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The blues and jazz in Albert Murray's fiction: A study in the tradition of stylization

Jacquelynne Jones Modeste

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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THE BLUES AND JAZZ IN ALBERT MURRAY'S FICTION:
A STUDY IN THE TRADITION OF STYLIZATION

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Jacquelynne Jones Modeste
2004
APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

[Signature]
Jacquelynn Jones Modeste

Approved by the Committee, November 2004

[Signature]
Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, Chair

[Signature]
Robert A. Gross

[Signature]
M. Lynn Weiss

[Signature]
Robert G. O'Meally, Professor
Columbia University
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Throughout the many meetings I have had with Albert Murray over the development of this project, he has consistently insisted on one thing: "Scooter [the recurring protagonist in Murray’s novels] is a hero." Sometimes Murray declared this in a loud, raspy voice. Sometimes he stated it as a simple matter of fact. A few times the assertion resulted from his sheer exasperation when I seemed to be missing this point completely. Much to the chagrin of Mr. Murray, the whole idea of Scooter’s heroism seemed secondary to me. In each of Murray’s novels, *Train Whistle Guitar*, *The Spyglass Tree*, and *The Seven League Boots* and in the series as a whole, I wanted to explore Scooter’s personal development. I wanted to gain insight into the process of artistic creation—particularly the use of the blues as a literary device—and to explore the cultural relevance of the blues in terms of its contribution to an American literary tradition. I believe the blues is instrumental in the formation of Scooter’s character. I knew that the blues heavily influenced the lives of many African Americans who used and sang the blues to explain life and express themselves, and enjoyed the blues just for its own sake, and I thought it logical that the blues as aesthetic statement would find its way into the fiction.

Albert Murray was born in Nokomis, Alabama, in 1916 but left this rural home at an early age and was reared by adoptive parents in Magazine Point, on the outskirts of the bustling port city of Mobile. Here Murray had exposure to the comings and goings of sailors who stopped over as their ships docked and the various languages they spoke and customs to which they adhered. Young Murray was exposed to an active nightlife, if not directly, through the businesses that comprised the entertainment and sustenance for sailors and area workers alike as they enjoyed visits to the city. A sawmill contributed to local industry. A train station, bus station and many other places helped Murray to imagine life beyond Mobile. Murray widened his environs first by attending Tuskegee Institute from 1935-39. Yet it was during his tenure as an Air Force officer from 1943-62 that Murray began to travel on a grand scale, taking full advantage of the opportunities to visit and/or live in California and abroad in Morocco, Italy, France, and Germany among other places.

Murray met Ralph Ellison when both were undergraduates at Tuskegee but the two did not develop a close friendship until they were in New York (Murray moved to New York in 1962) pursuing writing careers. Married in 1941 to the beautiful Mozelle Menefee, also a Tuskegee graduate, the two have one daughter, Michele, an accomplished dancer. Murray has taught at the university level, written an autobiography of Count Basie, and has contributed several important books of non-fiction. He has published one book of poetry and to his Scooter series, comprised of the three books in this study, has just been added a fourth recently completed novel entitled *The Magic Keys*.

As I began to study the scholarly work on the blues and explore my own interest in the music, I became intrigued with its central characteristic of improvisation. A seemingly effortless endeavor, a musician’s ability to improvise is actually the result of years of patience, practice, and dedication. The result is a deceptively spontaneous

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musical creation that reflects a smoothness of style that transforms the original into a stylized statement of the artist's personal interpretation. Each performance varies with each artist, within the repertoire of a single performer, and with each rendition of a particular tune. Such a display of individuality seemed untamable and I wondered how I could bring a sense of scholarly unity to something that was, in its very nature, diverse and elusive. I did not wish to write a history text on the blues, investigating the various aspects of individual performances and fill pages with great variety as I identified basic structural similarities. Neither did I want to write fiction, reveling in the emotive nature of the music and creating my own version of its guiding elements. Rather, I sought to merge these two endeavors, presenting a synthesis that is, like the music, based on the centrality of improvisation. As I worked toward this objective examining the blues and analyzing Scooter in terms of his blues rearing, I discovered the most amazing thing—Scooter is a hero because of the blues.
ABSTRACT

The use of the blues as a critical theory and as a literary model for the crafting of fiction opens new possibilities for both intellectual and artistic exploration. Reflecting the power of human agency amidst antagonism, the blues is the music of personal triumph over the brutality of circumstances despite any change in condition. The music’s emphasis on improvisation reveals human agency because through instrumentation, singing, stylistic nuances, audience participation and/or venue individuals transform perceived or imagined woefulness into hopefulness. Studying the blues and its cultural legacy is significant in identifying the mechanisms by which individuals and ultimately entire communities sustain themselves. The literature that uses the blues as an aesthetic guide demonstrates variety of experience, human agency, and an individual crafting of identity in relation to group identity.

Albert Murray’s Scooter series, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), *The Spyglass Tree* (1991) and *The Seven League Boots* (1995), lends insight into the ways in which the blues contributes to the writing of fiction. Initially set in the 1920s and 30s Jim Crow U.S. South, the series follows Scooter through maturity into the 1960s. Scooter is reared in the blues tradition; its history is his life. Music abounds, living conditions are harsh but his community exudes vitality that parallels the music. The blues is intrinsically linked with heroic activity because it demonstrates the ways in which personal agency transforms actual or perceived limitations.

In Murray’s blues-based series, a modeling of jazz is the logical outcome of Scooter’s characterization because jazz resonates with ingenuity and variety while being rooted in African American culture. This study analyzes Scooter’s maturity as it parallels the development of the blues through the country blues (*Train Whistle Guitar*), classic blues to jazz during Scooter’s college years (*The Spyglass Tree*), and the smoothness of style consistent with swing-style jazz during Scooter’s mature adulthood (*The Seven League Boots*). Scooter’s characterization will be considered in conjunction with Thomas Malory’s, Arthur in *Le Morte D’Arthur* (1485); Ralph Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952); and Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940).
THE BLUES AND JAZZ IN ALBERT MURRAY'S FICTION:
A STUDY IN THE TRADITION OF STYLIZATION
INTRODUCTION: ACADEMIC JAM SESSION

Viewing fiction as the ultimate expression of human creativity and possibility, Albert Murray uses his Scooter series to demonstrate how a keen focus on the particular can serve as a guide for humanistic concerns. In general, Murray’s novels can be read in terms of the maturation of his series protagonist, Scooter. His series can also be read in terms of the ways in which it illuminates the cultural function of using the blues as a state of mind by having his protagonist employ, continuously, an attitude of self-affirmation. In this effort, Murray succeeds in revealing the blues in a multiplicity of cultural manifestations beyond the scope of the music itself. Murray’s series is comprised of four novels: *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), *The Spyglass Tree* (1991), *The Seven League Boots* (1994), and the forthcoming novel *The Magic Keys*. By introducing readers to characters whose lives and attitudes exude the blues, Murray grants readers an ‘inside’ view of the ways in which the blues permeates not merely the air waves through sound but the mind sets of its knowing or unwitting practitioners. The blues as a state of mind indicates a cultural practice of meeting hardship face-to-face and transforming it by way of positive action regardless of any change in circumstance or condition. In fact, in the Murray and Ralph Ellison line of thinking hardship is precisely the thing that encourages or challenges the individual to do his best. This process is one of ‘antagonistic cooperation’ and as employed by Murray and Ellison is based on the understanding that “what brings out the best also shows up the worst.”¹ This mindset operates as “a frame of acceptance of the obvious fact that life is always a struggle against destructive forces and elements

whether seen or unseen."² Murray's series, therefore, does not rely on blues lyrics, privilege performance venues, singers or musicians in order to reveal the culture synthesized by the music; one need not hear the blues to identify its existence because the blue feelings that cause so much trouble penetrate the psyche and are, "absolutely noiseless at all times."³ In Murray's view fiction is capable of bringing synthesis to the complexity of the human existence (including death, pain, suffering, joy, elation, disgust, etc.) in a way that other artistic mediums cannot because fiction can imply sound (through onomatopoeia, the actual use of lyrics, names of performers and their songs), create visual landscapes in the minds of readers, evoke a wide range of sentiments, inspire or reinforce action, and contribute to the expansion of thought.

Albert Murray argues that, "[f]iction at its best may well be a more inclusive intellectual discipline than science or even philosophy. It can also function as an activating force which at times may be capable of even greater range and infinitely more evocative precision than music."⁴ "It is the writer as artist," says Murray, "who first comes to realize when the time is out of joint" and so can offer his own corrective.⁵ Through fiction, the writer can assume the status of a "mythmaker (and by implication, [a] value maker)" who "defines the conflict, identifies the hero...and decides the outcome; and in doing so he not only evokes the image of possibility, but also prefigures the contingencies of a happily balanced humanity...."⁶ In this regard, the writer is charged with the responsibility of integrity; his efforts are to be in the service of

⁴ Murray, Hero, 10.
⁵ Murray, Hero, 11.
⁶ Murray, Hero, 11.
producing work that will create a better humanity through the sincerity of his craft. Murray asserts, "The writer never ceases being concerned with human fulfillment."\textsuperscript{7} Protest fiction is rendered useless in this view because it seeks only to bring light to and complain about some immediate circumstance or condition; protest fiction is tantamount to rebellion. Humanistic concern, however, is geared toward creating a better world beyond the scope of any narrowly defined political agenda. Humanistic concern is revolutionary because according to Murray, "The primary concern of revolution is not destruction but the creation of better procedures and institutions...being a revolutionary should mean that you are \textit{against} something because you are \textit{for} something better. Indeed, primarily because you are for something better."\textsuperscript{8}

Edward Said's posthumous collection of essays suggests there is hope in the writer's role in addressing humanistic concerns. Said notes, "during the last years of the twentieth century, the writer has taken on more and more of the intellectual's adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority."\textsuperscript{9} Dating from the 1970s, the themes Murray explores in his fiction seem more urgent now than ever given the globalization of economies and cultures and addresses humanistic concerns in a manner consistent with Said's insights. Rather than suggesting a lack of seriousness play, indicates a mastery of craftsmanship. One must have intimate knowledge of his field and its various cadences in order to play with themes and nuances. Murray asserts, "the writer is likely to achieve his best (and most useful) work when his mastery of his craft is such that he is able to play with his story, even as a musician plays a score, even as actors play

\textsuperscript{7} Murray, \textit{Hero}, 13. \\
\textsuperscript{8} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 18. \\
a script, even as athletes play a game."¹⁰ Significantly Murray is able to address complex thematic concerns by granting a wide range of readers access into his novel, and so the world he envisions and creates, through the seemingly innocuous realm of childhood play. Murray crafts Scooter in the blues tradition in order to counter continued cultural pessimism in its myriad forms. *The Omni Americans* offers a nonfictional way, “To counterstate the use of sociological concepts to provide images of human behavior, particularly brownskin Americans behavior.”¹¹ Murray’s fiction merges his non fictional ideology into an art form in an effort to, “promote the general welfare” by attempting to draw readers’ attention away from the distractions of racial discourse and into the more useful discourse of becoming better prepared to face the inevitabilities of change (including globalization) we face as humans and as a nation.¹² Murray posits Scooter as an example of the types of youngsters we can develop if we, as a nation, make ourselves cognizant of our national cultural heritage of which the blues as a music and mindset is an integral part.

Beyond its identification as a musical genre, the blues is a way of life indicating a psychological proclivity that is both pragmatic and optimistic. In its ability to transform personal angst, through playful teasing and the often bawdy instrumental accompaniment to the singer’s voice the blues functions as an important and enduring cultural device that subverts the very blue feelings from which its name is derived. Esoteric by nature due to its multifaceted origins and multiplicity of influences, the blues must be understood not cognitively but holistically. This project will focus on the subversive nature of the blues as it threatens intellectual parameters and yields insight into at least three significant and

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¹⁰ Murray, *Hero*, 89, 90.
related debates within the study of the genre. In general, my discussion will center on questions of identity, both personal and national, and will consider the following: first, the blue feelings expressed in blues lyrics; second, the alleged indebtedness of the genre to its African roots; and third, the music’s cultural function.

I. Setting the Stage

As a musical genre, the blues is primarily a vocal music that can be identified by its eight or twelve-bar structure (though there are variations on this as well) and its syncopated beats or ‘blue’ notes. However, as a synthesis of various musical, vernacular and spiritual influences the blues is difficult to define. For this reason scholars tend to describe rather than define the blues.\(^\text{13}\) Houston Baker identifies a combination of, “work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more” as contributing to the emergence of the blues as a distinct musical form.\(^\text{14}\) Eileen Southern identifies the blues by its formal structure but takes care to note the blues is “an aural music... with few absolute features... intended to take on its shape and style during the performance.”\(^\text{15}\) She notes further that spirituals, work songs, field hollers, roustabouts and other musical forms all contributed to the development of the blues as a distinct musical genre. The blues changes according to the desires and needs of its creator and/or performer. It needs no written score; it is an improvised music, and because of its indebtedness to change, the blues innately subverts attempts to codify it into a single cohesive entity. As Baker asserts, “As a driving force, the blues matrix [a network of


influences] thus avoids simple dualities."16 In understanding the blues, one must take into consideration the multiplicity of seemingly distinct entities that together create a medium significantly greater than the sum of its individual parts.17

Steven Tracy, blues performer and scholar, lends insight into the myriad definitions of the blues, and in his _Blues Reader_ dedicates a section to defining the blues.18 Regarding its origins, Tracy quotes Memphis Slim who says, "The blues started from slavery," but Tracy problematizes this notion with a quote from Wild Child Butler that subverts both time and place: "I'm from where the blues came from...that old country farm."19 Albert Murray notes that the blues ballad, "almost always relate[s] a story of frustration" but can "hardly be described as a device for avoiding the unpleasant facts of Negro life in America. On the contrary, it is a very specific and highly effective vehicle, the obvious purpose of which is to make Negroes acknowledge the essentially tenuous nature of all human existence"; hard times and bad luck are common to all.20

The blue feelings expressed in blues lyrics are inextricably bound to an individual’s immediate predicament and the transformation of deep-seated angst via an assertion of human agency. The blues represents the pain and suffering common to all humankind but the lyrics, no matter how plainly stated, are a mere skeleton of the expression of pain and its transformation.21 Langston Hughes’ implementation of the

17 Baker, _Blues Ideology_, 3.
19 Tracy, _Blues Reader_, 10.
21 In this regard, the blues speaks to immediate and individual concerns but through the expression of antagonism that plagues one’s soul, shares much with musical genres worldwide that function culturally in similar ways. One genre related to the blues is Spanish flamenco. For connections between these two genres, see Ralph Ellison’s essay titled, “Flamenco” in Robert G. O’Meally’s _Living With Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings_. New York: Modern Library, 2001. Also see Frederico Garcia Lorca. _In Search of Duende_. London: New Directions Publishers, 1998. For an autobiographical account of duende as it relates
blues in his poems notwithstanding, his short story "These Blues I’m Playing" is a case in point. Here Oceola Jones, a classically trained piano protégée, has decided to forgo the continued philanthropy of her northern patron in order to move to Georgia and marry the man she loves. Oceola knows full well the social and economic consequences of reverse migration and sacrificing her career in exchange for the domestic work sure to await her in the Jim Crow South; she knows, too, the responsibilities of motherhood. However, Oceola also knows the power of love and a woman's need for a man. In facing the reality of her situation, she sings the blues as she faces the disappointment of her exasperated patron who can narrowly consider only the sacrifice of talent. Oceola’s sing-spoken words, though shaped by her piano playing, are insufficient to capture the depth of her emotion; one needs the additional layers of information contained in Hughes’ story, at least, in order to get a glimpse into Oceola’s blues.\textsuperscript{22} Blues lyrics confront, in unsentimental ways, the unjust nature of life (lost loves, lack of money, lust and general heartache are the most common subjects of blues songs) but through the often bawdy, provocative instrumental accompaniment to the lyrics, the very act of singing (and certainly singing one’s own lyrics) and/or audience participation and venue, grants the performer (often the creator) the catharsis necessary to liberate him/her (if only temporarily) from the blue feelings that have caused such despair. As Baker states, “Even as they [the blues] speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility.”\textsuperscript{23} Hughes’ depiction makes clear that possibilities exist for Oceola, though

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] Baker, \textit{Blues Ideology}, 8.
\end{footnotes}
they are in direct odds with the life her patron has imagined for the protégé. Because the blues is deeply personal and filled with heart-felt angst, Baker notes, “The task of adequately defining the blues is equivalent to the labor of describing a world class athlete’s awesome gymnastics. Adequate appreciation demands comprehensive attention. An investigator has to be there....”

Although Oceola’s patron is “there” in the same room, the philanthropist does not employ “comprehensive attention” in regard to her student and so misses the deeper significance of Oceola’s angst.

A mere window into the world of the blues, lyrics are woefully inadequate as the sole source for analyzing the genre because they offer a “synthesis” and so only limited insight. Ralph Ellison recognizes the blues as a cultural force that signals the conflict and complexity of human existence. He states, “The blues speaks to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans...” In his Stomping the Blues, Albert Murray discusses the blue feelings so often associated with the music. These feelings, or blue devils, are “absolutely noiseless at all times. Their movements make no sound whatsoever. And they are evidently voiceless. They are said to speak, but only in the silent language of spirits.” Like a specter, the blues permeates the psyche, fills the air and is impossible to touch. The struggle to overcome or stomp the blues offers a platform of opportunity whereby individual fortitude is challenged; catharsis is victory. Baker asserts, “Even as they speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and

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26 Baker, Blues Ideology, 4.
28 Murray, Stomping, 4.
unending possibility."\textsuperscript{29} Tracy allows performers, scholars, writers and laymen alike to render their own interpretations of the blues. He offers a multivocal approach to identifying the genre that succeeds in exploring the breadth of the music and signaling its life affirming qualities. Tracy quotes Sara Martin’s lyrics, “Blues you roll and tumble, you make me weep and sigh/Made me use cocaine and whiskey but you wouldn’t let me die.”\textsuperscript{30} Because its focus is on the individual, the blues is inherently heterogeneous; each person will have his/her own interpretation as each singer will have his/her own vocal style. Understood culturally, the blues is a device used by some but not all in the transformation of personal antagonism; the blues subverts efforts to homogenize. Kalamu Ya Salaam, a poet and critic, asserts, “lest we be terribly mistaken, we must understand two factors” about the blues: “(1) not all african americans are blues people, and (2) the blues aesthetic is an ethos of the blues people that manifests itself in everything done, not just in the music.”\textsuperscript{31} An understanding of the blues involves infinitely more than musical appreciation and as Baker makes clear, “an investigator has to be there” in order to know the music’s deeper meaning and identify its cultural significance.\textsuperscript{32}

II. Tuning

The second point of contention within the scholarly debate surrounding the blues is related to the first and involves the hunt for the music’s African roots. Steven Tracy dedicates an entire section of his \textit{Blues Reader} to, “Africa and the Blues” and offers a survey of scholars who explore the West African influence on the music.\textsuperscript{33} While the

\textsuperscript{29} Baker, \textit{Blues Ideology}, 8.
\textsuperscript{30} Tracey, \textit{Blues Reader}, 11. The life affirming quality of the blues will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters of this study.
\textsuperscript{31} Salaam, \textit{What is Life}, 7.
\textsuperscript{32} Baker, \textit{Blues Ideology}, 4.
\textsuperscript{33} People were brought from all points in Africa to West African seaports for shipment over the Middle Passage. These people might have been East African and/or at least from various regions.
analyses in this section are keen, scholars avoid discussing the blues as a U.S. creation and so cannot address the music’s deeper meanings, cultural function, and continued vitality as a pragmatic device for confronting and transforming antagonism by dedicating their intellectual muscle, instead, to the hunt for origins beyond New World shores. Discussions of the blues suffer the limitation of time and place; the discourse stalls somewhere in the 1940s and is limited to the Mississippi Delta region of the U.S. Tracy’s comments suggest hopefulness in the future of scholarly endeavors to understand the blues and its African connections. He says, “[w]e have moved toward an increasingly more concrete and balanced examination of elements of African thought and experience that seem to have endured the Middle Passage and the crucibles of slavery, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, the Jim Crow system, and the civil rights struggle.” I believe he is correct although in my view, race is only one of many points of entry into an examination of culture. Richard Alan Waterman offers valuable insight into the music’s formal structure in his essay, “African Influence on the Music of the Americas,” but his analysis of the peoples who created the music denies them the heterogeneity of having myriad cultural influences and so runs counter to the multiplicity of influences synthesized by the blues. He asserts, “American Negro groups have remained relatively homogeneous with regard to culture patterns and remarkably so with respect to in-group solidarity.” Janheinz Jahn’s description of the music’s cultural function is a noteworthy attempt to move beyond an analysis of the music’s formal structure, though his understanding of the music focuses primarily on its African origins. Jahn insightfully acknowledges the transformative power of the blues and states; “The

