miles south... The train came thundering around Lake Lily, and snorted up to the station. I was there looking the thing dead in the face, and it was fixing its one big, mean-looking eye on me. It looked fit to gnaw me right up. It was truly a

²² Farebrother, p. 331.

²³ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 147.

²⁴ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 67.

most fearsome thing!’²⁵. The young Zora promptly turned and ran from the “snorting” machine that pulled up alongside the platform. Just as the railroad transported her into Sanford, it later carried her away from it, providing escape from the domestic volatility of her father’s home. Remembering the moment of departure, her sentiment echoes the ‘tangible’ sense of freedom that Davis identifies; ‘When I got on the train, I said goodbye – not to anybody in particular, but to the town, to loneliness, to defeat and frustration, to shabby living, to sterile houses...to the kind of people I had no wish to know’²⁶. For Davis, the theme of impulsive travel was ‘ubiquitous in early women’s blues’²⁷. In particular, she observes the songs of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who sung about transient women who were ‘forever walking, running, leaving, catching trains, or sometimes aimlessly rambling’, actions that were often prompted by the betrayal of sexual partners, escape from domestic violence, or urban migration. In the late 1920s, Rainey recorded several “takes” of a song titled ‘Traveling Blues’, which narrated the story of a woman betrayed by her lover, whose heartbreak prompts her to leave him. She subsequently purchases a train fare with no destination in mind (*‘I done bought my ticket and I don’t know where I’ll go’*), as Rainey sings in her distinctly melancholy tone; *‘I’m dangerous and blue /can’t stay here no more / Here come my train, folks/and I’ve got to go’*²⁸. Similarly, the expansive repertoire of Bessie Smith included a song entitled ‘Dixie Flyer Blues’, which told the story of a woman boarding a train bound for ‘Dixieland’; *‘Hold that engine, let sweet mama get on board / ‘Cause my home ain’t here, it’s a long way down the road’*. She follows with the line, *‘wouldn’t stay up North to save nobody’s doggone soul’*. Davis observes that Blues representations of women ‘engaged in self-initiated and independent travel [constituted] a significant moment of ideological opposition to the prevailing assumptions about women’s

²⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 99.

²⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 251.

place in society’, challenging an increasingly unstable form of gender politics. For Cheryl Wall, Polk County provided Hurston with a space that fully embraced the ‘blues ethos’²⁹. She refers to Hurston’s description of the area in *Dust Tracks*, in which she observes black men in a jook house ‘boasting of last night’s love’ and revelling in their ability to move-on when they please; ‘No more here? Plenty more down the road...I’m going. Who care about no train fare? The railroad track is there, ain’t it? I can count tires just like I been doing...’. The extract includes a short lining rhythm that leads with; ‘*Got on de train didn’t have no fare/But I rode some/Yes I rode some*’³⁰. Wall makes a comparable observation to Davis, in that the travelling refrain throughout Hurston’s literature closely echoes the Blues style of Smith. It is also worth noting the conscious difference in the gendered attitudes towards the rail: the women sang of purchasing tickets, while the men rode freely until caught and ‘rapped’ over the head by a conductor. The presence of the railroad symbolised a freedom that Hurston herself had experienced and benefitted from. It is significant that, whilst preoccupied with the songs and culture of the railroad liners, the collection is largely mapped by road rather than rail. She traversed Southern Florida in a red Chevrolet, an unusual amenity for a black woman travelling unaccompanied³¹. Yet her engagement with the railroad in Polk County was rooted in a distinctly male perspective, reinforcing the connection between the infrastructures of modernity and masculinity. Throughout *Mules and Men* the message is clear: women rode the rail, but men lined the tracks.

Beyond the camps Hurston bore witness to the labourers’ rhythmical methods of laying the tracks themselves. In a sawmill, she described the process of cutting lumber as something of a mechanized, cyclical spectacle: ‘...the logs march into the mill with its smokestacks

²⁹ Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington & Indianapolis; Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 139.

³⁰ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on A Road*, p. 149.

³¹ In Chapter Four of *Mules and Men*, Hurston describes a venture into Lakeland recalling that the Chevrolet made her look ‘prosperous’ and many residents suspected that she was a revenue officer. She instead passed herself off as a bootlegger.

disputing with the elements, its boiler room reddening the sky, and its great circular saw screaming arrogantly as it attacks the tree like a lion making its kill. The log on the carriage coming to the saw. A growling grumble. Then contact! Yeeld-u-u-ow!...All day, all night. Rumble, thunder and grumble. Yee-ee-ow!'. The lumber being sawn would eventually be transported to the railroad to provide wood for the tracks. When questioned in the Jacksonville recordings whether or not she recalled hearing the “clink” of the steel lining bar as it was worked into place, Hurston explained ‘...you don’t hear the lining bar, because it’s under the rail and they shove the rail with it...and all the men, because it’s awful straining, they [say] “hah!”...Sometimes it’s about seven or eight [men] on that one [bar]’. In *Dust Tracks* she described; ‘the clang of nine-pound hammers on railroad steel...Hah! A rhythmic swing of the body, hammer falls, and another spike driven to the head in the tie...The singing-liner cuts short his chant. The straw boss relaxes with a gesture of his hand. Another rail spiked down. Another offering to the soul of civilisation whose other name is travel’³². In the recordings with the Federal Music Project, she performed several of lining tracks herself. Of particular note is a song entitled ‘Shove it Over’³³, which describes and mirrors the moment of “lining” the rail, similar to that observed in *Dust Tracks*;

When I get in Illinois

I’m g’on t’ spread the news about the Florida boys

Shove it over! Hey, hey, hey, oh can’t you line it?

Ah shack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a (hah!)

Can’t you move it? Hey, hey, hey, oh can’t you try?

...

Elaborating on the unique chorus of the song, Hurston explained the function of the lyrics; ‘When [the liners] say “shak-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack”, they’re getting ready to pull [the rail] back,

³² Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 148.

³³ Stetson Kennedy, Herbert Halpert, Zora Neale Hurston, ‘Shove it Over’ [Can’t You Line It?] (1939) Audio Recording, Library of Congress.

and when they say “*hah!*”, they’ve shoved the rail over’. This same rhythm was later transcribed under the alternate title, ‘Can’t you Line it?’³⁴, as part of the work song series in the appendix of *Mules and Men*, in which Hurston had included functional directions to indicate all of the men ‘straining at the rail in concert’ and the subsequent ‘grunt’ in unison as the rail was moved. In her discussion with Halpert, she also observed that compared to other lining rhythms, ‘Shove it Over’ incorporated ‘a lot of rests in between’ each movement, but required a ‘harder shove’ of the rail and a greater level of exertion by the liners themselves. A similar “*hah!*” sound also appeared in a second song entitled ‘Let’s Shake It’³⁵, which Hurston recalled hearing in Callahan, North Florida, in 1935. She identified this as a short chant or lining “holler”, rather than a song, used to work the steel rail into place before the hammer gang spiked it down;

Ah, in Mobile (hah!), ah, in Alabama (hah!)
Ah, Fort Myers (hah!), ah, in Florida (hah!)
Ah, let’s shake it (hah!), ah, let’s break it (hah!)
Ah, let’s shake it (hah!), ah, just here (hah!)

According to LeRoi Jones, the ‘grunt’, shouts and hollers that Hurston repeatedly refers to were a functional sound, echoing an earlier form of blues-singing by slaves and agricultural labourers in songs which ‘[used] as their measure the grunt of a man pushing a heavy weight or the blow of a hammer against a stone to provide the metrical precision and rhythmical impetus behind the singer’³⁶. The shout ‘dictated the form the blues took’ and shaped the contemporary three-line, twelve-bar blues rhythm. As Jones explains, the ‘first two lines of the [work] song were repeated...while the single line was waiting to come. Or, as was characteristic of hollers and shouts, the single line could be repeated again and again, either

³⁴ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 264-66.

³⁵ Stetson Kennedy, Herbert Halpert, Zora Neale Hurston, ‘Let’s Shake It’ (1939), Audio Recording, Library of Congress.

³⁶ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 67.

because the singer especially liked it, or because he could not think of another line'³⁷. 'Shove it Over'/'Can't You Line It' follows the latter rhythmical pattern.

Jones stresses that the early work songs, specifically those sung on slave plantations, were indicative of 'limited social possibility'³⁸. In linguistic terms, they revealed the stark, 'relative paucity of American words that the average field Negro possessed'. This in turn had a detrimental effect on the former 'rhyme line', which proved difficult to implement until the language was mastered, the single repeated line prevailing in the absence of broad lyrical range. The "call and response" motif has long been a trope of African American work songs. Jones identifies this as the 'antiphonal singing technique', in which a 'leader sings a theme and a chorus answers him', answers that are usually 'comments on the leader's theme or comments on the answers themselves in improvised verses'³⁹. Levine affirms that the 'antiphony in these songs consisted of the words of the lead singer and the grunts of the workers or the sounds of their tools'. In the Jacksonville recordings, Hurston described the rhythmical sound(s) of the railroad liners as a "call and response" between the men:

...when the men are lining, they put the rail down...and then the Captain, he squats straddle of it, and looks down it so he can tell when it's lined up in exact line with the others...and he'll say "shove it over"...and when they get it exactly in line he'll tell them, "join it ahead", and all of them [repeat] "join ahead"...⁴⁰.

She further stressed the functionality of the work song, noting that chorus of liners working to whichever rhythmical pace the Captain (or leader) chose to sing, be it fast or slow. 'They get just as much work done it seems', she said, 'somehow or another'. In his study of secular music and African American work songs, Levine references the WPA testimony of Bradley Eberhart,

³⁷ Ibid, p. 62.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 60.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Stetson Kennedy, Herbert Halpert, Zora Neale Hurston, 'Description of a Lining Track' (1939), Audio Recording, Library of Congress.

a liner and ‘tune setter’ of the Florida railroad. Eberhart’s recollection of his own experience lining railroad tracks closely echoes Hurston’s own observations;

Now de hans, dey all ready on de track wif de bars under the line, and dey line on de rhyme...On de fust line de boys got de bars under de line, de rail, I means, by we calls hit de line on de rhyme...On de fust line de boys got de bars under de line, de rail, I means, by we calls hit de line. Den on de second line ob de song dey come down hard, sit down on de bars we calls hit, and on de words what rhyme dey jerk de bars up and dat straightens de track...Dem boys, dey just cain’t line track ifen a song ain’t set fur em⁴¹.

The visual scene that accompanies Hurston’s sonic recollection of the railroad labourers makes an important statement on the relation between sonic memory and history, particularly in the resonant connections with slavery. Still some thirty years before the eradication of Jim Crow laws, the liners of Polk County work under circumstances of economic deprivation, under the control of “captains”, in scenes that resonated loudly with the past image of chain gangs working the railroad. A photograph drawn from the Florida State archives depicts a small lining gang working the rail in 1934, in an area of Jacksonville. The image includes several of the actions that Hurston describes: the hammering of the rail, and the lining bar that lifted the rail into place. Notably, the “captain” of this scene appears to be a white overseer, reinforcing the resonant image of chain gang labour. Earlier photographs from the Moore Haven and Clewiston area of Southern Florida also indicate that lining gangs were far larger in number during the early 1920s than that of the lining gang depicted in Jacksonville.

It must be acknowledged too that *Mules and Men* fails to incorporate any direct historical reference to slavery, a glaring omission and inadvertence on Hurston’s part. Yet the anthropological method of layering past and present soundscapes over one another resonates with Duboisian interpretation of the longevity of African American folk song. A distinct

⁴¹ Bradley Eberhart, in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, Levine, Lawrence W., (Oxford, London, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 208.



Fig. 12. Laying railroad track for airport construction in Jacksonville (1934)



Fig. 13. Rails being spiked while building the Moore Haven and Clewiston Railway (1921)

parallel can be drawn between the slave songs of the pre-abolition era and the lining rhythms of the early twentieth century. The “sorrow songs”, according to Du Bois, were the ‘siftings of centuries...far more ancient than words’⁴². In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the songs that Du Bois makes reference to follow the same pattern as the lining rhythms overheard by Hurston, and reveal again the relative paucity of language possessed by those who sung them. According to Du Bois, ‘...the rhythm of the songs, and the limitations of allowable thought, confined the poetry for the most part to single or double lines, and they seldom were expanded to quatrains or loner tales...’⁴³. In the forethought to *Souls*, he stressed the formal and representational presence of a single bar of the “sorrow songs” in the opening of each chapter, as ‘some echo of a haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past’⁴⁴. So too does he reaffirm the symbolic resonance of the songs with labour, referring to the ‘stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of [the] vast economic empire...’⁴⁵ of America. The presence of lining rhythms throughout *Mules and Men* echoed the sonic memory of enslavement and African American labour, but it also made an important statement on the inter-generational function of the African American work song. Moreover, the sonic environment that Hurston traverses throughout *Mules and Men* reaffirmed the fact that, while the post-abolition economic status of African Americans had shifted, the antiphonal sounds of labour, the physical sounds of “spiking” steel accompanied by the rhythmical work song, remained. The presence of the lining song as a song of labour was an audible reminder of slow social progress, an affirmation of Du Bois’s statement in the after-thought to *Souls*:

⁴² Du Bois, p. 157.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. vi.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 163.

‘Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth’⁴⁶, and an echo of both McKay and Fisher’s narratives of disillusionment and an interrupted transcendence.

In narrative terms, the forceful and methodical process of “hammering” or “spiking” a steel lining rail into place is an appropriate reflection of the formal aspects of *Mules and Men*. Scholars of Hurston’s work have repeatedly observed the fragmented nature of both the prose and chronological disparities within the collection. To some extent, this might be considered as an accurate reflection of the spontaneous nature in which aural folktales were shared amongst black Floridian communities, marking Hurston’s strive for authenticity. In a formal sense however, it is characteristic of her tendency to “hammer” or “crowbar” otherwise disjointed stories into place within the text. To some extent, this is an inevitable feature in the merging of ethnography and fiction. To return to the words of Farebrother, formal fragmentation was simply an unavoidable characteristic of Hurston’s ‘diverse oeuvre’⁴⁷. Recognising the paradoxical nature of Hurston’s writing, Farebrother examines *Mules and Men* as a pattern of ‘synthesis and fragmentation’⁴⁸. Far from the inherent ‘asymmetry’ that Hurston identifies, Farebrother posits that the fragmented rhythm in *Mules and Men* results in an aesthetic form that is ‘at once a collection of disparate parts *and* an integrated whole’. From an anthropological perspective, the ability to see each story as separate and at the same time innately linked to one another – is a reflection of the ‘jarring discontinuity’ of human nature. She later observes that ‘...readers must negotiate tensions between fragmentation and integration, employing a close-up view, which attends to the arrangement of fragments and edges, alongside what Claude Lévi-Strauss has called “the view from afar”, a perspective that enables viewers to appreciate that the collage also constitutes a single image in two dimensions’. Extending Farebrother’s theoretical framework beyond a solely visual analysis, her theory of

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 165.

⁴⁷ Farebrother, p. 330.

⁴⁸ Farebrother, p. 328.

‘aesthetic impulses’ can be examined more closely in sonic terms. *Mules and Men* is essentially a narrative of sound bites; its rhythms alternate in pace, depending on the tale, the “teller”, and the locality.

In addition to “Shove it Over/Can’t You Line It” and “Let’s Shake It”, Hurston identified another popular lining rhythm in the Jacksonville recordings, entitled “Mule on de Mount”⁴⁹, which she declared to be ‘the most widely distributed work song in the United States’. Here too, the movement of lining the rail was represented by a repetitive “*hah!*” sound. While the tune remained consistent, the song had several alternate titles, and different verses and versions were sung according to its locality. Hurston first heard the song in Eatonville, yet she noted that the rhythm had ‘grown by incremental repetition’ until it seemed to be the ‘longest song in America’. Certainly, a number of folktales that feature throughout *Mules and Men* might be referred to in those same terms adopted by Hurston to describe “Mules on the Mount”; being widely distributed, developed by incremental repetition, and seemingly lacking in any definitive ending. Variations of a tale, “How the ‘Gator Got His Mouth”, are retold thrice in quick succession by three sawmill labourers. One adaptation of the story suggests that Brer Dog ‘caused de ‘gator to lose his tongue’⁵⁰ by purposefully cutting his mouth too wide, while another repeats a version in which the alligator’s tongue is used as a bass drum by Brer Dog and subsequently ‘wore clean out’⁵¹. Despite the variations, both Brer Dog and ‘Gator are consistently pitted against one another, and while the third telling of the story shifts the focus to one of skin colour, replacing the figure of Brer Dog with Brer Rabbit - “How the ‘Gator Got Black” - the animated rivalry between the two creatures remains. In stark contrast to those songs and tales widely known and distributed, there are also a few select examples throughout *Mules and Men*, in which the topic of the folklore is almost entirely dependent upon locality.

