JAZZ TEMPORALITY AND NARRATIVE: A READING OF RALPH ELLISON’S INVISIBLE MAN

BY

JORDAN CROSBY LEE

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

May 2013

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Approved By:

Erica Still, Ph.D., Advisor

Barry Maine, Ph.D., Chair

Dean Franco, Ph.D.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... iii

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... iv

INVISIBLE MAN, AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERACY, AND NARRATIVE POWER ........... 1

NARRATIVE JAZZTEMPORALITY .......................................................................................... 19

RESTRAINING JAZZ TEMPORALITY .................................................................................... 34

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................... 50

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................... 54

CURRICULUM VITAE ......................................................................................................... 56
ABSTRACT

JAZZ TEMPORALITY AND NARRATIVE: A READING OF RALPH ELLISON’S INVISIBLE MAN

Thesis under the direction of Erica Still, Ph.D. Professor of English.

This thesis explores the complex relationship between jazz, temporality, and narrative form in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. Although Ellison rejected the notion that he was a political writer, his novel still functions as a form of protest based on its narrative form which ultimately seeks to undermine traditional formulations of time. Specifically, Ellison’s narrator, Invisible Man, controls his narrative by employing a unique temporal configuration to assert his subjectivity and to press against hegemonic structures intent on homogenizing individuals. This unique temporality borrows from traditional jazz and utilizes literary forms of swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation in an effort to protest the universalizing temporal modes of fatalism, determinism, and reversion.
INTRODUCTION

Much work has been done on the relationship between Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and jazz. The relationship between the two is hard to ignore in light of Ellison’s passion for jazz music and his writings on the subject in *Shadow and Act*. Additionally, the content of the novel contains a plethora of allusions to the genre. *Invisible Man* refers to Louis Armstrong, encounters characters with names similar to jazz musicians—for example, Rinehart is an allusion to gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, and Peter Wheatstraw is a reference to blues guitarist William Bunch who went by the moniker Peetie Wheatstraw—and even offers lyrical verses from jazz songs. Ellison’s knowledge of jazz stems from his own musical background. Horace A. Porter, author of *Jazz Country*, highlights Ellison’s musical roots: “Ellison began playing trumpet when he was eight, and he listened to and practiced playing ‘hard driving blues’” (Porter 3). Porter also notes that “[j]azz musicians were as a group among Ellison’s several boyhood heroes” (Porter 3). Porter explains the significance these heroes possessed for the young Ellison:

For Ellison, jazz musicians...definitively personify African American experience. Musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Lester Young—who played in Oklahoma during the 1920s and 1930s—inspired Ellison and his boyhood friends: “And we recognized and were proud of our group’s own cultural style wherever we discerned it—jazzmen and prizefighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing...We did not fully understand the cost of the style but recognized within it an
affirmation of life beyond all question of our difficulties as Negroes.”

(Ellison qtd. in Porter 4)

Jazz music as a life affirming art form is also Ellison’s starting place for its importance within American society. In his essay “Living with Music,” he asserts that jazz music has the ability to “send you...into an ecstasy of rhythm and memory and brassy affirmation of the goodness of being alive and part of the community” (“Living with Music” 193). In essence, jazz music, for Ellison, is an exultation of life in the face of hardship and affliction.

Knowing well that jazz heavily influenced Ellison, critics have endlessly analyzed *Invisible Man* in the context of his musical passion. The range of topics is broad, but critics often address *Invisible Man*’s proclamation of America’s democratic potentiality. For example, in his essay “Ralph Ellison’s Righteous Riffs: Jazz Democracy and the Sacred,” Steve Pinkerton states the following:

I argue that the novels and essays of Ralph Ellison engage fruitfully and almost incessantly with precisely these tensions, and that jazz serves, on the strength of those tensions—principally in its big-band, dancehall, Ellingtonian incarnation, though also as its spirit irrupts into the music and preaching of the African American church—as the exemplary sacred-profane model for Ellison’s ambitious democratic vision. (Pinkerton 186)

Similarly, Paul Allen Anderson, in his essay “Ralph Ellison on Lyricism and Swing,” explores blues lyricism within *Invisible Man*. He argues, “Putting his blues Modernism to work on a nationalist project, Ellison...sides with the ideal of an
unbuilt and prospective America” (Anderson 302). Essays such as these give prominence to *Invisible Man*’s vision of America, and they certainly offer a valuable contribution to the study of the novel. Unfortunately, they often sacrifice important nuances of the novel to uphold the work’s “nationalist project.” Of course a single essay cannot be all things for all people, but *Invisible Man* includes two major components—which are inextricably bound to jazz—that these works ignore: narrative and temporality.

This is not to say that critics have entirely ignored temporality within the novel. In fact, Marc Singer’s “‘A Slightly Different Sense of Time’: Palimpsestic Time in *Invisible Man*” is a wonderfully crafted look at the different modes of temporality that Invisible Man experiences throughout his odyssey. Singer argues that “[w]hile Invisible Man portrays a journey through a telescoped and allegorized African-American history, it also interrogates the diverse means by which people perceive time and attempt to impose competing narrative, historical, or political structures upon it” (Singer 388). Singer continues, “The novel manipulates time and abandons linear chronology to examine how variant temporal and historical structures can govern, circumscribe, or potentially empower the individuals who are subjected to them” (Singer 388-389). Throughout the next several chapters I will suggest something similar. But I intend to explore how *Invisible Man*’s narrator employs a jazz aesthetic to express an experiential form of temporality that celebrates the unique individuality of the subject. Thus, of necessity, my concern is not only with temporality, but with narrative execution.
Critics have yet to explore the relationship between narrative, jazz, and time in *Invisible Man*. For example, Paul Anderson approaches jazz and time, but ignores narrative. He writes,

Armstrong’s music imparts lessons in *Invisible Man* about time. Like the team “passing the ball just right” or the boxer who can step “inside of his opponent’s sense of time,” the expert improviser knows to “slip into the breaks and look around”—with similarly stunning effects (8). Ellison’s notion of *slipping* “into the breaks” refers, most simply, to those places within a performance where the rhythmic accompaniment goes silent, as if halting the crafted flow of time, or merely punctuates in stop-time a soloist’s break. At these points, the improvising soloist (usually singular) fills the otherwise empty sonic space with dramatic solo obligatti, usually without abandoning the overall performance’s established feel or its tempo of rhythmic propulsion. (Anderson 288)

Anderson makes a cogent argument, but he fails to recognize one of the most overlooked features of the novel: Invisible Man—the Invisible Man from the prologue and epilogue—is narrating his own autobiography. In other words, Armstrong’s music is not merely “imparting a lesson...about time,” *Invisible Man* actually applies this lesson to his own narrative: he controls time through narrative; he employs his own unique voice; he empowers himself; and he asserts his agency by borrowing jazz music’s unique temporal styles.
Ultimately, I will be examining three components of *Invisible Man*: the power of the written narrative, jazz temporality, and the restraint of jazz temporality. All of these elements work together throughout the novel to assert that time is an experiential mode and not an abstract or universal structure. Each individual is subject to his own sense of temporal experiences and can press back against oppressive, controlling mechanisms of time by using the written word and narration to reclaim individuality. This has special implications for the African-American community considering their American existence has been one of immense oppression; hegemony has used time as form of power to control and subjugate marginalized groups by forcing them into its own nonsensical understanding of universal time. Most importantly, *Invisible Man* demonstrates that one can learn from the jazzman's soloist techniques of manipulating time to express his own unique and individual sense of temporality. It is my contention that Invisible Man the narrator does exactly that by adopting the jazz techniques of swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation in his literary narrative. Doing so resists the homogenizing forms of time that the college, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter promote. These institutions advocate, respectively, fatalism, determinism, and circular temporality. Unfortunately for Invisible Man, each of these temporal modes ignores his humanity by reducing his individual experience to an object of temporal production. Only by adopting jazz temporality in his own narrative can Invisible Man uniquely express his own subjectivity while simultaneously rejecting their homogenizing formulations of time.
As for the structure of my work, it is important first to establish that written narration is a source of African-American empowerment; specifically, the written narrative allows one to protest by offering the author the capacity to manipulate homogenizing forms of time. Necessarily, chapter one will briefly explore the history of African-American literacy to suggest that all African-American writing is a form of protest. Included in this discussion will be an analysis of early African-American writers who adopted the hegemonic practice of writing in order to subvert prevailing hierarchies of power. This discussion will lead into an investigation of how Invisible Man as a narrator employs writing to lend a unique voice to individual experience and to demonstrate the singular power of temporal control that the written word allows. Next, I will suggest how the college, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter are representations of homogenizing temporal structures, which Invisible Man will push against with his own unique temporality derived from the aesthetics of jazz.

Chapter two will then launch into an investigation of jazz temporality and its existence as a form of protest. Once I have established how the temporal techniques of jazz undermine universal time, I will demonstrate how Invisible Man adopts the techniques employed by the jazz soloist in his own narrative. Through a series of close readings, I will examine Invisible Man’s literary use of swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation. I intend to verify that these reimagined jazz techniques affirm the individual human experience that fatalism, historical materialism, and regression all deny.
And finally, chapter three will make a clear distinction between reclaiming time and abandoning it completely. Specifically, I will argue that Invisible Man uses cultural memory to ground jazz temporality in a way similar to that of traditional jazz musicians. Bebop, as critiqued by Ellison, and Rinehart represent the entropic results of ignoring temporal form entirely. To demonstrate how Invisible Man restrains his narrative from this fate, I will point to Peter Wheatstraw and Mary Rambo. Invisible Man uses these characters to remind the reader that he is not merely a mosaic of fragmented experiences, but part of a larger historical and cultural tradition.