34 Tracy, Blues Reader, 13, 14.
blues are sung, not because one finds oneself in a particular mood, but because one wants to put oneself into a certain mood. And this mood is melancholy only from the romantic point of view current since the time of the abolitionists."\textsuperscript{36} The problem with Jahn’s analysis, and studies that mediate the connections between Africa and the blues, is that in general the discourse stagnates somewhere between emancipation and the 1940s, since then the music seems to serve no cultural function.\textsuperscript{37}

Renowned folklorist Alan Lomax’s impressive body of work in documenting African American culture identifies the blues as a distinctly U.S. creation and credits the Delta blues, its practitioners and creators, as the originators of a significant cultural entity. Lomax recognizes the blues as a cultural force and as a medium granting agency to even the most downtrodden. He asserts, “Clearly, these underprivileged blacks had transformed every situation, every aspect of their environment—dance, orchestration, religion, work, speech—making them over in their own image.”\textsuperscript{38} However, by designating an entire group of people as “underprivileged blacks,” Lomax obscures any differences in the group in favor of social, economic, biological and cultural homogenization. Lomax denies this group the human agency his words seem to suggest. Ralph Ellison says, “the blues...was what we had in place of freedom.”\textsuperscript{39} Lomax’s comment neutralizes the sense of dignity expressed by Ellison. Well meaning, to be sure, Lomax cannot move past his own views of the “underprivileged” and their alleged difference from him and so illuminates distinctions rather than similarities and succeeds

\textsuperscript{36} Tracy, \textit{Blues Reader}, 30.
\textsuperscript{37} Scholars in this section tend to focus on the blues and its connections to West Africa and seem oblivious to the fact that Africa is a continent and not a country. Even when one narrows the geographic terrain to the West rather than Northern, Eastern, Southern or coastal regions of Africa, a great deal of homogenizing of peoples and cultures (languages, religious practices, etc.) must be enforced to make such connections. This effort obliterates or erases the very diversity and multiplicity of influences scholars agree went into the formation of the blues.
\textsuperscript{39} Ralph Ellison. “Blues People” in \textit{Shadow and Act}, 255.
in erecting/reinforcing a barrier between groups. Lomax goes even further and criticizes a Fisk University study for failing to, “locate the cultural wellsprings of this underprivileged majority and to describe the dynamics of their constant creativity.” In basing his understanding of the blues on its indebtedness to Africa (Amazingly, Lomax discovered that “black Africa had distinctive performance styles, quite as formal as those of Western Europe.”) Lomax’s argument, like others that privilege Africa, is weighted in favor of Africa; Murray’s favors the United States. In order to meaningful insight into the continued vitality of the blues as a current and pervasive cultural practice in the United States one needs to explore the vast terrain that exists between these two opposing trains of thought in order to demonstrate that the blues is an ongoing multifaceted American tradition. In his latest study Lomax tightens the connections between the blues of the United States and the continent of Africa. He states, “It is the gradual discovery of this river of black African tradition flowing through the Delta life that gives form to the experiences chronicled in” his current study. He states further that it “was a source of deep satisfaction to me that at last I, a white Southerner, could penetrate the Southern façade and learn something about what life was like on the other side of the Jim Crow line.” Lomax’s hard-line distinction between groups runs counter to Ellison’s view of the U.S. as an “international country” and opposes Albert Murray’s entire body of non fiction. With Lomax at one pole of thought and Murray at the other, scholarly discourse on the blues takes on a fixed position that is counter to the complexity indicated by the very music it debates. The Jim Crow line was not one with such sharp divisions that

40 Lomax, The Land Where Blues Began, xiii.
41 Lomax, The Land Where Blues Began, xiii. Good for him! However, the relationship Lomax describes sets up a relationship that parallels “black Africa” with “Western Europe” Lomax that leaves black Africa’s musical and cultural legitimacy dependant upon that of Western Europe.
43 Lomax, The Land Where Blues Began, xiv.

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cultural exchange between groups was not available nor was it the panacea of Murray’s fiction.\textsuperscript{45}

Albert Murray’s explication of American culture in the United States in \textit{The Omni Americans} offers keen insights into the hybrid nature of society. He asserts, “American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite… incontestably mulatto.”\textsuperscript{46} In \textit{Hero and the Blues} Murray reiterates this point and notes the influences on Negro singers and musicians as hailing from a multiplicity of sources including the music of “Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong among others, and by the sonorities of various down-home church rituals [more] than by any actual personal experience of racial oppression, no matter how traumatic.”\textsuperscript{47} Murray continues, “The actual working procedures of such blues-oriented arrangers, composers, and conductors…can hardly be explained by references to oppression or even economic exploitation.”\textsuperscript{48} Like Murray, Ellison views U.S. culture as, “pluralistic,”\textsuperscript{49} while Lomax’s view reveals no recognition of the hybrid nature or complexities suggested by the term ‘colored’. Instead, Lomax offers a narrow understanding of “black” communities and indicates, among other things, the difference between many of those who visited places where the blues could be heard and many others who lived within the tradition of the genre, who knew its deeper meanings beyond mere musical

\textsuperscript{45}In Murray’s fiction, there is very little mention of Africa or its influences on US culture. In Lomax’s study there is no mention of myriad cultural influences on the port city of New Orleans, Mobile or other similar locales. No mention of the Spanish-American War as having any influence on the development of musical styles or in the significance of the guitar or other instruments and their contributions to the development of the blues vocal or instrumental styles. There is no detailed analysis of the French influence on the musical styles though Creole culture figures prominently in the Delta section cited so frequently. Native American culture is likewise scantily addressed although numerous indigenous peoples inhabited the “colored” section of the areas discussed. Murray’s \textit{Train Whistle Guitar} makes these influences clear (even Ellison notes the relationship between flamenco and the blues).

\textsuperscript{46}Murray, \textit{Omni}, 2.

\textsuperscript{47}Murray, \textit{Hero}, 83, 84.

\textsuperscript{48}Murray, \textit{Hero}, 84.

\textsuperscript{49}Ralph Ellison. “Blues People” in \textit{Shadow and Act}, 255.
manifestations. To recall Baker, “An investigator has to be there”; sporadic visits into the culture do not compensate for lived experience.50

III. Sound Check

    Scholars, writers and musicians such as Murray, Ellison, Baker and Marsalis whose enterprise is to explore the blues as a significant cultural force typically subvert the use of race as a methodology in favor of views that indicate a shared or integrated living experience. This study offers comprehensive attention to the blues and its varied forms within the lived experiences of people. As Houston Baker argues the blues is a “synthesis” that combines, “work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more [and that] constitute an amalgam that seems to always have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.”51 Similarly Albert Murray argues, “There is...no question at all that the ultimate source of the dance-orientation so central to the life style of most contemporary U.S. Negroes lies somewhere in the uncharted reaches of some region in prehistoric Africa. But for all immediate practical purposes, the blues tradition, a tradition of confrontation and improvisation... is indigenous to the United States....”52 Murray’s assertion erases any meaningful history that Africa has on the U.S. and his implication that a pursuit of the African origins of the music dissipates into vagueness and obscurity (because one can only imagine cultural connections hailing from any precise geographical, tribal and/or period specific location on the African continent) needs updating to reflect the scholarly work that has bolstered the field since the 1970

50 Baker, Blues Ideology, 4.
51 Baker, Blues Ideology, 5. Emphasis is mine.
52 Murray, Omni, 17.
publication of *The Omni Americans*. Murray’s body of scholarship deals intimately with the blues as a U.S. tradition and he explores the blues in its multiplicity of cultural manifestations without using race as a primary element because through the particularities of experiences expressed through the music, he views a humanistic tool for survival that belies race. He asserts, “Those Negroes and those ever so liberal, completely compassionate, but very white friends of the Negro who are so readily convinced that they must look beyond the shores of the United States to find a great and honorable tradition are obviously unacquainted with the extraordinary studies in Americana...” Murray laments, “It is extremely difficult to believe that they could possibly understand very much [about US history and culture] that is of fundamental significance” because they “persist in ignoring so much of the flesh-and-blood history all around them at home and go chasing off to beat the Herskovitsian underbrush along some African riverbank” and their “very procedure destroys that which they claim they are seeking...” Salaam asserts a similar sentiment and expresses frustration with scholars who are intent on illuminating the connections between the blues and the African continent. He says, “the blues is not african. samuel charters dedicated many years trying to chase down the african roots of the blues, the savanna laughed at him...he never found the song, not to mention the singer. although certain african elements (including scales and instrumental/vocal techniques) are undeniable, west africa simply did not have the social basis to give rise to a blues vision.” I agree with Salaam, Murray and those similarly aligned. However, there is value is added to scholarly discourse that considers a wide array of influences *including* its African component. Scholars do an enormous disservice

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54 Murray, *Briarpatch*, 88, 89. Here Murray’s criticism extends to all who are aligned in the project of excavating the cultural roots of the blues in Africa, regardless of heritage.
to the field of study by positioning themselves in ‘either/or’ camps of thought. My investigation of the blues and its cultural manifestations is an effort, like Murray’s and Ellison’s, to “affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude” because, oddly, some do not engage the value of such life affirming qualities. This is not surprising, and as historian Robin D.G. Kelley notes, “most of the literature ignores what these cultural forms mean for the practitioners. Few scholars acknowledge that what might be at stake here are aesthetics, style, and visceral pleasures that have little to do with racism, poverty, and oppression. Nor do they recognize black urban culture’s multicultural roots.” Such one-sided views, however, are true despite the color line. Likewise, Salaam states, “some of us… underestimate the transformative force of slavery, civil war, reconstruction, and jim crow [sic]” and “ignore this unique historical development at the cost of rendering all our theories about black folk, blues aesthetic, etc., null and totally void.”

The aforementioned scholars know blues lyrics do not take as their subject matter the exclusive domain of race and yet for some race guides the discussion. For example, Lomax states that Zora Neale Hurston “never elicited any accounts of oppression from anyone, nor did she discuss such matters.” His reasoning that Hurston, “considered this too risky” (he is, in fact, “sure she was right”) denies the reality that Hurston lived the blues and so could take for granted the reality of racial bias and simply or exquisitely live

56 I had the pleasure of hearing Senator elect Barak Obama speak at the Harvard lecture in Edgartown, Massachusetts, this summer. One of his lines stuck with me and is useful here. He said discussion are not, “either/or” they are “both/and.” In terms of my discussion, both Africa and European influences need to be explored in order to have the fullest possible discussion of the blues and its cultural influences.


59 Salaam, What is Life, 8.

60 Lomax, The Land Where Blues Began, x.
her life, achieving, loving, lamenting, laughing and celebrating myriad experiences in a manner consistent with the blues tradition.\textsuperscript{61} By denying Hurston (and by implication all people of color) the agency and power of self-affirmation Lomax relegates her to the status of a victim. In Lomax’s mind, Hurston should have been outwardly dismayed by her racial inferiority. While Lomax acknowledges that Hurston did not view herself from his perspective, he is suspicious as to why she did not. The seemingly innocuous act of second-guessing Hurston’s intentions and motivations is an act of symbolic violence and is patronizing. Not only does Lomax cast Hurston as a victim but one who is masochistic and lacks self-consciousness. This action, as innocent as it may seem, denies artists the agency of self-expression and is an act that threatens to relegate human beings to subhuman status. Jim Crow was a lived reality on both sides of the color line but was not a focal point of one’s existence. Speaking of Jim Crow Murray asserts, “I was beating that. I was better than that. I wasn’t their conception of me, I was \textit{my} conception of me.”\textsuperscript{62} Speaking of musicians (Ellison worked as a professional trumpeter), Ellison notes that many jazzmen “lived for and with music intensely. Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of the idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments”; their efforts, by their own admissions, were not guided by race.\textsuperscript{63} This sentiment is repeated by classically trained jazz musician Wynton Marsalis who states, “For musicians you have many, many levels of antagonism. The first level is just to develop the skill of playing. The instrument itself is antagonistic because it’s not helping you, it’s difficult.”\textsuperscript{64} While Marsalis noted several

\textsuperscript{61} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where Blues Began}, x. Zora Neale Hurston’s professional achievements and personal exploits are well documented.
\textsuperscript{62} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 154.
\textsuperscript{64} Author’s interview with Marsalis conducted in NYC April 3, 2004.
levels of antagonism faced by musicians as they honed their skill, race never made it into the top ten points of consideration. Reiterating this point in an interview with Howard Mandel Marsalis states, “All I ever wanted to know was how I can play this mother-lovin’ trumpet and get better?” As Dizzy Gillespie has said regarding race and musical creation, “We didn’t go out and make speeches or say, ‘Let’s play eight bars of protest.’ We just played our music and let it go at that.” Race was not a guiding feature in artistic creation and certainly not in the way Lomax imagines it was or should have been. Ellison’s famous response to Irving Howe clarifies the point: “I am more knowing than Howe where my own life and influences are concerned.... To allow others to go unchallenged when they distort that reality is to participate not only in that distortion but to accept, as in this instance, a violence inflicted upon the art of criticism.” Hurston’s view of herself was more in line with Ellison’s, as he could never imagine himself as less than human. Similarly, Murray asserts, “I have never thought of myself as a victim or villain. I was always but always, the fairytale hero who would marry the fairy tale princess.” I will offer here a corrective to views like Lomax’s by arguing for those people who lived their lives in the fullest way they knew how and did not view themselves as victims. Hurston and those like her who achieved despite the odds, were everyday heroes who were actively engaged in living not lamenting their lives. The critical oversight regarding the blues as having cultural resonance beyond the scope of the music’s lyrics is a myopia that threatens to compromise the discourse.

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Investigations that focus on Africa in their attempts to better understand U.S. culture by-pass any benefits that might be realized from an active intellectual engagement of the heterogeneity of the U.S. population and the cultural collaborations between groups because their focus is elsewhere. The hopefulness Tracy expresses regarding the scholarly move “toward an increasingly more balanced examination of elements of African thought that seem to have endured the Middle Passage…” should be expanded to engage more fully the pluralism that exists in the United States. The United States has long been lauded for its human diversity but many scholars simultaneously and systematically fail to recognize the “hybridity and internal differences” in African American culture. Citing Paul Oliver’s 1970 study that focuses on African retentions in the blues Tracy credits Oliver as being, “an intelligent scholar with an intimate knowledge of the blues tradition and a probing, vigilant curiosity interacting with the concrete details of African life and ideas.” Quite at odds with Ralph Ellison’s view of Oliver’s work as a “sadly misdirected effort” Tracy’s praise seems hinged on the “curiosity” Oliver expresses for his subject matter. Tracy’s praise for Oliver’s study signals the division between subjective and objective points-of-view (one’s curiosity is peaked when viewing or studying the exotic). Both Tracy and Oliver suggest that African Americans have but one primary biological and cultural ancestor while Murray’s body of work makes clear, the connections between race and culture are limited.

There are at least two related problems with focusing on Africa in blues-based scholarship. First, attempts to locate the origins of the blues threatens to undermine any

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69 Tracy, *Blues Reader*, 13, 14.
70 Kelley, *Disfunktional*, 17. Here, as I have mentioned earlier, Murray falls on one side of the debate by limiting Africa’s influence and other scholars do the opposite. There must be a balance in the scholarly depiction of the blues.
serious consideration of the blues by diverting scholarly attention away from the music's cultural function, its various cultural manifestations and wide-ranging influence in favor of a one-sided view; deeper insights are not made obvious because Africa is the primary point of focus. Second, Africa is made more significant than the U.S. when, in fact, both are necessary to a comprehensive analysis of the blues. No matter the initiative, the privilege granted one camp of thought or the other is violent; the politics of this cultural division are compelling and in this study I will explore Murray's counterstatement as a counterattack on discourse that is weighted in favor of Africa. According to cultural critic Ross Posnock, "The demand for authenticity is always conformist and enforces homogenous norms, for instance rigid masculinism and rooted regionalism, while suppressing the cosmopolitan recognition that one lives a 'mixed-up self' 'in a mixed-up world' where ancestral imperatives do not exert a preordained authority."\textsuperscript{73} Scholars know full well the diversity of the U.S. and so the effort to homogenize is most curious.

Robin Kelley's insights on black urban culture are relevant to my discussion of the blues. He asserts, "By conceiving black urban culture in the singular, interpreters unwittingly reduce their subjects to cardboard typologies who fit neatly into their own definition... and render invisible a wide array of complex cultural forms and practices."\textsuperscript{74} The blues brings synthesis to the 'mixed-up' self and acknowledges the varied experiences and diversity of human existence. Through the recognition of diversity individuality is rescued from annihilation. Studies such as Richard Alan Waterman's that assert "American Negro groups have remained relatively homogeneous with regard to culture patterns and remarkably so with respect to in-group solidarity" reinforce

\textsuperscript{74} Kelley, \textit{Disfunktional}, 17.
hegemony by denying entire groups of people the dignity of self-assertion. This is the type of study Murray’s body of work is designed to counter. A military man, Murray is no stranger to combat. His body of work is a weapon for countering scholarly attacks on people of color. Waterman’s essay shrouds individuality in favor of overtly homogeneous assertions that obliterate any consideration of the music’s cultural function beyond the point of musical creation and in this way, supports the status quo—the traditional bifurcation of peoples along the lines of color or race. Waterman’s scholarly endeavor, like so many, marginalizes the human triumph over adversity (a meaningful success achieved through the blues) and reinforces hegemony by denying entire groups of people the cultural relevance, psychological power and victory that comes from self-assertion. Murray’s fiction (for the purposes of this study) focuses on the triumphs that did occur on communities of color.

In his *Omni-Americans*, Albert Murray recognizes the political implications of inflexible concerns with African origins and suggests that one’s participation in this quest for legitimacy is deeply personal and inextricably bound with determining one’s own identity and maintaining the status quo. He asserts, “how far back into the past one goes in order to establish the beginnings of one’s own tradition or cultural idiom is...downright arbitrary and quite in accordance with some specific functional combination of desirable skills and attitudes in terms of which one wishes to project

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75 Richard Alan Waterman. “African Influence on the Music of the Americas” in Steven Tracy, ed. *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*, 17. Waterman also notes that “in some respects, the western one-third of the Old World land mass is musically homogeneous” but I am not clear (and he does not clarify) as to whether or not he means the geographic land area comprised of the earliest English settlements or if he includes the lands currently part of the U.S. and previously colonized by France and Spain or these lands as they were inhabited by indigenous peoples. However, because Waterman considers American Negro groups “relatively homogenous” I am lead to believe his study includes the lands only as they were colonized and particularly by English settlers.
himself." While it may be easy to identify the blues by its eight or twelve-bar structure (and many other lengths), the difficulty arises in engaging the music’s complexity—it is so simple yet so complex. Murray’s fiction offers readers a simple coming-of-age story but in its apparent simplicity, all sorts of complexities are revealed. A matrix, according to Houston Baker, is “a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit.” Baker warns against viewing the blues as a “function of formal inscription” favoring instead the blues as a “forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself.” This force indicates “Afro-America’s cultural signifying” and posits the blues as an amalgam (matrix or hybrid) that can be identified in many cultural forms such as those explored in this study through Albert Murray’s fiction. Tony Bolden considers the blues “an excellent model for an oppositional criticism” because “it rejects simplistic binary oppositions” in favor of a multifaceted view of culture. This holistic approach may begin with the particularities of individual experience (blues lyrics address, overwhelmingly, the unjust nature of life in terms of lost loves, jobs and heartache) but moves towards a deeper understanding of human survival in its acknowledgement of human suffering and its transformation by human, not ethereal, means.