⁴⁹ In the appendix to *Mules and Men*, she noted of the work song ‘this has everything in folk life in it...it is something like the Odyssey, or the Iliad’.

⁵⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p.104.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 105.

“Ella Wall” is a derisive rhyming tribute to a local woman, sung, according to Hurston ‘in every jook and on every job in South Florida’⁵². The lyrics allude to Ella’s known sexual exploits; “*Go to Ella Wall/Oh, go to Ella Wall/If you want good boody/Oh, go to Ella Wall*”. The song is so fundamentally rooted in local ‘lore’ that when it appears in the narrative, Ella Wall herself is there to hear it when it is performed, snapping her fingers, revolving her hips, and enthusiastically declaring to the singers of the jook house: “Tell ‘em about me!”.

In her criticism of the fragmentary nature of Hurston’s writing, Duck posits that *Mules and Men* ‘models possibilities for [the] alignment of seemingly different temporal frameworks which enables communication and mutual understanding’⁵³. She recognises that Hurston’s text ‘is deliberately structured to emphasize her own experiences of coevalness – the ways in which she and other Floridians share in the same time’. The reference to ‘alignment’ is crucial to re-framing *Mules and Men* as a text influenced in form by the methodical and functional “lining rhythms”. The question posed by Brooks - “Sister, can’t you line it out?” - applies not only in the context of the railroad camp, but also to Hurston’s ability to find a connection between those aesthetic and cultural tensions within her narrative. The anthology contains a series of paradoxical tensions; dispersed communities, conflicting temporalities, alternate modernities (the rural sphere versus the urban), and a personal conflict in Hurston’s role as both participant in and observer of the Southern communities she traverses. As long-established work songs popular across America, functional lining rhythms transcended a number of these tensions, linking the South and North through their widespread cultural distribution and in a geographical dimension, through the physical construction of the railroad. As Brooks posits, song (or singing) in both Hurston’s writing and recordings ‘not only operates as a mode of embodied cultural documentation, but it also upsets the putative boundaries between scholar and cultural

⁵² Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 150.

⁵³ Duck, p. 275.

informant, individual and community, folk culture and modernity, and gendered spaces of work and play'⁵⁴.

One lining rhythm in particular provided Hurston with the necessary means to combat the conflict of her identity, being, according to Brooks, 'both of and in the crowd as well as whimsically positioned outside of it'⁵⁵. Sat on a front porch with two of Eatonville's residents, Bubba Mimms and Charlie Jones, Hurston hears for the first time a recognized lining rhythm, 'John Henry', that would later appear in her repertoire of recordings with Halpert and Stetson. By the second chapter of *Mules and Men*, Hurston had grown frustrated and impatient with the lack of material she had gathered in her short time in Eatonville, telling her porch companions; "You lied good but not good enough". In response, Jones directs her attention to Polk County, which he associates with popular lining rhythm; "Course, Zora, you ain't at de right place to git de bes' lies. Why don't you go down 'round Bartow and Lakeland and 'round in dere – Polk County? Dat's where they really lies up a mess and dat's where dey makes up all de songs and things lak dat. Ain't you never hea'd dat in Polk County de water drink lak cherry wine?". The song that Bubba and Charlie subsequently perform is described by Hurston as 'the king of railroad track-laying songs', and makes reference to the tale of a steel driver (John Henry), in a legendary contest that pitted man against a steam-powered drilling machine in the construction of a railroad tunnel, to see which could drill holes in the rock the fastest. John Henry defeated the steel drill, but died as a result. The song - part ballad, part narrative – is transcribed in *Mules and Men*;

John Henry told his Captain

When you go to town

Please bring me back a nine pound hammer

⁵⁴ Brooks, p. 617. [abstract]

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 622.

*And I'll drive your steel on down,
And I'll drive your steel on down
...
Captain ast John Henry,
What is that storm I hear?
He says Cap'n that ain't no storm,
'Tain't nothing but my hammer in the air,
Nothing but my hammer in the air...*

Captured by the legend of John Henry and the promise of an endless plethora of folklore in Polk County, Hurston makes an abrupt departure from Eatonville's 'oaks and oleanders', instead pushing her Chevrolet across Orlando 'headed south-west for corn (likker) and song'⁵⁶.

For Hurston, "John Henry" proved to be an invaluable anthropological tool. In "Go 'Gator Muddy the Water", she defined the song as a ballad, despite its initial emergence as a lining rhythm. This shift from lining rhythm to ballad is undoubtedly a testament to the versatility of the song. 'A ballad catches the interest of everybody in that it is more or less a story that is sung', she wrote, 'Before, there was music mostly for music's sake. But in the ballad the storyteller is merely using the vehicle of music to carry a tale. The interest of the listener has shifted from sound and rhythm to characterization and action'⁵⁷. In "John Henry", Hurston argued that the words and the music were essentially one and the same. 'Read the words aloud and you have the tune', she remarked, 'the stresses and lack of stresses all come down where they would naturally be if the story were told without music. In other words, the ballad is the prelude to the prose'. She further likened "John Henry" to that of a child's folk rhyme, suggesting that, where simple verses or notes (alternating between 'sense line' and 'sound line') are repeated to form a 'pleasing' rhythm, 'rhyme for the sake of sound furnishes

⁵⁶ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 57.

⁵⁷ Bordelon, p. 74.

evidence of the youth of literature'. She concluded her analysis by positing that 'the real significance of these rhymes is that there is no thought of vocal or instrumental accompaniment – just a talking sentence...that brings it right next door to prose'⁵⁸. The repetitive use of "John Henry" is a key example of Hurston's anthropological methods in practice, following closely the same process of learning songs that she later described to Halpert in the recording of "Halimuhfack". Taking the opportunity to learn and perform "John Henry" alongside several local residents, Hurston achieves the desired recognition and sense of belonging within the community:

...I strolled over to James Presley and asked him if he knew how to play it. "Ah'll play it if you sing it," he countered. So he played and I started to sing the verses I knew. They put me on the table and everybody urged my to spread my jenk...By the time the song was over, before Joe Willard lifted me down from the table I knew that I was in the inner circle. I had first to convince the "job" that I was not an enemy in the person of the law; and second, I had to prove that I was their kind. "John Henry" got me over that second hurdle⁵⁹

The ballad swiftly became a staple of Hurston's repertoire in Polk County and further afield. In *Dust Tracks* she recalled, 'James Presley, Slim and I teamed up and we had to do "John Henry" wherever we appeared...Mulberry, Pierce and Lakeland'. The lining rhythm is seemingly unbounded, recognised in several communities and crossing seamlessly between Hurston's fictional and autobiographical narratives. Moreover, she becomes an agent of transposition, actively engaged in ensuring that "John Henry" is heard and shared across several local communities in the South. Despite its initial usefulness, the popular lining rhythm ultimately brings an abrupt end to Hurston's time in the 'famed' Polk County. An abrupt turn of events sees her chased from the town by a woman who, jealous of Hurston's performances with her small travelling band and suspecting her of stealing her husband, attempts to murder

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 75.

⁵⁹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 65.

her in the middle of a wild jook house dance, sparking a mass brawl. In *Mules and Men*, the brawl is accompanied by the sounds of singing and bass strings ‘throbbing like all Africa’ and a melody ‘crying like repentance’⁶⁰. ‘Switch-blades, ice picks and old-fashioned razors were out’ she wrote in an account of the same scene in *Dust Tracks*, ‘I really ran...I ran out of the place, ran to my room, threw my things in the car and left the place. When the sun came up I was a hundred miles up the road, headed for New Orleans’⁶¹. The scene is evidence of the provisional nature of Hurston’s position within the communities she observes.

Duck posits that the tensions present within *Mules and Men* arose from social and cultural attitudes that increasingly revolved around the urban sphere, stating that, in a nation ‘fascinated with its own modernity, the “folk” seemed, to many, to belong inherently to another temporality’⁶². From an anthropological perspective, Eatonville is depicted as a town in which time has seemingly stood still, remaining curiously unaffected by the exodus of migration; a perfectly encapsulated example of the Southern folklore that Hurston sought. The polarised temporal frames of the anthology, as well as its paradoxical sense of modernity, reveal the importance of sound as a shared experience across geographical boundaries in Hurston’s narrative. The anthology also emphasizes two distinctly divergent soundscapes: the heralded “folk” soundscape of Eatonville, and the intentionally absent (or silenced) soundscape of Harlem. Returning to Car and Cooper’s suggestion that the temporal fragmentation of the narrative reveals an inherent conflict between *modernism* and *modernity*, the distinction between two “modern” soundscapes is substantial. Given the ‘spectre of modernity’⁶³ that

⁶⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 178.

⁶¹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 156.

⁶² Duck, p. 273.

⁶³ Chusak Pattarakulvanit, ‘The Spectre of Modernity and the Modern Spectre’, *South East Asia Research*, 23.4 (2015), p. 459.

lingers over the narrative, the nostalgic soundscape of Eatonville locates the town firmly in a unique ‘sound world’⁶⁴, arguably one rooted in “lost” cultural practices.

One such cultural practice unique to the South is that of “porch talk”. If, as Farebrother suggests, the anthology is built upon fragmented rhythms, then the Eatonville porch provides the space in which the segments are drawn together. On the porch the folktales maintain a sustainable rhythm, the intention of the “teller” being to keep their audience listening for the longest possible amount of time, sparking a competitive stream of lengthier, more gregarious tales until the pace is interrupted or changed. This process follows a fairly simple form, and is repeated several times, in Eatonville and beyond. In Polk County, the porch is replaced with the jook, yet the arrangement remains the same. It is notable that she first hears “John Henry” on an Eatonville porch, because it establishes the “call and response rhythm” mirrored as a method of expression on both the porch and the railroad tracks.

The “porch talk” motif is repeated again in the second and third chapters. Hurston’s personal sonic ruminations play an important part in this conflicting temporality. In *Dust Tracks*, she identifies the front porch of Joe Clark’s store as the ‘heart and spring of the town’ around which several of her childhood memories revolve. The porch is the communal stage, but it is also a space of shifting temporality, and sonic nostalgia. Hurston describes it as an almost utopian sphere, in which ‘men sat around...on boxes and benches and passed this world and the next one through their mouths...there were no discreet nuances of life on Joe Clark’s front porch. There was open kindness, anger, hate, love, envy and its kinfolks, but all emotions were naked, and nakedly arrived at’⁶⁵. As a young teenager, Hurston was perpetually curious about the conversations that took place here, recalling that the store porch was ‘the most interesting place’ she could think of. ‘I was not allowed to sit around there, naturally’, she

⁶⁴ Vic Seidler, ‘Diasporic Sounds: Dis/Located Sounds’, in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, by Michael Bull and Les Black, eds. (New York: Berg, 2003), p. 404.

⁶⁵Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 45-46.

wrote ‘But I could and did drag my feet going in and out whenever I was sent there for something to allow whatever was being said to hang in my ear’⁶⁶. In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, she recalls her earliest memory as being ‘...the habit of the men folks...to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories’⁶⁷. The opening chapter begins with a porch scene of similar resonance. Crossing the Maitland-Eatonville township line, Hurston expresses her ‘delight’ in the fact that the town ‘had not changed’, having maintained its ‘same love of talk and song’⁶⁸. From a considerable distance she is able to identify several figures sat on the front porch of Joe Clark’s store, ‘deep in a game of ‘Florida-flip’, as familiar to her as when she left the town over a decade earlier. The ensuing scene offers a somewhat clichéd moment of mutual recognition; “Hello, boys”, I hailed them as I went into neutral. They looked up from the game and for a moment it looked as if they had forgotten me. Then B. Moseley said, “Well, if it ain’t Zora Hurston!” Then everybody crowded around the car to help greet me...’. The Eatonville porch embodies two chronological frames, yet the sounds of “porch talk” remain consistent across temporal borders. The porch simultaneously engages Hurston’s sonic memory, evoking a sensory reaction drawn from nostalgia, and yet it also establishes a sense of ‘coevalness’ within the present that she so ardently sought, aiding her subsequent collection of folktales.

Upon her arrival in Eatonville, both Hurston and her peers establish themselves as ‘sonic beings’, implementing sound as a mode of both shared communication, expression, and cultural identity. This theme of shared cultural expression is evident in Hurston’s first night in Eatonville. Persuaded to attend a ‘toe party’, she loads up her car with partygoers and heads to the neighbouring town of Wood Bridge; ‘There was a lot of horn-honking...Everybody was in boisterous sprints...We were at the tail end of the line and as we turned off the highway we could hear the boys in the first car doing what Ellis Jones called ‘bookooing’ before they even

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 46.

⁶⁷ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p.2

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.7.

hit the ground. Charlie Jones was woofing louder than anybody else'⁶⁹. Several hours later, on the return to Eatonville, the 'bookooing' continues, the voices this time unidentifiable, 'The car was overflowing with passengers but I was so dull from lack of sleep that I didn't know who they were. All I knew is that they belonged to Eatonville...somebody was woofing in my car about love'⁷⁰, Hurston recalled. Shortly after her arrival, she listens as her companions threaten to "lie up a nation"⁷¹ with a variety of African lore and European myth, signalling a transnational discourse. 'Some of the stories were the familiar drummer-type of tale about two Irishmen, Pat and Mike, or two Jews as the case might be', she wrote, 'Some were European folk-tales undiluted, like Jack the Beanstalk. Others had slight local variations...'⁷². The group gathered on the porch subsequently overhear a preacher 'sending up a prayer'⁷³ in a nearby Church. Drawing upon the change in their immediate sonic environment, their tales take on a Biblical refrain. One participant tells the story of a man mistakenly called to preach by a braying mule. Another recalls the error in judgement that resulted in the fragmentation of the Christian church, 'built on pieced-up rock' by Jesus and his disciples. A third participant, known only as 'B. Moseley', entertains those gathered with a humorous anecdote of the competition between black preachers of different religious creeds; 'Baptis' and Methdis' always got a pick out at one 'nother. One time, two preachers – one Methdis' and de other one Baptis' wuz on uh train and de engine blowed up and bein' in the colored coach right back of de engine they got blowed up too. When they saw theysel'f startin' up in de air de Baptis' preacher hollered, 'Ah bet Ah go higher then you!'. The pace of the porch tales, performed predominantly by the male participants of the group, is abruptly changed by a female resident of Eatonville, Mathilda, ridiculing her male counterpart and his inherent need to tell a long

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 19.

⁷² Ibid, p. 19-20.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 24.

winding ‘literary’ with an overtly simple connotation. Her contribution carries no epic, mythical, or biblical refrain. Instead, a curt rhyming couplet dismantles the established rhythm and closes the “lying session”: ‘Stepped on a pin, de pin bent/And dat’s de way de story went’. This same couplet is later repeated, used once again as a playful rebuttal of a long-winded tale about a cat with nine lives. The rhythm here too is brought to an abrupt end, to reflect a thematic shift in the tales being told⁷⁴. It is important to note the presence and destructive force of the train in the context of B. Moseley’s tale; a symbol of modernity and industry infiltrating and influencing the ‘lore’ of the porch. A similar connection is made in Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, in which a preacher performs a sermon that depicts the ‘damnation train’ and ‘two Trains of time’, in another pertinent metaphor for a journey across a temporal and ethereal divide;

I heard de whistle of the damnation train

Dat pulled out from Garden of Eden loaded wid cargo goin’ to Hell

Ran at break neck speed all de way thru de law

All de way thru de prophetic age

All de way thru de reign of kings and judges – ⁷⁵

Here, the signs of modernity in the landscape of the South conflate the two separate soundscapes that Hurston seeks to outline. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* tells the story of John ‘Buddy’ Pearson, who rises from poverty to become a preacher, known for his promiscuity. Early on in the novel his attention is drawn to a steam train cutting through the landscape of Alabama, en route to the depot; ‘...around the bend came first the smoke stack, belching smoke and flames of fire. The drivers turning over chanting “Opelika-black-and-dirty! Opelika-black-and-dirty.”

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 123.

⁷⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), p. 181.