Hopefully, this thesis will bring to light aspects of *Invisible Man*—narrative, temporality, and jazz—that have been studied individually, but not studied in their plaited relationship with one another. More important, I hope to demonstrate that this novel is a form of protest that affirms life and the individual experience in the same way that traditional jazz does for Ellison himself.
Invisible Man, African-American Literacy, and Narrative Power

Beginning with the prologue, Invisible Man clearly resists conventional expectations of narrative time. The temporal aspect of Invisible Man’s narration in this section is disorienting because of its rapid shifts from the present to the past. For example, he begins his account in the present tense with “I am an invisible man,” yet two paragraphs later he shifts to the past tense when he begins reflecting on the “night [he] accidentally bumped into a man” and proceeded to assault him for his lack of contrition (Ellison 3, 4). In the course of his ruminations, he mentions an encounter with Ras the Exhorter. Even though this encounter occurred before he assaulted the man who bumped into him, he states, “But that’s getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” (Ellison 6). The spasmodic movements between the actual present, the actual past, and the story’s future causes a loss of our temporal bearings (i.e. as readers, we are unsure of two things: what happened when; and when now is). In addition to these formal aspects of the prologue, Invisible Man establishes that his narrative will emphasize an unconventional expression of time when he states, “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat” (Ellison 8). Temporal complexities such as these are not without consequence. It becomes clear that Invisible Man’s complex temporalities allow him to express his own unique experience unburdened by homogenizing forces. Additionally, as I intend to demonstrate, this literary expression of time acts as a form of protest by shattering hegemonic notions of absolute time. Although Ellison
is not specifically a protest writer, his work re-imagines protest by focusing on a unique temporal experience.

The following chapter will focus on how Ellison and his narrator are implicated in a long literary tradition of African American protest. I will argue that *Invisible Man* highlights the importance of this tradition by demonstrating the hazards of orality as seen in his post-battle royal speech. I will also argue that in opposition to orality the novel proposes that the written narrative has the power to reduce chaos to form and to subvert hegemony. This chapter will further suggest that the written form’s most potent weapon against oppression lies in its ability to reconstruct time. Through a close reading of the college, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter, I will argue that *Invisible Man* underscores the destructive power of universal modes of temporality—modes that tend to deprive the subject of agency and visibility. Ultimately, the work done henceforth will provide an understanding of the various models of time that Invisible Man as narrator will subsequently challenge with his own unique version of narrative temporality.

In order to understand Ellison’s particular form of literary protest, it should first be noted that all African American literacy is inextricably bound up in acts of protest. I do not mean to imply that all writings produced by black authors are political or revolutionary, but that writing—at one point accessible only to whites—has the power to assert an individual’s humanity. Of course writing does not fundamentally make an individual more human, but within the context of Western Enlightenment, writing is often judged as an indication of one’s humanity and civility. The supposition once was that if one did not have the cognitive skills
required to read or to write, then they must be considered more animal than human.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins outlines the way in which nineteenth century science schematized levels of humanity. She explains how “Western natural and social sciences were deeply involved in constructing the primitivist discourse” (Collins 99). She adds that “everything had its place and all places were ranked. With its primitiveness and alleged jungles, Africa and its people marked the bottom” (Collins 99). Naturally, being at the bottom was “the worst place to be” (Collins 99). Africa’s occupation at the bottom rung of the hierarchy made it “a place ripe for colonial conquest” (Collins 99). Even worse, “within Western science, African people and apes occupied a fluid border zone between humans and animals” (Collins 99). Collins furthers her point by noting that historically, “African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence” (Collins 153). Naturally, black literacy would prove that those of African descent did in fact have mental capabilities equal to those of Westerners; thus, black authorship would undermine Western science’s claims that African people were controlled by animalistic impulses.

Given this state of affairs, any evidence that might prove blacks to be equally as human as whites was indeed quite threatening to slave owners and white hegemony in general. If slaves were recognized as fully human, then white slave owners could no longer claim that their ownership of slaves was morally permissible. More important, if slaves had access to the written word, they would in turn have access to educational capital that could emancipate them from a life of
unskilled labor. In Forgotten Readers, Elizabeth McHenry illustrates the fear white slave owners had regarding slave literacy. She explains that when Mr. Auld, Frederick Douglass’s master, discovered his wife trying to teach Douglass to read, he said, “If you teach that nigger...how to read, there will be no keeping him,” (McHenry 1). McHenry continues, “According to Douglass, ‘these words sank deep into [his] heart’; they led him to understand that ‘the white man’s power to enslave the black man’ was located in his ability to maintain the black man’s ignorance and his illiteracy” (McHenry 1). Douglas’s keen observation explains white hegemony’s impulse to create and disseminate images of African American males as “the buck, brute, the rapist” (Collins 153). Collins explains that these images “all worked to deny Black men the work of the mind that routinely translates into wealth and power. Instead, relegating Black men to the work of the body was designed to keep them poor and powerless” (Collins 153). Historically, writing—the work of the mind—has worked to subvert these images by demonstrating African Americans’ intellectual equality. Because black authorship has the power to subvert hegemonic stereotypes, it qualifies as a form of protest regardless of the written product’s content.

As an African American writer, Ralph Ellison is implicated in this tradition of protest despite his attempts to distance himself from anything political. His apolitical stance was insistent. Once, when asked about whether or not Marxism had influenced him during the composition of Invisible Man, he replied, “‘A writer isn’t concerned with politics but with human beings and the way they live, and the way they move, and the way they dream’” (Schor 6). Another time, he said, “I didn’t
think too much of the so called proletarian fiction even when I was most impressed by Marxism...Most of the social realists of the period were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice. I wasn’t, and am not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art” (Schor 7). Because of comments like this, many critics have overlooked Ellison’s political nature. Nevertheless, I contend that Ellison’s work is deeply political. As David Messmer argues, “critics have often accused Ellison of lacking [Richard] Wright’s strong commitment to improving the conditions of mid-twentieth-century black life or to challenging the racism that led to black oppression” (Messmer 187). Messmer goes on to state that “Ellison’s commitment to aesthetics in *Invisible Man*...show[s] a consistent awareness of and sensitivity to the need to challenge the political and cultural status quo and, most importantly, makes significant interventions in these regards” (Messmer 187). His commitment to aesthetics and attention to the human condition is exactly what makes Ellison’s work a form of protest. His status as an author allows him to control and to create his own universe and express a particular form of experience through the written form of narration.

Ellison’s *Invisible Man* demonstrates that the written narrative has the power to subvert hegemonic oppression in a way that the oral tradition cannot. In fact, the novel suggests that the oral narrative can even be detrimental. There is one instance in particular that adeptly demonstrates orality’s hazards: Invisible Man’s speech after the battle royal. The battle royal speech is a particularly heartbreaking scene in which the spoken word is rendered effete. On his graduation day, he delivers a speech that is deemed “a great success” (Ellison 17). The speech goes so well that he
is “invited to give the speech at a gathering of the town’s leading white citizens” (Ellison 17). Invisible Man, still quite young, believes in the power of speech and is utterly unaware that in order to give his speech, he will first be sexually humiliated and forced into acts of brutality. His presence at the gathering is merely a spectacle for malicious white men intent on demeaning him. Nonetheless, his blind faith in the spoken word is on his mind even in the midst of battle: “The harder we fought the more threatening the men became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me?” (Ellison 24). The absurdity of thinking about his speech while being brutalized suggests that buying into the power of orality is a product of youthful ignorance and delusion.

When he finally gives his speech, he is heckled and further reduced to a spectacle. He stands in front of the ballroom and “there was laughter as [he] faced them, [his] mouth dry, [his] eye throbbing. [He] began slowly, but evidently [his] throat was tense, because they began shouting, ‘Louder! Louder!’” (Ellison 29). Even as he increases his passion “the men were still talking and laughing” (Ellison 29). Becoming a spectacle is avoided in the written word. The written text cannot suffer the humiliation that Invisible Man suffers as he speaks to the men. In other words, the written text offers distance—thus, protection—from the degradation that Invisible Man experiences in that room. It also offers protection from corporeal harm. As Invisible Man speaks he gets sicker from his recent brawl: “I coughed, wanting to stop and go to one of the tall brass, sand-filled spittoons to relieve myself, but a few of the men, especially the superintendent, were listening and I was
afraid. So I gulped it down, blood, saliva, and all, and continued” (Ellison 30). This disturbing image demonstrates the ineffectuality of orality. The act of speaking can immediately threaten the physical safety of the speaker. Once again, an author’s written text does not suffer from the same dangers, and is therefore less likely to have its purpose thwarted since it is safe from physical harm.

The battle royal speech also highlights orality’s vulnerabilities regarding memory. Invisible Man notes, “The speech seemed a hundred times as long as before, but I could not leave out a single word. All had to be said, each memorized nuance considered, rendered” (Ellison 30). Invisible Man adds that it was not that simple: “Nor was that all. Whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it” (Ellison 30). The stress of the situation leads Invisible Man to make a mistake: he utters the phrase “social equality” instead of “social responsibility.” When he does so, “[s]ounds of displeasure filled the room...They shouted hostile phrases at [him]. But [he] did not understand” (Ellison 31). He does not understand because he does not realize he has made the mistake despite having memorized every nuance. The suggestion is that the verbal speaker is not in full control of his words. An author of a written text, on the other hand, would have had much greater control since he would have been able to reread and revise—a luxury not afforded to a speaker orating in real time. As observed in this scene, the lack of control the young orator possesses makes it near impossible to communicate any message at all, much less a subversive one.

It is important to note the distinction between Invisible Man the young orator and Invisible Man the narrator who narrates the story of Invisible Man the
young orator. Simply, *Invisible Man* consists of two Invisible Men: Invisible Man the narrator and Invisible Man the character. Kerry McSweeney explains in greater detail: “*Invisible Man* employs one of the staple conventions of prose fiction, a retrospective first-person narrator...[T]here is a distinction to be made between the ‘I’ as character and the ‘I’ as narrator” (McSweeney 27). The difference is easily overlooked, but the separation between the two is crucial to any interpretation of the text. McSweeney notes that the difference is “between the younger, experiencing self who participates in and/or observes the events recounted in the narrative and the older narrating self who does the telling” (McSweeney 27). We know from the prologue that the narrator of *Invisible Man* is a storyteller. While describing his underground dwelling, he “accidentally” mentions Ras the Exhorter. Noting his error, he states, “that’s getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” (Ellison 6). It is important to observe that Invisible Man “will tell the story of his earlier life for both expressive and communicative reasons, both to discharge emotion and to enable the reader to understand how he came to his present state” (McSweeney 28).