One of the most important aspects of the blues is its ability to capture a sense of playfulness despite its lyrical depiction of suffering and pain. Murray notes the “blues counteragent that is so much a part of many people’s equipment for living that they

76 Murray, Omni, 14.
77 Baker, Blues Ideology, 3.
78 Baker, Blues Ideology, 4.
79 Baker, Blues Ideology, 5.
81 In the study planned beyond the current project, I will investigate the connections between the blues, jazz and various world music such as flamenco as mentioned earlier.
hardly ever think about it as such anymore is that artful and sometimes seemingly magical combination of idiomatic incantation and percussion that creates the dance-oriented good-time music also known as the blues."^82 As is practitioners are playing with the feelings that have gotten them down, they sometimes dance away their blues. Murray states, "the fundamental purpose of the blues musician (also known as the jazz musician) ... is not only to drive the blues away and hold them at bay at least for the time being, but also to evoke an ambiance of Dionysian revelry in the process."^83 Because jook-joints, dance halls and even private listening to the blues encourage hip-moving, finger snapping and such, Murray likens the experience to "a purification rite and a celebration the festive process of which [is] tantamount to a fertility ritual."^84 Salaam notes the sexual aspect of good times. He states, "it is celebratory in the here and now, body and soul. This is why the blues aesthetic emphasizes and enjoys the sensual and erotic elements of life."^85 Eileen Southern notes, "almost always there is a note of irony or humor in the blues, as if the singer is audaciously challenging fate to mete out further blows."^86 Such teasing and taunting can be taken literally as a playful challenge but can also connote the realm of sexual playfulness, a nuance supported by the often provocative instrumental accompaniment to a singer's voice. Playfulness comes in many forms from childhood recreation to the sophisticated re-creation or re-enactment of events by mature adults. "Playful effort" as Murray intimates, "may be just a matter of fooling around...or a matter of gratuitously increasing the difficulty of execution..."^87 Playfulness is integral to Murray's ideas regarding culture because it reveals the value system of the group. He

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82 Murray, *Stomping*, 16, 17.
83 Murray, *Stomping*, 17.
84 Murray, *Stomping*, 17.
85 Salaam, *What is Life*, 17.
asserts, "[T]he essential character or disposition of a nation...may be discerned in its games and toys."\(^8\) Playfulness can be understood as an act of defiance. Murray asserts, "But perhaps far worse [than imitation] is casual mimickry, which even when it is relatively exact is an act of defiance...As for deliberately distorted mimickry, not only is it outright misrepresentation (and thus naked misidentification and misdefinition) but it is also undisguised defiance become downright mockery expressing contempt and even disdain."\(^9\) When singers sing the blues, they are confronting the blue feelings that trouble their souls and playfully, artfully and skillfully, transforming or neutralizing angst and thereby controlling, containing or mastering the pain if only temporarily. As Murray states, "The whole point is not to give in [to blue feelings] and let them get you down...For what is ultimately at stake is morale, which is to say the will to persevere, the disposition to persist and perhaps prevail; and what must be avoided by all means is a failure of nerve."\(^9\) This attitude of self-affirmation in the face of adversity indicates a proclivity towards optimism through an unsentimental confrontation of life’s unjust nature—the ability to persevere, by an act of sheer will, in the face of even the most bizarre situations with grace and apparent ease.

Speaking of the blues as a "frame of mind" Ralph Ellison states, “I refer not only to the song form, but to a basic and complex attitude toward experience. It is an attitude toward life which looks pretty coldly and realistically at the human predicament, and which expresses the individual’s insistence upon enduring in the face of his limitations, and which is in itself a kind of triumph over self and circumstance."\(^9\) These life lessons,

\(^8\) Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 31.  
this "bluesy attitude" is the stuff of childhood as it is here that one is reared in the
tradition of dealing with life's troublesome nature. The terrain of youthful play grants
access to the ways and means by which adulthood and mature sensibility are achieved or
earned. Linking improvisation with play Murray asserts, "Improvisation...is the ultimate
skill. The master craftsman is one for whom knowledge and technique have become that
with which he not only performs but also plays." "Playing with the possibilities" of
creation, children employ the lessons imparted to them by those more knowledgeable and
learn to stylize or individualize their responses to various situations by honing their skill
at confronting life's experiences when they engage in youthful play. Murray states that
through play, man becomes "the stylizer and...humanizer of chaos; and thus does play
become ritual, ceremony, and art; and thus also does the dance-beat improvisation of
experience in the blues idiom become survival technique, esthetic equipment for living,
and a central element in the dynamics of U.S. Negro life style." It is the idea of
playfulness first expressed in childhood that Murray captures in his first novel, *Train
Whistle Guitar*, and expands upon in its sequels.

IV. Rehearsing

An understanding of the blues and its cultural function lends insight into jazz
music and its cadences within American culture. Murray defines the blues idiom lyric as
a cultural practice that "would have the people for whom it is composed and performed
confront, acknowledge, and proceed in spite of, and even in terms of, the ugliness and
meanness inherent in the human condition. It is thus a device for making the best of a bad

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95 Murray, *Omni*, 58.
He continues, “blues-idiom dance music challenges and affirms [the individual’s] personal equilibrium, sustains his humanity, and enables him to maintain his higher aspirations in spite of the fact that human existence is so often mostly a low-down dirty shame.”

This ability to face life’s demands and forge one’s own response is empowering, demonstrates individual agency, is a central tenet of the blues and is a powerful element in jazz music. “Improvisation—the art of composing in the moment, while performing, without a written score—has long been seen as the hallmark that sets jazz apart from other musics…” The blues forms the basic structure of jazz music. As Murray states the, “basic structural devices” of the blues were “extended, elaborated, and refined into jazz.”

Jazz music moves beyond the eight or twelve-bar structure of the blues and expresses a musical complexity through variety in instrumentation and the expectation that each band member will improvise and so contribute his unique voice to the overall mission of the group. As John Szwed states, “every musician is expected to rise to a certain level of creativity.” Implicit in the instrumental variety is the fact that jazz music, unlike the blues, cannot be played alone. While improvised solos are expected of each band member, jazz is decidedly not the music of solitude and represents a collaborative effort. Collaboration itself is complex, as individuals must negotiate their behavior, actions, and personalities in response to and in conjunction with group members. Musically this marks the difference between cacophony and euphony or

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100 Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 43.
101 Such solitude was the stuff of the earliest blues music; the singer and composer were one and the same and performed for his sole entertainment. An audience was incidental to the singer/composer. See LeRoi Jones’ *Blues People*, Eileen Southern’s depiction of early blues music in *The Music of Black Americans* and also Murray’s fictional rendering of Luzana Cholly, a wandering bluesman in *Train Whistle Guitar* (all to be discussed in the body of this study).
harmony. As a genre that captures the anxiety ridden conditions in which the individual finds himself surrounded on stage, jazz music serves as a metaphor for urban realities such as those experienced by migrants to northern cities. This complexity is summed up in Murray’s understanding of jazz as, “the fully orchestrated blues statement.”102 Jazz represents heightened individuality because the individual must overcome personal angst in order to improvise, as with the blues, but he must do so within a group setting. As the function of blues music is to stomp away blue feelings in an atmosphere of good times, jazz music stomps away any remnants of blue feelings through sophisticated sonic creations, individual variations on musical themes, and within a group setting that demands the participation of every one of its members.

The blues and jazz share a musical component called the “break”—the moment when an individual separates from the group for the purpose of performing solo. Of the break Murray states, “it is a cessation of the established rhythm and temp which jazz musicians regard and respond to...as an opportunity to exercise their personal best.”103 As a dance-oriented music the blues shares with jazz the ability to create an atmosphere of good times. Like the blues, jazz music is difficult to define because it subverts simplistic definitions. Szwed notes, “Jazz...breaks from Western conventional thinking, denying the distinctions between composer and performer, creator and interpreter, composer and arranger, soloist and accompanist, artist and entertainer, even soloist and group.”104 (Szwed 47) Like the blues, jazz is more than a musical genre; jazz, is a state of being. “It is a way of being as well as a way of doing. It is an emergent form, a social form, and as much an ethic as it is an aesthetic. No wonder, then, that many jazz

102 Murray, Brirarpatch, 4.
103 Murray, Brirarpatch, 6.
104 Szwed, Jazz 101, 48.
musicians speak of their music in metaphysical or spiritual terms, or justify the music in terms of personal and collective survival.” As a way of life, the blues and jazz indicate the individual’s ability to play with and transform the various situations in his life in all their complexity. The similarities between the blues and jazz form a continuum of effort that indicates a tradition of individuals negotiating and responding to the competing demands of their lives.

Serving as a highly significant component of Murray’s literary endeavors, the blues and jazz are models for the explication of the individual’s concerns in increasingly wider and more complex settings. In his fiction Murray favors swing-style jazz and in heralds Duke Ellington as an important cultural hero for being able to use the blues as a basis for creating his complex jazz compositions. As Murray notes, “Ellington’s musical context from the very outset...was one in which primary emphasis was placed on coming to terms with the vernacular music of New Orleans, the blues, vaudeville show tunes and novelties, and popular dance melodies.” A cosmopolitan, Ellington’s palette was broad; he knew classical and vernacular music, various forms of artistic and cultural expression, and was ‘at home’ in both jook-joints and the White House and spoke the language privileged in each setting. From this amalgamation of influences, Ellington forged a sonic synthesis and left an incredible legacy.

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105 There are many connections between jazz music and democracy, an idea addressed by many stellar musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie (see Eric Porter’s What is this Thing Called Jazz), various Duke Ellington’s interviews, get Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison, Lincoln Center’s December 2003 symposium on “Jazz and American Democracy,” and my June 2004 conference presentation in Nottingham, England, titled “Everyday Revolutionaries: Murray, Marsalis and Democracy” and Stanley Crouch’s essay, “Blues to be Constitutional” in Robert G. O’Meally’s, ed., *The Jazz Cadence in American Culture*. The connections between jazz and democracy is the subject of a project I have running concurrently with this one.

106 Murray, *Briarpatch*, 152.

107 Duke Ellington’s music currently forms the core of Jazz at Lincoln Center’s musical and educational endeavors.
Murray’s Scooter is crafted similarly taking in all the formal and informal influences and opportunities he can in order to learn as much as possible and obtain his goal of being cosmopolitan and also sustain the admiration of his home community. Speaking of the literary, musical and vernacular influences on his own writing Murray recognizes his style as an “integrated one.”

Ellington gauged his success by audience response and so maintained his musical integrity by giving the people what they liked to hear. As Murray notes, “the audiences he [Ellington] was hoping to please were not in the great concert, recital, and philharmonic halls. They were in the vaudeville and variety show theatres, dance halls, at parties, parlor socials, honky-tonks, after-hour joints, and dives.”\textsuperscript{108} Ellison’s explanation for this preference is that, “For the jazz artist there is some assurance in continuing to play for the dance audiences, for here the criticism is unspoiled by status-directed theories; Negroes simply won’t accept shoddy dance music.”\textsuperscript{109} Impressed and influenced by Ellington and his legacy, Murray’s efforts as a writer have been to, “try to make literary applications of the devices of jazz orchestration” or rather to do with words what Ellington did with sound.\textsuperscript{110} Like Ellington and Murray himself, Scooter—the protégée in Murray’s series—is not guided by thoughts of deprivation but rather is propelled onward because he is inquisitive. For Murray swing-style jazz is the most desirable form of the genre because it improves by way of audience participation; the more one integrates into new situations, the more he learns. If a band is swinging, the audience will dance; if the band can’t swing, the audience will remain still in direct defiance (and even disgust!) of what is being played. Of course, this view is summarized best by the expression “it don’t

\textsuperscript{108} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 45.
\textsuperscript{110} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 62.
mean a thing if it ain't got that swing” because the people guide the music's development; dancers cannot dance if the music will not support their efforts. As a mindset, the idea of swing indicates one’s ability to encounter life’s ugliness head-on and not simply transform the anxiety of any given moment (blues and jazz can do that) but to rhythmically glide through the tension in time, on beat with the apparent ease and grace of a dancer swinging to the music. As Murray states in his poem, “Pas de Deux”, “swinging is never uptight.../swinging is not only/the most elegant mathematical/solution/it is also/the best revenge.”111 Through swing-style jazz the complexity of jazz instrumentation is negotiated in time; a musician has to maintain the rhythm while improvising in the heat of the moment in order to allow dancers to maintain their flow of movement. Rather than restricting a musician’s creative energy, swing provides him with a supreme challenge; he must create within a given structure and so negotiate his innovative forays within the larger dynamics of the group and he must keep in mind the dancers at all times. The dynamics of swing are complex and comprise what Murray refers to as “the best revenge” because of the supreme masking swinging involves.112 Musicians must negotiate the anxiety of the moment intellectually and through sound exude the idea that their efforts are simplistic and even reflexive; “uptempo relaxation.”113

In order to learn all he can, one must integrate as many learning experiences (formal and informal) as possible into his storehouse of knowledge so he can broaden his worldview. Everything, every situation must be counted among one’s useful weaponry in preparation for future engagements of one sort or another. Scooter’s lessons come from

112 Murray, Conjugations, “Pa De Deux,” line 16.
113 Murray, Conjugations, “Pa De Deux,” line 5.
both likely and unlikely teachers. Luzana Cholly, a wandering hustler whom Scooter and his friend Little Buddy admire, knows the boys respect him and so uses his authority in this regard to stop their premature departure from town, letting them know they are not yet ready for such excursions. Red Ella certainly did not intend to teach Scooter a lesson in male-female relations but her killing of her man, Beau Beau Weaver, left a powerful impact on the boy who seemed to learn that the consequences of murder extended well beyond any associated dead body. Despite any legal consequences, there was an enormous personal price to pay that also involved community disdain. By integrating himself into various experiences and spying on adults as they discuss politics, social relations and enjoy jook-joint escapades, Scooter learns a wealth of knowledge that he could not learn anywhere else. Similarly Scooter’s academic experiences broadened his intellect in a way that complimented his personal worldview. Seeing soldiers wander the downtown streets on stop-overs from abroad and hearing barbershop tales of Spanish-American War and World War one veterans, Scooter knows Gasoline Point is but one of many places in the world he must visit in order to be cosmopolitan. Stories endow Scooter with a sense of his history as part of a community. His youthful exuberance is transformed into mature wander lust as he grows older, a reality reflected in Scooter’s love for geography and travel, eagerness in meeting new people and constant reading various magazines, novels and musical appreciation (as an aficionado and musician). As a result Scooter views his hometown as one filled with possibility and always desires experiences beyond its borders. In his mind Mobile is, “The City of Five Flags” bearing a name that harkens tales about the French colonists, and the indigenous peoples who first populated the area but also Mardi Gras and so a blending of Spanish, French, indigenous,
African and African derived peoples celebrating together. "Incontestably mulatto" Mobile and its environs was a Creole society. In such a diverse community with such a rich history, integration was a way of life that belied any notions of color line separation.

Like musicians who take in as many influences as they can to perfect the sound they seek to achieve, Scooter and those who would be cosmopolitan viewed themselves as members of a world community whose borders extended beyond any narrowly conceived geographic configuration, whether or not they ever traveled beyond the town's actual borders. Speaking of Duke Ellington, Wynton Marsalis tells Eric Porter "Ellington's music was a 'synthesis'...of a wide range of musical styles and cultural influences...Duke's Mantra...was integrate, integrate, integrate." Similarly, Scooter like world-class musicians makes himself part of various communities and so continuously expands his realm of knowledge. In this way, one always moves towards the center of new experiences rather than remaining at the periphery. The insight one stands to gain through the process of integrating himself into a community or culture is vastly different than that which would be gained by remaining an outsider. Active integration allows for full-scale participation in new group settings and so the realization of liberty, psychological at least, from bifurcated experiences and notions of 'otherness.' Scooter is Murray's fictional representation of his belief that, "Your ambition should be to become as cosmopolitan as possible." Integration dismantles borders both physical and metaphorical. With this in mind, Murray's playful inquisition "when you got to ask [sic] what it is/you never get to know" takes on an added dimension. Here the narrator illuminates the difference between one who would ask the question and one who would

114 Murray, TWG, 77.
115 Porter, What is the thing Called Jazz, 287.
116 Murray, Briarpatch, 19.
117 Murray, Conjugations, "Pa De Deux," lines, 18, 19.
know the answer; asking is done on the periphery and is a good starting point for inquiry. However, by integrating oneself into a community (for example) one can discover his own answers from within the group setting and ask no more.\textsuperscript{118} Similarly, in critical analyses of the blues, I think an integrated approach works best as this honors the multiplicity of influences, cultural and otherwise, that form the music by viewing its nuances from the inside out.

Albert Murray’s series depicts the blues, jazz and swing-style jazz as they resonate culturally. In Murray’s series, blues music and musicians do not figure prominently in order to focus on Scooter’s mindset and intracommunity relationships that exude the blues as a frame of mind. Focusing on the intimate details of his protagonist’s life rather than overarching legal, social or economic conditions, Murray introduces readers to young Scooter and his best friend Little Buddy Marshall in \textit{Train Whistle Guitar}. The two are children and as such are always only concerned with those activities common to childhood; playtime, school time, and family relationships are paramount but are levied against youthful risk taking. Resonating the intimacy expressed in the blues, Scooter represents the playful side of the music; its good-time nature, occasional forays into sexuality, its mediation of fear/safety are part and parcel of Scooter’s childhood experiences.

By novel’s end Scooter knows the pain of blue feelings.\textsuperscript{119} Luzana Cholly is a transient and a prominent figure in \textit{Train Whistle Guitar}. Cholly exudes the blues in his manner of dress and speech, by playing the music, singing lyrics that he composes on the spot (improvisation) and having a mysterious past that has encouraged legends and tall

\textsuperscript{118} Murray, \textit{Conjugations}. 29-31.
\textsuperscript{119} Stanley Crouch asserts the contrary and charges Scooter with having paid no dues (and so, for Crouch, there are no blues) in this novel. See Crouch, \textit{Always in Pursuit}. I provide more discussion on this point in a later chapter.
tales surrounding his existence. Blue Eula Bacote and Red Ella are presented as opposite character types. Blue Eula has every bit as much of a reason to feel blue as Red Ella but unlike Red Ella, Blue Eula transforms her angst (her no-good man gambles and cheats) by way of positive energy void of overt violence to herself or others. Mediating the brutal facts-of-life in such a way is key to understanding the blues as a cultural practice; violence is contained within the music and is negotiated intellectually and made manifest in nonviolent actions. Handling personal antagonisms in such a way represents a human triumph over raw emotion. Growing up in a community where the blues is honored and is practiced as a way of life, Scooter receives training in life skills and learns, by having the example of various community members, to transform his own angst in non self-destructive ways—a lesson not learned by everyone. Sometimes people just make horrible mistakes (or at least bad choices).