Then as she pulled into the station, the powerful whisper of steam. Starting off again, “Wolf coming! Wolf coming! Wolf coming! Opelika-black-and-dirty, Opelika-black-and-dirty! Auh-wah-hooooon” – into the great away...’⁷⁶.

The snippets of folklore told on the Eatonville porch offer ‘asymmetric’ fragments of the scene. Returning to Hofman’s assertion that there were ‘limitations’ to anthropological transcription, the assumption is therefore that in Hurston’s dictation of numerous porch scenes there were some inevitable omissions in the subsequent (edited) anthology. Farebrother asserts that ‘attention to the orchestration of cultural fragments in the pages of *Mules and Men* demonstrates that there is a close relationship between the thematic collage of the text and anthropological concepts of culture’⁷⁷. Imitating the same rhythmical patterns as the lining tracks, the porch scenes allows Hurston the opportunity to establish a “call and response” rhythm to her narrative; her presence in these scenes limited to the occasional line or prompt – the “call” – to which her contemporaries provide a “response” that is largely improvised, producing a ‘rhythm of segments’. To this extent, the porch represents the stage, upon which folktales are told in various acts. In her subsequent use of the anthropological material gathered in Eatonville and Polk County, she harnessed the performativity found in railroad camps and on porch stoops, for a larger stage.

“Spiking” Steel on Stage

Shortly after returning from her anthropological exploration of the South – including research of voodoo practices in New Orleans – Hurston’s engagement shifted from prose to musical production⁷⁸, as she sought to bring the soundscape of Southern railroad camps and jook houses

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 41

⁷⁷ Farebrother, p. 339.

⁷⁸ In chronological terms, Hurston’s performative work preceded the publication of *Mules and Men*, although the gathering of material coincided for both.

to the metropolitan stage. A significant number of the songs listed in the appendix to *Mules and Men* appeared in the programme of *The Great Day*, including “Can’t you Line It?”, “Mule on de Mount”, and “John Henry”. During the rehearsal period, Hurston wrote to Mason, ‘...I wish that you could hear these five huskies yelling “Mule on de Mount”. It would do you good’⁷⁹. The appended musical scores are predominantly arranged for piano, although in her concert series, Hurston employed a broad musical ensemble to recreate the sounds, sorrows, and ‘intricate percussive melodies’⁸⁰ she had heard on the railroad, including the guitar, drums, and a substantial choral cast for vocal effect(s)⁸¹, the first indication of conscious adaptation between the original musical form and theatrical production. The performative aspects of everyday life were central to Hurston’s shift into theatre. In the Jacksonville recordings she outlined her early intentions to bring the songs back from Polk County to New York; ‘Sitting around in saw-mill quarters, turpentine camps, prison camps, railroad camps and jooks, I soaked them in as I went...I brought this mass home, seeing all the possibilities for some Negro musicians to do something fine with it’⁸². She initially sought advice on the musical score for *The Great Day* from the composer Hall Johnson⁸³, who, after holding the programme of work songs for six months, advised her that ‘the world was not ready for Negro music unless it was highly arranged’⁸⁴.

On the 10th January 1932⁸⁵ she presented *The Great Day*, a dramatization of a day in the life of a working railroad camp, at the John Golden Theatre in New York. A review

⁷⁹ Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason (October 26th 1931), *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. by Carla Kaplan (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 236.

⁸⁰ Brooks, p. 617.

⁸¹ In the initial programme for *The Great Day* and in a later adaptation, *From Sun to Sun*, songwriter and playwright Porter Grainger was credited for the musical arrangements.

⁸² Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 280.

⁸³ Hall Johnson was an African American composer, whose career focused on the preservation of authentic Black Spirituals.

⁸⁴ Letter to Thomas E. Jones (October 12th 1934), cited in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. by Carla Kaplan (New York: First Anchor Books, 2003), p. 315.

⁸⁵ In a later letter to the President of Fisk University, Thomas E. Jones, Hurston stated that the first performance of *The Great Day* had taken place on January 1st 1933, although press reviews and her earlier specification of dates would seem to contradict this. The production received favourable reviews, but struggled financially. Shortly

published in *The New York Times* described the performance as a compilation ‘drawn from four years’ salvaging of rare Negro folklore in the deep South’⁸⁶, suggesting that African American folklore was in danger of relative cultural extinction, an assumption seemingly fuelled by Northern migration. While the tension(s) surrounding the theme of authenticity have already been investigated by seasoned scholars of Hurston’s work, her move into staged and choreographed theatrical forms casts a new dimension over the tension between her desire to maintain authentic representations of African American life, and an appeal to the masses. For Brooks, Hurston’s theatrical productions excavated and showcased both the sound and movement that formed the foundation of the black vernacular culture(s). Her ethnographic material and fictional writing placed an emphasis on the localised vernacular of the South. In particular, Brooks suggests that *The Great Day* ‘follows the path of musicality and expressive movement embedded in quotidian African American labour and leisure...[that] went against the grain of contemporaneous black musical revues and black folk dramas’⁸⁷. Crucially, she observes that the concert ‘transitioned Hurston into an era in which she quested to celebrate, cultivate, and *make more audible* to the masses the depth and complexities of Afro diasporic sonic cultures’. Hurston’s use of the sound was both a celebration of the Southern black community, and a direct confrontation to her readers (or audience) to actively engage with and negotiate *between* the boundaries of cultural experience. In this aesthetic approach, song was a crucial part. As Brooks argues, ‘Hurston not only theorized the sounds in her scholarship and incorporated them in her folk concerts but also performed them herself underscores the extent to which she embraced the act of singing as an extension of her critical ethnographic work’⁸⁸.

before Christmas in 1931, Hurston wrote to her patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, requesting further financial support due to the fact that she was only able to pay her dancers and cast for one night’s work, despite weeks of rehearsals having already taken place, and still required stage scenery and promotional materials.

⁸⁶ ‘Rare Negro Songs Given: Zora Hurston’s Compilation of Fours Years Heard at Golden Theatre’, *The New York Times*, January 11th 1932, p. 29.

⁸⁷ Brooks, p. 619.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 625.

Through performance, Hurston sought to confront the debate around authenticity and imitation that had hampered African American art, preserve folk traditions, and bring to the fore a cultural memory previously lost by black urban audiences newly migrated from the South. On this issue, she quarrelled frequently with Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, both of whom were invested in the ‘New Negro’ aesthetic, which Hurston seemingly dismissed through preservation of the folk idiom. To some extent, her move from ethnography towards revised theatrical performance echoes the aesthetic adopted by Jean Toomer in the early 1920s, in which he declared that the artist should seek to creatively adapt himself to ‘angular, to dynamic, to mass forms’⁸⁹. Paul Anderson identifies Toomer’s aesthetic style as merging the ‘slower diurnal rhythms of rural life with the faster mechanical rhythms of the industrial city’⁹⁰. While Hurston sought mass appeal with her theatrical productions, she departs from Toomer’s aesthetic in channelling the rhythms of the modern city. Her theatrical productions were instead intended to bring the ‘diurnal’ rhythms of the South to urban audiences in their original form, celebrated for the fact that they did not adhere to the ‘mechanical’ rhythms of the city.

Her decision, however, to bring the sounds of Southern labour to a metropolitan stage indicated a crucial change in performance space, and symbolism. If *Mules and Men* provided a relatively accurate depiction of the spontaneity of ‘lying sessions’ and storytelling within a community, the spectacle of lining songs performed on a mid-town Manhattan theatre stage inevitably signalled a departure from authentic forms of representation. The work songs lost the essential functional qualities that underpinned both the rhythm and lyrics in the move from the South to the stage. Notably, there is nothing in Hurston’s account of rehearsals for *The Great Day* (nor for any of its subsequent adaptations), to suggest that the lining songs included in the programme were paired with a re-enactment of the physical motions involved in “lining”

⁸⁹ Jean Toomer to Lola Ridge, December 1922, in *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*, Rusch, Frederik, L. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 17.

⁹⁰ Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 60.

the rail that Hurston had observed in close detail in Polk County. The periodic “spiking” of the rail was seemingly absent, as was the “shoving” of the lining bar. Arguably, without the functional element, the lining rhythms lost their status as work songs altogether, and thus their historical resonance and potential impact. Echoing Du Bois’s question: “Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?”, scholars of Hurston must inevitably ask the same when examining her adaptation of lining rhythms.

In the loss of function, the lining rhythms took on a specifically performative role, shifting the sonic memory from one of enslavement to a type of performativity bordering on minstrelsy. This was further reinforced by additions of “primitive” dance to the programmes, Hurston’s choice of theatres – especially in New York - and by extension, her audiences. Although initially led by anthropological curiosity, her decision to present the black body in states of labour and primitive dance, echoed the lingering presence of black vaudeville acts that remained popular into the late 1930s. While touring ensembles such as “The Rabbit’s Foot Company” contributed significantly to the popularity of the Blues, launching the careers of both Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, they were frequently marketed as minstrel shows. Following the death of its African American founder in 1911, the company was subsequently taken over by proprietor and plantation owner, Fred Swift Wolcott. On the other hand, readers might view Hurston’s theatrical productions as part of an important process in the shift away from what Houston Baker defined as ‘minstrel nonsense’, towards ‘pure kinesthetics and masterful black artistry’⁹¹, in the development of African American public voice.

Hurston’s correspondence throughout the early 1930s reveals no plans at all to stage *The Great Day* in a Harlem theatre, although there is some suggestion that this may have been partially due to economic circumstances. In a letter from October 1931, Hurston named initially the ‘Guild Theatre’ as the intended venue, but mentioned that she had advised theatre producer

⁹¹ Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 33.

John Golden on a play he was due to produce, which goes some way to explaining why *The Great Day* was eventually staged at the theatre in midtown⁹². Based at the intersection of West 45th street and 8th Avenue, the John Golden theatre was firmly situated within the commercial theatre district of New York. Hurston wrote to Mason just two months later to say that she had sold her Chevrolet in order to put up the deposit on the theatre, but required money for cast costumes, advertising and publicity costs. For the extensive rehearsal period she was only able to offer her actors one night's pay. 'The Negro singers and actors have been deceived and exploited so often that they are always on the defensive'⁹³, she wrote. The performance was a success with critics but a commercial failure, which appeared to irk her considerably. 'I have no feeling of glory...', she wrote to Mason, 'I am too keenly conscious of how far short I fell of the mark at which I aimed'⁹⁴. That she expressed such disappointment would suggest that *The Great Day* was foremost a commercial venture, before an exercise in cultural anthropology.

A subsequent adaptation of *The Great Day*, entitled *From Sun to Sun*, was performed at the New School Auditorium⁹⁵, in the bohemian Greenwich Village. Hurston's choice of theatres was critical in determining her audience. Although she invited Harlem's 'literati', including Alain Locke and Carl Van Vechten, the locations of each theatre would suggest that the assembled spectators were predominantly white. The concert programme also included a note from Locke, vouching for the authenticity of the performance, arguing that in contemporary performance and on Broadway, the 'folkways and folk-arts' of African Americans had 'been presented in tinctured and adulterated approximations'⁹⁶. He acknowledged *The Great Day* as 'part of a cycle of Negro folk-song, dance and pantomime

⁹² Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason, October 15th 1931, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Kaplan, C. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 233.

⁹³ Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason, December 16th 1931, *ibid.* p.238.

⁹⁴ Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 14th 1932, *ibid.* p.241.

⁹⁵ 66 West and 12th Street.

⁹⁶ 'Notes on the Programme', *The Great Day* cited in *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. by Lynda M. Hill (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1996), p. 18.

collected and recorded by Miss Zora Hurston over three years of intimate living among the common folk in the primitive privacy of their own Negro way of life', arguing that it 'was thus a rare sample of the pure and unvarnished materials from which the stage and concert tradition [had] been derived'. Despite Locke's favourable commentary on Hurston's method of collecting material, his comments are also resonant of the 'elitist' attitudes found amongst the 'New Negro' set of Harlem.

His emphasis on a 'common primitivism' simultaneously reinforced the vast social disparities between African Americans in the North and South, whilst playing to the sentiments of Harlem Renaissance patrons who viewed primitivism with a voyeuristic gaze. His recommendation seems all the more curious, given Hurston's view of Black leadership during this time. Like McKay, she often made a conscious effort to differentiate herself from Locke and other members of Harlem's elite. In the very same letter detailing the progress of rehearsals for *The Great Day*, Hurston wrote to Mason that the leaders of Harlem's Renaissance were a 'degenerate and self-seeking lot'⁹⁷. 'You must hang with the gang', she added, 'or be shot in the back...Get on the band wagon, that is the backs of the poor Negro and ride his misery to glory...He is supposed to be a figment of the printed page...He must not walk in daylight and disturb the cogitations of our intellectuals'. In this context, her concert performances appear to be specifically produced to bring the plight of Southern labourers to the attention of the elite black leaders in the North. But her subsequent comments (within the same letter) suggest a conflict of her personal philosophy, deriding the average African American and his absence amongst white circles, claiming this to be proof of his "backwardness". 'He doesn't take advantage of his opportunities', she remarked, asking the question: 'Is a race champion supposed to go hunt these wretches down?'. She ends by claiming dismissing the seriousness

⁹⁷ Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason (October 15th 1931), *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Kaplan, C. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003) p. 234-5.

of her comments, claiming that her anger was driven by frustration and declaring, 'I am on fire about my people'. Nevertheless, the letter is a revealing example of Hurston's conflicting personal views, against her anthropological aims.

Further, Locke's reference to Hurston's collection as a 'rare sample' of 'unvarnished material' seems at odds with the context in which the lining rhythms were being performed, which was in itself adapted from the original form. The lining rhythms that Hurston collected became detached from their original form at the point of her recordings with Halpert. Locke's programme 'note' also reinforces the comments made in the *New York Times* review (referenced earlier in this chapter) that Hurston had "salvaged" the folklore of Polk County by putting lining rhythms on the stage. The 'acknowledgment' printed on the programme reinforced the point that Hurston had spent four years 'salvaging some of the surviving portions of *primitive* life of the Negro'. The emphasis on primitivism was further reinforced for Hurston's audiences, in her decision to add a series of Bahamian dances to the programme of *The Great Day* and subsequent adaptations. 'I had been in out in the Bahamian Islands collecting material', she wrote in *Dust Tracks*, 'and had witnessed the dynamic Fire Dance...the Jumping Dance, The Ring Play, and the Congo. It was so stirring and magnificent...I could just see an American audience being thrilled'⁹⁸. Prior to producing the concert, Hurston published an account of Bahamian dances, in which she stressed the prominence of the drummer in dictating a continuous rhythm, and the movement of the dancers;

...the players form a ring, with the bonfire to one side. The drummer usually takes his place near the fire. The drum is held over the blaze until the skin tightens to the right tone. There is a flourish signifying that the drummer is all set...The players more often call out what they want played. One player is inside the ring. He or she does his preliminary flourish, which comes on the first line of the song, does his dance on the second line, and chooses his successor on the third line and takes his place in the circle. The chosen dancer takes his place and the dance goes on until the drum gets cold. What

⁹⁸Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 281.

they really mean by that is, that the skin of the head has relaxed until it is no longer in tune. The drummer goes to the fire and tunes it again. This always changes the song⁹⁹

While the drummer sets and maintains the rhythm of the song, the exchange between singular musician and the subsequent ‘players’ is reminiscent of the “call and response” pattern between the ‘captain’ and the singers of the lining tracks. Similarly, the drummer (or captain) creates a rhythm that dictates the movement of the dancers (and steel liners). Hill asserts that this scene is suggestive of Alabama ‘rural folks...transported to a primeval time and place’. The depiction of the dance, she argues, ‘is rendered not simply as an evening’s entertainment but as an occasion for the author to display her understanding of African-American music’s parallels with African performance traditions’¹⁰⁰. Hurston is quick to observe that Bahamian dances serve a purely social (rather than functional) purpose, carrying a cultural significance and universality across the Bahamas. ‘It resembles the Cuban *rumba*’, she describes, ‘and the dances held in New Orleans after the great migration of Haitian and Santo Dominican Negroes after the success of L’Overture. Every dry night the drums can be heard throbbing, no matter how hard the dancers have worked that day, or must work the next’. Despite Hurston’s envelopment within Floridian communities, the repeated emphasis on the primitivism associated with lining rhythms was an overt misrepresentation reinforced by the inclusion of Bahamian dance. Why these two forms of musical expression were performed within the same production is unclear, the dances seemingly appended to the functional lining rhythms to reinforce a primitive image. In *Dust Tracks* she acknowledge West Indian dancing

⁹⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, ‘Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas’, *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol 43, 169 (1930), p. 294.