Although Invisible Man the narrator is a storyteller, he is not subjected to the same hazards as Invisible Man the young orator, because Invisible Man the narrator is not an oral storyteller; he is a writer. The epilogue makes us aware of this fact when he asks, “So why do I write, torturing myself to put it all down” (Ellison 579). Invisible Man being a writer has an enormous impact on how we ought to interpret the novel (or reinterpret the novel since this revelation occurs at the very end of the book). Invisible Man’s authorial status removes him from the position as an oral
raconteur or speech giver. More important, his position as a writer suggests that he might be nearing emancipation, whereas Invisible Man the high school graduate was shackled by the constraints of orality. McSweeney helps elucidate this idea—writing as a form of emancipation—when she points to Invisible Man's reefer induced experience during which he meets a black woman who claims she loved freedom even more than her master. When Invisible Man asks, "Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well," she responds, "I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head" (Ellison 11). Invisible Man on the other hand does find a way to say what is in his head in spite of the fact that his vast experiences occur over a very short time as well. By doing so in the written form, Invisible Man (as a construction of Ellison's) joins Ellison in a long tradition of African American writers who participate in a form of protest without necessary engaging in protest writing.

Invisible Man the narrator/writer reclaims his unique voice and subverts hegemony—white southerners, the college, Liberty Paints, and the Brotherhood—by recounting his own individual experience with literary artistic grace and skill. His literary approach is organized and meticulously planned. McSweeney points to Invisible Man the narrator’s organization of thematic ideas in the prologue: “The leitmotifs of invisibility, sight and insight, identity, alienation, freedom, boomeranging and the spiritual history are all first sounded in the novel’s overture” (McSweeney 30). McSweeney’s observation demonstrates that Invisible Man does not merely ramble or scribble out his memories onto the page; instead, he has taken
the chaos of his odyssey and formed it into a cornucopia of themes, symbols, and allusions.

The greatest form of Invisible Man’s narrative control and authorial power concerns his manipulation of time and history. Marc Singer notes that *Invisible Man* is “a novel that displays an astonishing narrative power over, and critical inquiry into, the dynamics of time. Through its temporal manipulations, *Invisible Man* demonstrates how both cultural history and individual identity are shaped by our diverse perceptions of time” (Singer 415). Specifically, Invisible Man’s narration refuses normative notions of temporality as a steady, unwavering linear progression. Singer adds, “The novel manipulates time and abandons linear chronology to examine how variant temporal and historical structures can govern, circumscribe, or potentially empower the individuals who are subjected to them” (Singer 388-389). The exploration of various forms of temporality stands in stark contrast to the typical linear temporalities of a great deal of protest literature. For example, the causal progression of time often found in socialist realism proposes that time is not a lived experience, but a mechanism or force that drives all action. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* affords a clear example of this type of narrative time. Wright’s novel follows Bigger in a steady linear pattern that is not jarring or disruptive. That is, the content of Wright’s *Native Son* is particularly disturbing, but the narrative’s temporal progression is predictable. For example, most readers feel that something is going to go wrong as soon as Bigger has to chauffeur for his white boss’s daughter. Essentially, the novel has an unshakable movement that allows the
story to unfold in something resembling typical narrative time (i.e. dramatic structure); there is a continuity that is almost undetectable.

R. A. York’s book, *The Rules of Time*, offers us another example of undetectable narrative temporality when York recapitulates the novel *The Warden*. He describes its narrative temporality: “The novel is short and simple; its pace seems regular, unhurried, and accomplished” (York 21). For these reasons, York uses the story as “an ideal starting point of our study [of narrative temporality] because its sense of rhythm may be totally imperceptible to many readers” (York 21). More importantly, “the reader never feels either rushed or held back” (York 21).

This is not the case in *Invisible Man*. Instead, the novel’s pace—the unfolding of events—happens both in slow motion and in spurts, and the reader becomes highly aware of the work’s variegated rhythms.

These variegated rhythms represent a form of protest by offering an alternative to the hegemonic notions of time as constructed by the college, the Brotherhood, and Black Nationalism. All of these institutions suggest that time is universally experienced. Ostensibly, this kind of time might not seem problematic, but *Invisible Man* demonstrates how a universal temporality is insidiously damaging to the formation of the individual subject by rendering him invisible.

*Invisible Man* first encounters universal time at the college in the form of “fate.” The concept of fate is initially evoked by Mr. Norton, a millionaire Bostonian and friend of the college’s illustrious founder. Reminiscing about the founding of the school, Norton notes, “it has been my pleasant fate to return each spring and observe the changes that the years have wrought. That has been more pleasant and
satisfying to me than my own work. It has been a pleasant fate, indeed.” (Ellison 39).

By invoking fate, Norton immediately denies the existence of individual agency. For Norton, “the years” bring about change. The notion that time—steady like the seasons (“each spring”)—manufactures change suggests that time is a phenomenon that acts upon the subject without the subject’s approval. This idea does not leave much room for individual experience. In Norton’s world, time brings about change, and whether or not that change is pleasant belongs to fate. At first glance, this perspective is quite attractive; there is an ease and peacefulness that accompanies fate. The individual is unburdened by having to act, and, instead, can allow time to perform the heavy lifting. Yet fate is only truly attractive to those with nothing at stake. Norton’s fate is guaranteed; he is rich and white, thus America’s substructure promises him future “pleasantness.” Meanwhile, fate from an African American perspective is quite different. Invisible Man acknowledges as much: “How could anyone’s fate be pleasant? I had always thought of it as something painful. No one I knew spoke of it as pleasant” (Ellison 40). Invisible Man’s observation is quite correct; his immediate fate proves to be very painful. Without any particular destination in mind, Norton tells Invisible Man to “just drive” (Ellison 38). This command is an extension of Norton’s fatalism. Invisible Man complies with Norton’s request and allows destiny to control the direction of the car: “Half-consciously I followed the white line as I drove” (Ellison 46). Unfortunately for Invisible Man, handing over his agency to fate proves disastrous. Norton’s encounter with Trueblood and the ensuing chaos at the Golden Day is most unpleasant for Invisible
Man. Norton, despite being a bit disturbed, gets to return to his bourgeois life; Invisible Man, on the other hand, is exiled.

Norton is not the only character associated with the college who subscribes to fate. The entire institution embodies fatalism, and each constituent performs as a humble subject of providence. The ceremony after the Norton incident where “policy was announced in broadest rhetoric” further demonstrates the ideologies of universality and fate (Ellison 115). Here, all students and teachers gather under one roof “[f]or [Bledsoe] demanded that everyone attend” (Ellison 115). Bledsoe’s demand enforces conformity since they will all be subjected to the same rhetoric—a fatalistic rhetoric demonstrated as they all sing, “Lead me, lead me to a rock higher than I” (Ellison 117). The inherent message of such a verse encourages the individual to abandon agency and to follow obediently. The students are encouraged to follow because the outcome—their fate—has already been decided. The honored guest speaker, Reverend Homer A. Barbee, suggests as much when he recounts the founding of the college. He describes that time as “[d]ays filled with great portent” (Ellison 118). His use of the word “portent” implies that the college was destined for future greatness. Barbee further suggests that the college was pre-destined by comparing the founder to Jesus, describing him as “a humble prophet, lowly like the humble carpenter of Nazareth” (Ellison 118). Like Norton’s fatalism, this form of temporality also appears attractive. There is a comfort in trusting prophecy; one only has to behave and time will unfold as it has been planned. Yet the perniciousness of this ideology is made clear to Invisible Man when he must confront Bledsoe about the Norton incident during which our protagonist adheres
to the role of humble follower. He tells Bledsoe, “I was only driving him, sir. I only stopped there after he ordered me to...” (Ellison 138). This enrages Bledsoe: “Dammit, white folks are always giving orders, it’s a habit with them. Why didn’t you make an excuse...My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?” (Ellison 139). Bledsoe’s anger stems from Invisible Man not asserting his own agency and trusting fate—a concept that benefits rich white men with nothing at stake and ambitious black men who know how to perform in the way that rich white men would have them. Fatalism, then, is an ideology that benefits those with power or those in pursuit of power by depriving other subjects of agency and individuality. For Invisible Man, subscribing to this form of temporality renders him invisible. In Bledsoe’s words, “You’re nobody, son. You don’t exist” (Ellison 143).

The Brotherhood offers Invisible Man a different temporal mode completely devoid of spiritual providence. Instead of trusting in fate, the Brotherhood believes it takes action and agency to move time forward. As Brother Jack states, “We are all realists here, and materialists. It is a question of who shall determine the direction of events” (Ellison 307). Whereas the college encouraged complacency and patience, the Brotherhood, at least ostensibly, encourages activity. For example, while instructing Invisible Man, Brother Jack states, “Remember too, that theory always comes after practice. Act first, theorize later; that’s also a formula, a devastatingly effective one” (Ellison 359). His mention of formula encapsulates the Brotherhood’s ideology. Unlike Norton who relied on faith and time to implement change, the Brotherhood believes in a hands-on, “scientific approach to society” (Ellison 350). The Brotherhood ultimately leads Invisible Man to believe that the “world...could be
controlled by science, and the Brotherhood had both science and history under control” (Ellison 381). Invisible Man further demonstrates his belief that the Brotherhood controls time when he watches three boys stepping off the subway platform. To him “they were men outside of historical time, they were untouched, they didn’t believe in the Brotherhood” (Ellison 440). After following and observing them, he concludes, “They were men out of time—unless they found the Brotherhood” (Ellison 441).