*The Spyglass Tree* continues Scooter’s saga in the wider realm of collegiate life. Here Scooter is introduced to an entirely new community miles away from the ‘safety’ of his home environment. Representing the migratory shift between blues styles and jazz, this novel serves as a metaphor for the increased complexity of instrumentation and experience above and beyond that depicted in *Train Whistle Guitar*. In addition, this novel introduces the element of competition that helps transform Scooter’s tale into one that models jazz. Scooter moves away from home and because he is poor, he has no money for return trips. He is cast into a new environment that fascinates him in a manner consistent with the fascination new migrants felt when first encountering northern cities. Scooter feels, “so totally alone” that his departure from home seems “a very long time

120 More detailed analysis in chapter one.

121 Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* resists the urge to smash a window of a store that sells skin-whitening products by exerting his intellect, containing his rage and so demonstrating a blues-like transformation of angst. This is discussed in detail in chapter three.
ago and in a place very far away.” Scooter who is accustomed to being a star in his hometown is only one of many talented college co-eds who occupy the new campus. Indistinguishable from “all the other freshmen waiting in the hallway outside the registrar’s office” Scooter could easily get lost in the crowd but will, like jazz musicians who are expected to improvise, find a way to distinguish himself amidst the crowd. Like a musician in a jazz band, Scooter is introduced to a variety of new instrumentation in his new setting. The globe in his third-grade teacher’s geography class is replaced by the biggest globe he has ever seen in the college library. In college, Scooter has access to new, more detailed and bigger maps, infinitely more books, and all the latest magazines. He must learn to live with his new roommate, a northerner. He must learn to negotiate the sexual dynamics of living with co-eds who are his peers, competitors, potential partners and nemeses. Like a jazz musician, Scooter must test his skill amidst similarly skilled competitors and can only maintain his place by demonstrating through his actions that he is good enough to remain part of the talented new group. For Scooter, this means maintaining the grade-point average necessary for continuing his academic scholarship, not getting a sweetheart pregnant (and so aborting his college career for fatherhood), and not getting killed in off-campus activities. Honing the skill of collaboration, Scooter is like a jazz musician who must negotiate myriad demands at once in order to survive on stage, psychologically and physically. As with musicians who maintained their focus on nurturing their skills, Scooter maintains his focus on academics, discovering his new environment and mediating its demands.

122 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 3.
123 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 3.
As Thomas Hennessey notes jazz was, "less a revolution against the values of mainstream America and more a way to 'make it' into the mainstream."\(^{124}\) College life allowed Scooter the chance to develop skills that would grant him access into the mainstream. In similar fashion, musicians "had trained artistic skills which they used for personal expression and to satisfy a mass audience."\(^{125}\) As Hennessey notes, "The demands of the national music industry helped to establish the professional, educated, middle-class oriented musician as the dominant figure in the black national bands and therefore the jazz scene."\(^{126}\) Similarly, Scooter’s collegiate education was in response to his community’s and his parents’ expectations but to the marketplace and middle-class respectability Scooter hoped to attain. Hennessey notes, "Self-discipline, punctuality, good appearance, and reliability were as important as musical ability" and the same was true for Scooter who had been reared these skills since his earliest childhood days at home, in school and within his local community in preparation for his entrance into the mainstream.\(^{127}\) Reared in the blues, to be sure, Scooter was concomitantly reared in the American tradition of mainstream values; the two are one and the same. Hennessy notes that during the swing era, "Musical standards also shifted with more emphasis on reading and ensemble playing for most players while solo abilities were required only for certain key performers."\(^{128}\) Scooter’s college education is consistent with the mainstream shift towards professionalism that required college degrees for its managerial class. More than literate, Scooter had to be college trained to enter into the elite realm he desired. "The swing style was complex...written arrangements...demanded full technical control by the


\(^{125}\) Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 11.

\(^{126}\) Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 11.

\(^{127}\) Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 11.

\(^{128}\) Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 11.
musician on his instrument”; likewise, these skills were required of Scooter and are depicted in *The Spyglass Tree*.\(^{129}\)

Swing is the epitome of the individual’s self-assertion within group dynamics and serves as the metaphor for the events that unfold in *The Seven League Boots*. In this novel Scooter, a recent college graduate who has deferred graduate school admission, is a professional bass player on tour with a well-known jazz band. A newcomer, Scooter is made to interact with the bands various members and share intimate spaces with them on the tour bus, in hotels, and after-hours parties. He must learn to integrate himself into the group’s dynamics and learn to forge his own voice so as to contribute to the group’s overall mission. While individuality is honored, an ensemble sound is preferred because swing bands cater to dancers and so need to maintain a rhythmic synthesis upon which dancers can rely. As John Szwed notes, swing bands are arranged in such a way that the instruments “play against each other in call-and-response fashion and then come together for ensembles.”\(^{130}\) The variety in instrumentation indicative of jazz bands is compounded in swing bands as entire sections are dedicated to particular instrumental arrangements. In general, swing bands have more musicians than smaller combos: reeds, brass, and rhythm are arranged in sections. Scooter’s experiences traveling with the band expose him to not only the members of the band but their audiences and fans as well. Scooter’s anxiety over entering college for the first time in *The Spyglass Tree* is compounded by the masses of new people he meets as a band member. Though Scooter is a novice bass player when he joins the group, his contributions help sustain the band’s overall mission to provide dance music the fans love. John Szwed informs readers, “the popularity of the string bass”

\(^{129}\) Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 11.

\(^{130}\) Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 126.
helped swing bands move from a two-beat to four-beat playing style.131 "A great band arranger" Szwed continues, "could make the band phrase and move as if it were a soloist, so when the actual soloists played they meshed perfectly with the ensemble."132 Scooter's contributions to the band's efforts demonstrate his ability to work within a larger group structure and keep in check his needs to assert his individuality; Scooter is a team player. In order to sustain the rhythm to which dancers can move, an overall synthesis of sound had to be maintained. Szwed notes that the movement from a two-beat to four beat style of playing could take, "seven or eight years" to achieve (even for the very best swing bands!) because "The ability of bands...to hold a steady swing rhythm was limited"; swing was hard precisely because it subdued individuality in exchange for an ensemble sound—a synthesis.133

Having demonstrated to readers his ability to adapt to a variety of situations throughout Murray's series, Scooter is a chameleon of sorts. Similarly, "swing rhythm became flexible and variable rather than precise" as the music developed and was sustained by its own momentum.134 In this regard, the Scooter series is one of ever-widening possibilities; he is ushered along through events in a seamless manner void of obvious pitfalls or stumbling blocks. In The Seven League Boots Scooter's opportunities broaden again. He first joins the jazz band and tours the United States; later in the novel, he embarks upon a solo career and visits Europe for the first time. "Swing was made possible by the substantial number of well-educated musicians in the United States who at this point could read or write sophisticated arrangements, and by the development of a

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131 Szwed, Jazz 101, 127.
132 Szwed, Jazz 101, 128.
133 Szwed, Jazz 101, 127.
134 Szwed, Jazz 101, 128.
number of stylists capable of soloing." Scooter’s college education grants him access to the wider realm of experience indicated by the jazz band; he is rewarded with the upright bass at the end of *The Spyglass Tree*. Educated formally, Scooter meets the new requirements of those who would serve the needs of the mainstream. Swing music was decidedly that of the mainstream and made Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Fletcher Henderson household names, defying race and class. As Szwed notes, “Swing of one form or another unified American taste reaching every class, age group, and race, despite segregation.” The manner of dress, the lifestyles and talent of swing musicians served as a model for success and was proof that large-scale collaborative efforts had mass appeal. For blacks Szwed notes, “It was a life of elegance, of pride in craft, a life that mocked the social limitations placed upon them. And the leaders were often heroes in the community.” Similarly, Scooter is a hero in the same vein as these world-class musicians who were/are “unique among African-Americans since music was one of the few fields in which racial stereotypes and prejudice did not hinder black achievement.” Scooter’s saga is a metaphor for the very heroism indicated by swing.

The three interrelated themes introduced above are taken up in the chapters that follow. First, the blues will be analyzed culturally as a lived part of the lives of its practitioners beyond the scope of the music’s sonic particularities. Chapter I, “The Making of a Hero” identifies the myriad ways in which the blues is made manifest culturally by analyzing characters and situations in Murray’s first novel, *Train Whistle Guitar*. Second, this study will address the benefits of employing the blues as a way of

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135 Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 129.
137 John Szwed notes that musicians dressed in tuxedos or “freshly pressed suits, starched shirts, and patent leather shoes” and female vocalists would wear, “evening gowns.” (Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 131)
139 Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 9.
life and the cultural work achieved in adhering to the power of human transformation rather than relying on some ethereal or magical source. The self-empowerment made possible by having a “bluesy” attitude is intrinsically related to the staunch individualism upon which this country was founded.

Chapter II, “Slaying Modern Dragons” sets the paradigmatic tale of heroism Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* against Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar* in order to illuminate a debate integral to the ongoing cultural war by demonstrating the power of human agency to transform personal antagonism by wielding the cultural weapon of a blues-based mindset and castigating various metaphorical dragons. The briarpatch, the environment in which one can negotiate various twists and turns of fate in a seemingly effortless manner because he has been reared in accordingly, is the metaphor Murray uses as the ground for comparison for young Arthur and young Scooter. In this chapter, the skill of negotiation is key to the success of each protagonist; Arthur needs external help and magic, Scooter is self-reliant.

Third, this study will use the blues as a theoretical device to analyze blues-based fiction. Chapter III, “Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Ralph Ellison—Point” an analysis of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as a blues-based narrative that stems from the same philosophical base as Murray’s fiction but that differs from Murray’s in significant ways. These differences illuminate the heterogeneity that is an inherent part of fictional renderings of the blues and emphasizes the distinction between Ellison’s and Murray’s artistic views depicted in their fiction. Chapter IV, “Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Albert Murray—Counterpoint” offers an analysis of Albert Murray’s *The Spyglass Tree* as counter statement to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Here Scooter’s characterization counters that of Ellison’s protagonist by concealing Scooter’s alleged ‘mistakes’ and making
apparent only a smoothness of narrative style. I argue that the difference is metaphorically the difference between bebop (*Invisible Man*) and swing-style jazz (*The Seven League Boots*), a difference that will become clearer in these later discussions. This type of analysis demonstrates the music, whether blues or jazz, is more than a musical genre.

The final chapter of this study, "(Un)Masking Possibilities: Bigger Thomas, *Invisible Man* and Scooter" examines one cultural divide between blues and non-blues people as expressed in the characterization of the protagonists in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Murray's *The Seven League Boots*. In order to unmask the heroic legacy they believe is an inherent part of their heritage, Ellison and Murray crafted protagonists who serve as a counterstatement to the literary configuration of Wright's Bigger Thomas; they did so by endowing their protagonists with a sense of their own history and a pride in their heritage, traits lacking in Wright's Bigger Thomas. In general, the literary debate explored in this chapter is one that centers on a dichotomy of literary expression as exuding either a "(1) the frame of acceptance or (2) the frame of rejection" in Murray's view and posits Wright's novel squarely on the side of rejection.140 In addition, this chapter demonstrates the heterogeneity that exists between groups that are allegedly similar and offers a counterstatement to homogenizing efforts such as those of Lomax in favor of a pluralistic or blues-based approach to analyzing literature and so better understanding culture. In a general sense this project is the academic equivalent to a jam session. It builds on an existing tradition of critical thought regarding the blues and jazz. In honor of that tradition, I contribute my own unique voice as a way to explore intellectual horizons. I aim to achieve, "in short, [a] self-determined identity" in a field.

that is "all the more difficult for not having been being rigidly codified."\textsuperscript{141} Knowing full well that, "as with the fast guns of the old West, there is always someone waiting in a jam session to blow [me] literally, not only down, but into shame and discouragement" I enter into the debate anyway, trained in the fundamentals of my field, steeped in many years of learning, armed with dedication and "enlisted for the duration."\textsuperscript{142}

CHAPTER I

THE MAKING OF A HERO

The blues is a musical genre that reflects, in unsentimental ways, the universal human will to survive and is shaped by the particularities of life within the United States. “Blues music is a ritualistic counterstatement” that puts into action an attitude of self-affirmation allowing a momentary catharsis over the troubles at hand.¹ Based on persistent resistance and made manifest through improvisation, the blues is the music of tenacity—of fighters not quitters. Murray states, “To me blues music is an aesthetic device of confrontation and improvisation, an existential device or vehicle for coping with the ever-changing fortunes of human existence.”² As evidenced by various cultural motifs including modes of vernacular expression, methods of transportation, musical articulation, and religious practice, the blues has been historically significant to the formation of African American group identity. The blues represents a “frame of acceptance” that allows one to take for granted life’s often unjust nature and proceed in spite of “destructive forces and elements whether seen or unseen.”³ Reared in the midst of these “destructive forces” one develops an immunity to them that allows for an apparent ease in negotiating the various twists and turns of one’s environment; this is one’s ‘home’—his briarpatch. As Robert G. O’Meally asserts, “He who is born into the thorny territory of the blues and who thus knows how to maneuver there without so much as a tear in his favorite fur coat” has found a home in the briarpatch, a pernicious land of

² Murray, *Briarpatch*, 5.
³ Murray, *Briarpatch*, 5. Murray’s credits Kenneth Burke with the use of this term.

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hardship for those who do not know its tricky terrain. The blues addresses the immediacy of the most intimate forms of personal angst, but when used as a guide for cultural analysis the blues reveals the complex mechanisms of group survival in the midst of mundane challenges of the briarpatch as people negotiate the minutia of their daily lives. This chapter explains the briarpatch of Scooter’s youth that guides his maturation and nurtures his will to achieve in a process Murray calls, “antagonistic cooperation.”

In Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*, Scooter is seemingly hemmed into a particular socio-economic condition. He lives in Gasoline Point, Alabama, a small town in the Deep South, and the vast majority of his community members are not formally educated. His neighborhood is poor and his best friend is an anxious adventure seeker whose antics nearly always involve danger of one sort or another. Prevailing social customs and Jim Crow legislation threaten to circumscribe every aspect of upward mobility for people of color in the 1920s American South and Ku Klux Klan members—with their white sheets, burning crosses, and Grand Dragons—threaten to transform the American south into a specter-filled medieval forest. While adults may be fully cognizant of how these dangers circumscribe Scooter’s livelihood, Scooter is a child and remains keenly focused on playtime, adventure, and doing well in school. Scooter rises in opposition to adult realities, pursues a formal education that prepares him to move beyond the region’s borders by skillfully navigating his way around personal and societal obstacles that threaten his future achievement.

Reared in the blues, Scooter enjoys the playfulness of the music and has a youthful good time throughout the early years of his life while learning the music’s

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deeper lessons regarding individual fortitude. A variety of teachers and mentors in Scooter’s community bestow upon him lessons that help guide him through life and prove equally important as those he learns in textbooks. In *Train Whistle Guitar* Scooter learns the lessons of the blues: to persevere in spite of his conditions and to improvise. As the ability to improvise implies skill and training, Scooter’s foray into the realm of improvisation comes at the novel’s end once he has accumulated academic and blues based training sufficient to prepare him for realms of exploration beyond those of his local heroes. Scooter’s successful passing of a test of skill proves he is qualified to assert his individuality in the proud tradition of heroic forebears. Heroic because his actions, behaviors, talent, skill, and courage are to be modeled, Scooter’s characterization demonstrates the strength of the blues as a reflection of cultural values in the crafting of literary heroes. *Train Whistle Guitar* offers a blueprint for the making of a blues-based hero. The struggles of the blues-based literary hero are not marked by fits and starts of resistance efforts; rather, such changes are presented as evolutionary and offer a platform on which the protagonist can improvise or showcase his ability to transform situations and demonstrate his skill while offering his expertise as a model for others to follow. Modeling the heroic raises the stakes of individual possibility by demonstrating the psychological freedom to imagine and prepare for greatness through testing the individual’s skill at improvisation or doing his very best.

In *Train Whistle Guitar*, Murray introduces our hero Scooter and defines him in terms of the blues. Like Murray who thought of himself as, “having to be the ever nimble and ever resourceful mythological Alabama jackrabbit...in the Alabama briarpatch” Scooter is reared in an environment that demands agility (verbal, physical, intellectual
and emotional). Overcoming the obstacles inherent in his environment is heroic because opportunities to succumb to internal pressures abound. However, by “making the best of a bad situation” Scooter achieves the improbable and overcomes the obstacles of his environment. “Heroism” Murray asserts, “is measured in terms of the stress and strain it can endure and the magnitude and complexity of the obstacles it overcomes.”

Shaped by destructive forces such as bootleg liquor trafficking, railroads that entice youngsters to expand their geographical horizons, budding sexuality and amorous relations with prepubescent co-eds, Scooter’s environment is laden with character types and situations that could impede his development and actually end his life. Scooter advances anyway, in spite of these obstacles by maintaining an attitude of self affirmation in the tradition of the blues. When scholars explicate the heroic possibilities of blues-based literature, the methods by which personal anxieties are transformed into weapons of personal, professional, and ultimately cultural survival are revealed. Using the example of Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar*, this chapter delineates the development of the blues-based hero in terms of the stylistic development of the music itself in order to demonstrate the practical applications of heroic activity in the transformation of hegemonic discourse regarding race in the Jim Crow American South of the 1920s and 30s.

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9 Modeling the heroic and blues-based heroic literature are explored more fully in chapter two.
Blues Background

The ability to highlight individuality is achieved in blues and jazz music though improvisation. “Improvisation—the art of composing in the moment, while performing without a written score…” is the individual’s opportunity to exhibit his personal style and distinguish himself as a unique being.10 The country blues, the genre’s earliest form, is identified by solitude, typically, one man playing and singing with a guitar. This solitude, primarily the result of Emancipation, allowed former slaves to separate from the group in meaningful ways and exert personal agency over the course their lives would take.11 Despite constrictions imposed by Jim Crow and social custom, the wandering bluesman was noted for his transience and songs of simple lyrics, and he represented the individuality made possible by Emancipation. As Houston Baker notes, “the blues singer and his performance serve as codifiers, absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience into formal expressive instances that bear only the slightest trace of origins, refusing to be pinned down to any formal, dualistic significance.”12 If his lyrics expressed blue feelings, his instrumentation and persistent wandering belied any commitment to sorrow, as perhaps the early bluesman understood blue feelings were relative to his prior condition of bondage. Baker notes, “Even as they speak of paralyzing absence and incredible desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility.”13 Eileen Southern notes, “Not all blues are sorrowful. Almost always there is a note of humor, and sometimes the blues singer

13 Baker, Blues Ideology, 8.
audaciously challenges fate to mete out further blows. Sure, he has lost his job and his woman has left him, and he has the blues, but he will go out the next morning to look for another job, and perhaps another woman will come along. In control of his comings and goings, the legally-free bluesman demonstrated personal agency forbidden during slavery and created songs that reflected his experiences in the free world. Spirituals, folktales and songs, and memories of endless labor during slavery influenced the lyrics and style of the early bluesman. Accompanied by a guitar or sometimes a harmonica, the early bluesman owned a piece of property and actually possessed a tool of his trade. He personified the freedom now granted to the group of African Americans because he could go as he pleased; his thoughts and property ownership demonstrated the types of possibilities available to the newly emancipated. As Ralph Ellison informs, “the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom.”

Classic blues marks the next stage of musical development in the blues genre and indicates a heightened individuality within the wider realm of early integration. Now accustomed to legal freedom, African Americans made forays into the mainstream and the classic blues represents a successful effort to this end. In Murray’s depiction of Scooter’s college experiences (in The Spyglass Tree), the realm of collegiate life broadens Scooter’s worldview in similar fashion. Legally free, Scooter integrates into an elite group of those able to pursue a college education during the Depression Era. While Scooter’s matriculation prepares him to advance his book learning, it also prepares him to integrate into the wider society once he graduates. Murray’s discussion of female blues singers demonstrates, in part, Scooter’s view of women (their impact on society and their

potential to serve as role models for young women who aspired to greatness whether in the entertainment, academic or other professional realm) is learned and nurtured in Gasoline Point.\textsuperscript{16} The women who emerged as the first practitioners of the classic blues genre were paid performers who sang in nightclubs during the 1920s and 30s. Well-known singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith enjoyed public notoriety in a variety of forms including record sales, scheduled nightclub engagements, local, and national acclaim. Distinguished from traveling bluesmen by the nature of their work, these women were more than members of their local communities.\textsuperscript{17} They were national icons who introduced an aspect of African American culture into the mainstream marketplace, an effort secured by the first recording of a blues record in 1920.\textsuperscript{18} While not required for the existence of the traveling bluesman, an audience was mandatory for the classic blues singer whose professional survival depended upon pleasing a crowd. Backed by a piano and perhaps an orchestra, the performance of a classic blues singer required instruments that could not be easily carried from place to place and indicated an end to the type of transience common to the wandering bluesman. Scooter’s collegiate years provide him with a static environment in comparison to the free-range of his wanderings during his childhood years in Gasoline Point. The variety of instrumentation required by classic blues singers suggested a complexity in musical possibilities beyond the scope of a single guitar or harmonica. While Scooter’s environment is relatively self-contained by the

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item[\textsuperscript{16}] There is a lot of work to be done in revealing the complex ways Murray depicts women. In Murray’s fiction, women are presented in a variety of ways and many of them serve as Scooter’s first teachers; he admires and respects them.
  \item[\textsuperscript{17}] The gender of the classic blues singer was also a distinguishing factor as classic singers were most commonly women and country blues singers were usually men. The gender divide will not be treated at length in this study. Rather, the focus will be on broad categories of musical genres and their uses as literary devices.
  \item[\textsuperscript{18}] Southern, \textit{Music}, 339.
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campus, his peers come from all over the state and nation and the resources at his disposal are far more sophisticated and numerous than those in his hometown. In this way, Scooter’s experiences parallel the shift from country to classic blues. The presence of the classic blues singer in the national spotlight, but not in a stereotypical caricature, symbolized a triumph over the legal and social constrictions promised by Jim Crow and the possibilities made manifest by a public recognition of individual talent. Murray’s series works similarly because Scooter is not portrayed as a stereotype but, as with blues singers, a prototype.