¹⁰⁰ Hill, p. 33.

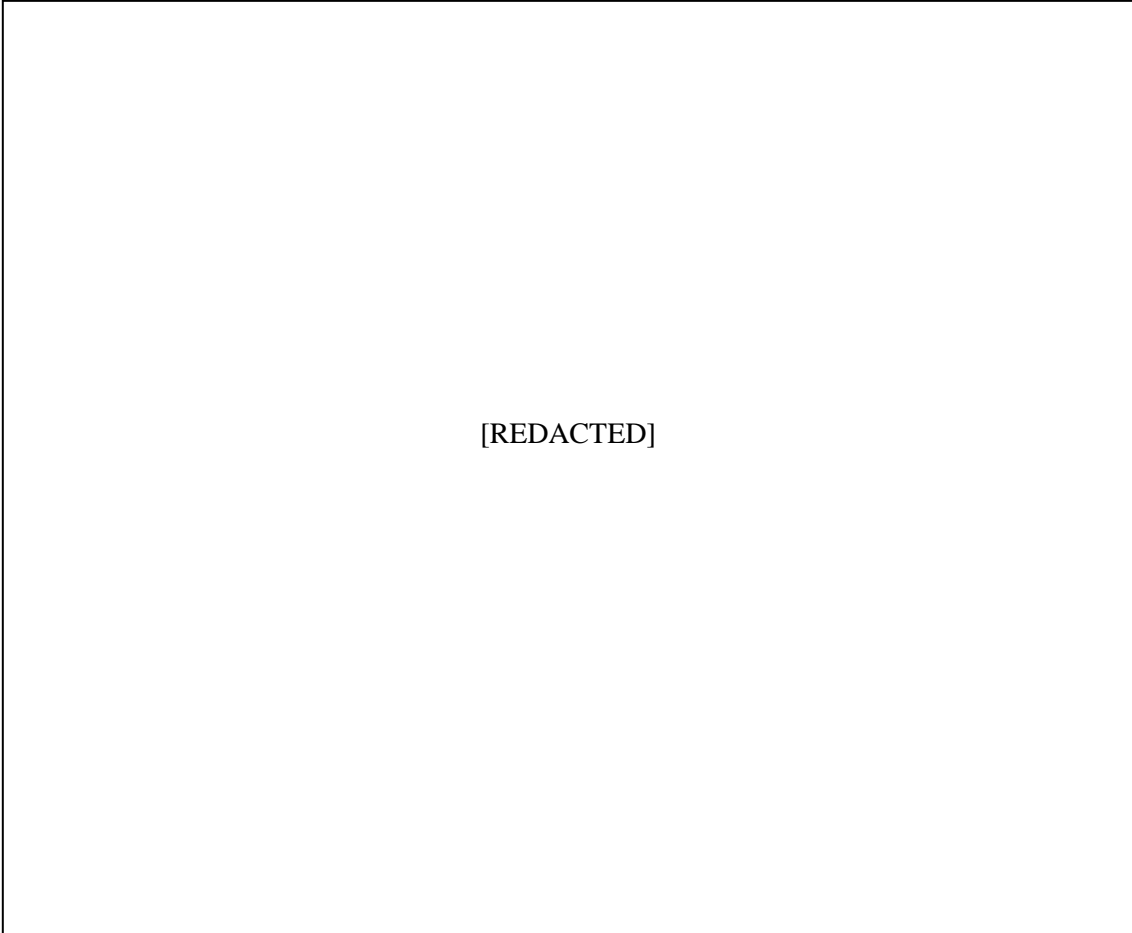


Fig. 14. Dance scene from *The Great Day*, 1932. Zora Neale Hurston and theatrical ensemble.

as something of a passing trend that had ‘created interest’¹⁰¹. Hurston’s choice of reinterpretation indicated a distinct level of detachment from the communities at the centre of her anthropology. Although Hurston’s intention was fuelled by the idea of cultural preservation and celebration through performance, the display of lining rhythms on the metropolitan stage was not without moral issue. To some extent, Hurston was culpable of the very thing she disparaged; ‘riding the misery’ or poor socio-economic experience of the individuals she observed in Florida in order to make commercial gain. Amongst the cast the feeling of discomfort was apparent. Hurston later revealed that backstage she was confronted with arguments over the (lack of) pay, and a disturbance amongst the dancers, one of whom accused her of exploitation. She was quick to dismiss his claims, pointing out that he was ‘the poorest dancer of all’¹⁰², although he was supported by two female dancers who also expressed their concern. Hurston subsequently fired all three.

In a letter to Mason (whom she often referred to as the ‘mother of primitives’) just three weeks before the first performance of *The Great Day*, she signed off ‘with high hopes for our venture and glory bulging from my pores’¹⁰³. Hurston’s own review of the concert was characteristically self-assured. ‘From the lifting of the curtain on the dawn scene where the shack rouser awakens the camp to the end of the first half it was evident that the audience was with us’, she wrote, ‘the male chorus “lined track” and “spiked” to tremendous applause’¹⁰⁴. On-stage, she delivered a speech to distinguished audience members, justifying her reasons for bringing the work songs of Florida to the metropolitan stage, including several Bahamian dances that she inserted into the end of the programme. ‘What I had tried to do was to present Negro singing in a natural way – with action. I don’t know what else I said, but the audience

¹⁰¹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, p. 285.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 284.

¹⁰³ Letter to Mason, December 21st 1931, Carla Kaplan, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), p. 239.

¹⁰⁴ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 283.

was kind and I walked off to an applauding house'. In the "Concert" appendix to *Dust Tracks* she expressed her satisfaction at what she had achieved. 'I am satisfied', she wrote in reflection, 'knowing that I established a trend and pointed Negro expression back towards the saner ground of our own unbelievable originality'¹⁰⁵.

In subsequent adaptations, Hurston made more visible efforts to return the performances to their place of origin, touring theatres in the South and incorporating some of the physical movements that accompanied the lining rhythms. 'Music without motion was unnatural'¹⁰⁶, she claimed. The folk opera went through several reinventions over a relatively short period, first being renamed as *From Sun to Sun*, and *All De Live Long Day*, both performed at Rollins College. Despite the initial re-naming of the production, the programme remained the same, with few changes. In the programme notes for *From Sun to Sun*, Hurston included more context to the work songs, in which she pointed out that, while the lyrics served merely to 'add body to the tunes', all the songs 'fit some definite rhythm' including the swinging of a pick, the driving of a nail, and the sawing of a log. Of the jook songs, she remarked 'few of them are ever heard by a person literate enough to preserve them in writing'¹⁰⁷. *All De Live Long Day* (performed in the year following *From Sun to Sun*) had a visibly changed programme, with a greater focus on blues and ballads, and which included a one-act folk play, "De Possum's Tail Hairs", a folk tale which later appeared in *Mules and Men*. By late 1934 however, the production had returned to metropolitan audiences. Hurston wrote to Locke, 'I am here in Chicago to direct a folk concert...with splendid backing. The Concert will come off before Thanksgiving. A big Loop affair'¹⁰⁸. The concert Hurston referred to was entitled

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 285.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 283.

¹⁰⁷ 'Notes on the Programme', *From Sun to Sun*; cited in *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. by Lynda M. Hill (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1996), p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ Carla Kaplan, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), p. 312. The concert, entitled 'Singing Steel' was subsequently performed on November 23rd and 24th. According to Kaplan, "big loop" is reference to Chicago's downtown area, which was encircled by the raised tracks of the 'el' train.

Singing Steel, the final production in the series of adaptations that had emerged from *The Great Day*, performed to a female audience at the Chicago Women's Club Theatre, at the University of Chicago¹⁰⁹. Prior to the performance, the *Chicago Daily News* ran an interview with Hurston, under the headline: 'Campaigns Here for Negro Art in Natural State'. In the interview, Hurston re-affirmed the effort she had personally taken in attempting to retain a sense of originality in the series of concerts from *The Great Day* to *Singing Steel*; 'I went to all the leading Negro musicians in New York', she declared, 'and they all turned me down...When musicians arrange these songs they make anthems out of them. "I've got a rainbow wrapped and tied around my shoulder", becomes "rain, rain, rain", and "bow, bow, bow", as the conductor manipulates his hands in a way that would make the original Negro singer listen as curiously as you do'¹¹⁰.

A second review published in the *Chicago Tribune* observed that the railroad chants were 'untainted by Tin Pan Alley influences'¹¹¹. On the musicality of African American folk song, both Hurston and Locke found themselves at odds. According to Locke, 'Negro folk music, properly maturing, has the capacity to produce new musical forms as well a new musical idioms; that is the task of the trained musician who has the sense and devotion to study seriously the folk music at its purest and deepest sources'¹¹². The developmental nature of folk song was something upon which Hurston and Locke appeared to diverge, Hurston believing instead that African American song should remain untampered with in order to retain some form of authenticity.

Prior to the first performance of *The Great Day*, she was frequently in correspondence with Mason regarding concert preparations. One letter revealed that she had arranged auditions with George Leyden Colledge at Steinway Hall, and her choice of a young baritone who she

¹⁰⁹ Hill, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ 'Campaigns Here For Negro Art in Natural State', *Chicago Daily News*; courtesy of University of Florida Digital Collections, Digital Library of the Caribbean, Zora Neale Hurston Papers; photo A.7.

¹¹¹ 'Singing Steel is Folklore of Negro Toilers', *Chicago Tribune*, November 24th 1934, p. 17.

¹¹² Alain Locke, 'Negro Music Goes to Par', in *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought*, ed. Anderson P.A. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 210.

claimed had ‘more volume and more quality than Paul Robeson’¹¹³. Several classical musicians including distinguished organist, Melville Charlton, mentored the baritone. Of Charlton, Hurston remarked, ‘You know very well what he wanted to do with the work songs. Make them into Bach Chorals’. She also stated that she had cast ‘a fine black girl as a contralto soloist, and a lovely black girl as a soprano’, adding, ‘no mulattoes at all’. As with the physical staging of the performance, Hurston’s careful method of casting choral voices to sing the lining rhythms seems at odds with her aim to make their representation as realistic as possible. There was a carefully curated musicality and choreography to each of the concerts she produced. Despite her dismissal of Eurocentric musical idioms, her choice of singers reflected a distinctly classical vein, seeking a harmonic resolution that would not necessarily have existed amongst the Polk County liners themselves.

This chapter here finds itself drawing to a close at the same place in which this thesis began, with a consideration of operatic influence on African American art forms. As is characteristic of Hurston, there is a recurring conflict in her aesthetic approach. On one hand, her repeated reference to *The Great Day* as a ‘folk opera’ confirms the formal influence of the ‘rhythm of segments’, each concert being arranged in a series of acts. However, Paul Anderson asserts that Hurston ‘posed her formulation about black vernacular music against the symmetrical rhythms and linear organization associated with Western music’¹¹⁴. He suggests that the expectation of an asymmetrical ‘rhythm of segments’ in folk music, punctuated by abrupt breaks ‘counters the dominant European ideal of unbroken thematic development in classical composition’. To return to McKay’s use of the leitmotif examined in Chapter Two, Hurston arguably does not rest on any single person or place for long enough to establish a developmental representation. It’s also important to recognise that as an anthropologist, she

¹¹³ Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason (October 15th 1931), *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: First Anchor Books, 2003), p. 231-235.

¹¹⁴ Anderson, p. 211.

was not aesthetically bound to developmental characterisation in *Mules and Men*, as in her fiction work(s). In contrast, as a theatrical representation of everyday life in the railroad camps, *The Great Day* did require a certain level of thematic development. While Anderson suggests that the ‘breaks’ in rhythm were key to setting Hurston’s ‘folk opera’ apart from western musical idioms, the historical definition of opera includes reference to a series of separate ‘acts’ or segments reflective of the structure outlined in the concert’s programme.

We are left to question the extent to which the lining rhythms of Polk County were accurately represented by Hurston upon her return from the South. As discussed throughout this chapter, the lining rhythms had a formal influence on *Mules and Men*, establishing a ‘rhythm of segments’ in order to align and map the shifting spatial, temporal and cultural aspects of the anthropological collection. The lining tracks simultaneously captured the soundmarks of Polk County, as well as affirming the importance of the liners themselves, and the functional significance of work songs. The sonic memory and resonant aspects of Southern slave labour are inexorable, although Hurston’s aversion to confronting this reverberant history may strike her readers as neglectful, particularly from an anthropological perspective. In her theatrical representations, Hurston reveals the inherent conflict between anthropology and fiction, personal philosophy and creative approach. From *The Great Day* to *Singing Steel*, questions of authenticity remain at the centre of the performances. For Hurston, bringing the sounds of Polk County to the metropolitan stage was a crucial exercise in confronting cultural nationalism, and the elitist attitudes of Harlem Renaissance leaders, bringing the deprived socio-economic aspects of life in the rural South to metropolitan audiences. To some extent, she was successful in her effort to show people ‘what real Negro music sounded like’¹¹⁵. But her commercial aims were seemingly at the forefront of her theatrical venture, and all too often she failed to “line” the delicate balance between authentic performance and the

¹¹⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 280.

mischaracterisation of those she sought to represent. Nevertheless, her method of recorded collection and exploration into sonic aesthetic(s) signalled an altogether unique approach compared to the peers she is examined against in this thesis, and provided a timely reminder that the Southern soundscape could not be made exempt from Harlem Renaissance literature, theatre, or thought. In that respect, Zora the vocalist undoubtedly triumphed.

Conclusion

As suggested in the introduction to this thesis, examining the Harlem Renaissance as a campaign for sonic modernity requires scholars to recognise the all-encompassing nature of environmental sound, and the broader musical influences that shaped Harlem's renaissance era. Returning to the question posed by Health Commissioner Darlington in 1905, over whether or not New York would become a *sounding* or *soundless* metropolis¹, it was seemingly inevitably that the city would develop within the former paradigm. In the conclusion to her extensive aural history, Thompson focuses on the "beginning" and the "end" of modern sound, identifying 1900 as the point at which modern sound began to transform and shape sonic environments, and declaring 1932 as the year in which the 'era of modern acoustics' came to an end. In chronological terms, the "sounding" of the Harlem Renaissance sits comfortably within the dates that Thompson identifies, as part of the acoustic and technological shift at the turn of the twentieth-century. While this thesis is similarly positioned within the period between 1910 and 1940, it is important that the Harlem Renaissance be considered as part of a broader discourse in the resonance of archetypal sounds, and as the point at which new forms of sonic expression and cultures of sound were beginning to develop. Contextualising the development of Harlem

¹ 'New York the Noisiest City on Earth', *The New York Times*, July 2nd 1905, p. sm3.

within the broader sonic and topographical history of New York not only affirms the uniqueness of the neighbourhood's soundscape, but also emphasises the social and political importance of "making noise". The "sounding" of the Harlem Renaissance affirmed the importance of sound as a tool for the forming of cultural and communal identities – in other words, the effort to *be heard* amidst the clamorous sonic environment of the city during the early twentieth century.

By way of conclusion, I will reconsider the main features of Harlem's soundscape, and the aural architecture in the literary contributions by McKay, Larsen, Fisher and Hurston, including the practice of "making noise" as a rebellious act, the presence of silence as a symbol of both social defiance and necessity in the act of racial passing, and the adoption of sound as a destructive force. Collectively, I discuss these auditory responses and representations as part of a sonorous 'counterpublic sphere'. In closing, I will consider the extent to which reading representations of sound within the novel changes our approach to (and understanding of) Harlem Renaissance literature in relation to modernism, and will offer a discussion of the reverberative aspects of Harlem's soundscape, focusing in particular on the way in which the aesthetic representations of the soundscape during its renaissance era prompted an artistic, cultural and historical "echo" in subsequent scholarship.

If, as Schafer suggests, a soundscape should be considered as a 'field of interactions'², then the literary contributions by McKay, Larsen, Fisher and Hurston, should be considered as narratives that were highly responsive to the sonic environment, incorporating a formal recognition of the keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks of Harlem. Moreover, each of the authors discussed here frequently acknowledge the historical significance of *archetypal* sound in African American oral and literary tradition, revealing a direct engagement with historical auditory environments and cultural practices, as well as those in which they themselves were

² Schafer, p. 131.

present. Arguably, at the point at which the sounds of Harlem were reproduced on the page, they were already sounds *past*, shifting into the realm of sonic memory and therefore subject to fictionalisation. To develop Schafer's statement further, I would argue that where Harlem Renaissance narratives engage with sounds drawn from the author's own auditory experience, the rendering of sound on the page ensures an aesthetic and cultural resonance, broadening the aesthetic scope of 'interactions' with the soundscape in question.