Despite the Brotherhood’s emancipatory motives, their deterministic temporal ideology ultimately demonstrates itself to be quite similar to that of the college. Both are concerned with progress and faith. Invisible Man affirms these similarities when he reflects on a threatening letter he receives. He states, “some enemy is trying to halt our progress by destroying my faith” (Ellison 391). The notion of progress is reminiscent of Barbee’s language: “For we are a young, though a fast-rising, people” (Ellison 133). And the notion of faith reminds us of Norton’s trust in fate. Additionally, the Brotherhood believes that temporal progress depends on “organiz[ing] that energy” of the people (Ellison 351). Likewise, Norton believes he has contributed to progress by organizing people. He states, “I have spent years helping your school. That has been my real life’s work, not my banking or my research, but my first hand organizing of human life” (Ellison 42). To organize means to universalize. In the same way that Bledsoe forces each member of the college under the same roof for the assembly, the Brotherhood desires everyone it touches to subscribe to the same ideology. The problem is with the homogenization that results. Both institutions effectively occlude the possibility for individual
experience. Instead, individuals are treated not as subjects, but as objects in a machine that keeps time moving forward. Norton intimates Invisible Man’s status as a mechanistic mode of production when he tells him, “You are important because if you fail I have failed by one individual, one defective cog” (Ellison 45). Invisible Man is stripped of individuality and reduced to a cog—a gear in a clock moving time forward. Likewise, Invisible Man, while working for the Brotherhood, refers to himself as a cog: “I’m no hero and I’m far from the top; I’m a cog in a machine. We here in the Brotherhood work as a unit” (Ellison 397). He continues, emphasizing his capitulation of self: “Individuals don’t count for much; it’s what the group wants, what the group does. Everyone here submerges his personal ambitions for the common achievement” (Ellison 397). Despite Invisible Man’s adherence to the Brotherhood, the organization, like the college, ultimately sends him into exile.

To summarize, the college and the Brotherhood both propose that time is linear and predetermined. They both presuppose a telos—something to be achieved. And they both suggest that the individual must dispossess himself of selfhood for the greater good that is temporal progress. What Invisible Man discovers is that these ideologies only ask him to perform a role, and that if he falters in this role he will be treated as broken cog that must be thrown away. His identity means nothing to them. Hence, it is no coincidence that Brother Jack “looked at [him] as though he did not see [him]” (Ellison 359). His status as an object, as a mode of temporal production, renders him invisible.

Teleological temporality is not the only form of universal time that Invisible Man encounters. Ras the Exhorter also advances a version of time that minimizes
one’s individual experience. Unlike the college or the Brotherhood, Ras’s Black Nationalist approach cares little for temporal progress; instead, he endorses a return to a distant past. Singer explains, “Ras...is characterized by...his futile desire to turn time backward” (Singer 411). Ras demonstrates his regressive temporality when he explains his hesitancy in killing Clifton. He states, “I’d have killed you, mahn. Ras the Exhorter raised up his knife and tried to do it, but he could not do it. Why don’t you do it? I ask myself. I will do it now, I say; but somet’ing tell me, ‘No, no! You might be killing your black king!’” (Ellison 373). Ras refuses to kill Clifton not because of who he is or who he might become, but because of who he might have been. In his mind, Clifton could have been a king in Africa if not for colonialism and the slave trade. His decisions are based not on the future, but on an idyllic past long before Western imperialism.

In light of the college’s and the Brotherhood’s philosophies (rooted in teleological progress and hostile to recognizing one’s individuality), Ras’s regressive perspective is tempting. Perhaps Ras, despite being deemed insane by the Brotherhood, offers a viable solution for Invisible Man’s temporal problems. But as Singer notes, “Ras’s attempt to reverse time proves dangerous, however, not only in the violence and destruction it wreaks in Harlem but also in its reductive model of racial-historical identity” (Singer 411). This reduction is similar to the reductive tendencies of the college and the Brotherhood when they attempt to reduce Invisible Man to a cog in their machines. In this case, Ras wants to reduce Invisible Man to an African. By bifurcating the world into black and white, Ras is encouraging a regressive temporality for all African Americans. The difficulty inherent in such an
approach is the same difficulty with historical materialism and fatalism: it closes the space for individual experience. Ras only “recognize[s] [his] black possibilities” and not his human possibilities (Ellison 374). Once again, another form of temporality renders Invisible Man invisible: “With Ras calling for the destruction of Harlem, who could notice me?” (Ellison 485).

All of the aforementioned institutions use their theories of temporality to deprive Invisible Man of his own unique experience. They homogenize the individual, force him into a box with other cogs, and use him as a “convenient tool...for shaping their own desires” (Ellison 511). In order for Invisible Man to claim a unique voice and assert his own individuality, he must create his own version of temporality. Subscribing to fatalism, materialism, and regression only furthers his invisibility. This brings us back to the power of the written narrative. By writing his story, Invisible Man is able to control time with literary aesthetics. He might not have been successful living in a world rife with hegemonic notions of temporality, but writing while underground allows him to express his own unique experiential form of time. Doing so is a form of protest in that he is able to reveal the oppressive nature of universalizing time while demonstrating that the individual subject is more than a cog in a clock. The individual is a subject, a human being, with a distinct story that cannot be categorized or forced into conformity. Invisible Man expresses his unique form of experiential time by adopting a narrative form of jazz temporality.
Narrative Jazz Temporality

The homogenizing forms of time that Invisible Man encounters all reduce him to an object of temporal machinery. In order to reclaim his subjecthood, he must express a unique temporal experience. Unfortunately, his options have been severely limited by the oppressive forces of the college, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter. These three systems have closed off several of his narrative options. He cannot write in a linear fashion without echoing the college’s belief in fatalism; he cannot write in the form of teleological progress without reaffirming the Brotherhood’s determinism; and he cannot write circularly without ratifying Ras’s regressive mode of time. Borrowing from any of these systems would be the exact denial of self that Invisible Man escapes underground to avoid. He discovers the temporal structure he seeks while listening to Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue.” It is at this point when he discovers that “Invisibility…gives one a slightly different sense of time” (Ellison 8). Whereas Louis is “unaware that he is invisible,” Invisible Man’s “own grasp of invisibility aids [him] to understand [Louis’s] music” (Ellison 8). The coupling of Armstrong’s music and our narrator’s sense of invisibility empowers him with the tools necessary to develop a narrative model that will protest homogenizing forms of time while simultaneously affirming his own humanity.

Singer’s approach to Invisible Man’s understanding of temporality arrives at a similar conclusion. He too argues that Invisible Man arrives at “a non-deterministic mode of temporality” (Singer 393). Whereas Singer argues that he discovers this version of time “in the form of a palimpsest,” I argue that he settles on
a version of time derived from the aesthetics of jazz. Moreover, Singer only notes that Invisible Man as a character changes his perception of temporality, but Singer does not suggest how he implements his new understanding. This is where we also diverge. I would like to suggest that Invisible Man, after confronting homogenizing forms of time, re-imagines temporality and demonstrates his new understanding by employing jazz techniques in a literary form throughout his narrative.

This chapter will begin by defining the three most notable characteristics of jazz that contribute to its unique temporality: swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation. In order to define these styles for non-listening audiences, I will use the simple rhythmic form of bluegrass as a point of comparison. Next, this chapter will demonstrate how Invisible Man adopts these three techniques and reconfigures them so they can function within his written narrative. The resulting discussion will focus on moments within the text where Invisible Man demonstrates “literary swing,” “literary syncopation,” and “literary soloing.”

Jazz temporality is without a doubt a subject on which tome upon tome could be written. Yet there are several salient aspects regarding jazz music and its relationship with time that are apropos of our discussion, the most prominent of which is the notion of swing. In the words of Duke Ellington, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” To rephrase, without swing, jazz is not jazz. But swing resists an easy definition. Christopher Meeder explains, “many consider this sense of swing to be indescribable...In jazz, this sense of swing is accomplished by allowing performers to toy with a steady beat, sometimes rushing ahead and sometimes lagging behind” (Meeder 14). Meeder defines the steady beat as “a regular occurring
moment of emphasis—the moment that you tap your foot” (Meeder 8). Swing flirts with music’s regular moments of emphasis by moving around inside of them.

To provide a point of contrast, look to the genre of bluegrass. Bluegrass is known for its steady beat. There is a predictability to the rhythm that will never confound the foot-tapping listener. Because bluegrass only incorporates string instruments, there is no percussive element. So in bluegrass, time keeping responsibility falls upon the rhythm guitarist who plays what is called a boom-chick. The boom-chick pattern consists of the guitarist—or vernacularly, the picker—picking a bass note followed by a downward strum. The pick is the “boom” (boom is an onomatopoeia for the resounding bass note) and the strum is the “chick” (an onomatopoeia for the tinny sound following the reverberating bass note). As for its time signature, in a song played in 4/4 time, the boom is the 1 and the chick is the “and.” Thus, the 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &, can be counted as “boom-chick, boom-chick, boom-chick, boom-chick.” This pattern is easy to follow and easy for the listener to learn. It becomes so repetitious that time is imperceptible and counting becomes unnecessary. The music becomes a steady flow of melody and harmony without any disturbing interruptions. In a way, time becomes invisible. And temporal invisibility does not allow for the individual picker to toy or play with the underlying beat.

In addition to swing, syncopation also contributes to the unique temporality of jazz. Meeder explains, “Jazz frequently makes use of syncopation, in which an unexpected emphasized note is played on a weak beat or off the beat altogether” (Meeder 9). Again, bluegrass music provides a point of contrast for understanding syncopation within jazz. Bluegrass offers a steady beat in the form of the boom-
chick. When the melody line of a bluegrass tune is played, the performer places the melody notes squarely on the proper “boom,” the strong beat. On the other hand, a jazz performer will place the melody notes where a bluegrass listener might not expect, perhaps on the “chick” or on an unexpected, out-of-place “boom.” The result of such a technique is jarring. The listener cannot predict when or where the notes will fall; his normative expectations are disrupted.

Jazz temporality is demonstrated most prominently during an individual performer’s solo. The way in which swing and syncopation are implemented is left up to him at the time of the performance. Although the entire jazz group loosely adheres to an underlying beat, the soloist, when his turn comes, is allowed to improvise with freedom. Solo improvisation makes jazz music unique. Meeder argues that “[d]etails about timbre, rhythm, even what notes to play and when are left to the discretion of individual performer, and vary from performance to performance, to a degree far greater than is found in classical music, rock, and just about any other Western musical tradition” (Meeder 1-2). Meeder’s observation implicitly suggests that the soloist’s ability to express himself freely in the moment provides jazz music with its singularity.