The variety in talent among blues singers allowed for individual success to be realized. The personal style and performance of the classic blues singer were distinguishing factors of the classic blues since endearing an audience to her act was a vital aspect of maintaining her employment and increasing her level of professional success. Each performer took pride in creating her own style and interpretation of a song, and so while performers in various locations might sing the same tunes, each presentation would differ. The stage was a proving ground for performers as an actual platform for the display of individual talent distinguishing the mediocre from the truly gifted, and improvisation was vital to such discernment. In this manner singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith entered into the public arena and earned fame and fortune while others, for a variety of reasons, did not. The complex nature and economics of identifying, creating, promoting, and sustaining public personas are some of the reasons why these opportunities were available only to a select few. Despite a plethora of talent, not all would or could attain the stature of a Rainey or Smith as talent was only one criterion for public recognition and financial prosperity. Several factors distinguished the classic blues
singer as a professional entertainer and so separated hers from the realm of the traveling bluesman, including the establishment of a public persona, emphasis on individual improvisation as compared to others within the same profession, paid recognition of the singer, the variety of instrumentation used, and the complexity of vocal intonations during the performance.

The emergence of jazz music indicates individual assertion amidst a group of individualists. As with the blues, improvisation is a key element in jazz and provides a mechanism by which self-expression is realized. A core element in jazz music Murray explains, the blues is “extended, elaborated, and refined into jazz.” The jazz band included a piano, but also a brass section with a coronet, trumpet, trombone, and a rhythm section that featured drums, banjos, guitars, and a bass. Later bands replaced the coronet with more trumpets, and either added saxophones or replaced clarinets with saxophones. The variety of instrumentation created a unique ensemble sound. Each musician would have a chance at improvisation and his individual expression of talent was expected from audience members who vied to hear the stylistic peculiarities of each musician’s self-expression. Within the aesthetic aural limits of group participation, each member was expected to showcase his talent. Rather than creating a cacophony of sound, the result was a complex sound as the musicians seemed to find just the right synthesis. As with the blues, improvisation was central to the presentation of the music. Whereas blues singers would often imitate the instruments in their bands, the focus in jazz is decidedly on instrumentation; instruments often imitated vocal expression. However, the variety of instrumentation in jazz bands and the emphasis and expectation of various

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improvisations within each song raised the stakes for the jazz musician as each member of the group had to assert his or her individual skill amidst a group of highly talented individuals. Jazz musicians competed for visibility and uniqueness of style even while exuding "an easy, relaxed approach," or grace under pressure.\(^2\) Jazz is a music that, unlike the blues, cannot be played alone; group effort is required.

The social and cultural integration of the 1920s and 30s made manifest in the world of music with the rise of the classic blues singer was compounded in the 1930s and 40s by the vast popularity of swing bands. Radio programming, record sales, nightclub attendance and media coverage catapulted swing leaders into the national and international spotlight as never before. Names like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Glen Miller, and Benny Goodman became household names not merely for the marketing strategies designed to achieve this end, but for the prodigious talent they possessed and demonstrated in their performances. Scouting for the best and most highly skilled musical talent they could recruit, these bandleaders constantly sought ways to update, heighten, and refine their signature sounds, thereby endearing themselves to their audiences and reinforcing their fame and popularity. As classic blues singers introduced an aspect of African American culture to the nation, jazz musicians introduced a distinctly American music to the world; swing leaders led the way for a grand-style introduction that left an indelible impression on their hearers.

Gasoline Point Blues

Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* is the first novel in Murray's series and parallels the country blues and the emergence of the classic blues. Introduced as a young boy in Gasoline Point, Alabama—the briarpatch of his youth—Scooter is a bright child who is expected to excel in the wider realm of college and eventually life beyond the region's borders. In this first novel Scooter earns his right, academically and socially, to go to college. He graduates from high school with honors and has demonstrated his loyalty to friends, family, and community.

The blues, personified through several of the novel's characters, informs Scooter's life. There is Bea Ella Thornhill, an intelligent, attractive young woman who represents the hope of her community until she falls into a bad relationship with Beau Beau Weaver whom she eventually stabs to death. From Bea Ella Scooter learns an important lesson in the blues—that bad things happen to everyone but the way in which one handles desperation plays a large part in determining one's future. Miss Blue Eula Bacote has a 'no-good' husband, but by listening to Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and a variety of other classic blues and jazz singers while cleaning her house from top to bottom, she washes away despair and prepares herself for another day. Bea Ella does not change the circumstances of her marriage—Beau Beau's cheating and gambling are beyond her control—but she can change her attitude. From Unka Jo-Jo the African, Scooter learns to have respect for his heritage. Not the African ancestry of which he knows virtually nothing, but his actual heritage in the South and the blues—tangible, accessible aspects of his being to which Scooter can attach meaningful significance. The continuous peer pressure exerted by his closest friend, Little Buddy Marshall, an
adventure seeker with no interest in academics, strengthens Scooter’s determination to stand apart from those in his peer group who are not academically inclined. Scooter’s perception is keen; he observes his environment intensely and listens acutely to his elders and the stories they share. Like a bluesman in training, Scooter knows he cannot venture on his own prematurely and when the time comes to leave the briarpatch of his youth for the more complex environment of college, he is ready to assume this new level of identification because he has learned his lessons well.

Luzana Cholly is the novel’s most influential character. He leads the way in demonstrating the benefits of a life modeled on the blues, and Scooter will improvise on Cholly’s teachings in order to form a synthesis of being consistent with his own rearing. By the 1920s and 30s, the era of Scooter’s youth, Jim Crow seemed to have firm control over the lives of the south’s non-white inhabitants. By this period the American South “was laden with vagrancy laws, enticement acts, contract-enforcement measures, and convict laws that taken together, certainly look like the framework for a comprehensive system of involuntary servitude.”  

However, as the novel’s “Sorry-but-I-can’t-take-you bluesman” Cholly’s proclivity and “mind to ramble” suggested the possibility of change in the midst of alleged despair. Luzana Cholly is credited with being a “twelve-string guitar player second to none, including Leadbelly” and the idea of possibility is reflected in Cholly’s music that mirrored the sounds of the railroad, “as if he were also an engineer telling tall tales on a train whistle, his left hand doing most of the talking including the laughing and signifying as well as the moaning and crying and even the

22 Robert G. O’Meally. Introduction to *Train Whistle Guitar*, xiii.  
23 Murray, *TWG*, 11. Leadbelly is a famous blues guitar player and singer.
whining, while his right hand thumped the wheels going somewhere.\textsuperscript{24} A wanderer who had chosen Gasoline Point as his "home," Cholly returned to town with stories of his various exploits to the delight of young Scooter and Little Buddy.

An entrepreneur in the most literal sense, Cholly’s exploits served as an example for his young fans. Moving from “place to place, from job to job, from one fast-moving freight train to the other” Cholly is modeled after actual wanders and hustlers whose very transience suggested heroism because it gave the impression that one could be fully control of his life.\textsuperscript{25} Cholly’s travels helped give form and content to his music and enhanced his talent as a first-rate storyteller, making him more worthy of the boys’ respect. In the boys’ view, Cholly was committed to no man other than himself. Such alleged freedom indicated an attitude reflective of the emerging reality of actual legal and social freedoms and tended to encourage the wrath of the white population. As Scooter recalls, “gambling and playing the guitar and riding the rails to and from far away places were the only steady things [Cholly] ever had done or ever would do.”\textsuperscript{26} Cholly was enterprising and earned his living in a variety of ways; his status outside the mainstream enchanted the boys. Thomas Hennessey notes musicians, “could not make their livings just from music.”\textsuperscript{27} Albert Murray notes men like Cholly peopled his home environment and sustained themselves financially by gambling, seducing women and in any variety of ways but “chances are” whatever means these men would employ to earn money, “the

\textsuperscript{24} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 8.
\textsuperscript{26} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 10.
guy’s not gonna mess up his fingers.” Of these undocumented bluesmen Eileen Southern notes, “early anonymous singers of the blues often were wanders who carried their plaintive songs from one black community to another, some of them sauntering down the railroad tracks or dropping from freight cars, others coming in with the packet boats, and yet others coming via the dirt road, having caught a ride on a wagon or later in time, on a track.”

Even Cholly’s musical performance exuded individual will, as no audience was needed to validate his blues. Scooter observed, “sometimes we would come upon [Cholly] sitting somewhere by himself tuning and strumming his guitar and he would let us stay and listen as long as we wanted to.” The longer Cholly played (and ‘played’ by varying his songs for the boys) the more likely he would get paid. The presence of the boys was merely a coincidence of, and not a requirement for, Cholly’s playing. While engaged in a song reflecting his own concerns, Cholly would “sneak [Scooter’s and Little Buddy Marshall’s] names into some very well known ballad just to signify at [them] about something, and sometimes [Cholly] would make up new ballads right on the spot just to tell [the boys’] stories.” In its emphasis on the individual and reliance on the certainty of change, the blues is an inherently hopeful music because even when the conditions about which one is singing are woeful, the possibility for change is ever present; hence, the railroad as a motif that informs Cholly’s music, the transience of the

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28 Albert Murray. Interview with the author on July 30, 2004. Murray explained that these men lived a bohemian lifestyle and were innovative in the ways in which they earned money because they could not sustain themselves by musicianship as a primary means of income.

29 Southern, Music, 332.

30 Like a lark, men like Cholly sang anywhere and while they may have sang hoping to receive payment for their efforts, payment was not assured and could not be expected.

31 Murray, TWG, 10.

32 Murray, TWG, 10.
early performers, and the innovation with which the music is rendered via voice and instrumentation. As Baker asserts, “Even when they speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility.”

Influenced by the railroad, the vocal nature of the blues depicted in Murray’s novel reflects an atmosphere of change and possibility. The railroad is a common motif suggesting hope and even optimism despite even the gravest circumstances. As Baker asserts, “This possibility came from the locomotive’s drive and thrust, its promise of unrestrained mobility and unlimited freedom.” Realizing the power of trains to endow an entire culture (and African Americans specifically) with a sense of strength and confidence in its own fortitude Albert Murray informs, “The image of the train—or the idea or notion of the train—was deeply embedded in the consciousness of these particular Americans.” Luzana Cholly’s singing is described in terms locomotion. He had a “notorious holler, the sound of which was always far away and long coming.” The blues is an active medium and employed textually indicates mobility. Cholly’s holler mimics the roar of the train and the cry of its whistle, alerting hearers of his presence even if he is not within sight. As Baker asserts, “The blues musician at the crossing became an expert at reproducing or translating these locomotive energies” by integrating sound into his

very being.\textsuperscript{38} Or, as Murray informs, "When you hear music from a blues guitar player, what do you hear? It's a train whistle guitar."\textsuperscript{39}

Most of the time (but not always) [his holler] started low like it was going to be a moan or even a song, and then it jumped all the way to the very top of his voice and suddenly broke off. Then it came back, and this time it was already at the top. Then as often as not he would make three or four, or sometimes three followed by four, bark-like squalls and let it die away.\textsuperscript{40}

The vocalization of Cholly’s blues is unreliable. One knows not what to expect when he lifts his voice in song as the variety with which his lyric is presented is ever changing. Like the railroad, one knows not where the point of origin is or where the final destination might be simply by hearing the sound of the train. The uncertainty suggested in this scenario indicates the angst associated with unreliability. “Life is at bottom...a never-ending struggle” and as such, one can never rely on continued success, the possibility of change is ever present and so always threatens one’s vitality.\textsuperscript{41}

The variety, the certainty of change, is integral to the blues and gives it a defining characteristic as an improvised music. Cholly’s voice is jarring, signaling a steady approach and yet is also spontaneous since it does not always start off with the same pitch. By suddenly breaking off, Cholly’s lyric makes room for a break, a musical component of the blues and jazz that allows the performer the opportunity to improvise.

\textsuperscript{38} Baker, \textit{Blues, Ideology}, 11.
\textsuperscript{39} Murray, \textit{Brarpatch}, 185.
\textsuperscript{40} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 8.
\textsuperscript{41} Murray, \textit{Stomping}, 17.
his own lyrics or instrumental innovations.\textsuperscript{42} In formal terms Murray explains \textquote{the break as a, \textquote{\textquoteright{}very special kind of ad-lib bridge passage or cadenzalike interlude between two musical phrases that are separated by an interruption or interval in the established cadence.}\textsuperscript{43} However, culturally, the break functions as a mechanism for the manifestation of possibility. Murray states, \textquote{\textquoteright{}The break...is a disruption but it is also an opportunity... a moment of truth, the moment in which your response defines your personal quality and identity.}\textsuperscript{44} Cholly\textquoteright{}s vocal imitation of the railroad identifies him as one who exudes hope even as he embodies change. His character type is indicative of the types of musical changes brought about with the use of instruments as the \textquote{\textquoteright{}blues, a vocal music, was made to conform to an instrument\textquoteright{}s range. But, of course, the blues widened the range of the instrument, too ... the strings had to make vocal sounds, to imitate the human voice and its eerie cacophonies.}\textsuperscript{45} If the sound of Cholly\textquoteright{}s voice dies away without the man actually being seen, it is as if a train had passed leaving only its sound as proof of its presence. As it embodies motion and change, the blues used as a literary device suggests \textquote{inventive play\textquoteright{} and in the characterization of Luzana Cholly portrays self-assertion and the ability to respond reflexively to the random events of life through improvisation.\textsuperscript{46}

The break is the stuff of jam sessions, \textquote{the jazzman\textquoteright{}s true academy,\textquoteright{} because it allows musicians to display their talent on stage \textquote{competing} with others in a display of

\textsuperscript{42} Southern, \textit{Music}, 334. Southern defines a break as coming \textquote{at the end of each line, for improvisation on the accompanying instrument (guitar, piano, or instrumental ensemble) during which the singer interjects spoken asides.}\
\textsuperscript{43} Murray, \textit{Stomping}, 99.\
\textsuperscript{44} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 22.\
\textsuperscript{45} Leroi Jones, \textit{Blues People: Negro People in White America} (New York: Quill, 1999), 69-70.\
\textsuperscript{46} Baker, \textit{Blues, Ideology}, 14.
their improvisational skills.\textsuperscript{47} Far from being an expression of random instrumental noisemaking, improvisation is the result of a mastery of technical skill and talent.\textsuperscript{48} In a jam session musicians share their knowledge in such a way as to transmit and continue musical traditions. John Szwed notes a jam session "depends solely on the shared knowledge of jazz traditions among the players."\textsuperscript{49} By crafting Cholly as a significant influence during Scooter's childhood, Murray establishes a tradition of blues training as imperative to the formation of Scooter's identity. Scooter hears Cholly's songs, copies his behavior (to the best of his youthful ability) and learns by this association to enhance his skills at verbal acuity, risk taking and rhythmic timing. These skills will be compounded and nurtured as Scooter matures and will serve as the basis for his ability to 'compete' in wider arenas and transition smoothly from one situation to the next. Tradition is a time-honored method for individual and so group continuation. "To refer to the blues idiom is to refer to an established mode" of facing antagonism and transforming it by employing the time-honored method of psychological fortitude in the midst of utter hopelessness.\textsuperscript{50} "Tradition," Murray continues is not only "that which continues; it is also the medium by which and through which continuation occurs."\textsuperscript{51} Scooter learns the blues tradition from community members, the most influential of whom is Luzana Cholly, and keeps it alive by employing it in his daily life. Scooter learns from Cholly and others and invents or improvises on their teachings to create his own response at the 'breaks' he will face. The


\textsuperscript{48} John Szwed notes, "To say that jazz musicians improvise does not mean that they pay without thought, or 'naturally,' or that there are no constraints, arrangements, or plans for what will be played." He continues, "Even in a jam session—there are nonetheless agreed-upon principles as to what might be invented and how it relates to the whole, and at least some standards that determine whether the improvisation will be successful or not." Szwed, \textit{Jazz 101}, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{49} Szwed, \textit{Jazz 101}, 41.

\textsuperscript{50} Murray, \textit{Hero}, 72.

\textsuperscript{51} Murray, \textit{Hero}, 72.
invention of Scooter’s new response is, like a musician’s and is ‘stylized’ or made to fit his individual circumstances. Scooter gathers all his teachings and makes his own sense of them. This is “opposed to the romantic use of invention as something you create from scratch” and “enables intellectual performances on many fronts, in many places, [and in] many styles that keep in play both the sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation….”52 By using the blues as a frame of mind, Scooter keeps it alive as a cultural practice, a tradition of confronting antagonism. Formally, the break allows improvisation; culturally, the break grants the individual the opportunity to realize a heightened sense of self and to distinguish himself as a unique being.

The inability to validate Cholly’s personal history assigns to him a legendary status that endears him to the boys. Cholly is among Scooter’s earliest memories, as he recalls, “I can remember being aware of Luzana Cholly all the way back there in the blues meshes of that wee winking blinking and nod web of bedtime story time.”53 As with any legendary hero, Cholly’s existence seems to have always been. Scooter cannot “remember any point in time when [he] had not already seen [Cholly] coming up that road from around the bend and down the L&N railroad bottom. Nor can [he] remember when [he] had not yet heard [Cholly] playing the blues on his guitar…”54 “Scooter and Little Buddy decide they want to be like Luzana Cholly” and although “Luzana Cholly doesn’t see any future in that” the boys choose him as their hero because in their youthful thinking, Cholly is the man they longed to be like.55 Cholly is more than a physical being. He is part of Scooter’s visual and aural landscape and presents a frame of reference for

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54 Murray, *TWG*, 7.
55 Interview with the author, July 30, 2004.
the youth. Scooter identifies the sights and sounds of his childhood with Cholly. The sounds from Cholly's guitar suggests, "the hero's need to take off and then to find his way back home."\textsuperscript{56} As with any legendary hero whose physical existence may be real but whose stories seem to belie his or her humanness, Cholly is credited with fascinating tales. (Murray captures this idea in a poem, "I can drink muddy water/sleep in a hollow log\textsuperscript{57}) As Scooter notes and as Murray knows from personal experience Cholly's existence belied official documentation. Scooter recalls, "nor was I ever to find out very much [about Cholly] that can actually be documented."\textsuperscript{58} As with the blues, having no one specific origin but rather a combination of influences contributing to its development, and so making its heritage difficult to pinpoint, Cholly is from nowhere and everywhere all at the same time. Such variety is what makes the blues, and Cholly, legitimate.\textsuperscript{59}

Cholly is called Luzana, not because he is from Louisiana—he was allegedly from Alabama—but because "that was where he had just come back in town from" when he first made his impression on the townspeople of Gasoline Point.\textsuperscript{60} An unverifiable hometown was irrelevant to the youngsters and the townspeople who accepted Cholly as a character all their own. If Cholly hailed from nowhere in particular, he also hailed from no one, as none in the local community had ever heard anything "about Luzana Cholly's mother and father."\textsuperscript{61} What mattered to townspeople was the way he presented himself, his physical appearance, social graces, and his deeds. These criteria, rather than the

\textsuperscript{55} Robert G. O'Meally. Introduction to \textit{Train Whistle Guitar}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{56} Murray. \textit{Conjugations and Reiterations}, lines 1-2: 10.
\textsuperscript{57} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 9.
\textsuperscript{58} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 9.
\textsuperscript{59} As Murray asserts, "If there was no Luzana Cholly, then there was no Blind Lemon Jefferson, no Leadbelly, no Robert Johnson, no Tampa Red." To question Cholly's legitimacy is to question Murray's fictional depiction and his memory of childhood. Cholly is drawn on character types that actually existed in the community in which Murray, and others like him, were reared. Interview with the author, July 30, 2004.
\textsuperscript{60} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 11.
\textsuperscript{61} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 14.
accident of birth, were the things that made a lasting impression. Locals knew that validating Cholly’s personal history, while perhaps an interesting endeavor, was ultimately a futile effort because it engaged only the superficial. The hunt for Cholly’s origins also belies the magnitude of his influence in the town in general and specifically on Scooter and Little Buddy. “Cholly’s name and, in the deepest sense, his identity—all are invented or improvised, not inherited through his family’s bloodlines.”