It is also important to acknowledge that, much like the authors themselves, the characters of the texts discussed here traverse the same intersections, thoroughfares, avenues, and frequently arrive by means of the same subway station, emerging into the neighbourhood at the intersection of 135th street. This not only emphasises the unique position of the author as *listener*, but also highlights the subjectivity in audible perception. The sounds that McKay celebrates (the phonograph, a radio, the blare of a trumpet) are also the sounds that Larsen's characters deem as "nuisance" noises. McKay also displays a far greater familiarity with the more disreputable of Harlem's cabarets (those establishments noticeably absent from Campbell's illustration) than Larsen, whose attempt at describing Helga Crane's one experience of a nightclub in *Quicksand* is prudish, at best. Although in virtually all of the Harlem-based narratives discussed here, the characters inevitably cross the main thoroughfares of both Lenox and Seventh Avenue, the spatial and sonic mappings of Harlem also provide some insight into the areas of the neighbourhood that each author was familiar with, ultimately revealing vast disparities in cultural experience, class and gender.

"Sounding" the Counterpublic

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the amplification of sound was fundamental to Harlem's era of cultural "vogue", but also positioned Harlem's inhabitants as both participants in and contributors to the broader soundscape of Manhattan. For Shane Vogel, McKay, Hurston, and Fisher were among a group of writers who 'rejected the narratives and logics of normative racial uplift and sexual respectability that initially guided the Harlem Renaissance'³. Arguably, they also formed a group who rejected the perceived norms of aural behaviour. The presence of sound and the noises of Harlem within their texts are indicative of an active engagement with counterpublic forms of self-expression, although there is evidence to suggest that formal representation of Harlem's auditory practices occasionally placed them in direct contention with Locke's 'New Negro' rhetoric. Clare Corbould argues that while '...other areas in New York City were also represented frequently as "noisy", notably Chinatown, the Lower East Side, Tin Pan Alley and, at night at least, Broadway', there was 'a certain something' to 'the sound of Harlem'⁴. She continues to suggest that '...where other minority groups in the city consumed, or at least window-shopped, African Americans *made* noise'⁵. In this possession of the soundscape through 'everyday noise', parades and other audible public events, Corbould asserts that Harlem's residents 'thereby lay claim to the physical space that they did not literally own, and carved out their own corner of that great modern city'. Most of all, she recognises that in Harlem, certain social freedoms (such as making noise on the street) were permitted to African Americans that were otherwise prohibited in the Jim Crow South. She concludes that:

Making noise was a way to build community through collective action that always had the potential to offend the sensibilities of white listeners. The sounds on Harlem's streets penetrated the ears of reluctant hearers, who could not close down their sense of hearing as they might curtail sight by simply shutting their eyes. Through sound,

³ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality and Performance* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2009), p.4.

⁴ Clare Corbould, "Street Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem", *Journal of Social History*, 40.4 (2007), p. 859. [emphasis added]

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 859-60.

Harlem's residents created a counterpublic sphere that was a spatialization of black self-expression commonly understood to be an inherently political act⁶

Corbould's definition of Harlem's soundscape as a 'counterpublic sphere' is indicative of the fact that the amplification of sound was foremost a communal practice, before an act of individual self-expression (or as Locke observed, an example of 'group expression' and 'self-determination'). The action taken by New York's authorities against the collective sounds of the neighbourhood reiterates Corbould's assertion that the 'Black Mecca' presented a *sonorous* counterpublic that endeavoured to be heard against the broader 'public' of New York.

Corbould draws upon Michael Warner's definition of a 'counterpublic' as that which is cast 'against the background of the public sphere', enabling exchanges that 'remain distinct from authority and have a critical relation to power'⁷. Warner suggests that counterpublics are mediated by print cultures, performance, 'networks of talk' and commerce. As discussed earlier in this thesis, publications such as *FIRE!!* endeavoured to offer a mediating space through printed culture and contributions by Harlem authors, artists, and intellectuals. Warner adds that these are also positioned as 'subaltern counterpublics', in the postcolonial denotation of the term as a reference to otherwise voiceless minority groups. The examination of Harlem's 'counterpublic' practices also leads to an important debate over the extent to which counterpublics are enforced or freely publicised. As Paul Gilroy questions in *The Black Atlantic*; 'How are we to think critically about artistic products or aesthetic codes which, though they may be traceable back to one distinct location, have been changed either by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through networks of communication and cultural exchange?'⁸. He acknowledges that this question also requires scholars to address the

⁶ Ibid, p. 862.

⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 56-57.

⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 80.

‘awkward’ issues of ‘unity of differentiation of the creative black self...and the role of cultural expression in its formation and reproduction’. In Harlem, the ‘unity’ and ‘differentiation of the creative black self’ was key, but the Harlem Renaissance also relied on the sustained ‘reproduction’ of these sonorous forms of expression.

The collective expression of a ‘counterpublic sphere’ and reproduction of *archetypal* forms of black self-expression also presented a direct challenge to Alain Locke and the established hierarchies of the ‘New Negro’ rhetoric, who argued that racial stereotypes were a concern of the ‘Old Negro’. His call to release the ‘talented group from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression’⁹ not only called for an assimilation into the ‘fullest sharing of American culture and institutions’ but excluded a large proportion of African Americans unable to access education and subsequently hampered by social immobility. Hurston proved to be one of the most outspoken critics of Locke’s strict categorisation of ‘New Negro’ expression. In response to his review of her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she was unrelenting in her criticism of his tendency to only approve of those forms of expression that were already widely accepted. ‘I remember well at Howard University’, she recalled, ‘that he was one of the leaders in a hullabaloo against the singing of Negro spirituals. That was before so many people in high places had praised them. Now he tootches his lips all out and shivers with ecstasy when he speaks about “those beautiful and sensitive things”...nobody was going to catch Dr. Locke not chiming in with something so popular as that’¹⁰. Hurston’s commentary on Locke’s approach to spirituals reveals a distinct disparity in attitudes towards traditional aural forms of African American expression.

⁹ Locke, p. 16.

¹⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, ‘The Chick With One Hen’, Box 1, f. 8a, Zora Neale Hurston Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

According to Corbould, sound allowed individuals to distinguish and ‘distance’ themselves from those ‘whose views or behaviours they disdained’. Perceptions of “noise” were critical to this debate. Corbould identifies that dispute ‘erupted frequently as to what was appropriate sound or noise, on the streets and especially in political and social agitation [...] the proliferation of voices and especially of competing approaches to defining and achieving freedom, were themselves characteristic of Harlem and of the black modernity that its residents made there’¹¹. Both Corbould and Warner offer a useful framework through which to discuss the themes of sonorous rebellion that have been highlighted throughout the course of this thesis, particularly in relation to literary representations of noise as a vagrant practice or a socially destructive force.

Locating McKay’s *Home to Harlem* within traditions of sound places the reader firmly within the cabaret and ‘rent party’ culture of the borough. Although scholarly analysis often makes reference to *Home to Harlem* as a depiction of the black ‘underworld’, I maintain the position outlined in Chapter Two, that in both form and content McKay ultimately produces a narrative that strives for transcendence, albeit an interrupted form compared to the type of cultural uplift envisioned by Du Bois and the majority of Harlem’s ‘Talented Tenth’. A reviewer for the *New York Times*¹² remarked that McKay came from ‘rebel stock’, and that the ‘tradition of rebellion’ was strong within him. Arguably, it is this tradition that aligns him closely with a Wagnerian aesthetic. His characters repeatedly engage with audible forms of self-expression and ‘making noise’ that Corbould indicates as markers of a counterpublic. For Jake, Zeddy and Ray, their relationship to authority and power remains ‘critical’, as Warner indicates. Moreover, McKay’s narrative space is mapped through a series of nightclubs that are sites of black expression, white voyeurism, sexual impropriety, jazz and liquor – spaces of

¹¹ Corbould, p. 862.

¹² ‘When Spring Comes to Harlem’, *The New York Times*, 11th March 1928, p. 59.

deviance that ultimately contribute to the spectacle of Harlem's broader 'counterpublic' sphere. The key to each of these deviant practices is that they form part of the sonic and visual "spectacle" of Harlem. In Jake's practice of 'strolling' or 'promenading' along Lenox and Seventh Avenues, he reveals the noises of communal self-expression – the sounds of Harlem's teeming street life capable of offending the ears of the 'reluctant' (white) listener.

If laying claim to this 'counterpublic sphere' through the amplification of sound was a method of establishing sonic identities and 'offending the sensibilities' of both white and black listeners, the 'reproduction' of creative forms of black expression provided a method of generating 'publicity' by drawing white, mid-town patrons into Harlem. In this approach there lay a conflict between the production of noise as part of cultural practice and social deviancy, and the amplification of sound as a means of driving economic prosperity. Sound audibly publicised Harlem's 'counterpublic'. Making noise was a way of laying claim to a commercial space, as much as it was a method of building a communal 'counterpublic sphere'. As I suggested in my introductory reading of Elmer Simms Campbell's 'Nightclub Map of Harlem'¹³, the map offers the closest representation of the cabaret culture of *Home to Harlem* than any other of the literary examples discussed in the preceding chapters. However, Campbell also visualises the commercialisation of Harlem's nightlife, in which sound proved to be a marketable commodity. Both black and white proprietors of Harlem's nightlife capitalizing on the noise and music that drew the voyeuristic attention of white patrons to the "Black Mecca".

Although exaggerated in its spatial representation, the soundscape illustrated by Campbell in the space spanning across the main thoroughfares of Lenox and Seventh Avenues offered an audible advertisement for Harlem's nightclubs and businesses. The lack of architectural distinction between internal and external spaces in Campbell's rendering of

¹³ See Fig.5.

Harlem is representative of the fact that the neighbourhood was, in commercial terms, “open for business”. The convergence of external and internal sounds also affirms the all-encompassing nature of the Harlem’s soundscape, in that it was not necessarily limited by topographical boundary - a key theme of the *Walls of Jericho*, as discussed throughout Chapter Four. For Shane Vogel, Campbell’s illustration offers a depiction of ‘black publicity’ through a caricature that ‘pictorially presents the underworld by a logic of performance, contingency, and relationality’¹⁴. He also suggests that Campbell’s caricature illustrates that the ‘everynight performances of 1920s Harlem’ could not be accessed ‘through the realism or literal language of sociological uplift’, purported by Locke and Harlem’s intelligentsia.

My point, in returning to Campbell’s illustration of Harlem, is that it offers a valuable visualisation of the conflict between ‘differentiation’ and ‘reproduction’ that Gilroy identifies, but it also visually captures the counterpublic practices recognised by Corbould. On one hand, Campbell presents a familiar romanticised rhetoric in his acoustic representation of Harlem’s centre, reaffirming the cultural importance of jazz, the allure of the speakeasy, and the celebrated figures of Harlem’s nightclub scene. Yet he simultaneously reproduces stereotypical representations of the period in the expression of ‘blackness’ as analogous with noise. As detailed in the introductory discussion of this thesis, measures taken by the Noise Abatement Commission and other city officials declared the sounds of self-expression in Harlem as a display of public misdemeanour. The very same street-corner trumpet player celebrated in Campbell’s illustration would likely be reported as the cause of complaint in the local press, or deemed as a civic nuisance. Alain Corbin suggests that authoritarian attempts to control the soundscape – in particular those sonic environments shaped by minority groups – were commonplace. He cites the measures taken in French rural towns during the nineteenth century, in which Republican leaders ‘endeavoured in various ways to deny communities their right to

¹⁴ Vogel, p. 149.

noise, to contest the need to sacralize space and time, and thus to alter the prevailing pattern of the senses', the intention being 'to curb the expression of everything pertaining to private life'¹⁵. For Maria Balshaw, these restrictions are exemplified through Fisher's narrative. She argues that *The Walls of Jericho* reflects the fact that Harlem 'was by no means a free expressive space' but rather, a space in which 'interesting commentaries on agency and identity' emerged from the 'conscious treatment of the urban scene'¹⁶. Her assertion relies on an analysis of Harlem as a visual spectacle, rather than a sonic one, however she acknowledges the 'complex reaction to Harlem as a commodified and spectacular site of desire for both black and white spectators [and] performers' as an impediment to true freedom of expression. Of the texts examined here, Fisher's narrative perhaps comes the closest to addressing these issues. In employing sound as a means to deconstruct hierarchical structures, he simultaneously employs counterpublic practices whilst ridiculing the social attitudes that supported them.

Like McKay, Fisher offers a characterisation of "noisiness" in *The Walls of Jericho* as an audible indication of racial and class stereotypes, noise being perceived by the white listener as symbolic of Harlem's black working class. He also employs familiar tropes – such as the trumpet (horn) – as an archetypal "sounding" of counterpublic practices (this trope evident too in Douglas's *Song of the Towers* and *The Judgement Day*). However, he further challenges conventional methods of reading black culture. As Emad Mirmotahari argues, Fisher shows that 'critique of racism and affirmation of blackness can be achieved outside of orthodox discourses of blackness and black authenticity, which themselves can disarticulate those for whom they purportedly speak'¹⁷. While *Home to Harlem* and *The Walls of Jericho* both offer

¹⁵ Alain Corbin, *Village Bells : Sound and Meaning in the 19th-century French Countryside*, trans. by M. Thom (Basingstoke and Oxford: Papermac, 1999), p. 4.

¹⁶ Maria Balshaw, 'Black Was White': Urbanity, Passing and the Spectacle of Harlem', *Journal of American Studies*, 33.2 (1999), p. 309-10.

¹⁷ Emad Mirmotahari, 'Mapping Race: The Discourse of Blackness in Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho*', *Journal of African American Studies*, 16 (2012), p. 586-7.

narratives drawn from the perspective of young male noisemakers, Fisher intentionally constructs a narrative that passes over racial and social borders in order to parody the response to noise by those agitated by the erroneous “threat” of Harlem’s increasingly black population. The anxieties of Agatha Cramp offer an ‘uncompromising satire’, according to Mirmotahari, ‘of misguided and disingenuous white liberalism’¹⁸. The ‘shriek, roar and clangor’¹⁹ of fire trucks that sound in the closing chapters of the novel, are an audible signal that the supposed dangers of black Harlem have arrived ‘uncomfortably close’ to her own doorstep. Fisher is particularly adept at subverting the figure of the listener. In the ‘City of Refuge’ in particular, Gillis is representative of an outsider altogether unequipped to audibly contribute to or navigate Harlem’s counterpublic sphere. His disorientating arrival into the neighbourhood is, to adopt Balshaw’s phrase, the equivalent of being unceremoniously ‘burped’ into Harlem by means of the ‘carnivorous’ subway²⁰. The short narrative is subsequently filled with sounds that assault his senses, and provide foreboding signals of his own fate. As discussed in Chapter Four, Gillis’s eventual counterpublic participation as a drug mule is the result of coordinated intervention by Mouse Uggam. The success of Uggam’s operation however, is almost entirely reliant upon Gillis’s inherent lack of understanding of the nature of the work, which subsequently renders him silent on the matter. His participation within Harlem’s counterpublic sphere ultimately relies upon his inability to audibly express his concern.

It is important to acknowledge, that Harlem’s sonorous counterpublic was constructed by silent responses, as much as audible practices. In Chapter Three, I discussed at length the necessity of silence in the act of racial passing as an act that contributed to Harlem’s counterpublic sphere. According to Susan Sontag, ‘silence exists as a *decision*’ by the artist,

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 583.

¹⁹ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, p.152.

²⁰ Balshaw, p. 307.

but it also exists as a form of ‘self-punishment’²¹. She discusses silence in the context of artistic expression, but the indistinct border between silence as a reflection of personal choice and as self-punishment is also present in Larsen’s depiction of passing. Primarily, it serves the necessary purpose of maintaining secrecy in Clare’s passing for white, a social and cultural act of defiance. In this, silence is representative of both a power and repression that passes across both sides of the gendered divide. Her passing challenges racial and social boundaries, and subverts the domestic ideals of marriage. Yet the need for her racial passing within her marriage is a direct result of broader racial prejudices, and, as discussed in Chapter Three, the “bellowing” sound of her husband often interrupts and obscures the sound of her own delicate “tinkling” voice. The silent dimensions of Larsen’s novel also reinforce the gendered imbalance in the ownership of the soundscape. To reiterate Corbould’s assertion that making noise was a method of laying claim to a space, both *Passing* and *Quicksand* reveal the extent to which the soundscape of Harlem was overwhelmingly male. Silence therefore serves as a distinctly feminized method of claiming a space and engaging in a counterpublic act. Arguably, in silence there is a far more powerful rhetoric. This was something that Langston Hughes echoed in his poem, ‘Silence’²², in three succinct stanzas;

I catch the pattern
Of your silence
Before you speak
I do not need
To hear a word

In your silence

²¹ Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), p. 9.