These three temporal components of jazz—swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation—are more than eccentric techniques contributing to an interesting aesthetic; they are a form of protest. They push back against those homogenizing temporal constructions that occlude the possibility for individual experience. The jazzman is not a cog; he is not merely playing a role for the collective musical experience; he is a subject with the power to freely express himself.
Invisible Man demonstrates a clear understanding of jazz temporality. In the prologue, he compares “what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music” with invisibility: “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind” (Ellison 8). This description is eerily similar to Meeder’s definition of swing. Invisible Man also echoes Meeder’s notion of the steady beat, which our narrator defines as “the swift and imperceptible flowing of time” (Ellison 8). For Invisible Man, jazz temporality involves rejecting the steady beat and becoming aware of time’s “nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead” (Ellison 8). By becoming aware of time’s nodes, one can “slip into the breaks and look around” (Ellison 8).

Invisible Man also suggests that jazz temporality is more than a theoretical concept; one can employ it as a form of protest. He demonstrates the praxis of jazz temporality by recounting a boxing match he once witnessed. The fight was between a professional pugilist and a rube. The prizefighter “was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action. He hit the yokel a hundred times...But suddenly, the yokel, rolling about in a gale of boxing gloves, struck one blow and knocked science, speed and footwork...cold” (Ellison 8). The yokel won the match against all odds by “step[ping] inside of his opponent’s sense of time” (Ellison 8). With this story, Invisible Man lays bare the deficiency of adhering to a stable beat, while simultaneously revealing that manipulating the stable beat allows the subject to overthrow existing power structures. To further emphasize the praxis of jazz temporality, he declares that Louis Armstrong’s music “demanded action” and that his “hibernation is a covert preparation for more overt action”
(Ellison 12, 13). He tells us that he is prepared: “I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see” (Ellison 13). With this new vision, Invisible Man is going “to put invisibility down in black and white” (Ellison 14). In other words, the action he will take is the act of writing his narrative. This narrative will employ his new understanding of jazz temporality.

Invisible Man the narrator cannot write his story by utilizing a steady beat alone. Doing so would only reinsert him back into the homogenizing forms of temporality that objectified and exiled his younger self. Instead, he borrows from the temporal aesthetics of jazz and shapes them into his work creating a narrative form of jazz temporality. In effect, we can identify the literary equivalents to swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation throughout his autobiography. These moments shirk “the swift and imperceptible flowing of time” by making us aware of time’s nodes.

Invisible Man often utilizes a re-imagined version of “swing.” “Narrative swing” constitutes those moments in the text when the narrator appears to fall behind or leap ahead of the steady beat. First, we experience the narrator falling behind the steady beat when a scene feels hypnogogic. These dream like moments are instances of narrative swing because the action does not unfold at the rhythmic speed expected. Instead, it feels as if the narrator is lingering too long on a particular note. For instance, Invisible Man makes a concerted effort to linger on the battle royal scene. He does not necessarily accomplish this feat by writing a longer sequence, but there are a plethora of images and descriptors that make the reader keenly aware of a series of events unfolding in slow motion. Invisible Man narrates
being “ushered out into the big mirrored hall” (Ellison 18). There “it was foggy with
cigar smoke. And already the whisky was taking effect” (Ellison 18). Although he is
ostensibly referring to the whisky’s effect on the men in the ballroom, his phrasing
leaves enough room for us to imagine that the scene itself is being affected by the
whisky; i.e. the scene is slowing and growing less sober, less clear. The blonde
stripper’s presence furthers the hypnogonic affect: “[S]he began to dance, a slow and
sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest
of veils” (Ellison 19). Her dance is sedated and the image of clinging smoke assists in
producing a dreamlike ambiance. Once the battle royal begins, Invisible Man
advances the scene’s interminability by noting that “[t]he smoke was agonizing and
there were no rounds, no bells at three minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion”
(Ellison 23). The hypnagogia continues with a phantasmagoric series of images:
“The room spun round me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by
tense white faces” (Ellison 23). Additionally, Invisible Man notes the lingering of
time as he rolls over an electrified rug. He tells himself, “It’ll all be over in a flash, I
thought as I rolled clear” (Ellison 23). Yet as he is rolling “[i]t seemed a whole
century would pass before I would roll free, a century in which I was seared through
the deepest levels of my body to the fearful breath within me and the breath seared
and heated to the point of explosion” (Ellison 28). Even when Invisible Man finally
makes his long awaited speech, it too is protracted: “The speech seemed a hundred
times long as before” (Ellison 30). Although Invisible Man never gives us any clue as
to how long the entire event actually takes, it is hard to imagine the sequence of
events in its entirety lasting longer than an hour in real time. Yet the smoke coupled
with the surreal, phantasmagorical sensory perceptions of the character achieve a temporality of slow motion. The narrator hangs onto the note just a little longer than one expects.

Invisible Man also implements “narrative swing” by jumping ahead of the beat. There are two ways to interpret this aspect of swing, both of which fulfill the criterion of making us aware of time’s nodes. One narrative device paralleling a jump in front of the beat is the ellipsis. These are moments in the text where the narrator abandons the steady unfolding of events and moves forward jarringly. One example presents itself after the battle royal scene. The battle royal as previously mentioned moves in slow motion. Once his speech is finished, he returns home, goes to sleep, and, essentially, wakes up in college. Here, Invisible Man moves us through time rapidly (i.e. after a long and protracted battle royal scene, he suddenly jumps forward to his time at the college). A similar movement occurs when the narrator moves us from his job at Liberty Paints to the hospital where he undergoes shock therapy. Up until this point, events had, for the most part, unfolded quite normally. Invisible Man drove Norton, introduced him to Trueblood and The Golden Day, got expelled from the college, travelled up north, went to see Bledsoe’s contacts, and finally lands a job at Liberty Paints. The reader can follow this sequence of events without much disruption. But suddenly, we lose track of time after the factory accident. Invisible Man experiences “a blinding flash,” hears a voice, “pause[s]” and awakens in a hospital bed (Ellison 230-231). The steady beat is disrupted by the narrator’s ellipsis, which propels us into an undetermined point in future. The
narrator calls attention to his temporal jump forward by marking Invisible Man's first dialogue after the accident with ellipsis:

“What is your name?” a voice said.

“My head...” I said

“Yes, but your name. Address?”

“My head—that burning eye...” I said.

“Eye?”

“Inside,” I said.

“Shoot him up for an X-ray,” another voice said.

“My head...” (Ellison 232)

Here, the narrator uses ellipsis in the character's dialogue to suggest that the character is having difficulty catching up with the narrative ellipsis that has just occurred. In effect, the narrator disrupts our (including his character's) sense of linear time by transporting us into the future.

Another form of “swinging” in front of the beat appears when the narrative reveals future events before their actual occurrence in the story. There are many examples, but one of the most prominent occurs during his dream about his grandfather. In this dream, his grandfather tells him “to open [his] brief case and read what was inside” (Ellison 33). The narrator continues, “I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness” (Ellison 33). When he reaches the last envelope, his grandfather commands him to read it out loud. He does: “‘To Whom It May Concern,’ I intoned. ‘Keep This Nigger-Boy Running’”
(Ellison 33). This dream is very far in front of the steady beat if we can imagine the steady beat as a linear revelation of Invisible Man’s lived experiences. The dream occurs immediately after the battle royal, and, later (i.e. after Norton, after Trueblood, after The Golden Day, after Barbee, after the expulsion, after the train ride, after settling in New York) we discover that Bledsoe does exactly what this dream presages. Bledsoe had given Invisible Man seven recommendation letters to assist Invisible Man in his quest for employment. Each of these letters turn out to be the antithesis of recommendations, and since Invisible Man never opens them, he keeps “running” from employer to employer in search of a job. In essence, the dream occurs before the reality. The narrator uses the dream to reveal a part of the story that the story itself has not yet revealed. Additionally, the narrator informs us, “It was a dream I was to remember and dream again and again for many years after” (Ellison 35). This is an act of authorial control that informs us of dreams he will have later but have not yet occurred along the horizontal axis; he is writing in front of time. In terms of jazz, he is swinging in front of the beat.

In addition to his use of ellipsis and presaging, Invisible Man also swings in front of the steady beat by increasing the pace at which he narrates events. This type of aesthetic move represents a contrasting model to swinging behind the beat seen during the battle royal. Instead of a protracted scene like the battle royal, supported by slow dancing women and lingering smoke, Invisible Man also narrates sequences of events which develop with meteoric swiftness. The riot in Harlem provides us with a clear example of accelerated time. Invisible Man, after running from Sybil, arrives back in Harlem where he witnesses “four men running toward [him]” while
pushing a safe. He leaps out of their way, “and there was a sudden and brilliant suspension of time, like the interval between the last ax stroke and the felling of a tall tree, in which there had been a loud noise followed by a loud silence” (Ellison 535). Here, our narrator is mimicking the jazzman falling behind the beat, but suddenly he leaps forward in time to play in front it: “time burst and I was down the street” (Ellison 535). This explosion results not in a sluggish hypnogogic form of experience, but in a heightened sense of awareness that absorbs a multiplicity of sensory experiences at once: “I was down on the street, conscious but unable to rise, struggling against the street and seeing the flashes as the guns went off back at the corner of the avenue, aware to my left of the men still speeding the rumbling safe along the walk” (Ellison 535). Invisible Man explains the swarming of activity around him: “[T]he block leaped alive. Men who seemed to rise up out of the sidewalks were rushing into the store fronts above me, their voices rising excitedly” (Ellison 536). The accelerated pace and the busyness of the episode, both of which occur after time pauses, parallels the jazz musician who jarringly picks up speed and riffs ahead of the beat after lingering too long on the previous beat.

In addition to “swing,” Invisible Man also executes a literary version of syncopation. Just as a jazz musician stresses a note off beat, Invisible Man stresses certain moments of his life that disrupt the narrative’s rhythm. Syncopation is similar to swing in that it makes the reader aware of time when continuity is disrupted. Invisible Man’s experience in the hospital, for example, functions as a literary form of syncopation. Although Invisible Man’s entire experience is surreal, his time in the hospital is especially peculiar because the scene materializes from
nowhere and is completely off the beat; in other words, there seems to be no causality that can claim responsibility for its existence. Invisible Man hints at this notion of originating from nothing when he describes that his “mind was blank, as though I had just begun to live” (Ellison 233). The chapter itself seems to result from his industrial accident, but Invisible Man cannot confirm as much: “Was he doctor, factory official, or both? I couldn’t get it; and now he seemed to move back and forth across my field of vision, although he sat perfectly calm in his chair” (Ellison 247). Even his memories seemingly come from nowhere. His question, “Do you know Mr. Norton, sir?” does not come from him, “[i]t came out of itself” (Ellison 247). All of these origin-less moments suggest that this incident is occurring off beat since the stress of a note on the off beat is disruptive and seemingly random. Nonetheless, Invisible Man narrates the scene despite its lack of continuity with the rest of the story. Doing so allows him to express his unique experienced without adhering to linear causality.