As Scooter notes of Cholly’s heritage, “most of the time you forgot all about that part of his existence just as most people had probably long since forgotten whether they had ever heard his family name. Nobody I know ever heard him use it, and no sooner had you thought about it than you suddenly realized that he didn’t seem to ever have had or to have needed any family at all.”

His adopted family, the townspeople of Gasoline Point, was all Cholly needed. As he roamed the rails to distant points, he always returned “home,” indicating his own affection for the locals. Adding to his acclaim and according to local legend, Cholly was credited as the one “who could drink muddy water” and “sleep in a hollow log.” Whether or not the tall tales surrounding Cholly were true, such stories regarding Cholly’s adventures were a part of the culture he called “home,” and both young and old laid claim to Cholly’s renowned exploits. His life mirrored the blues in that he continuously met danger and turned his experiences and methods of survival into rhythmic song. His adventures and his alleged courage in the face of danger—he had been in the Army, jail, and the penitentiary—gave him the reputation of being a bad-ass,

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62 Robert G. O’Meally. Introduction to Train Whistle Guitar, xiv. Here it is important to note that O’Meally’s notation does not suggest the inaccuracy of Cholly’s characterization, rather his comment indicates the flexibility exuded by types like Cholly who created their own names and personalities as they saw fit.

63 Murray, TWG, 14.

64 Murray, TWG, 5.
and even “the idea of getting lynch-mobbed didn’t faze him either.”65 Cholly was a hustler, intelligent and quick-witted, and adults, “if they knew him well enough to call him crazy, they also had to know enough about him to realize that he wasn’t foolhardy or even careless.”66 These characteristics were all reasons enough for Scooter to know that Luzana Cholly was “the Man [he] wanted to be like.”67 If Cholly was not a legend in his own mind, he certainly was in Scooter’s, who realized on his “deepest levels of comprehension that the somebody-ness of Luzana Cholly was of its very nature nothing if not legendary.”68

Like the blues, defining Cholly proves to be no simple task and “avoids simple dualities.”69 The color that comes to mind when Scooter remembers Cholly is not the legend’s brown skin but rather “steel blue, which is also the clean, oil-smelling color of gunmetal and the gray-purple patina of freight train engines and railroad slag.”70 The blues as musical genre becomes synonymous with the color and smell of the trains that transformed the natural environment. Knowing the color and smell of the railroad is necessary for understanding the musical genre, but these two elements alone do not provide a full definition. Scooter explains that “blue steel is the color you always remember when you remember how [Cholly’s] guitar used to sound.”71

If the blues has its own colors and smells, it also has its own fashion and associated behaviors. Of entertainers Murray notes, “Most perform in special ceremonial costumes of one sort or another” but even “the off-duty blues musician tends to remain in

65 Murray, TWG, 9.
66 Murray, TWG, 9.
67 Murray, TWG, 9.
68 Murray, TWG, 15.
70 Murray, TWG, 7
71 Murray, TWG, 7.
character....”72 While practitioners must surely devise their own versions of the blues style, Murray offers Cholly’s as an example.

Sometimes he used to smell like coffee plus Prince Albert cigarettes … and sometimes it was a White Owl cigar, and sometimes it was Brown’s Mule Chewing Tobacco. But when he was wearing slick starched wash-faded blue denim overalls plus tucked in jumper plus his black and white houndstooth-checked cap plus high top, glove-soft banker-style Stacey Adams … he always smelled like green oak steam.73

The various aesthetic statements that comprise the blues vary according to Cholly’s dictates and his needs. Reinforcing the influence of the blues on individual performance, Cholly’s self-representation via smells and attire are symbolic of the always-changing nature of the blues. Cholly’s presentation was ever changing. Sometimes he would wear a “tailor-made black broadcloth boxback plus pegtop hickory-striped pants plus either a silk candy-striped or silk pongee shirt plus a knitted tie and diamond stickpin plus an always brand new gingerly blocked black John B. Stetson hat,” while at other times he would smell like “barbershop talcum and crisp new folding money.”74 Like Cholly, the blues music is a combination of colors, smells, and aesthetic taste all illustrating personal style and offering a rich sensory experience that defies narrow definitions.

To accompany his appearance, Luzana Cholly has a “trochaic-sporty stomping-ground limp-walk” that Scooter and Little Buddy try to imitate.75 This walk is not explained away as a birth defect but rather is considered proof of Cholly’s adventuresome

72 Murray, Stomping, 230.
73 Murray, TWG, 7.
74 Murray, TWG, 7.
75 Murray, TWG, 4.
lifestyle. He is not handicapped. Everyone knows that Cholly is “as rough and ready as rawhide and as hard and weather worthy as blue steel,” and so his walk signals courage and tenacity not physical infirmity. The boys’ adulation of Cholly is unaffected by his broken stride. The “sporty-blue limp-walk” that Scooter and Little Buddy affect in honor of Cholly tells “the whole world that you [are] ready for something because at worst you had only been ever so slightly sprained and bruised by all the terrible situations you had been through.” Consistent with Murray’s explication of the blues Cholly’s walk was proof that one could “confront, acknowledge, and proceed in spite of and even in terms of, the ugliness and meanness inherent in the human condition” and “make the best of a bad situation.” Cholly’s walk is cool, in the vernacular sense, and makes the boys feel a sense of their manhood. They, too, can have adventures, face danger courageously, and live to tell about it all. By appropriating Cholly’s walk, the boys revise any negative perceptions regarding his stride and transform them into a thing to be revered. “Imitation” Murray informs, “whether by sound or by movement, is representation, which is to say reenactment, which is of its very nature is obviously also the most graphic description and thus also the most specific definition.” By imitating Cholly’s walk, the boys endow themselves with the heroic characteristics of their idol. This transformation process, based in the blues because it turns infirmity into invincibility, teaches the boys to endure despite the circumstances with which they are faced. When the boys start exploring environs beyond their immediate homestead and teach themselves how to jump trains, they realize they are “running a double risk (of being caught and getting maimed for life
yet they persist despite the warnings they have received for at least two reasons: first, because risk taking is a vital aspect of childhood play and teaches the boys to assume the risks necessary to become viable players in the adult realm; and second, because the walk devised by Scooter and Little Buddy is not simply a replication of Cholly’s but becomes a mark of self-assurance and empowerment that reflects the youths’ individual styles.

If, as Houston Baker suggests, the blues may announce itself via a “mélange of phonics,” then Murray’s title alone, *Train Whistle Guitar*, indicates the journeys and junctures related to the adventure of change and chance that signal the blues. Imitated in the music and incorporated into Murray’s writing via onomatopoeia, the sound of the railroad with its promise of mobility fuses the blues genre with existential and voyeuristic hope as one expects physical or psychological change. As Scooter and Little Buddy trot alongside the railroad track waiting for a chance to jump on board the train and venture to points unknown, in imitation of Cholly’s adventures, their stride is one with the “Um chuckchuck um chuckchuck um chuckchuck” of the train rolling by. The perpetual motion that is the railroad serves as a liberating device within the text because it advances the plot and demonstrates the progression of the protagonist to new but unknown psychological and geographic destinations. This sentiment is captured in a poem in which Murray’s narrator states, “once was the north star/then it was the L&N/…not talking about cincinatti/not telling anybody where or when.” Such new destinations were in

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80 Murray, *TWG*, 16.  
81 Murray, *TWG*, 16.  
84 Murray, *Conjugations*, lines 1, 2, 5, 6: 5.
direct opposition to the mandates of Jim Crow legislation, and southern traditions regarding race that sought to restrict the mobility of peoples of color “without the formality of laws.”85 The “sound is the ‘sign’...of the blues” and suggests “unlimited and unending possibility.”86 The train whistle of Murray’s title is the metaphoric ‘All Aboard!’ call of a conductor enticing and even challenging the text’s characters to push through proscribed limitations and explore the world beyond Gasoline Point.87

Scooter’s blues rearing determines his identity, shaping his personality and giving him the strength of character to endure life in the briarpatch of his youth and despite Jim Crow. As Murray says of his experiences with Jim Crow, “I was beating that. I was better than that...my conception of me came from the great books of the world...not what some dumb-assed white guy thought a colored guy should be doing and feeling.”88 In awe of Cholly’s adventures, Scooter improvises on Cholly’s style to create one more his own. Representing a new generation of academically trained youngsters, Scooter’s adventures will take him into the proverbial big leagues of life outside of Gasoline Point, Alabama, first when he attends college and later when he ventures to various points of stateside and European travel. Regarding Cholly’s playing, Scooter explains “I myself always thought of it as being something else that was like a train, a bad express train saying Look out this me and here I come and I’m on my way one more time.”89 In being steadfast in his pursuit to excel academically Scooter, a schoolboy, forges his way into new territories—intellectually, psychologically, and geographically. Academics will be the way Scooter makes it into the mainstream and accomplishes the goals he and his community have in

86 Baker, Blues, Ideology, 8.
87 Woodward, Jim Crow, 97.
88 Murray, Briarpatch, 154.
89 Murray, TWG, 8.
mind for him. (As the narrator of Murray’s poem states, “They used to call me schoolboy and I never did deny my name… you’ve got to be a schoolboy if preparation is your aim.”90) This type of indefatigable persistence is what comprises the blues in Murray’s text. Like the “hammer and the anvil” that are used to “beat the sword into shape,” Murray’s blues is based on the steel blue ruggedness of the railroad, and like the railroad Scooter is expected to press onward to new destinations.91 The ways in which he will do this will vary according to his circumstances, and this is what forms the opportunities for improvisation. In its emphasis on the individual via improvisation, the blues as a frame of acceptance provides both the opportunity and foundation for heroic action. As Cholly tells the boys when he thwarts their attempt to run away in search of adventure, “You going further than old Luze ever dreamed of. Old Luze ain’t been nowhere. Old Luze don’t know from nothing.”92 The opportunities for the African American youth of the 1920s and 30s far exceeded those of any previous generation. Similarly, the opportunities available for Murray’s 1974 readers far exceeded those available for his 1920s protagonist. Indicating change over time, the evolution of blues people is like the railroad—steady, steadfast, and resistant to social or legally imposed constrictions. Murray’s fiction is a documentation of the triumphs over and in spite of overt and covert obstacles threatening to hinder the various aspirations of people of, in this case, African descent in the United States. His non-fiction reinforces the intent of his fiction. Murray states, “Heroism, which like the sword [which like the railroad] is nothing

90 Murray, Conjugations, lines 1, 2, 5, 6: 8.
91 Murray, TWG, 38.
92 Murray, TWG, 30.
if not steadfast, [and] is measured in terms of the stress and strain it can endure and the magnitude and complexity of the obstacles it overcomes.”

Miss Blue Eula Bacote did not play or sing the blues, but she taught Scooter a blues lesson all the same. Although she was childless and her husband, Lemuel Bacote, a.k.a. Eula’s Mule, spent all his money gambling and in the Skin Game Jungle, Blue Eula did not give in to her feelings. Every Monday morning, she threw open her windows and doors and woke up the neighborhood with the classic blues of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and the jazz of Jelly Roll Morton and Count Basie blaring from her Victrola letting the entire neighborhood know she, too, had the blues. Dressed in Saturday night glamour, high-heeled shoes, 18kt gold dangling earrings, and a bobbed hairstyle, Blue Eula moved all the furniture out of her house. While the music played, she got down on her knees (because she had been down on her luck) and scrubbed, cleaned, mopped, and shook out the dust from all her household furnishings. She would spread suits and coats on the clothesline and use hot sudsy lye water to scrub the porch and steps. The task was daunting because her blues ran deep. While cleanliness overpowered the stain of blueness that ran through her house and the furnishings and while clothes baked in the sun to dry, Blue Eula would tend to her flowers and then sit, smoking cigarettes and drinking black coffee while she listened to her music. Though tied to her local neighborhood, Blue Eula could travel vicariously via the airwaves and imagine herself in a club where Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey sang or where Jelly Roll or Count Basie delighted crowds and made them forget whatever burdened their hearts and minds. She listened to blues music,

for the simple fact that it always [made her] feel good." She could bring big time stars to her own yard and move about from one cleaning station to the next, from flowerbeds to clotheslines, as she infused herself with the hope made manifest in singers and musicians who had known far away places—miles away from the blues she knew. Blue Eula's hometown blues seemed small in light of the big city blues of such renowned stars. As Scooter recalls, all Blue Eula ever used to do was "hold her head to one side with her eyes closed and pat her feet and snap her fingers every now and then." Constant movement, like the railroad, seemed to soothe her into a place of quiet acceptance but not defeat. By mid-afternoon, she had worked out the blue devils that haunted her. She could return her furniture, close her windows and doors, and face another week with the blues at bay once again. Scooter's observations of Blue Eula taught him that blue feelings were a matter and fact of life. While one could not escape their reach, one could resist their dominance.

Resistance was not a lesson Bea Ella Thornhill had learned in her experience with the blues. Bea Ella Thornhill was a young and promising schoolgirl who embodied the hopes of her community in her potential for success beyond Gasoline Point. Like Scooter, she was part of the younger generation expected to succeed academically and enter into various professions. Community members expected Bea Ella to use her skill at record keeping. Instead she ran away from home, moved in with the notorious Beau Beau Weaver, took a job as a maid for a white family, and let Beau Beau spend all her hard earned money. She made a fool of herself and had shamed herself in the eyes of her community—her "boll weevil epidemic," as townspeople called it, had caused everyone

94 Murray, Stomping, 54.
95 Murray, TWG, 102.

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dismay. Downtrodden and filled with despair, Bea Ella’s blue feelings took control and rather than negotiate the temporary pain, she gave in to the pressure and stabbed Beau Beau to death in an effort to end her own suffering in rejection of the life-affirming qualities indicated by the blues, and in denial of “one of its most distinctive features”—a “unique combination of spontaneity, improvisation, and control.” Afterward known as Red Ella, she faced a prison term and all the ensuing psychological, sociological, and spiritual consequences of murder. Red Ella’s real mistake, however, was in “not knowing that bad luck and disappointment meant not the end of the world but only that being human you had to suffer like everybody else from time to time.” As an exercise in intellectual fortitude, the blues is a method of controlling the dark emotions that comprise personal angst in song and musical composition. These blue feelings are freed through the learned skill of improvisation even as they are rooted in the desperation of circumstances. The blues is a mechanism used to “affirm life and humanity itself in the very process of confronting failure and existentialistic absurdities. The spirit of the blues moves in the opposite direction from ashes and sackcloth, self-pity, self-hatred, and suicide.” Bea Ella had book learning, but her lessons in the blues proved insufficient to deal with her despair. In addition and as Murray states, “As notorious for violence as the reputation of blues-oriented dance-hall records has been over the years, blues-idiom merriment is not marked either by the sensual abandon of the voodoo orgy or by the ecstatic trance of a religious procession.” She never mastered improvisation and so her act of self-assertion—her defining moment—was disastrous. Although filled with

96 Murray, TWG, 109.
97 Murray, Stomping, 50. Emphasis is mine.
98 Murray, TWG, 122.
99 Murray, Omni, 147.
100 Murray, Stomping, 50.
passionate emotion, the blues is not a violent musical genre but in its steady persistence, resists the finality of metaphoric or physical death.

Stagolee Dupas was to the piano what Luzana Cholly was to the guitar but Stagolee’s influence on Scooter represented the professional possibilities of a new era. Hennessey notes though band members typically could read music and played “very well-rehearsed” pieces and “stock written arrangements” these skills were “hidden from the rich, white patrons of the bands to fit the racial stereotypes of the period.”101 Crafted with this in mind, Stagolee could read music and kept a standard repertoire of well-known tunes. Improvising his own variations to popular tunes in addition to creating his own pieces, Stagolee taught Scooter the rudiments of music in ways Cholly could not. Scooter observed that Stagolee’s music was more “concerned with instrumentation than with lyrics.”102 His keyboard arrangements were figured in as a part of a larger group arrangement with his piano as only one of the instruments being played. Stagolee was an early jazz man. He was not a wanderer but traveled with a band and his engagements in a town were not surprise encounters but planned events. The level of professionalism that Stagolee represented indicated a level of complexity that enticed Scooter and helped to broaden his horizons beyond Gasoline Point. Whereas Cholly’s way of life enticed Scooter to seek adventures beyond the region’s borders, Stagolee’s example suggested the possibility of a secure life beyond Gasoline Point. Perhaps Scooter, too, could travel to distant points like St. Louis, Reno, and San Francisco, experiencing and enjoying those cities as a paid performer, rather than as a wandering musician. Using one’s skills to earn a living opens possibilities beyond the scope of those available to Cholly, thus

101 Hennessey, From Jazz to Swing, 27.
102 Murray, TWG, 125.
introducing a new level of self-assertion and individual agency. Formal training and financial means allows choices denied to those without such qualifications. This broadening of possibilities captured in the characterization of Stagolee Dupas mirrors the shift between the country and classic blues by introducing the aspect of paid performance, the necessity of an audience, and scheduled travel rather than random meandering.

Scooter and Little Buddy admire the professional respect between Stagolee and Claiborne Williams, Stagolee’s keyboard colleague. Each pianist is highly skilled and has his own musical style, comprised, only in part, of the music he played. Claiborne Williams wore “hand-tailored high-waist shark-skin pants” with suspenders and arm garters to match and always wore the flashiest French cuff links anyone had ever seen.103 When Claiborne notices Stagolee in the juke joint crowd, he begins to play with more vigor trying to out-do himself, not to show-up Stagolee, but to prepare the crowd to give Stagolee a proper reception when he takes the stage. Scooter likens this moment to a preacher revving up his congregation to welcome a visiting pastor. Stagolee is dressed in a “sporty gray checked pinchback suit, a black silk shirt open at the collar, and a black and gray hound’s tooth cap, with his visor unsnapped.”104 When he takes the bench, he places his fruit jar of whiskey on top of the piano, crosses his legs, and begins playing with one hand on the keyboard and the other resting casually in his lap. Unfortunately, the respect shared between the two musicians is not observed by the local white sheriff, Earl Joe Timberlake, who ends the Saturday night activities with a raid. Scooter and Little Buddy ran a great risk by spying on adult activities. Jook joints as Murray notes,

103 Murray, TWG, 131.
104 Murray, TWG, 132.
"were forever being raided, broken up either by the county sheriff and his deputies or by the city police..." He continues, "There was also no telling when somebody was going to start another knowck-down drag-out rumpus, or there would be another cutting scrape, or the bullets would start flying again." Although he assaults the manhood of Claiborne and Stagolee but his greatest offense is in damaging the keyboard shared by the two musicians and therefore insulting their profession and disrupting the community ritual.

Once the crowd has cleared, he is alone with Stagolee, and Timberlake’s death that night seems scarcely mysterious to Scooter and Little Buddy. Whereas wanderers may earn a living by various means, professional entertainers like Claiborne and Stagolee rely on their instruments to generate an income. In defense of this freedom to choose professions Stagolee’s implicit murder of Timberlake represents personal agency—a defense of his right to earn a living as he chooses.