²² Langston Hughes, ‘Silence’ (n.d.)

Every tone I seek

Is heard.

More than a decade after the publication of *Passing*, Hughes upholds the rhetorical power of silent response. Like Larsen, Hughes acknowledges the weight of that which goes “unspoken”. As Balshaw recognises, the silence of passing is also a feature in *The Walls of Jericho*, the lawyer Fred Merrit passing for white in order to purchase his home on Court Avenue. His rebellion against the imposed social boundaries of Harlem, as well as those drawn topographically, relies on his ability to maintain a silence regarding his racial identity. Silence in this context is then by no means a less rebellious action than the raucous practices of Jake or Banjo within McKay’s narratives.

LaGuardia’s “Noiseless” Campaign

Of the numerous sonic representations of Harlem discussed throughout this thesis, Larsen also offers the most accurate depiction of broader attitudes towards the “war on noise” and the campaign for its abatement. Towards the latter part of the nineteen twenties, the Noise Abatement Commission had reached the end of the citywide noise survey. By August 1930, when the City Noise Report was published, the treasury report²³ indicated that the Commission had simply run its course. The Finance Committee noted that the ‘pioneering’ campaign had largely been the result of the ‘unpaid services’ and ‘generous financial contributions’ of private individuals, organisations, and foundations, totalling \$4,178.40. Having subsequently spent \$3,843.17 on the research gathered for the City Noise Report, the Commission was left with the rather meagre sum of \$335.33. To continue to tackle the ‘modern frontier of noise’ on a

²³ ‘Finances’, *City Noise* (1930), Milstein Division of U.S., Local History and Genealogy, New York Public Library.

‘routine basis’, the Committee requested that an additional \$50,000 be made available to fund the campaign through the following year, with the suggestion that this would adequately cover the cost of implementing an educational programme in or to teach the ‘seven million inhabitants of [the] city to avoid unnecessary noise’. The report concluded with an invitation to New Yorkers to donate to this sum, stating that it was ‘fitting and proper that the contributions be on a democratic basis’ with ‘as many citizens as possible’ sharing in the civic enterprise. In the midst of economic depression however, the final appeal of the Commission appeared both optimistic and somewhat out of touch with the public concerns of the time. After the stunned silence that fell on Wall Street in October 1929 the sounds and sights of industry, far from being considered as a nuisance, came to signify tangible evidence of economic and social recovery.

The issue of noise abatement didn’t reappear as a major public health concern until 1935, when Mayor Fiorello La Guardia called for the reintroduction of a ‘city ordinance’ on noise abatement and, in accordance with the recommendations of the previously published City Noise Report, embarked on an ‘education campaign against unnecessary noises’ in New York²⁴. In a press statement, La Guardia called for the inauguration of “noiseless nights”, with the aim of restricting the use of automobile horns between the hours of 11pm and 7am. It was announced that “noiseless days” would follow “noiseless nights”, during full twenty-hour periods where warnings would be issued to ‘noise offenders’ by the city’s authorities. The campaign regarded radio as a ‘cruel and unusual form of punishment’²⁵. The Uptown Chamber of Commerce, including ‘all business organizations on Washington Heights and Harlem’ were amongst those called to list ‘principle noise nuisances in upper Manhattan and submit recommendations for their abatement’²⁶. The renewed campaign included a number of

²⁴ ‘Press Release from the Office of Mayor F.H. La Guardia’, August 11th 1935 (1), Milstein Division of U.S., Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library.

²⁵ Ibid, September 9th 1935, (1A).

²⁶ Ibid, September 22nd 1935, (3).

questionable slogans, including; ‘SILENCE IS GOLDEN’, ‘IXNAY on the OISENAY’, and the somewhat more confrontational: ‘Courteous folk are never noisy. Draw your own conclusions’²⁷. La Guardia eventually settled on, ‘QUIET PLEASE’, as a slogan that was easy to market and got directly to the point²⁸. As Lilian Radovac observes, La Guardia’s campaign against noise was in frequently directed at cultural minority groups. While subsequent publication of data from the Office of the Police Commissioner carefully listed ‘Manhattan’ as a singular borough, rather than denoting separate aural ‘zones’ of the city as the Noise Abatement Commission had proposed to list noise offences, Radovac suggests that during his time as the congressional representative for East Harlem, La Guardia had deemed the neighbourhood’s aural culture as ‘strange’ and ‘impossible to fully understand’²⁹. This was particularly prevalent in the period following riots in Harlem in 1935. La Guardia’s proclamation stressed a ‘rigid’ police presence ‘on all cabarets’³⁰. ‘Impromptu quartettes on street corners’ he warned would ‘find hostile audiences in patrolmen on beat’. Moreover, ‘imported customs’ such as ‘serenading under windows’ would become taboo. The perception of Harlem as a counterpublic space was, at least politically, already firmly established. Of La Guardia’s personal attitude towards the sounds of Harlem, Radovac asserts;

By all accounts, he despised jazz, not only because it offended his aesthetic sensibilities, which had been shaped by years of classical music instruction, but also because it seemed a gateway into the “dives”, “easy sex”, and “social problems” that he was determined to stamp out [...] he heard syncopation itself as a form of “improvised disorder”, which mirrored the chaos that threatened to erupt in the streets at a moment’s notice

La Guardia’s strive for uniform “quiet” in both public and private spaces, but particularly the boroughs home to cultural minorities, affirms Corbould’s suggestion that the suppression of

²⁷ Ibid, September 7th 1935 (5).

²⁸ Ibid, November 1st 1935 (4)

²⁹ Lilian Radovac, ‘The “War on Noise”’: Sound and Space in La Guardia’s New York’, *American Quarterly*, 63.3 (2011), p. 747-8.

³⁰ ‘Press Release from the Office of Mayor F.H. La Guardia’, September 15th 1935, (3-A).

noise was a method of curbing African American expression, and controlling a perceived ‘counterpublic’. This attitude towards noise has ultimately formed part of a lasting, repetitive pattern in the post-war period. As Radovac observes, by ‘equating the sounds of protest, begging, or even certain kinds of music with the commission of violent crimes, La Guardia’s was on noise foreshadowed the “broken windows” theory of urban policing, which became the founding doctrine of [Rudy] Giuliani’s notorious crackdown on crime in the 1990s’³¹. The increasingly restrictive approach to the concept of noise and reverberation does much to explain the development of sonic ‘counterpublic’ practices. To some extent, Harlem’s counterpublic sphere arose as a direct result of the technological restrictions initially placed on sound that had far broader political and social implications.

Harlem Reverberations

In the considering the concept of reverberation within a literary aesthetic, we must also acknowledge the gap between the immediacy of a sonic event and its subsequent aesthetic reverberation. Jonathan Sterne argues for recognition of a ‘detachable echo’, a construct that definitively separates ‘sound’ and ‘reverberation’³². Through this, he suggests that the history of ‘reverb technology’ should be understood as ‘a history of *representation* and construction of space’. He writes that ‘the separation of sounds from themselves – the detachable echo – multiplied spatial perspectives for listeners and proliferated possible sonic configurations and modes of representation’³³. Considered within this context, the texts discussed throughout the course of this thesis encapsulate the concept of a ‘detached echo’, in both an aesthetic and temporal sense. If, as Sterne posits, ‘all sound needs a medium’, then textual and visual

³¹ Radovac, p. 756.

³² Jonathan Sterne, ‘Space within Space: Artificial Reverb and the Detachable Echo’, *Grey Room*, 60 (2015), p.111.

³³ *Ibid*, p.113.

representations of sound produced during the Harlem Renaissance allow for this ‘detached’ configuration of a ‘multidimensional sonic space’. ‘If we follow reverb’s tail’, Sterne suggests, ‘then times and spaces are not compressed or annihilated though modern technology and aesthetics. Time and space are endlessly recombined, choreographed, pin-pointed, and diffused’³⁴. The sonic representations discussed throughout the course of this thesis are free (in both their textual and visual form) from the restraints of temporal and spatial specificity. They represent the sounds of Harlem, but are not bound to it. McKay’s return to Harlem, for instance, when overlaid by a Wagnerian theme, not only echoed another place, but harked back to a preceding century – eschewing any notions of time and space specificity. As discussed here in the fifth chapter, Hurston’s anthropological representation of the Southern soundscape throughout *Mules and Men* does rely on temporal and spatial specificity. If, as Thompson asserts, reverberation ‘interfered with the transmission of speech’, then Hurston’s focus on aural traditions in her literary work signals a rejection of the reverberative qualities of modern sound. In her representation and reconstruction of the soundscape of Southern railroad camps in a number of metropolitan theatres and concert halls, she also created the same disconnect that Thompson identifies – enforcing a disparity between the *sounds* she sought to recreate, and the *space* in which they derived.

As Thompson repeatedly observes, concert halls and theatres were amongst the first examples of change in the architectural understanding of modern sound, not least because they were among the most resonant of internal spaces. The move to restrict the quantifiable levels of reverberation within these spaces was crucial to the audience’s consumption of the sounds being produced onstage³⁵. While Thompson’s study focuses on larger musical venues, ranging

³⁴ Ibid, p.127.

³⁵ Thompson refers to Wallace Sabine’s equation for measuring the reverberative quality of any room, prior to its construction. Sabine’s equation also took into account the variables of different sound-absorbing materials that were already commonly used in construction. His calculations could be used by architects to modify their designs in advance.

from Boston Symphony Hall and the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago to Radio City Hall in New York, Hurston's operas toured far smaller venues, with less sophisticated approaches to the regulation of modern sound³⁶. While she paid considerable attention to the vocal tones of her leading cast members in the planning and rehearsal of the productions, there is little to suggest in her correspondence with her patron that she considered the acoustic architecture of the spaces in which she intended to stage her folk operas. As her letters also indicate, due to limited funding her choice of performance spaces was predominantly a matter of convenience, rather than acoustically informed. This is particularly significant considering the fact that several "acts" in her folk operas were based entirely on sounds heard in an external setting. In the move to an internal stage, the acoustic reception of the sounds of 'lining' the rail (the "hammering" of steel) would have been noticeably different from the way in which Hurston herself audibly registered the sounds in their spatial setting in Polk County. Despite this, Hurston was resolute in her belief that the productions should include the repetitive sound and rhythm of 'hammering' the lining tracks into place. The performances themselves revolved entirely around these actions, and the sounds they produced.

Of all the authors discussed here, Hurston's attempts to physically recreate a soundscape are unique, and should not be dismissed. A better understanding of the acoustic architecture of her performance spaces might have drastically improved her approach to reconstructing the Southern soundscape. However, her choice to transpose the soundscape of Polk County in a performative context inevitably raises questions over authenticity, as well as the 'formation' and 'reproduction' of cultural expression that Gilroy identifies. For Paul Hegarty, the reverberative qualities of sound and noise are part of a 'dynamic progress'³⁷. His

³⁶ The John Golden Theatre held a seating capacity of just over 800, the smallest on Broadway at the time of Hurston's staging of *The Great Day*.

³⁷ Paul Hegarty, 'A Chronic Condition: Noise and Time', in *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, ed. by Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Hegarty (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 16.

premise is similar to that of Sterne, although he observes that the detached reverberations of sound ‘offers the prospect of sequence – and even an isolated sound suggests a narrative to which it belongs or disrupts’. Locating Hurston’s folk operas within the ‘sound sequence’ of the Harlem Renaissance is problematic, and is hampered somewhat by the fact that her performances played to a number of racial stereotypes and “primitive” assumptions, reinforcing the narratives to which they belonged, rather than disrupting them, and lacking in progressive qualities. In contrast, Fisher offers the clearest example of an aesthetic construction and representation of sound that both signals a ‘detached echo’ from past sonic cultures, and is positioned as part of a reverberative sound ‘sequence’.

The Walls of Jericho forms part of a historical discourse surrounding black social uplift, predominantly shaped by the sound of the trumpet as a means to break through social and cultural barriers. Within the context of black social progress in America, Fisher’s sentiments were echoed by others in the decades that followed. When Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the crowd who had marched from Selma to Montgomery in the Spring of 1965, he recited the spiritual of ‘Joshua’, calling once more for the sounding of the ‘ramhorns’, quoting Julia Ward Howe when he declared to the assembled crowd: “He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat”³⁸. When President Barack Obama stood on the very same bridge fifty years later, he reminded the crowd; ‘We’re the inventors of gospel and jazz and blues, bluegrass and country, and hip-hop and rock and roll, and *our very own sound* with all the sweet sorrow and reckless joy of freedom’³⁹.

The key to understanding the reverberative sounds of the Harlem Renaissance is that, in both the historical and literary representations of Harlem’s soundscape, the reproduction and resonance of sound can never reflect the soundscape in its entirety. In the ‘detached echo’,

³⁸ Martin Luther King Jr, ‘Our God is Marching on’, March 25th 1965, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University.

³⁹ Barack Obama, , ‘Remarks by the President at the 50th Anniversary to Montgomery Marches’, March 7th 2015 [emphasis added]

certain sounds become distorted or lost, incapable of being fully represented through the page or any other representation medium of sound, because they belong entirely to a specific place and time. For James Helgeson, the question of ‘reproducing past sound’ is not limited to musicologists, but is present in archival data and historical sources that ‘tell us much about the social fabric of a space’⁴⁰. I would argue too that literature should be considered as analogous to the historical sources to which Helgeson refers. His suggestion however, that to represent a past soundscape is to ‘consider its loss as a living environment’ disregards the importance of aesthetic resonance. To evoke a past soundscape through a different aesthetic medium is to consider its social legacy, maintained through alternate mediums. In the case of the authors considered throughout this thesis, their ability to represent the soundscape was all the more significant in a ‘modern’ era, where, as Thompson outlines, the sonic environment was being architecturally shaped in accordance with ‘nonreverberant criterion’⁴¹.

In the case of Harlem, the shift in the soundscape did not necessarily prove successful in preventing reverberative sound, or eliminating noise. Moreover, the attempts to engineer uniformity across the soundscape carried the risk of eliminating the audible signals and soundmarks that allowed residents to navigate the city space. Thompson suggests that even as early as 1930, sounds and signals ‘had physically and intellectually commingled and coalesced to the point where not only sound engineers, but physicists, were uninterested, perhaps even unable, to separate the two’⁴². She suggests that ‘modern sound’ addressed the ‘unsettling possibilities’ of ‘contextless’ sound or sound that appeared to have an unidentifiable source⁴³. Where noise abatement measures had ultimately failed, the shift into electroacoustic sound ‘provided an aural anchor...by establishing a standard that was heard clearly and distinctly

⁴⁰ James Helgeson, ‘Solemn Resonances: The Incomplete Monument and the Posthumous Soundscape’, *Paragraph*, 41.1 (2018), p. 80.

⁴¹ Thompson, p. 3.

⁴² Thompson, p. 291.

⁴³ Thompson, p. 321.

above the din and confusion that modern technology had wrought'. The representations of sound by Harlem Renaissance writers signalled a rejection of the shift towards a restrictive uniformity that Thompson outlines. This is most evident through the ways in which Harlem Renaissance authors, such as Langston Hughes, continued to draw upon and incorporate the new electroacoustic environment within their writing as a method of speaking to communities beyond the "Black Mecca".

Janet Neigh observes that the soundscapes of Harlem were very much 'alive' in the poetry produced by Hughes throughout the 1940s, but more importantly, had gained a new transnational resonance⁴⁴. She refers to Hughes's poem, "Broadcast to the West Indies", as an example of a 'collective voice' that acknowledged 'the growth of black diasporic community during World War II, spurred by an increase in the transnational flow of people and ideas often facilitated by the radio'. The first stanza, intended to reflect a radio broadcast, sounds a greeting to Caribbean islands including Haiti and Cuba. The stanza concludes with a refrain repeated in several variations throughout the poem;

I, Harlem,
Speak to you!

I, Harlem,
Island, too.