Invisible Man further complicates his temporal experience by allowing other characters to narrate their own autobiographies. In jazz, each performer gets a turn to play with the steady beat in the form of a solo; one musician alone does not control temporality. In similar style, Invisible Man hands over his narrative power, minus the occasional and brief interjection, to Trueblood. To start, Trueblood begins his narrative—much like Invisible Man’s prologue—at the end of his story: “’Fore they heard ’bout what happen to us out here I couldn’t git no help from nobody. Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help” (Ellison 52 italics mine). Then, suddenly, after describing his current situation, Trueblood engages his past—the
beginning of his story: “You see, suh, it was cold and we didn’t have much fire” (Ellison 53). The importance of this transition is its startling suddenness. The rapid swing back in time is similar to the jazz soloist who is in the groove and unexpectedly drops behind the beat. His pace thereafter is steady until he suddenly drops behind the beat again. This time, Trueblood toys with the readers’ and Norton’s expectation. He describes lying next to his daughter in the cold, and describes that “The gal looks just like the ole lady did when she was young and I first met her, only better lookin’” (Ellison 54). The threat of incest is imminent. Then suddenly, just as his audience grows increasingly disturbed by the narrative they know he is going to tell, he drops behind the beat again to reminisce on his childhood: “Then I got to thinkin’ ‘bout way back when I left the farm and went to live in Mobile and ‘bout a gal I had me then” (Ellison 55). This digression is not totally random; in other words, it is not chaos. He is narrating his train of thought building up to the literal climax of the story, but the steady beat that picks up steam and drops suddenly is jarring. To parallel, this is the jazz soloist building up to his climax and then suddenly falling back behind the band. Finally, Trueblood builds up to the rapid climax of his narrative by retelling the frenetic exchange between him and Kate when she discovers Trueblood copulating with their daughter:

‘Git up! Git up!’ she says.

‘HEY! NAW! KATE!’ I says.

‘Goddamn yo’ soul to hell! Git up offa my chile!’

‘But woman, Kate, lissen…’

‘Don’t talk, MOVE!’ (Ellison 61)
This high-speed form of narration continues up until Trueblood finishes his story.

As seen above, like Invisible Man and like the jazz soloist, Trueblood controls his narrative by falling behind and jumping ahead of the beat.

Invisible Man’s willingness to hand over his narrative to Trueblood is an essential component to jazz music. More importantly, it further distances Invisible Man from the homogenizing forces of time that he experiences throughout his odyssey. It suggests that Invisible Man as a narrator is willing to embrace others’ individualized and experiential forms of temporality; thus, he believes that his understanding of temporality is not universal.

All of the aforementioned jazz techniques allow Invisible Man to assert his unique individuality. They allow him to express his epiphany that he experiences when he rejects the Brotherhood:

   "It was as though I’d learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. (Ellison 508)

Singer claims that this moment indicates that “[h]e realizes he is a composite man comprised of his own experiences, a living palimpsest of his own history” (Singer 409). I agree that, here, he becomes fully aware of his individuality and unique experiences, but it is only through reimagining jazz that he is able to express this
moment. Yet even jazz temporality can be taken too far. If jazz does not acknowledge its history, it degenerates into bop, modern jazz, or free jazz. Likewise, if Invisible Man does not acknowledge his history, he will degenerate into Rinehart.
Restraining Jazz Temporality

If defined too loosely, jazz temporality can undermine itself in both music and literature. Thus far I have worked to define jazz temporality in *Invisible Man* as a disturbance in the normative or the expected rhythm of narrative. These disturbances destabilize universal modes of time that deprive individual subjects of their humanity. The disruption of rigid time structures allows for a more personal, experiential form of temporality. But too much disturbance can be counterproductive. Without some kind of ordering formation, the notion of jazz temporality collapses in on itself and produces nothing but entropy. In music, for example, if time is completely ignored, the result would *not* be a singularly inventive form of music; instead, the result would resemble the cacophonous chaos of a highway accident. Similarly, if a work of literature ignores basic temporal structure, the product would be prosaic bedlam. The difficulty with formless art is its inability to convey experience. Traditional jazz balances the two opposite poles of temporality well: it plays with time enough to reject universal experience, but it still holds on to a basic structure that keeps it from unraveling into simply noise.

Similarly, *Invisible Man* narrates his odyssey with the same balance of disruption and stability. What they both have in common is a firm understanding of history and community—or shared experience. Cultural history, therefore, serves as the restraining force that keeps both jazz and *Invisible Man*'s story from exploding into noise and drivel.

In order to demonstrate how *Invisible Man* controls narrative jazz temporality, I will explore Ellison's viewpoints on traditional jazz and bebop. This
chapter will show that Ellison’s favoring of traditional jazz originates from its respect and understanding of tradition. Likewise, this chapter will show that Ellison’s distaste for bebop originates from its lack of respect and understanding of tradition. Then, I intend to show how Rinehart is literarily similar to bebop—that his rejection of boundaries possesses the same hazards as bebop. Next, I will reveal how Invisible Man as a narrator prevents his story from degenerating into bebop/Rinehart like chaos by examining Mary Rambo and Peter Wheatstraw. I contend that these characters root the text with the cultural tradition it needs to prevent it from decomposing into temporal chaos.

Musicologists have wrangled over the value of traditional jazz versus that of bebop or modern jazz since the dawn of Charlie Parker. Ralph Ellison, not a musicologist but a critic of jazz nonetheless, expresses abundant approval for traditional jazz while remaining skeptical—if not disapproving—of bebop. His love for Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Rushing, Duke Ellington, and other traditionalists tends to stem from these musicians’ understanding of history and community. In other words, traditional jazz, for Ellison, is rooted in cultural history and promotes both the individual and the collective experience.

Ellison is most clear about traditional jazz’s representation of a democratic community. In his essay “Living with Music,” he describes the cooperative jam sessions he witnessed while growing up in Oklahoma City. He writes, “[t]he delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization” (“Living with Music” 189). What Ellison finds so marvelous is the jazz musician’s capacity to express himself
while remaining aware of the other musicians around him. In his essay on Jimmy Rushing, he refers to this traditional jazz phenomenon as “communion”:

It was when Jimmy’s voice began to soar with the spirit of the blues that the dancers—and the musicians—achieved that feeling of communion which was the true meaning of the public dance. The blues, the singer, the band and the dancers formed the vital whole of jazz as an institutional form, and even today neither part is complete without the rest. (“Remembering Jimmy” 244).

Ellison does not ignore the complexities of such a feat. He calls the expression of individual identity in jazz “a cruel contradiction”:

For true jazz is an individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment...springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity, and as a link in the train of tradition. (“The Charlie Christian Story” 234)

As an art form, traditional jazz is aware of both the individual and the collective experience. This awareness restrains the musician from abandoning the group’s temporality, yet it does not deny him any opportunity to express himself; he is still allowed to play with the rhythm.

Ellison suggests that the mediation between the individual and the group generates from music’s uncanny ability to facilitate identification. “Living with Music” demonstrates how he was once forced to identify with his neighbor, an
aspiring singer who lived directly above him. Although her ceaseless practicing drove him mad, he refused to call the police or ask her to stop. His guilt would not allow him, since he too “terrorized a good part of an entire city section” when he was a young, aspiring musician (“Living with Music” 191). Thus, he states, “I had to hold my peace” (“Living with Music” 193). Being forced to listen to her, he “soon became involved to the point of identification” (“Living with Music 193). For Ellison, trad jazz has the ability to bring people together for a common cause: “[the] brassy affirmation of the goodness of being alive and part of the community” (“Living with Music” 193). Yet it also resists the universalizing effects that deprive one of individuality.

Bebop, on the other hand, demonstrates how abandoning time entirely leads to a chaotic form of jazz which reduces itself to the same homogenizing structures traditional jazz sought to avoid. In his essay “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz,” Ellison critiques postwar jazz founder Charlie Parker to make this point. First, he criticizes the avant-garde and chaotic elements of Parker’s style by comparing him to a mockingbird:

His playing was characterized by velocity, by long-continued succession of notes and phrases, by swoops, bleats, echoes, rapidly repeated bebops—I mean rebopped bebops—by mocking mimicry of other jazzmen’s styles, and by interpolations of motifs from extraneous melodies (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 223).
If this does not make it clear that Ellison considers Parker to have strayed too far from what he deems temporally acceptable, his description of modern jazz at Minton’s (with a reference to Parker’s song “Salt Peanuts!”) will:

[The music] was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs jeering—“Salt peanuts! Salt peanuts!” Its timbres flat or shrill, with a minimum of thrilling vibrato. Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary, its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 203)

Ellison, although approving of Parker’s inventiveness, ultimately rejects Parker because Parker rejected Louis Armstrong. By “fasten[ing] the epithet ‘Uncle Tom’ upon Armstrong’s music,” Parker shattered the collective ethos of trad jazz (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 227). Ellison explains, “In attempting to escape the [entertainer’s] role, at once sub- and super-human, in which he found himself, he sought to outrage his public into an awareness of his most human pain” (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 227). In other words, Parker used his innovative form of jazz to affirm his own identity, but did so at the expense of the collective. Instead of achieving an Ellington-like communion, Parker “employ[ed] a calculated surliness and rudeness; treating the audience very much as many white merchants in poor Negro neighborhoods treat their customers” (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 225). Ellison argues that doing this resulted in Parker’s becoming something far more ‘primitive’: a sacrificial figure whose struggles against personal chaos, on stage and
off, served as entertainment for a ravenous, sensation starved, culturally disoriented public which had but the slightest notion of its real significance (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 227).