Jim Crow, an insidious a system of legal bias that reinforced social divisions, hurt all—not just the colored community. Black-on-white violence such as that between Stagolee and Timberlake was generally not publicized. As Murray intimates, "They never tell you when Negroes are killing them [whites]" because “that’s when they’re messing up!” In honor of Jim Crow such violence went unchecked. To publicize black-on-white violence in a case when whites had “gone too far” in asserting the authority of alleged white privilege would mean to challenge the stereotype of blacks as being animalistic, acting on raw emotion and unable to contain their rage in favor of humanizing and justifiable self-defense. "What brings out the best also shows up the worst" and in

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105 Murray, Stomping, 136.
106 Murray, Stomping, 136.
107 Interview with the author, July 30, 2004.
publicizing justifiable black-on-white violence, whites, not blacks, are shown to be morally and ethically inferior.109 As a system that supported such moral deviance, Jim Crow hurt whites and allows lawlessness in white communities. Such realities were common to those, like Murray, who knew Jim Crow’s unwritten history. As Murray confides, “If you don’t know the texture of the life, you go on what conclusions you draw from sociology on what these people were like…if you don’t know that actual history of it.”110 Indicating at least a fictional understanding of this undocumented history of black-on-white violence, Toni Morrison depicts the Seven Days Club as a group of blacks who mete out such unchecked violence on the white community in her Song of Solomon. As sinister as the group’s activities may be, their actions have no legal consequences. Jim Crow and social traditions allowed this iniquity. It is not surprising that so many would not know these unwritten laws. As Baker asserts, “an investigator has to be there” not merely experience the culture from the margins.111

The most influential young person in Scooter’s life is his best friend, Little Buddy Marshall, whose adventure-seeking ways threaten to stifle the development of Scooter’s own individual agency and expression.112 Peer pressure causes Scooter to decide to jump aboard the train and run away from home with Little Buddy in hopes of visiting big cities like New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. Even though he knows he is not ready to leave Gasoline Point, he is willing to suffer uncertainty to the point of nausea just to please his friend. The boys’ attempt to run away is thwarted by Cholly and individual

109 Murray, Hero, 40.
110 Interview with the author, July 30, 2004.
111 Baker, Blues, Ideology, 4.
112 Little Buddy encourages Scooter to jump rail and leave town but the effort is stifled by Cholly who escorts the boys back home. Little Buddy likes to play hooky from school and is also eager to have as many sexual partners as he can. Since Little Buddy is Scooter’s best friend, these types of antics provide peer pressure for Scooter.
agency is stifled. Like the country blues and its emphasis on isolation, Scooter must remain ‘sequestered’ from mainstream America because he lacks the skill and formal training that would make such a move viable. Peer pressure also causes Scooter to stay put when the boys spot a dead body floating in a local waterway. The two boys find themselves hot on the trail of the “peckerwoods” who they assume are responsible for the death despite Scooter’s admission that he did not want to be involved. The trouble Little Buddy risks if they are caught will be Scooter’s as well. Unable to separate from his friend, Scooter risks the suppression of his own identity. Yet despite these pressures to identify with his friend and so form a unit, Scooter asserts his individuality. While both boys enjoy envisioning themselves as adventurers to distant points and mimicking Cholly’s walk, each develops his own interpretation of it and resists the effort to copy the other’s take on Cholly’s stride. Cholly influences the boys’ play in other ways as well. The playful leapfrogging Scooter and Little Buddy enjoy as they name the distant cities they’d like to visit reflects an early lesson in improvisation. Each boy must come up with a city name in time to coincide with the rhythm of the game. This playfulness is part of the country blues, as Cholly would devise nonsensical lyrics for the boys.

It is in the academic realm that Scooter exhibits the courage to distinguish himself from Little Buddy by arriving at school early to receive extra lessons. In this way, Scooter can still present the façade of a free spirit concerned only with adventure and risk, while avoiding the bookworm stigma. In the final paragraphs of Train Whistle Guitar, Scooter makes his most clear attempt to separate from his sidekick by devising a

113 Murray, TWG, 45.
self-styled verbal response to learning of his illegitimate birth. Yet, even here, Scooter seeks Little Buddy’s sanctioning. Like a country bluesman whose transience limits his self-assertion to the confines of local communities, Scooter exhibits his individuality within given constraints of his local environment. However, like the classic bluesman and in imitation of the professional life of Stagolee Dupas, Scooter realizes a realm of opportunity beyond his region’s borders and uses his time in Gasoline Point to prepare him for such adventure. His youth is greatly influenced by his relationship with Little Buddy Marshall, but the result is marked resistance to peer pressure and the inner war between self-assertion and group identification.

**Fairy Tale Blues**

Life in the segregated south of Scooter’s childhood was similar to that of the peasants of medieval and early modern Europe. As Robert Darnton explains, “To eat or not to eat, that was the question peasants confronted in their folklore as well as in their daily lives.” European peasants forged their lives amidst harsh living conditions and endless toil, and as a result the original oral forms of some of their tales were filled with gruesome realities, ranging from cannibalism to pedophilia. “Everyone faced endless limitless labor, from early childhood until the day of death” and yet despite their lives of labor, all lived within the depths of poverty. The briarpatch of peasant life, replete with danger and despair, was also the place where peasants forged survival techniques in opposition to the perniciousness of their environment. Antagonistically cooperative, the

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114 This is explained in detail later in this chapter.
116 Darnton, *Cat Massacre*, 35.
briarpatch was the place where various rituals and myths were used in the development and sustenance of attitudes of affirmation that allowed these allegedly downtrodden peasants to survive despite the incredible odds with which they were faced. As Murray states, "To survive you got to have an affirmative attitude toward your possibilities rather than an attitude of defeatism and lamentation."\textsuperscript{117} The fairytales such as those made popular by Charles Perrault and The Brothers Grimm, though refined to cater to the literary tastes of a genteel reading public, are remnants of the history of storytelling as serving a cultural function. Cognizant of this history of rituals and myths in the construction of identity, Murray develops Scooter in similar fashion. "Nothing is more brutal than a fairy tale" Murray informs, "you got the wolf, you got the trials and tribulations—you always have something brutal and threatening in a fairy tale. But you’ve got to translate the quotidian into metaphor. Why not metaphors of heroism?"\textsuperscript{118} In Murray’s depiction, the briarpatch is the breeding ground for heroes, whether born into peasant life or life in Gasoline Point. Scooter crafts survival techniques similar to those employed by fairy tale heroes in order to transcend and transform the brutality inherent in his environment.\textsuperscript{119} Calling himself "Jack the Nimble and Jack the Quick" Scooter makes storybook heroes real by merging the reality of harsh conditions, such as those faced by the peasants, with the ultimate good fortune of the literary fairy tale hero in \textit{Jack and the Beanstalk}. The chinaberry tree in Scooter’s front yard is “ever as tall as any fairy tale beanstalk” and serves as Scooter’s spyglass tree from which he can view his surroundings and metaphorically, the world beyond Gasoline Point.\textsuperscript{120} Contemporary athletes like Jack

\textsuperscript{117} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 193-4.
\textsuperscript{118} Murray, \textit{Briarpatch}, 155.
\textsuperscript{119} Darnton, \textit{Cat Massacre}, 9-72.
\textsuperscript{120} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 3.
Johnson the boxer, "who was by all accounts and all odds the nimblest footed quickest witted Jack of them all" and who was reputed as being able to "spring six feet backwards and out of punching range from a standstill" become models, like Cholly, Stagolee and others, for Scooter’s future achievements.121

The brutality of Scooter’s circumstances provided an environment of antagonistic cooperation where hardship paradoxically fostered survival. Local legends, national sports icons, and fictitious heroes alike formed Scooter’s repertoire of mentors and these provided counterstatements to any hardships resulting from Jim Crow or economic disadvantage. Like the blues musical genre, Scooter’s influences come from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms, even as the most prominent or organizing influences were based in African American culture. Such imaginative transformation allows Scooter to envision for himself a life beyond the legal and social constrictions of the Jim Crow South; the hybrid nature of his influences allows him the freedom to choose from amongst a variety of useful guides. Like musicians who learned their craft from other musicians, Scooter learned to excel by modeling the heroic exploits of those who had achieved what he hoped to achieve. While practicing punching on a bag hanging from the chinaberry tree in his front yard, Scooter pretends he is the nationally renown boxer who inspired brown-skinned boys and men to request their “coffee as black and strong as Jack Johnson and [their] scrambled eggs all beat up like poor old Jim Jeffries.”122 Armed with Johnson’s heroic accomplishments, backed by the strength of local legends like Cholly, and imagining himself capable of fairy tale feats, Scooter pretends that he is “the one [the Ku Klux Klan] wanted to come and lynch” not because he was “as black or as big as Jack

121 Murray, TWG, 32
122 Murray, TWG, 32.
Johnson” or because he wanted to be a boxer, but because Scooter, like Johnson, intended to achieve greatness regardless of the color line. While he knew such aspirations encouraged the wrath of Klansmen, who made every effort to stifle the dreams of the non-white population, Scooter’s imitation of Johnson’s talents and victories represents an ongoing fight against racism and, as with the ultimate triumph of Jack of the beanstalk tale, the possibility for its defeat. As Levine notes, “Throughout the afternoon and evening [of Johnson’s victory] deaths and injuries from racial conflict were reported in every state in the South as well as in New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, Missouri, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Washington D.C.” Like the Jack of the beanstalk tale and Jack Johnson, Scooter intended to “[rupture] role after role set aside for Negroes in American society.” In order to transcend the brutality native to his environment, Scooter needed natural skill, formal training, and a metaphor for fairy tale magic. By aligning himself with heroes wherever he could locate them, Scooter democratically and without bias provided himself with role models for his future endeavors. As Murray thought of himself as, “having to be as the ever nimble and ever resourceful mythological Alabama jackrabbit in the no less than mythological Alabama metaphorical briarpatch” Scooter is mentally and physically nimble and knows well how to negotiate the twists and turns of his briarpatch.

123 Murray, TWG, 32.
125 Cohen, At Freedom’s Edge, 211. According to Cohen, there were a total of 969 lynchings recorded from 1910 to 1934, of which the overwhelming majority took place in the South.
126 Levine, Black Culture, 431-2.
127 Levine, Black Culture, 431, 432.
128 Murray, Briarpatch, 4.
Scooter also appropriated, to his own circumstances, the brutality faced by U.S. slaves who recorded their worldviews in folktales that featured various woodland or briar patch animals engaged in exercises demonstrating their wit, skill and triumph over adversaries. Early in *Train Whistle Guitar*, Scooter tells his readers that his name is “Jack the Rabbit because my home is in the briar patch” and thereby places his story within the context of American history: the setting is harsh and in many ways animalistic due to the nature of racial bias. As noted by Eric J. Sundquist, “Jack the Rabbit and Jack the Bear could be cited as comparatively wide-ranging metaphors of African American experience in the world of bondage, labor, and racism” and its “meaning remained especially sharp in the era of segregation.” While Scooter’s circumstances are similar to those of European peasants, they are inextricably linked to those of American slaves for obvious reasons. Like Brer Rabbit who “defeats his enemies with a superior intelligence growing from a total understanding of his hostile environment,” Scooter is ever aware of the pernicious nature of his environment and like a woodland animal is always poised for action, whether physical, psychological, or verbal. In the volatile briar patch of Gasoline Point, the violent racial atmosphere of the Jim Crow South is captured in the city’s name and serves as a reminder of the danger native to Scooter’s natural environment. Like the briar patches of folkloric woodland animals that were governed by the laws of nature, Scooter’s briar patch is governed by social traditions and Jim Crow laws but is laden with visible and invisible obstacles like peer pressure, sexual promiscuity and bootleg liquor deals gone awry. Scooter’s circumstances link him to the

130 Eric J. Sunquist, ed., “African American Folk Song: Jack the Rabbit! Jack the Bear!” in *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1994), 120.
legendary briar patch animals in that he “[c]onsistently ... act[s] against the powerful, the pompous, the hypocritical ... in the name of survival” but all the while managed to derive from his actions, a measure of “sheer joy” and Scooter’s joy is made manifest in the realm of childhood play.132

In the stifling environment of slavery, the transmitters and creators of folktales could only imagine “higher social purposes” as existing beyond the physical world. Yet Scooter, a product of a society that had passed through Emancipation, Reconstruction, and into the early 20th century, intends to achieve his higher social purposes within the earthly realm.133 This is demonstrated by Scooter’s commitment to formal education and collegiate aspirations.134 He is not reared in slavery but in the blues, music that supports a proclivity towards individual excellence, the wider possibilities of which are made manifest in the relative legal freedoms enjoyed by Scooter’s era. By telling his story in the legacy of his heroic ancestors, Scooter uses a human voice, rather than that of a woodland animal, to signify his individual agency, self-assertion, and most importantly, to reclaim the humanity historically denied slaves. Telling tales using only animal characters had been necessary to protect the safety and identity of the storytellers, but this encoding was no longer needed for the literature created during Scooter’s generation.135

While the country, or “primitive,” blues portrays the more “normal human existence” available to newly freed slaves, Scooter’s blues reflects those of the earlier

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135 Murray began his Scooter series in 1974, when the freedom of authors to create characters of their choosing without concern for their own personal safety was a liberty taken for granted. During the period in which *TWG* is set, the writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance were creating the most obvious artistic model for such depiction, offering no apologies for the characters they created, their styles of writing, or their topics.
period but developed beyond them as a result of improved social and legal conditions and so is marked by distinct differences. Reflecting approximately 70 years of freedom from slavery, Scooter’s blues is marked by a conscious and broader expectation to travel, pursue formal education, achieve increased levels of literacy, and choose employment. However, the nature of blues lyrics remained unchanged and focused, as always, on the particularities and uncertainties of human relationships involving love, sex, longing and loss. Though the primitive blues shaped much of Scooter’s fascination with the music and its associated lifestyle through Luzana Cholly’s influence, the decades of Scooter’s youth, the 1920s and 1930s, witnessed a transition in the blues into a music “that could be used to entertain others formally … a way of making a living. An external and sophisticated idea had come to the blues, moving it past the casualness of the ‘folk’ to the conditioned emotional gesture of the ‘public’. “ Murray’s development of Scooter’s character mirrors this change. Scooter is reared in the blues, but his formal academic instruction and eventual college matriculation indicate that he is being trained for an existence beyond the “folk” of Gasoline Point and onward to the “public” (broader and more complex) briar patches of the world.

Verbal acuity is necessary both to briar patch survival and the development of heroic traits. Leapfrogging, a verbal call-and-response game between Scooter and Little Buddy Marshall, tests the boys’ intellectual, verbal, and aural abilities. One must have a quick wit in order to respond appropriately, a quick tongue in order to transmit the correct response, a sharp ear and a keen sense of timing in order to continue the rhythm. In the following example, the boys are preparing themselves for jumping the train, going

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137 Jones, *Blues People*, 82.
onward to distant locations and bringing back home stories of their own adventures modeled, of course, after those of Luzana Cholly. The excitement of the moment is the equivalent of a verbal revving up for a musical break. Little Buddy begins it with, "You know something? Goddammit, when I come back here to this little old granny-dodging burg, boy I'm going to be a goddamn man and a goddamn half." The energy builds to a dizzying pace as the dialogue is traded between the two. Scooter says, "And don't give a goddamn who knows it" and Little Buddy's reply to this initiates the verbal sparring:

Boy Chicago. And I said: Man, Detroit. And he said: Man, St. Louis. And I said: And Kansas City. Then: Hey, Los Angeles. Hey, San Francisco. Hey, Denver, Colorado. Him calling one and me adding another until we had leapfrogged all the way back down to the Florida Coast line, with him doing that old section gang chant: Say I don't know but I think I will make my home in Jacksonville (Hey big boy can't you line em).139

Murray describes play in terms of categories. He states, "The categories are competition, chance, make-believe, and vertigo. And playful effort may be just a matter of fooling around...or a matter of gratuitously increasing the difficulty of execution" (as in the preceding example).140 This verbal playfulness also illustrates one of the prerequisites for heroism, an innate desire to explore realms beyond one's own borders. The life of a hero demands foreign travel. Demonstrating one's intellectual, verbal, and aural adeptness is relatively easy among lifelong friends and family members; the proving ground lies in employing such skills in distant lands and circumstances. Like an animal in the wild, in order for Scooter to survive to face new levels of adventure he will have to employ all...

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139 Murray, *TWG*, 20.
that he has learned in the briar patch of his youth, and the testing of his survival skills through the childhood play helps develop this strength.

**Legends and Blues**

The train whistle of Murray’s title is a clarion call to adventure and an invitation to explore regions beyond Gasoline Point. Here Murray’s Western intellectual training is demonstrated as Scooter is called upon to accept the duty of the traditional hero near the novel’s close.141 Scooter is devastated by the news that he is illegitimate. Apparently thrown off track, Scooter isolates himself from his group of supporters, emerging two days later acting “as if nothing had happened,” but cannot resign himself to silence and denial.142 Months later, he forms a verbal comeback and figuratively slays the woman who revealed the truth that first gave him the blues. He says to Little Buddy, “man you know something? One time I caught Old Lady Booty Butt Minnie Ridley-butt Stovall trying to gossip some old hearsay stuff about me and Miss Tee.”143 Here Scooter consciously employs his briar patch training in the slaying of his first personal dragon as he takes the sting out of Miss Stovall’s comments using verbal acuity, quick wit, and rhythmic intonation. His response is that of a bluesman—he recognizes the low-down dirty shame regarding his birth but stomps away the sting of biological illegitimacy. The time delay in formulating such a response is indicative of his youth. Scooter is not yet sure-footed enough to improvise a response at the precise moment of the occurrence. Also, young Scooter needs Little Buddy’s validation on this point because he lacks the

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141 Murray has crafted Scooter as a literary hero based on the example set forth in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Chapter two gives an in-depth analysis of this connection and the improvisation Murray performs on Malory’s 15th-century text.

142 Murray, *TWG*, 182.

143 Murray, *TWG*, 182.
self-assurance to make such validation unnecessary. Scooter’s response is similar to that of a novice bluesman and his rhythm grows out of a black vernacular speech pattern but is abbreviated—he cannot sustain the rhythm created over long periods. Scooter is not yet capable of creating a fully orchestrated, long and flowing, refined reply. He cannot respond in the heat of the moment; Scooter cannot improvise, hence his delayed response. In short, Scooter is no Luzana Cholly. While Scooter’s attempt is noble, it is marked by a lack of sophistication both verbally and aurally—telling signs of his inexperience and youth. Fashioned individually, without Little Buddy’s verbal encouragement or assistance and occurring near the novel’s close, Scooter’s innovative reply demonstrates his courage in attempting the solo performance required of a bluesman. In turn, Little Buddy’s response reveals more than mere acceptance: he is in awe of his friend and declares that “that’s as good as giving you the inside claim on old Luzana and old Stagolee and old Gator Gus and them and all that.”

Now Scooter can claim direct ties to a beloved member of the community along with an adventurous past and a renegade legend all his own. This self-styled response qualifies Scooter as worthy of the blues training he has received and indicates Scooter’s first conscious effort to separate from the group and assume an individual identity.