'Through the metaphor of radio connectivity', Neigh observes that Hughes 'imagines the space of Harlem in translocal terms by developing a fragmented approach to social voice'⁴⁵. Here she defines connectivity as the measure of one's 'ability to tune in and receive a radio frequency'. In the context of human relationships, Neigh suggests that connectivity;

⁴⁴ Janet Neigh, 'The Transnational Frequency of Radio Connectivity in Langston Hughes's 1940s Poetics', *Modernism/modernity*, 20.2 (2013), p. 265-6.

⁴⁵ Neigh, p. 267. [emphasis added]

...underscores how affective ties are never static and waver in intensity. It emphasizes political alliance in phenomenological terms as a feeling, rather than as a concrete reality, which communicates how one can feel a part of a larger system without being able to *see* or know how that connection operates. For Hughes, radio connectivity reconfigures how communal feeling can be fostered in diasporic contexts without the fantasy of return to an original homeland

In her definition of connectivity as never ‘static’ but ‘wavering in intensity’, Neigh draws an analogy between connectivity through radio frequencies and the behaviour of sonic environments, specifically modern soundscapes of the early 20th century. Between 1920 and 1930 in particular, Harlem’s soundscape ostensibly grew in its intensity, as opposed to wavering, and subsequently developed an increased transnational connectivity and cultural resonance. The emphasis on connectivity as best communicated through audible rather than visual means also affirms the importance of sound as a means to move beyond prejudices enforced by visual narratives. Hughes made this clear in the poem’s epigraph, which read;

Radio Station: Harlem
Wave Length: The Human Heart

By positioning Harlem as the root of shared experience amongst both African American, Carribean and West Indian minority groups, he affirms both a historical acknowledgment (the ‘detached echo’) of ‘suffering, domination, segregation – locally called Jim Crow’, while emphasising clear common and progressive aims for the future, declaring of the former: ‘Those things must go!’.

Hughes notably penned “For Claude – sincerely, Langston” on an early manuscript version of the poem, suggesting that the theme of shared connectivity was a personal endeavour as much as a common aim, and affirming the resonance of sound as a means to connect Harlem Renaissance authors to one another as well as to broader audiences. By 1943, McKay had been absent from Harlem for thirteen years, a period of exile that was in part as a result of his West Indian heritage and social disengagement with Harlem, and had been suffering from ill health.

The lines of Hughes's poem would have undoubtedly resonated with McKay on a personal level as a message from one companion to the other;

It's a long ways
From where you live to I live - - -
But there's a direct line
From your heart to mine - - -
West Indies - - - Harlem!
Harlem - - - West Indies!

The hyphenated breaks in the typescript emulate the audible breaks and stutters in radio transmission. For Neigh, Hughes's call to the West Indies signals a realization of radio technology 'as a way to imagine an emotional frequency'⁴⁶ through which Harlem's African American population could communicate with transnational communities and 'maintain a diasporic vision' not compromised by local geography. In terms of public attitudes towards electroacoustic technologies, there is a noticeable difference in Hughes's metaphorical adoption of radio technology in 1943, than the adverse attitudes present in Larsen's novels over a decade beforehand, in which the radio was perceived as the intrusive loudspeaker within the home. Hughes continued to adopt radio as a means to communicate through transcultural channels for several decades. In 1944, he produced a radio opera, 'The Man Who Went To War', a collaborative project with D.G. Bridson, the Programme Editor for Arts at the BBC. It was intended, in part, to be broadcast as veiled wartime propaganda.

When broadcast, the production was introduced by Paul Robeson, who stressed that although the play depicted African American troops, it was a play for all allied troops who were 'determined to win freedom in the world'⁴⁷, from London to Chongqing. Addressing a British audience directly, Robeson said; 'We are giving you a picture of what you yourselves have lived through, Britain – only the words and the songs are our own, for these are the words

⁴⁶ Neigh, p. 273.

⁴⁷ Alan Lomax and Langston Hughes, 'The Man Who Went to War' (1944), Alan Lomax Collection, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress.

and the songs that Negroes sing. Like your own, these are the songs of one more freedom loving people'. Crucially, Hughes adopted the tropes of music, cultural expression and the African American experience in the US in order to communicate the British experience of war, drawing a distinct parallel between racism in the US, and fascism in Europe. In 1964, Hughes produced a BBC Radio show entitled 'The Negro in America', examining the changing nature of black experience within American society. While Hughes's literary works have long been canonised in Harlem Renaissance literature, radio broadcasts provided a platform from which to engage broad audiences by means of a mainstream organisation.

In the decades that followed 1940, Harlem would undergo several periods of severe economic deprivation. The soundscape too would undergo significant transformation, although the characteristics of communal and individual self-expression still remained. The neighbourhood would also experience new periods of gentrification, during which the 'war on noise' would reappear, and the archetypal sounds of Harlem colliding with the expectations of residents in new multi-million dollar apartment blocks. One report from *The New York Times* in 2008 began as such;

It is Saturday evening the second day of summer, and the air around Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem is filled with the scent of blossoming linden trees and the sound of West African drums...The drummers in the park are African-American and from Africa and the Caribbean...Their supporters, who acknowledge that the drumbeats can pierce walls and windows, regard the musicians as part of the city's vibrant and often noisy cultural mix...some in the building at 2002 Fifth Avenue, most of them young white professionals, have a different perspective. When the drummers occupy a spot nearby, residents say they are unable to sleep, hear their television sets, speak on the telephone, or even have conversations with their spouses without shouting. Some say they cannot even think straight...the stalemate has bubbled over into a dispute about class, race and culture...⁴⁸

The article, which ran with the headline, 'An Old Sound in Harlem Draws New Neighbours' Ire', is notable for the numerous comparisons with the noise complaints collected by the Noise

⁴⁸ 'An Old Sound in Harlem Draws New Neighbours' Ire', *The New York Times*, July 6th 2008, p. 21.

Abatement Commission. One resident of the fifth Avenue apartment block declared “Everything, after four hours – even if it’s Mozart – is pure unadulterated noise”. A member of the drum circle responded; “People come to Harlem because it has a certain vibration to it. This is part of that vibration. No one’s excluded. Anyone can bring a drum...”. The article echoed the debate of the 1920s, over the cultural associations, prejudices, and communal conflicts over music and “noise”. State Senator Bill Perkins remarked that the new residents of Harlem were simply ‘unaccustomed to the neighbourhood’s vigorous – and often loud – street life’. Artists also continued to represent Harlem’s soundscape in various aesthetic forms. In 2007, jazz musician Craig Harris, composed a ‘sound portrait’ of Harlem, with the aim of reminding residents of Harlem’s black history as it underwent a period of ‘gentrification and transition’⁴⁹. He viewed the composition as a form of musical anthropology, stating that he planned to ‘document’ his time ‘sonically’. “I am part of this community and thus see my composition as my gift and musical reflection... TriHarLenium records the way I see them walk, talk and pray. I’ve composed a piece I hope will record Harlem’s oral history for all posterity”. Harris also created composition based on seminal African American literary texts, including Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, and James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones*.

When John Cage defined musical sound, he put it in the simplest terms: ‘A sound is high or low, soft or loud, of a certain timbre, *lasts a certain length of time*, and has an envelope’⁵⁰. In considering the lasting resonance of the Harlem Renaissance, this thesis has been concerned predominantly with the latter two points of Cage’s definition. That sound lasts a certain length of time is true, but the length of that time is indeterminate, and unique to each sonic event. But what of the ‘envelope’ – the process of occurrence, sustaining and decaying – of a sound? Beyond a musical definition, how far must the envelope stretch to encompass a

⁴⁹ ‘Craig Harris; Composing a sound Portrait of Harlem’, *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 30th – September 5th, 2007, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Cage, p. 49.

soundscape in its entirety? In the case of the Harlem Renaissance, the sounds of Harlem continue to be carried through this envelope, sustaining the sounds of Harlem in the early 20th century through representation and interpretation. Words too, contribute to Cage's definition of sound. 'If words are sounds', he asks, 'are they musical or are they just noises? If sounds are noises but not words, are they meaningful?'⁵¹. Hughes defined the musical dimension of the *written* word in African American literature. 'Jazz seeps into words – spelled out words', he declared, noting that for future generations, it would allow them to communicate better than those that came before them. 'You'll tell me about its perspectives when you get ready', he wrote. In the broader context of Harlem Renaissance literature, *sound* seeped into words as both a communicative and aesthetic form. The generation to which Hughes referred ultimately sought to create their own musical sounds and forms of sonic expression, as occupants of a sonic environment that was continuously undergoing change.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 42.

Coda

The “Bop” Aesthetic

In an essay published in *Esquire* in 1959, the writer Ralph Ellison reflected on the legacy of jazz in America and the ‘Golden Age’ of Harlem, recalling the ‘noisy lostness’ of New York during the 1940s¹. ‘It was an exceptional moment’, he wrote, ‘and the world was swinging with change’. Of the occupants of that time and place, Ellison acknowledged that ‘they were caught up in events which made that time exceptionally and uniquely *then*, and which brought, among other changes which have reshaped the world, a momentous modulation into a new key of musical sensibility – in brief, a revolution in culture’. Ellison’s recollections are drawn from a Harlem nightclub belonging to the saxophonist Henry Minton, and the place from which “bebop” would eventually emerge. He recalls a mural that hung above the nightclub bandstand², depicting a group of jazzmen holding a ‘jam session’ in a Harlem tenement. The mural was representative of a past sonic event; a ‘detached echo’ of a time and place that Ellison viewed in retrospect. He describes the tenement musicians in the scene as they ‘...bend to their music in a quiet concatenation of unheard sound: a trumpeter, a guitarist, a clarinetist, a drummer, their only audience a small, cock-eared dog...The trumpet is muted. The barefooted drummer,

¹ Ralph Ellison, ‘The Golden Age, Time Past’, in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. by Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 53.

² The mural still hangs in Minton’s Playhouse today.

beating a folded newspaper with whisk-brooms in lieu of a drum, stirs the *eye's ear* like a blast of brasses in a midnight street'. The scene, as Ellison recalls it, evokes a feeling of 'musical effort caught in timeless and unrhetoical suspension'. He observes the painting, which he dates to approximately 1946, as being in a 'harsh documentary style reminiscent of W.P.A. art'. In terms of cultural resonance, the painting carried a significant cultural reference to the history of jazz. The unidentified musicians that Ellison describes are rumoured to be the guitarist Charlie Christian (who gained renown as part of Benny Goodman's sextet, and later played at Minton's on an almost nightly basis), clarinettist Tony Scott, and the trumpeter Oran "Hot Lips" Page. Common belief is that the female figure asleep on the bed was that of Billie Holiday³.

By the time Ellison's essay appeared in *Esquire*, he acknowledged that the décor of Minton's had changed beyond recognition, leaving the mural as the only remaining reminder of the 'old days'. It saddened Ellison to perceive the "jam session" in its silent form. He lamented "the girl who must sleep forever unhearing, and the men who must forever gesture the same soundless tune". The painting was representative of the point at which the sound of jazz (as Ellison had heard and performed it) began to change. As Robert O'Meally acknowledges, Ellison's connection with the mural at Minton's signalled a personal bias against "bebop". 'Faced with a choice involving the boppers or the avant-garde players of the next decade', he suggested that the author 'would take the hard-driving, true Golden Age blues players and singers every time'. Ellison would later indicate that bebop failed to incorporate the same identifiable "voice" that had made jazz 'most American'⁴. As a young trumpet player at Tuskegee, he recalled having to learn how to make the 'trumpet speak as a trumpet'. 'You strove for a militant, brilliant tone' he recalled, 'you had to learn to control your vibrato and make it speak in a number of voices...The blues timbre, the sound of the Negro voice, was

³ 'Where Lady Day Sleeps, a Jazz Tradition Awakes', *The New York Times*, March 13th 2005, p. 39.

⁴ Ron Welburn, 'Ralph Ellison's Territorial Vantage' [interview], in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. by Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 25.

already in you, and if you didn't produce it instinctively you could listen to those who used it...This is a pluralistic society and culturally the melting pot really melts...there's a long history of interchanging musical styles between the races'. For Ellison, the strongest evidence of jazz's transposable aesthetic was in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where he quoted a lyric from James Weldon Johnson's "Under the Bamboo Tree". For Eliot's readers, Ellison suggests that Johnson's connection with the NAACP 'provided some sense of complexity of the American identity'⁵. He observed that where jazz had been capable of transcending racial divisions, bebop musicians created new sounds with the intent of closing off the potential for mimicry by white artists and discouraging popular dance crazes. It was a 'listener's music'⁶, and it was unapologetically politicized.

Ellison's connection with the mural at Minton's suggests that even in its soundless form, its sonic resonance provided a far more accurate depiction of the 'Golden Age' than even Ellison himself was capable of recalling. As he acknowledged in the essay's prologue; 'that which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been, or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds, our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists'. For Ellison, there was some debate over the setting and even the figures that the mural depicts, but the sounds emanating from the musicians in the midst of their "jam session" in the confined tenement scene could still be heard. According to Robert O'Meally, Ellison's essay offered a broader 'critique of American forgetfulness, selective memory, and cultural waste'⁷. Arguably, even in sonic memory something is perpetually in danger of becoming lost or fragmented through recollection. As discussed broadly throughout this thesis, the original sonic event is almost immediately lost, even where that sound is resonant. The 'eye's ear' can evoke the detailed memory of a scene but it may also embellish

⁵ Ibid, p. 29.

⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

⁷ Robert G. O'Meally, foreword to 'The Golden Age, Time Past', in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 51.

or romanticise the gaps in recollection. This is the conflict between ‘true memory’ and the ‘pieces of legend’ that frequently intervene. While Ellison points out that music often ‘gives resonance to memory’, he also recognises that the shift from jazz to bebop was reflective of a tumultuous post-war era (‘there have been two hot wars’, he wrote, ‘and that which continues called “cold”’). He determined that the mural was painted in approximately 1946. Whilst almost three years outside of the marked period of the Federal Art Project, it nonetheless was close enough in both chronological and cultural terms to echo the sentiments expressed through other projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration between 1935-43. Ellison himself had documented several conversations for the WPA and conducted interviews in Harlem during the late 1930s that revealed instances of racism. By the mid-1940s, the strive for the preservation and documentation of culture(s) was fast becoming outdated in favour of establishing new forms of artistic expressions and identities.

It was nonetheless a period of uneasy, uncertain recovery. For Ellison, bebop ‘was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed...its timbres flat or shrill, with a minimum of thrilling vibrato’. There was an audible disconnect between the music being produced, and the spaces in which it was performed. Ellison suggests that even for frequent patrons, ‘the enduring meaning of Minton’s took place off to the side, beyond the range of attention...the revolutionary rumpus sounding like a series of flubbed notes blasting the talk with discord’⁸. Bebop appeared as revolutionary only in retrospect, its rhythms ‘out of stride and seemingly arbitrary’. Where the music initially provided escape for young men aware that they ‘might soon be sent to fight and die’, post-war the same recordings represented significant works of sonic art, in which they found ‘some key to a fuller freedom of self-realization’. According to Ellison, it was an ‘odd swing of the cultural tide’. The ‘strange sound’ that musicians of Minton’s ‘threw against the hum and buzz of vague signification...and which,

⁸ Ibid, p. 55.

like disgruntled conspirators meeting fatefully to assemble the random parts of a bomb, they joined here and beat and blew into a new jazz style' subsequently became the clichéd sounds and technical exercises for musicians across America and Europe. Despite its fast tempo being perfectly suited to the *pace* of urban life (particularly in New York) bebop was seemingly incapable of engaging with the broader sonic environment to the same extent or with the same effect as earlier jazz music of the 1920s and 1930s.

The attempts outlined by Thompson to bring an acoustic 'uniformity' to the soundscape, also offer an explanation for the 'disconnect' in bebop. Ellison branded "bop" as 'hardly more than a nonsense syllable...a word which throws up its hands in clownish self-deprecation before all the complexity of sound and rhythm and self-assertive passion which it pretends to name'⁹. In the post-war era, Harlem had reached a point of social and economic deterioration in which it was difficult for individuals to establish any sense of identity, let alone communal self-expression through sound. In a fragmented context, bebop musicians themselves were mostly soloists who came together for "jam sessions", rather than regular band players¹⁰. By 1948, Ellison wrote that it was common for residents of the neighbourhood to reply to the question; "How are you?" with the claim, "Oh, man, I'm *nowhere*"¹¹. 'Not quite citizens of America' yet 'full of the tensions of modern man, but regarded as primitives', he observed that African Americans were caught in a 'desperate search for an identity'. He echoes McKay's conflicting narrative in his recognition of both cultural stagnation and the possibility for cultural transformation. 'To live in Harlem', he wrote, was 'to dwell in the very bowels of the city' and 'pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with

⁹ Ibid, p. 56.