Even worse, “[i]n the end he had no private life and his most tragic moments were drained of human significance” (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 227). Thus, Parker’s abandoning of the collective tradition did not heighten the expression of his individual humanity, it crushed it. Finally, Ellison shuts the door on those who might claim that Parker’s new form of jazz, with its temporal chaos and speed, speaks for itself: “For all its velocity, brilliance and imagination there is in it a great deal of loneliness, self-deprecation and self-pity. With this there is a quality which seems to issue from its vibratoless tone: a sound of amateurish ineffectuality” (“On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz” 230). Ultimately for Ellison, Parker offers a valuable lesson: an uncontrolled jazz temporality that refuses its collective, community building powers will collapse on itself.

Additionally, Ellison firmly believes that traditional jazz is rooted in history and memory. There are several instances found throughout his essays that place considerable import on the aspiring jazzman learning traditional jazz techniques before venturing forth to determine and express his identity. In “Living with Music” he states that the goal of intense musical training and discipline was “to express an affirmative way of life through its tradition and that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame” (“Living with Music” 189). Here, Ellison is suggesting that the traditional framework of jazz has more than enough room for one to express himself. The framework does not need to be shattered. Instead, “he must learn the
best from the past and add to it his personal vision" (“Living with Music”189). He advances the importance of tradition further in “The Golden Age, Time Past.” Ellison argues that “the jam session is revealed as the jazzman’s true academy” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 208). He adds that “although...many jazzmen have had conservatory training...it is more meaningful to speak...of apprenticeships, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, and rebirth” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 208). The implicit argument that Ellison makes here is that jazz music is handed down from older jazzmen in order to instill the apprentice with a cultural lesson. Although Ellison never explicitly states the exact nature of this lesson, he hints toward it when he discusses the jazz musicians he learned from in Oklahoma City. For these musicians, “[l]ife could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form” (“Living with Music” 190). If Ellison was learning to play his instrument in the late 1920s in Oklahoma, one has to imagine that the cultural lessons being handed down pertained to affirming life through music in the face of racism and bigotry. These lessons are historical and cultural, and cannot be found in classical music conservatories. Once the apprentice receives these lessons, “he must then ‘find himself,’ must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul...[H]is instrument...will allow him to express his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 208-209). But Ellison’s emphasis remains that the musician must be rooted in his cultural history before he can begin expressing his own identity.
Ellison suggests that the postwar bop musicians did not have the historical footing that jazz needed. In “The Golden Age, Time Past” Ellison discusses the rise of the new generation of bebop musicians at Minton’s Playhouse. There he heard “the first attempts toward a conscious statement of the sensibility of the younger generation of musicians as they worked out the techniques, structure and rhythmical patterns with which to express themselves” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 210). Ellison notes the causes for the new sound: “An increasing number of the younger men were formally trained and the post-Depression developments in the country had made for quite a break between their experience and that of the older men” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 211). Thus, the bop generation lacked the instruction and guidance needed to reinforce cultural memory. The resulting sound was “not fully formed” and resembled “arbitrary...chaos” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 203). The chaos of bop, for Ellison, deprived music of its “power to give us an orientation in time” (“Living with Music” 198). Ordinarily, “[i]n the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspired,” but bop falls short of achieving this end. Out of those at Minton’s who were there for the genesis of bebop, “few actually remember” it (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 203). “When the moment was past no one retained more than a fragment of its happening” (“The Golden Age, Time Past” 202).

To summarize, Ellison had very different feelings regarding traditional jazz and bebop, obviously favoring the former. He makes it clear that bebop's rootless beginnings and inability to mediate between the individual expression of self and the collective will is exemplified by the generation's fragmented and chaotic sound. I
contend that bop’s frenetic cacophony represents the effects of unrestrained temporal experimentation. Traditional jazz, on the other hand, is able to play with time without abandoning it entirely. Suggested by Ellison’s exaltation of traditional jazz musicians like Charlie Christian, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, it appears that notions of tradition and community are what keep jazz temporality from flying off the rails. Although traditional jazz musicians all employed swing, syncopation, and solo improvisation, cultural memory grounded them and prevented those techniques from degenerating into chaos, chaos that would ultimately deprive the individual, like Charlie Parker, of his humanity.

Invisible Man, our author and narrator, is also aware of the necessity of staying grounded in a cultural tradition. His construction of Rinehart is the literary equivalent to Charlie Parker and the bop generation. Rinehart, like the bebop musicians, rejects form and borders altogether. Doing so allows him to occupy a multiplicity of identities. Invisible Man wonders if such an existence is possible: “Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rhine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart?” (Ellison 498). He decided that he cannot “doubt it”: “He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was as true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool” (Ellison 498). The concept of Rinehart leads Invisible Man to think, “His world was possibility and he knew it...The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity” (Ellison 498). And with this realization, Invisible Man has discovered a new temporal experience: a temporality
without borders, without form. Here, Invisible Man expresses the same eager willingness to believe in the functionality of Rinehart's fluid existence as he experienced with the Brotherhood’s historical materialism and the college's fatalism. This suggests only that Invisible Man is experiencing a new mode of existence, but that does not necessarily mean it is viable.

Like bebop or modern jazz, Rinehart’s formless existence ultimately collapses in on itself leaving no room for human experience. Invisible Man proves as much when he decides to utilize “Rinehart methods” and con one of the Brotherhood's leader’s wife, Sybil, into giving him information (Ellison 512). To pull off his con, he attempts to seduce her. Doing so requires Invisible Man to ignore his own identity and adopt Rinehart’s world “without boundaries.” The experiment goes terribly awry. Invisible Man, although attempting to play the role of a spy, gets reduced to a sexual animal when Sybil asks him to rape her. This reduction forces Invisible Man into understanding the ineffectuality of Rinehart’s methods. He berates himself: “What does she think you are? A domesticated rapist, obviously an expert on the woman question. Maybe that's what you are, house-broken and with a convenient verbal push button arrangement for the ladies’ pleasure. Well, so I had set this trap for myself” (Ellison 521). At this point in the text, Invisible Man realizes that even when dissembling, he is still reduced to an object—in this case a sexual object. Despite his failure in his quest for information, he does achieve Rinehart’s fluidity. Unfortunately, it is not what he is expecting: “Time ran fluid, invisible, sad” (Ellison 532). He is not empowered by assuming false identities; instead, he experiences self-deprecating loneliness reminiscent of Ellison’s critique of Charlie
Parker’s. The Rinehart experiment fails, and proves, as he predicted, “too vast and confusing to contemplate” (Ellison 499). Invisible Man cannot function in the Rinehart world of chaos.

In order to control his narrative and resist slipping into the chaos of Rinehart and bebop, Invisible Man, the narrator, grounds his autobiography in the same cultural memory that allows the traditional jazz musician to express his own unique identity without sacrificing the collective dynamic. In other words, his insertion of traditional and communal aspects of his past keeps his jazz temporality from becoming unhinged. Mary's presence acts as one of these grounding devices. Invisible Man demonstrates this idea when he states, “[Mary] was something more—a force, a stable familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirring off into some unknown which I dared not face” (Ellison 238).

Although Invisible Man the character ultimately rejects Mary once he joins the Brotherhood, our narrator uses her character to keep his unique narrative rooted in his southern traditions. Mary reminds the reader of the small southern community which values a collective experience. She demonstrates this collective experience when she asks a bystander of Invisible Man’s fainting incident if he knows her. “The fellow” responds, “Sure, I’m Jenny Jackson’s boy, you know I know you, Miss Marry” (Ellison 252). Mary Rambo responds, “Jenny Jackson, why, I should say you do know me and I know you, you Ralston, and your mama got two more children, boy named Flint and gal named Laura-jean, I should say I know you—me and your mama and your papa usedta...” (Ellison 252). Mary’s dialogue with Ralston demonstrates a southern past that is rooted in a collective identification by showing
how lineage and association lead to recognition. Mary also reinforces her southern heritage with her use of vernacular: “Now you’ll be better and when you git all right you’ll know how bad a shape you been in, here, now taka sip of this water” (Ellison 253). Additionally, Mary's folksy altruism is redolent of the traditional jazz experience that required the older jazzman to advise and care for the new generation of musicians by passing down cultural memory. Mary suggests as much when she states, “No, it’s you young ones what have to remember and take the lead...And you have to take care of yourself, son. Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don’t git corrupted” (Ellison 225). Mary is exhorting Invisible Man to remember his past and stay connected to his cultural roots as he “takes the lead” (Ellison 255). In a way, she is performing the role of the traditional jazz mentor and keeps the text grounded in a historical past that still allows for unique self-expression.

Although he occupies a much smaller role than Mary, Peter Wheatsraw also culturally and historically grounds the narrative. Peter Wheatsraw is an allusion to William Bunch’s moniker, Peetie Wheatstraw (Komara 1068). In his Encyclopedia of the Blues, Edward Komara encapsulates William Bunch’s musical, historical, and literary personality:

During the 1930s, Wheatstraw’s style of singing was ubiquitous in St. Louis and East St. Louis. He influenced blues musicians such as Alec Seward, Louis Hayes, John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson and Robert Johnson. While Wheatsraw’s musical influences are seen in other contemporary blues musicians—in song, style, and sobriquet—it is
his persona as the Devil’s son-in-law that makes him a cultural icon. His style of self-boasting is present in today’s hip-hop genre and is best personified in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. (Komara 1068).

Komara also connects the historical figure to the literary figure and makes an argument for his literary purpose:

Ellison’s character is directly modeled after the blues musician Peetie Wheatstraw, “The Devil’s Son-in-Law.” The whole point of both Ellison’s character and the persona created by bunch is to break through the barriers of Jim Crow America...In *Invisible Man*, Ellison has carefully identified all the all the symbols of authentic Southern hoodoo, including seventh sons of seventh sons, the evil eye, black cat bones, and high John the conqueror. The “greasy greens” he also mentions are an artistic license: they are a staple food of Southern black culture. (Komara 1068).