¹⁰ By 1959, Ellison observed that even the way in which "jam sessions" were created and listened to had changed, offered instead as radio and television features. He argued that this misrepresented the true nature of the sessions themselves, where musicians went to hone their trade in a 'contest of improvisational skill and physical endurance'.

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, 'Harlem is Nowhere', *Harper's Magazine* (August 1964), p. 54.

the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay [...] if Harlem is the scene of the Negro's death agony, it is also the setting of his transcendence'.

Where the amplification of sound and the uniqueness of Harlem soundscape had once distinguished the borough from the rest of Manhattan, in an uncertain post-war era, Harlem's sonic identity had been lost. 'One's identity', Ellison concluded, 'drifts in a capricious reality [...] One "is" literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a "displaced person" of American democracy'. Crucially, the "nowhere" state of mind that Ellison refers to was not a permanent one, but rather a state of flux. While Ellison's essay highlighted the complex struggles facing the continuation of black self-expression that had emerged in Harlem during the inter-war period, Cynthia Dobbs argues that 'Harlem is Nowhere' also signalled a certain 'resilience and savvy grace'. She refers to Ellison's New York essays as tracking 'a nimble African American resistance to ongoing societal efforts to control both the movement of black bodies and the *sounds* of rebellious Black laughter'¹². Despite the mobility evident in Ellison's essays and novel, Dobbs suggests that "ease of movement" came at a cost. For African Americans, mobility was dependent 'on a psychologically and ontologically perilous mastery of masquerade – which is to say, on the strategic use of social invisibility and hypervisibility'. Migrant 'invisibility' was also dependent on a suppression of one's audible presence.

The fragmented nature of bebop then appeared to provide the perfect aesthetic form through which to navigate the volatile environments of both the North and South. As Timothy Spaulding suggests, 'as chaotic and disjointed from the past' as bebop music sounded, Ellison realised that what they symbolised was a 'continuous revolution of the jazz tradition'¹³. In an interview published in 1976, Ellison would later remark that this 'continuation' and the attitudes promoted by 'boppers'; the spirit of rebellion, 'discouragement of dancers' and the

¹² Cynthia Dobbs, "Mapping Black Movement, Containing Black Laughter: Ralph Ellison's New York Essays", *American Quarterly*, 68.4 (2016), p. 911. [emphasis added]

¹³ A. Timothy Spaulding, 'Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*', *Callaloo*, 27.2 (2004), p. 483.

widespread use of drugs, had gone so far as to make help ‘make the Beatles phenomenon possible’¹⁴. While the new sounds held little significance for Ellison himself, he acknowledges that in a period of post-war displacement, bebop held a broad transnational appeal. In its fragmented form, he observed that bebop was more meaningfully placed beyond Harlem. Minton’s (and by extension, “bop”) held far more significance for Europeans, associated in his view ‘with those continental cafés in which great changes, political and artistic, have been plotted’, echoing the displacement and revolutionary rhetoric expressed by Banjo and his companions, in McKay’s earlier mapping of the café culture in Marseilles.

Invisible Man

Spaulding suggests that Ellison’s approach to the “bebop” aesthetic highlights a ‘complex cultural terrain’¹⁵ that underpinned the formal structure and content of Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. The novel signalled a distinct turning point in Ellison’s musical sensibilities. It was both a tribute to jazz and an acknowledgement of the trajectory from jazz to bebop. Recognising this conflict, Ellison declared that in writing the novel he intended to improvise upon his materials ‘in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis’¹⁶. Spaulding observes that Ellison’s own traversal of sonic environments in New York reflected the demands of a new cultural landscape. In the introduction to *Invisible Man* Ellison discussed the importance of seeking a space to write. The manuscript was subsequently drafted across three spaces; a converted stable on 141st street, a ground-floor apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue (commonly known as “Striver’s Row”), and an eighth-floor office suite on Fifth Avenue, firmly within the ‘hustle and bustle of midtown

¹⁴ Welburn, p. 33.

¹⁵ Spaulding, p. 481.

¹⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London and New York, Penguin Classics, 2001) p. xli.

Manhattan'. The remainder of the novel was written in a 'below-street-level'¹⁷ apartment in Harlem. Ellison's traversal of three separate spaces not only shaped his writing process and the setting(s) of the novel, but also confirmed his awareness and engagement with distinctly different sonic environments.

He was particularly knowledgeable on the new acoustic technologies that were beginning to occupy internal acoustic spaces, earning a small income during this period by building and installing audio amplifiers and high-fidelity sound systems (a practice in which he was highly skilled) in addition to freelance photography commissions. 'The Fifth Avenue interval aside', he wrote that for the most part, the novel was completed in Harlem, where he drew upon the 'voices, idioms, folklore, traditions and political concerns' of those whose 'racial and cultural origins' he shared¹⁸. For Ellison, the choice to occupy separate spaces fulfilled a desire to 'close' his ears and avoid the 'hyperreceptivity' that he deemed inevitable to the writer. Moreover, while *Invisible Man* was drafted and published in peacetime, Ellison affirms that it 'erupted out of what had been conceived as a war novel', an acknowledgement, to some extent that domestic conflicts in America had only intensified in the post-war era. As Spaulding suggests, the context from which the novel sprung reflected a 'tense interaction between seemingly opposing worlds: between the black community located in Harlem and the (largely white) mainstream world of mid-town Manhattan; the creative innovations of art and the commercialisation of public performance', alongside two separate aesthetic approaches, one 'rooted in black folk culture' and another 'influenced by white mainstream culture'. These performative spaces are key to the novel itself. Ellison's narrator is forced to shed his *visual* identity – to occupy an invisible space. As for his sonic identity, it is arguably never his own.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. xxvi.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. xxix.

He is forced to present a different performance, and “voice”, depending on the space and the audience.

The bebop aesthetic in *Invisible Man* offers an insight into the way in which Ellison’s unnamed narrator navigates the tumultuous environments in both the Jim Crow South, and later in Harlem. Moreover, he establishes a *soundtrack*, through the music of Louis Armstrong, that overlays and interrupts the narrative on several occasions. While the narrator claims to inhabit the jazz rhythms created by Armstrong, Spaulding suggests that the conflict of identity he faces echoes the same conflict that bebop musicians endeavoured to confront with the sounds they produced. ‘Beyond the inspiration that jazz musicians provided Ellison as a writer’, he asserts, ‘the figure of the bebop virtuoso also provided [him] with a contemporaneous cultural context for the “chaotic” forces that ultimately constrain the protagonist of this novel’. Some of those dilemmas facing bebop musicians, which Spaulding identifies as a lack of employment opportunities, racial discrimination and physical violence, provide ‘illuminating corollaries to the nameless narrator’s own situation and subsequent attempts to survive this cultural terrain’¹⁹. The novel opens with the constraint of the narrator in the spatial sense, revealing his enclosed, internal sonic environment;

...I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?” – all at the same time [...] Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat [...] Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music²⁰

¹⁹ Spaulding, p. 485.

²⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 7-8.

The ‘new analytical way of listening’ that the narrator discovers in Armstrong’s music whilst ‘under the spell of a reefer’ seemingly provides a map of audible ‘gaps’ between points of cultural conflict. He describes how the ‘...unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths’. To return to Morrison’s definition, this is the space ‘beyond hearing’. The underground apartment (or “hole”) is the only space in which the narrator is able to establish his own sonic identity, and soundscape. The space is filled with both sound *and* silence to alternating degrees: an ‘invisible music’ of ‘isolation’²¹.

Music also transports him beyond this space. While listening to Armstrong’s “What Did I do to Be so Black and Blue?”, the narrator slips into a memory filled with archetypal sounds associated with the Jim Crow South. The familiar trope of the trumpet sounding a signal for freedom is heard by the narrator, but is perceived instead as a ‘blaring’ and ‘hectic’ rhythm rather than a fanfare for liberty, drowned out by the more primitive sound of a tom-tom ‘beating like heart-thuds’²². For the narrator, the reverberation (or ‘vibration’) of Armstrong’s music is a physical feeling, as much as a sonorous one. The chorus - “*what did I do to be so black and blue?*” – is repeated frequently throughout the narrative. In the first instance, it draws the narrator into the present, prompting an ascent out of the ‘underworld of sound’ that the narrator associates with a traumatic past. The sound of the horn is heard again in the opening of the second chapter, as the narrator begins to reveal the events of the previous twenty years, ‘slipping into the breaks’ and looking back on his time as a student at a black Southern college under the patronage of a white “Founder”. His memory shifts between idealistic and isolated

²¹ Ibid, p. 13.

²² Ibid, p. 12.

visions. A 'sonorous choir' of 'four trombones and an organ' can be heard²³, sounding the shift between his recollections. Notably, the narrator here identifies the extent of the music's reverberation, noting that it does not extend past the railroad crossing that separates the college from the 'empty fields' and 'sun-shrunken shacks' from the most deprived area of the community.

Ellison also offers a clear distinction in his treatment of soundscapes in both the North and South. Where the Southern soundscape frequently evokes archetypal memories and sonic references that connect the narrator to a broader African American history and heritage, in Harlem, the roar of the chaotic urban environment seemingly prevents Ellison's narrator from slipping 'between the breaks' of these memories. The soundscape roots him firmly in the present. Arriving to the neighbourhood by way of the familiar, crowded subway, he echoes Fisher's 'City of Refuge' in the description of his arrival in Harlem, being unceremoniously "shot out" onto the subway platform, 'feeling like something regurgitated from the belly of a frantic whale'²⁴. Similarly to Gillis, he expresses his 'shock' of seeing a black police officer directing traffic at an intersection, white drivers 'obeying his signals as though it was the most natural thing in the world'²⁵. So too does the initial 'bombardment' of sounds in Harlem evoke a feeling of infinite possibility. He states; 'This really was Harlem, and now all the stories which I had heard of the city-within-a-city leaped alive in my mind...For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams; perhaps because I had always thought of my life as being confined to the South. And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds'. Whereas Fisher prolongs the sense of wonder in the opening of 'City of Refuge', Ellison offers a jarring disruption through the 'angry and shrill' voice of a street corner orator.

²³ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 158.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 159.

Compared to the ‘staccato West Indian accent’ and the yells from members of the gathered crowd, the narrator perceives the ‘roar of the city’ as comparatively tranquil, noting that the ‘clash between the calm of the rest of the street and the passion of the [orator’s] voice gave the scene a strange out-of-joint quality’²⁶. Ellison deliberately uses the initial auditory impression to acknowledge Harlem as a site of both Southern and transnational black mobility, while simultaneously signalling the cultural unrest that black freedom of movement had caused. Yet he also subverts the way the sonic environment of Harlem is audibly perceived, establishing black voice as capable of drowning out the sounds of the city – a virtually impossible achievement in acoustical terms. Later, the narrator himself, in his attempt to become a public orator for Harlem, orchestrates this subversion, assuring the organisation known as the ‘Brothers’ that the neighbourhood is calm, despite the fact that crowds were gathering to riot against the white authority that the organisation represented. ‘The community’, he remarks, ‘was still going apart at the seams’²⁷. It is worth noting too that, in comparison to his sonic experience of the South, the chaotic, urban sounds of Harlem appear to render the neighbourhood constantly on the verge of a riot. The sounds of the cramped subway car, whilst familiar to his fellow commuters, cause him to remark; ‘...they must have riots on those things all the time’.

Living with Music

For Ellison, music provided a way of interpreting and taming the sonic environment. In an essay published for ‘High Fidelity’ magazine in 1955, he recalled his childhood spent in Oklahoma City, where he learnt from jazzmen that the aim of musical discipline and technical mastery ‘was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition’. He

²⁶ Ibid, p. 161.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 513-14.

remarked that life ‘could be harsh, loud, and wrong if it wished’ but the jazzmen ‘lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form’. He admits ‘terrorising a whole city section’ and tormenting the ears ‘of all not blessedly deaf’ whilst learning his craft on the trumpet, blowing ‘sustained notes’ out of the window for hours at a time.

Several decades later, he displayed a similar sensitivity to the acoustic architecture of the internal spaces he inhabited, revealing himself as a long-time audiophile. Where his ‘invisible’ narrator once declared, ‘I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five’, this was seemingly an accurate reflection of Ellison’s own obsession with acoustic technologies, particularly hi-fi and stereo systems. His experience whilst living in a ground-floor apartment in Harlem came to encapsulate the growing disparities between “live” music and recorded music, as well as the changing acoustic architecture of domestic space. ‘In those days’, he wrote, ‘it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live’²⁸. In this space, which he describes as ‘a thoroughfare of sound’, Ellison recreates a soundscape complete with howling cats, preaching drunks, barbershop style renditions of popular blues songs, and passing orators lecturing on every topic from the ‘long-sunk Titanic’ to the ‘merits of the Giants and the Dodgers’. ‘Naturally’, he adds, ‘there was great argument and occasional fighting – none of it fatal but all of it loud’²⁹. The result of this cacophonous environment was a prolonged period of “writer’s block”, in which Ellison claimed to be unable to hear his own typewriter keys. He also found himself in contention with the “singer in the ceiling”, a neighbour dedicated to vocal performances ranging from the *bel canto* style to slave songs. Ellison recalls;

²⁸ Ralph Ellison, ‘Living With Music’, in *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. by Robert G. O’Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2002) p. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

From morning to night she vocalised, regardless of the condition of her voice...or my screaming nerves. There were times when her notes, sifting through her floor and my ceiling, bouncing down the walls and ricocheting off the building in the rear, whistled like tenpenny nails, buzzed like a saw, wheezed like the asthma of Hercules, trumpeted like an enraged African elephant, and the squeaky pedal of her piano rested plumb center above my typing chair³⁰

In his subsequent decision to combat the ‘shrieking chaos’ and fight noise with noise, Ellison embodies the same attitudes toward noise abatement that had plagued New York in the decades prior to his own, domestic war on sound. Yet he also exemplifies the shift into electro-acoustic sound in the move toward the 1950s. ‘Between the hi-fi record and the ear’, he states ‘there was a new electronic world’³¹. In his own words, the apartment soon became an ‘audio booby trap’, furnished with ‘...a fine speaker system a first-rate AM-FM tuner, a transcription turntable and a speaker cabinet’. Ellison built ‘a dozen or more preamplifiers and record compensators’ before finding a commercial one that ‘satisfied’ his ear. At the heart of the ‘plunge into electronics’ Ellison’s main aim was ‘the enjoyment of recorded music as it was intended to be heard’ ‘I was obsessed’, he wrote, ‘with the idea of reproducing sound with such fidelity that even when using music as a defence behind which I could write, it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion’. Victorious in his campaign against the incessant noises of his neighbours, he observed that the amplification of music had essentially freed him from the burden of his domestic soundscape; ‘...the chaotic sounds from without and above had sunk, if not into silence, then well below the level where they mattered. Here was a way out. If I was to live and write in that apartment, it would be only through the grace of music...deliverance was mine’. Ellison’s experimentation into electronic sounds marks an important shift in the sonic environment, particularly in the home, through high-quality reproductions of sound and music. To some extent, this lessened the distance between

³⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

³¹ Ibid, p. 10.

an original sound source, and its sonic and aesthetic reverberation. By the 1950's, individuals could hear clearly the sounds of jazz singers in their homes, without the "grainy" distortions that had been audible on records produced between 1920 and 1940.

For Ellison, living with music – and the sound technology that reproduced it - was significant, in that it represented the 'swift change in American society in which the meanings of one's origins [were] so quickly lost'. He observed that one of the 'chief values' in living with music ultimately lay in its power to give the individual 'an orientation in time'. The same can ultimately be said for sound, and for the sonic environments that we inhabit and curate. For Harlem in particular, the 'orientation' in sound gave Harlem Renaissance writers temporal specificity, but provided them with a formal aesthetic that reflected the progressive and continuously changing sonic environment. Ellison asserts that 'in the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire'. So too, can this assertion be considered in the broader concept of sound, as a marker of changing social and cultural attitudes. In the decades that followed the Harlem Renaissance, the soundscape of New York would continue to be represented through different forms and mediums. Somewhere, between the hi-fi record and the ear, between frequencies, between the silences in Ellison's prose, the echo of Harlem still resonates.

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