Komara’s cogent analysis of Wheatstraw reminds the reader of the narrator’s southern culture. Yet *Invisible Man* shows us that in pursuit of progress and self-advancement, he has forgotten his own roots; his cultural memory only exists in traces. He demonstrates this loss of cultural memory when he first sees and hears Wheatstraw:

Close to the curb ahead I saw a man pushing a cart piled high with rolls of blue paper and heard him singing in a clear ringing voice. It was a blues, and I walked along behind him remembering the times
that I had heard such singing at home. It seemed that here some
memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to
things I had long ago shut out of my mind. (Ellison 173)

Wheatstraw’s presence informs both the reader and Invisible Man that “[t]here was
no escaping such reminders” (Ellison 173). Nevertheless, Invisible Man tries to
perform as if his southern roots have been eradicated. Wheatstraw addresses him:

“Looka-year, buddy…”

“Yes,” I said, pausing to look into his reddish eyes.

“Tell me just one thing this very fine morning—Hey! Wait a minute,
daddy-o, I’m going your way!” (Ellison 173)

Here, Invisible Man is doing his best to avoid talking to this particular reminder of
his past. Wheatstraw forces his attention, and in an accent completely void of
vernacular, Invisible Man coldly responds with “What is it?” (Ellison 173). Then
Wheatstraw begins a game to authenticate Invisible Man’s down-homeness: “‘What I
want to know is,’ he said, ‘is you got the dog?’” (Ellison 173). What Wheatstraw is
signifying here is irrelevant. What is relevant is Invisible Man’s disdain for the
conversation. Timothy Spaulding explains, “the narrator’s initial reaction is one of
revulsion and incomprehension. The narrator fails to understand Wheatstraw’s
words and responds with anger and embarrassment” (Spaulding 490). But because
his past is inescapable, “Gradually Wheatstraw’s signifying begins to seep into his
memory and cultural consciousness as he continues to speak to the narrator in
familiar terms” (Spaulding 490). Wheatstraw is actually aiming to connect with the
Invisible Man who he knows is “from down home” (Ellison 173). Marc Singer views
this interaction as a conflation of two time periods: "The Invisible Man encounters a new and equally chaotic temporal conflation when, expelled from the bucolic university, he arrives in New York City. There he soon encounters a living embodiment of this conflation of past and present in the cartman Peter Wheatstraw" (Singer 397). Invisible Man finally accepts his past when he replies, "Don't let him get you down" which is Invisible Man’s entrance into the language game that Wheatstraw has been playing (Ellison 174).

Yet the most powerful moment of this scene occurs when Invisible Man’s spirits are actually lifted by what he at first found to be absurd and offensive: "He had me grinning despite myself. I liked his words though I didn’t know the answer. I’d known the stuff from childhood, but had forgotten it; had learned it back of school" (Ellison 176). When Invisible Man notes he “had learned it back of school,” the audience is reminded that whatever unique temporality the narrator employs, his past is always a part of his unique make-up.

To summarize, these grounding devices are the narrator’s reminders that his experience, no matter how uniquely expressed in his narrative, is not simply a fragment of moments but a collective whole including his entire past. Although Invisible Man’s jazz temporality often disturbs the stable narrative rhythm in an effort to express his experience apart from homogenizing forms of time, the aforementioned historical and cultural references stabilize the narrative enough to keep it from whirring off into entropy. Without a cultural tradition, Invisible Man’s narrative would suggest an identity as protean as Rinehart’s—without boundaries. But some form of temporal boundaries is necessary for lived existence. Without
them, the subject cannot exist in relationship with the world. That is why Invisible Man swears off reefer: “the drug destroys one’s sense of time completely” (Ellison 13). Invisible Man then expresses that life would be entirely unlivable without some awareness of temporality: “If that happened, I might forget to dodge some bright morning and some cluck would run me down with an orange and yellow street car, or a bilious bus!” (Ellison 13). Ultimately, Invisible Man’s narrative suggests that demonstrating one’s own sense of temporality is necessary to conveying a unique individual experience, but disregarding the surrounding world’s sense of time entirely could be disastrous in practice. Even though the subject is an individual, he still must exist in relationship to others. Traditional jazz and Invisible Man’s narrative find this balance; they truly are “marvels of social organization.”
Conclusion

Invisible Man’s closing remarks could potentially lead us to believe that his attempt to write his story (history) has been a failure. He freely admits, “Here I’ve set out to throw my anger in the world’s face, but now that I’ve tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I’m drawn upward. So that even before I finish I’ve failed” (Ellison 579). Writing, in his estimation, was supposed to empower him; it was supposed to expose the world that treated him and others like “mere pawns in the futile game of ‘making history’” (Ellison 575). Yet “[t]he very act of trying to put it all down has confused [him] and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness” (Ellison 579). Furthermore, he states, “having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge” (Ellison 581). The language of “having tried” implicitly carries traces of failure—as if the time spent underground attempting to bring chaos to form has been a waste. “Perhaps,” he writes, “I’ve overstayed my hibernation” (Ellison 581).

If we accept Invisible Man’s ostensible admission of defeat, then we must also accept that his narrative temporality has not, for him, properly achieved its initial intention. He does not believe the reader will see his subjectivity. In his evaluation, we too, despite his narrative efforts, will look through him: “So now having tried to put it all down I have disarmed myself in the process. You won’t believe in my invisibility and you’ll fail to see how any principle that applies to me could apply to you” (Ellison 580). Here, he suggests that despite his best effort to reveal society’s homogenizing power structures and to craft a unique individual experience, the
reader will still subscribe to whichever hegemonic system has already shaped his (the reader’s) experience. In other words, as products of structures outside of ourselves, we are incapable of seeing how these structures are acting upon us. Thus, all of his writing has been in vain because although he is “invisible, not blind” we are both invisible and blind (Ellison 576).

Yet Invisible Man’s tone throughout the epilogue is disingenuous. He signals to the reader early in his coda that he cannot be trusted—that he is unreliable: “Let me be honest with you—a feat which, by the way, I find of the utmost difficulty” (Ellison 572). This utterance should immediately force us to question all proceeding remarks. Necessarily, we ought to mistrust his judgment regarding his admitted miscalculations apropos of narrative power. Two prominent examples of authorial moves he makes that we should be wary of are his supposed reasons for writing and his laying bare of textual binaries. First, his motivations for writing remain unclear. At times he suggests that writing is an attempt to force commiseration. For example, he asks, “Why should I be the one to dream this nightmare? Why should I be dedicated to set it aside—yes, if not to at least tell a few people about it?” (Ellison 579). In this moment, it appears as if he desires others to suffer with him. Yet, in other moments, he suggests that he wants his writing to prevent others from suffering. He does so by implying that he wishes to enlighten the reader by revealing the true chaos of structural patterns through his own literary pattern: “the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived” (Ellison 580). And, of course, we must also understand that his stated authorial intentions could just be an act of dissembling. Second, he is
overly interested in doubting that his life and ensuing text mean anything. He expresses this doubt by freely offering indeterminacies. For example, he writes, “When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through it” (Ellison 572). Here we think Invisible Man is about to make some cogent argument about the actual state of things and about the actual state of being, but he does not do it. Instead, he admits that he is still “plagued by his [Grandfather’s] deathbed advice…I can’t decide” (Ellison 574). He also admits that after being “‘for’ society and then ‘against’ it,” he “assign[s] [him]self no rank or any limit” (Ellison 576). Instead, his “world has become one of infinite possibilities” (Ellison 576).

In both of the aforementioned literary moves—stating intention and juxtaposing binaries—Invisible Man is performing a role that he has been performing from the start; he is performing the role of jazz musician. He is engaging in a Derridean-like form of play. But he is not playing by merely decentering binaries and origins. In other words, if his epilogue were only laying bare indeterminacies—as it ostensibly appears to be doing—then he would only be overly determining his text as indeterminate. Instead, he is teasing the reader in the same way the jazz musician teases his listener. His analysis of Louis Armstrong can assist in understanding the playful moves he is making as an author:

With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, “Open the window and let the foul air out,” while the other says, “It was good green corn before the harvest.” Of course Louis was kidding, he wouldn't have thrown
old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the
dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of the old
Bad Air’s horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music
and his dancing and his diversity, and I'll be up and around with mine.

(Ellison 581)

In the same way that Louis Armstrong is kidding or teasing, Invisible Man is playing
with his reader. By suggesting that his text is indeterminate, he is only marking the
absence of determinacy, which simultaneously suggests the presence of
determinacy. That being the case, like the jazz musician who plays with time by
moving in and out of it, Invisible Man is creating and playing with his own binary:
determinacy/indeterminacy. The movement between these two opposite poles is an
extension of his entire temporal mode that balances tradition and individuality.

Thus his epilogue may remain undecidable regarding what it means, but how
it means is consistent with his entire narrative form. His writing has not been a
failure; his writing has been an aesthetic composition like that of a Louis Armstrong
piece. If we try to pin the text down, it will slip from our grasp in the same way that
swing and syncopation elude the jazz listener who tries to capture or stabilize a
steady beat. Invisible Man is an artist like Duke Ellington; he is including us in his
music only to include us in the dance.
Works Cited


CURRICULUM VITAE

JORDAN CROSBY LEE

EDUCATION

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
MA, English
May 2013

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
BA, English
May 2009

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
Writing Center Tutor, August 2011-July 2013
- Tutored students from all academic disciplines in English composition
- Developed, organized, and directed a writing workshop available to the entire student body that focused on the ten most misleading writing myths (Spring 2012)
- Assisted Dr. Ryan Shirey with instructing his writing workshop on composing personal statements (Spring 2012)
- Developed, organized, and directed a writing workshop available to the entire student body that focused on battling writer’s block (Fall 2011)

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
Research Assistant for Dr. Erica Still, Professor of English, May 2012-August 2012
- Researched, vetted, and summarized critical articles about a variety of African-American and LGBT literary works
- Exhumed difficult-to-find texts from a variety of libraries and on-line journals

Central Catholic High School, San Antonio, TX
Creative Writing Teacher, Speech Teacher, Creative Writing Anthology Moderator, Debate Coach, August 2009-May 2011
- Created an unprecedented speech curriculum based on Wake Forest’s introductory communications course
- Collaborated with Principal Eddie Ybarra to develop and teach Central’s first “Men of Integrity” course which instilled the students with the values of altruism and compassion
- Established Central’s first Lincoln-Douglas debate program
- Compiled, edited, and formatted students’ creative writing pieces for Central’s creative writing anthology (Spring 2010 and Spring 2011)