The separation necessary to the development and evolution of the blues is also required of the hero. As noted by Lord Raglan regarding the hero of tradition, “it is very rarely that [the hero] is represented as having any companions at all, and when he has he never trains or leads them.” Heroes are, by the very nature of their being, special. Scooter and Little Buddy share camaraderie even if one and not the other will advance to

144 Murray, TWG, 182.
new levels of development. Raglan explains that “our hero’s followers, if any, are out of the way or killed off when his crucial fight takes place. All his victories, when they are actual fights and not magical contests, are single combats against other kings, or against giants, dragons, or celebrated animals. He never fights with ordinary men, or even with ordinary animals.” Scooter, not Little Buddy, is awarded a “certificate and the top prize” for excelling in school. Little Buddy’s death, which occurs in The Spyglass Tree, is a necessary part of Scooter’s development because it secures and validates Scooter’s establishment into the new realm of college life. In the academy the briar patch assumes new form: the stakes are high and the fight is crucial. To survive amidst the other select few who comprise the Depression Era African American collegiate student body meant Scooter must always be prepared to prove himself intellectually—especially since he had received an academic scholarship—and to practically employ all his briar patch skills, the very lessons of physical and psychological survival. By answering the “call to adventure” which “signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown, … [t]his fateful region of both treasure and danger,” Scooter is confirmed as the chosen one. Enticing people to adventure by transporting them from “within the pale of [their] society” to “a zone unknown” the railroad serves as a metaphor for heroic adventure by drawing the individual away from his group. As a heroic protagonist, Scooter is steeped

146 FitzRoy, The Hero, 194.
147 Murray, TWG, 182.
148 James D. Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, 1988), 41, 275. Table 7.2 illustrates that there were 2,348 Black college students (public and private) in the state of Alabama in 1935. Of these, 793 were males enrolled in private schools such as that which Scooter attends in The Spyglass Tree. Table 2.1 provides a comparison to the total population of blacks in Alabama, 944, 834, in 1930.
in the vernacular and musical traditions of his group as well as the academic training of his formal educational advisors and teachers. Yet, Scooter must separate from each group in order to prove he is qualified to be an agent of the culture and community he represents. By the end of Murray’s first novel, Scooter has demonstrated that he is capable of numerous improvisations to assist him in developing heroic qualities. Having drawn on the best aspects of local legends, nationally acclaimed athletes, and fairy tale and folktale heroes, Scooter is prepared to meet challenges in a wider arena.

The process of continuously making the best out of harsh situations is the basis of the blues. As Murray states, “The basic dynamics of the blues idiom are predicated upon confrontation or acknowledgement of the harsh facts of life.” The hero in the blues is a self-styled, courageous, individual who asserts a tenacious, railroad-like will to survive by maintaining an attitude of affirmation made possible by consciously, publicly, and continuously “transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song,” and never giving up the quest for personal and group edification. The railroad serves as a significant cultural metaphor for this type of persistence. Murray states, “If you want really to study the locomotive as a student of culture would study it...you would see that the image of the train—or the idea or notion of the train—was deeply embedded in the consciousness” of African Americans. Scooter’s drive is like that of the railroad, he persists despite and in spite of any obstacles and remains actually focused on his success.

As a way to transcend the brutal nature of their environment, the descendants of slaves relied heavily upon formal education. Denied formal academic training during

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150 Murray, Briarpatch, 20.
151 Baker, Blues Ideology, 7.
152 Murray, Briarpatch, 185.
slavery, the newly free pursued formal education as a matter of self-assertion. The “school bell” is a familiar sound for Scooter and during school hours “everything you did was part of the also and also and also that school bells and school bell times were all about.”\textsuperscript{153} As Murray states in a poem, “they used to call me schoolboy/ and I never did deny my name” because being academically trained was part of one’s “preparation” for entering wider realms of opportunity.\textsuperscript{154} While segregation dictated that few such opportunities were available to blacks the pursuit of formal education remained a practical approach to avail oneself to the benefits of integrating into mainstream society. If schools were available, they were poorly furnished and inadequately staffed. Those, like Scooter who had the advantage of attending school year-round, every year, were privileged indeed. If the school was furnished nicely and staffed with knowledgeable experts dedicated to academic excellence, the privilege was even greater.\textsuperscript{155} Though a child, Scooter is cognizant of his elite status. Scooter is in awe and enamored of Miss Lexine Metcalf, his third grade geography teacher, and her “blue and green and yellow globe revolving on its tilted axis.”\textsuperscript{156} She literally introduces Scooter to the world and allows him to envision himself as part of an elite group based on intellectual excellence. Intellectual growth and academic pursuit have the power to grant Scooter the freedom of integration associated with living beyond “the veil” of cultural illegitimacy validated by Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{157} By mingling the lessons of his non formal training with intellectual forays

\textsuperscript{153}Murray, TWG, 52.
\textsuperscript{154} Murray, Conjugations, lines 1,2: 8.
\textsuperscript{155} Anderson, Education of Blacks, 194, 236. Table 6.3 demonstrates that as late as 1915 there were no high schools for African Americans to attend in Mobile, Alabama. Table 6.5 shows that in the academic year 1933-34, of the 90,654 African Americans living in the state of Alabama, only 9,162 were enrolled in secondary grades.
\textsuperscript{156} Murray, TWG, 54.
\textsuperscript{157} W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Signet, 1982), 44. DuBois describes the moment when he first realized that he was different from his classmates. He states, “then it dawned upon me with a
like those learned in Miss Lexine Metcalf's geography class, Scooter learns to survive the classroom aspect of his briarpatch. Here the "globe revolving on its tilted axis with its North and South Poles, and its Eastern and Western Hemispheres, and its equator plus its Torrid and North Temperate and South Temperate and Frigid Zones" represented new fields of play and exploration. Rather than being intimidated by the difficulty and rigor associated with academic training, Scooter appropriates such lessons and reduces them to the familiar territory of childhood play and bedtime stories. From having been reared in Miss Metcalf's classroom, Scooter develops a certain 'immunity' to classroom anxiety. Realizing endless possibilities in her instruction, Scooter allows Miss Metcalf's desk to become "the Roundtable from which armor-clad knights errant set forth to do battle with dragons and blackboard problems." Enchanted, Scooter knows that "her window box plants" could "become Robin Hood's forest" and that her "magic pointer ... [could] change everyday Gasoline Point schoolgirls into Cindarellas and Sleeping Beauties and you into Prince Charming or Roland or Siegfried or Sinbad or Ulysses and your Buster Brown shoes or your Keds into Seven League Boots." The inspirations for Scooter's viewing himself as capable of magical transformations were in the realm of fairy tales. While the origins of the tales spoke to brutality and poverty, the literary forms of the tales demonstrated that a transformation was possible; happy endings did exist. Scooter's 'magic' would come in a form consistent with his cultural particularities and would be based on his briarpatch skills. In adhering to the ideal associated with academic training,
Scooter knows he will have to “become a schoolboy above and beyond everything else” in order to take the ideal of heroism further than that depicted by local heroes. In order to integrate into mainstream society of the 20th century quick wit, verbal acuity, and nimble feet would have to be augmented by academic excellence. Knowing this Murray crafted Scooter accordingly. As Murray recalls of his childhood, “We had free public education! We had the same books! They [white school children] were taking Latin. I was taking Latin!” Murray does this in order to demonstrate that successes were possible despite Jim Crow and economic hardship. The process of integration could take place even within “segregated” classrooms making cosmopolitanism a legitimate and achievable goal despite the color line.

Education, like the railroad, provided an opportunity for physical and psychological escape especially for those who, like Scooter and his family, decided to remain in the Jim Crow South rather than participate in the mass exodus of southern blacks to the north during the Great Migration. As Raglan asserts “the chief qualification for the throne has always been the possession of power, the power that is conferred by divine descent and the absorption of divine wisdom, and that is demonstrated by victory over the elements and over man.” About his own experiences as a child, Murray explains that, “they [members of his community] all thought of me as an Ivy League-type kid. We didn’t have anything. I was from a very, very poor family,

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161 Murray, TWG, 54.
162 Conversation with Albert Murray, 7 December 2001.
163 This is an example of the way Murray counters views that blacks are deprived because they did not have certain advantages that came from economic viability. However, Murray’s view needs to be balanced. His words suggest an equality that did not exist.
164 Cohen, At Freedom’s Edge, 93. Table 4 reveals that from 1910 to 1930, 1,583,000 blacks left the south.
165 Raglan, The Hero, 196.
but on the campus I was part of the elite.\textsuperscript{166} Influenced by W.E.B. DuBois and his notions of the Talented Tenth, Scooter is exactly the type of youngster DuBois had in mind. In *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, Critic Joy James argues that the phrase “Talented Tenth” was initially coined to “distinguish...liberal arts education [advocated by Henry Moorehouse] programs and their students from the ‘average or mediocre’ black intellect that aligned itself with [Booker T.] Washington’s ideology of vocational education for race advancement.”\textsuperscript{167} The idea presented in this statement lies at the crux of an artistic and intellectual divide like that between Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, a point to which I return in a later chapter, but also one that continues to divide scholars today.\textsuperscript{168} Scholars must mediate the space in between opposing views in order to enrich the field of study. Somewhere between DuBois’s and Washington’s views, for example, lies territory ripe for exploration. Aligning oneself on one side of the debate is, at best, short-sighted and at worst insulting because it is reductive. The title of her study implies the presence of barriers between Black leaders, laypersons, and American intellectuals. Further, it suggests that blacks and Americans are different groups and that blacks are singular. In their works both Murray and Ellison refute this type of simplistic duality. In James’ study blacks are reduced to a single type with black politics appearing only in one limited form. In addition, the idea of transcending the Talented Tenth suggests the uselessness of an entire group. Remembering the obstacles of legal and social restrictions and the physical danger faced by the Talented Tenth as they pursued artistic and

\textsuperscript{166} Conversation with Albert Murray, 13 July 2002.
\textsuperscript{168} This intellectual divide is explored fully in chapters 3 and 4 of this study.
intellectual endeavors, one need not 'transcend' but build on their work in a tradition of paving paths of excellence.

In the nameless, faceless mass envisioned by James, black agency assumes limited form. My study and its focus on the blues is, in part, a method of honoring the traditions built by those who resisted the hegemony that sought to restrict their lives despite any overt political engagement. The transformation made possible by the blues does not require grandiose political acts but certainly provides the platform upon which such overt acts can be realized, like improvisation and its ability to root political engagement in traditions of resistance (briarpatch survival), self-assertion, individuality, and skilled responses to random occurrences. Scooter never imagined himself as a tradesman or agricultural laborer. Rather, Scooter understood "divine descent" to mean that one (in this case Scooter himself) had been chosen as capable and worthy of attending college where it was assumed one would tirelessly pursue and absorb the "divine wisdom" being conferred by the professors. Matriculation and certainly graduation meant that Scooter had achieved a "victory over the elements and over man" because in so doing he would have avoided not merely the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan but personal anxieties, social (campus and community) deterrents, economic hardship, and academic challenges simultaneously in his achievement over the proverbial common man with no academic degree. In this regard, Scooter views himself as becoming a "privileged, authoritative [expert]," as a goal of having overcome so many obstacles. Remembering that despite migration figures, most blacks remained in the region of their

169 Raglan, The Hero, 196.
170 James, Transcending the Talented Tenth, 157.
birth, Scooter’s use of education indicates one of the many types of self-preservation tactics employed by members of a legally and socially, by custom, restricted group.

The blues is a vital weapon for dismantling the hegemonic discourse of race because it is inherently humanistic. The blues deals with the secular world made by humans and the complexities of their relationships and antagonisms. "Humanism" like the blues is, "an achievement of form by human will and agency."171 "Humanism is not about withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse: its purpose is to make more things available to critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies for emancipation and enlightenment, and, just as importantly, human misreadings and misinterpretations of the collective past and present."172 Scholars who are committed to a blues-based ideology, philosophy or mindset promote an approach to understanding the human condition that accepts the often unjust nature of life and its transformation by human, not divine, energies. Committed to the idea of emancipation (of the mind, at least, and temporarily if nothing else) from whatever barriers seek to constrict human agency, blues-based scholars seek to expand the ways in which our "collective past and present" are read and interpreted by invoking a theory for cultural analysis that addresses the complexity of the human condition at once. As a critical device, the blues aligns humans on the basis of human (not racial, class, religious, etc.) concerns; personal antagonisms plague us all and so we all have a vested interest in their transformation. The blues as a theoretical device can address the complexity of the human condition because it does not hail from a single source. Inherently heterogeneous, the blues "invites inventive play" and allows scholars the freedom to locate human agency in a variety of forms beyond

musical expression. In at least this way, the blues as a theoretical device is one of inclusion. Rather than designating the self-confidence depicted by intellectuals like Murray—Ellison falls into this category as well—as being part of a “self-serving elitism that obscures non-elite agency,” as does Joy James, Murray’s crafting of Scooter in the blues tradition demonstrates a method of identifying human agency in a multiplicity of forms. There is no simple dichotomy as James suggests. By choosing fiction over autobiography, Murray posits Scooter’s story as multi-layered, offering links between fairy tale, folktale, fictitious, and real-life heroes and demonstrates how one might use the particulars of even the most humble circumstances to craft an identity of one’s own choosing. There is nothing elite about the briar patch.

The genre of fiction allows Murray the use of the limitless range of his imagination, thereby making possible the freedom for which artists so often strive. In using the blues as a basis for his writing, Murray appropriates in print the liberty typically associated with musicians and their use of improvisation. Recognizing the possibilities that exist through music, Murray wanted to “use musical devices to stylize literary statements.” Much of his writing is stream-of-consciousness narration and is depicted in long italicized sections found in each novel. This freedom of expression allows an author to make use of a wider range of artistic sensibilities. As with musical improvisation, the selection of words and styles must not be random, though it may appear so, but instead based on skill in order to transmit the appropriate image and sound—one that works. As Murray states, “It is not a matter of making a record of things, memories, opinions, and notations as they come to mind. It is a matter of

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175 Conversation with Albert Murray, 7 December 2001.
composition." A musician’s improvisation must flow and must aurally fit into the larger composition of the group. Likewise, a writer’s words must fit together in such a way as to create a unified idea and image that fits into his overall project. If the final result of the musician or writer makes the creation seem effortless, the improvisation is successful because the skill of the artist leaves no mark of struggle or strained attempt. Through a modeling of the blues and its ability to transform struggle by way of practical human application, authors can transform stereotypical constrictions as they craft their works, creating not stereotypes but, perhaps, prototypes.

Through the attitude of affirmation ("one is tempted to call it a philosophy—that is forthrightly heroic") demonstrated in the heroic blues novel, the very idea of victimization is put at bay and the useful aspects of the nation’s brutal history are transformed into tools of forward progress and various types of personal and group mobility. Rather than obscuring “non-elite agency,” I would offer that such characterization offers non-elites the opportunity to view themselves as potential heroes through, for example, a personal modeling of the blues because such a mindset indicates, "not defeat and victimization—even for the black American in the strange world of trouble he knows as his homeland—but possibility."

At the very least the blues offers hope; at its best, heroism. In Murray’s rendering, Scooter’s success in realms beyond Gasoline Point is a product of his formal academic training, “extracurricular sessions” such as those in the local barbershop, lessons ascertained from a cognizance of community affairs—all synthesized by his ability to

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176 Murray, Briarpatch, 110.
177 O’Meally. Introduction to Train Whistle Guitar, viii.
178 O’Meally. Introduction to Train Whistle Guitar, ix-x.
view himself as exceptional in all ways. "Aside from the rawness of black oppression were fireside stories" and other methods of support "that at their best were visionary and made endurance and even heroism not only possible but the expected thing." Scooter is the "rightwise" king of his community and as such must go forth into the battlefields of the world and stake his claim to personal prosperity that can be reflected back onto his community. Such individual agency, like the blues, is based on group involvement, but in its requirement of isolation, like the blues, allows for improvisation, and thus the possibility of heroic action. In his use of the blues idiom in the crafting of his fiction, Murray's series exposes a matrix, a complex literary and artistic guide for analyzing fiction. Murray's Train Whistle Guitar speaks to the ways in which the blues offered physical and psychological escape and empowerment, in this case, for Depression Era blacks whose lives were allegedly restricted by Jim Crow and social tradition.

Through the blues-based novel, readers can discover a vision of self-assertion and empowerment while simultaneously honoring a multi-faceted American heritage; one synthesized by African American culture, but also one that honors the various aspects that comprise that culture. As Murray states, "Distinctive as it is, U.S Negro music, like U.S. Negro life, is, after all, or rather first of all, also inseparable from life in the United States at large." Contemporary critics working within the blues matrix are offered a method for intellectual reinvigoration based on the transformations and the invitation to "play" made manifest in analyses of the blues novel. By using the blues as a guide for analyzing literature critics can address the ways in which individuals mediate change and assert themselves in face of their personal antagonisms within the context of a non violent

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179 O'Meally, Introduction to Train Whistle Guitar, xi.
180 O'Meally, Introduction to Train Whistle Guitar, xi.
181 Murray, Omni, 147.
tradition. In this process overarching generalities restricting the complexity of the human experience (such as race and class) into simplistic dualities are dismantled; individuality is rescued in honor of human agency. The blues-based narrative offers a discourse of inclusion because in its requirement of improvisation it honors individuality, encourages innovation, and like the railroad, channels or challenges theoretical discourse regarding the fiction to be progressive and push through the seemingly natural landscape of hegemonic ideology. Voyeuristic and intellectual journeys are available to all courageous enough to come along for the ride.
CHAPTER II
SLAYING MODERN DRAGONS

Used as critical theory, the blues offers new ways of reading and thinking about literature.\(^1\) Its hybrid nature exposes the various intersections of texts that are obviously related and even those that would seem to share no commonalities. As Houston Baker asserts, “the juncture is the way-station of the blues.”\(^2\) This juncture is the point of commonality among, for the purposes of this study, various works and genres of literature. In Albert Murray’s series the juncture is the briarpatch, the environment in which one can negotiate various twists and turns of fate in a seemingly effortless manner because it is the land of his rearing. Serving as the link between Albert Murray’s Scooter and Thomas Malory’s Arthur in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the briar patch experience—the proving ground for the hero—is antagonistically cooperative and yields heroes, albeit in two distinct traditions.\(^3\) For the peasants of early modern Europe, briarpatch brutality is comprised in part by the medieval forests where mysterious beings and wizards reigned. Peasant tales and literary stories like those popularized by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm are part of a European based culturally specific legacy of human triumph in the midst of uncertainty such as that captured in Malory’s paradigmatic tale of

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this study, the blues will be used only to investigate literature. However, with its multi-faceted offerings and the ability of sound to influence the listener, I have no doubt that the blues as a critical device can be used—and I believe should be used—to investigate the workings of various mediums. In this regard, the collages of Romare Bearden come first to mind.


\(^3\) In a telephone conversation on April 25, 2002, Murray directed me to read Heinrich Zimmer’s, *The King and the Corpse*, Joseph Campbell’s, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, and to look at Thomas Malory’s King Arthur as an example of the type of hero upon which Scooter’s characterization is based.
heroism. Similarly, Murray’s heroic tale is a literary stylization of various folk traditions, literary and musical influences that are culturally specific to the United States. Like Malory’s heroic tale, Murray’s stems from hybrid sources. Both tales share a protagonist who must overcome deeply personal antagonism regarding his identity in order to enter into the realm of heroic adventure.

A critical focus on the ways in which the individual relates to his environment and responds to the random situations with which he is faced reveals the mechanisms by which he negotiates his angst and lends insight into the culture from which he hails. In Malory’s tale, Arthur comes to a psychological dead end that seems certain to block his entrance into the realm of heroic activity that readers know awaits him. For example, an investigation into Malory’s tale promises to reveal insight into the value of heredity, the power of Merlin’s magic, the power of privilege and how its use and abuse has resonated both nationally and globally and its association with imperialism. Murray’s tale seems truer to the U.S. ideal of anti-aristocratic and democratic philosophy. Scooter relies not on magic, heredity or privilege but on his blues training, an amalgamation of resources contributing to an attitude of affirmation in the face of the unjust nature of life, in order to transform his mindset (temporarily at least) if not his conditions or circumstances. For Scooter, there are no dead ends; he views his life as being laden with possibilities. As the protagonist of Murray’s series, Scooter’s individual tale is the focal point; however, his tale lends insight into the vitality of his culture and community in ways that belie efforts

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4 These tales were designed to cater to the tastes of sophisticated readers and were watered down to avoid offending them by obscuring the brutal nature of peasant life. See Darnton, *Cat Massacre*, 11.

5 These traditions stem from a variety of sources including European, African, Native American and Spanish and lend insight into the diversity of the United States.

6 For a detailed analysis of how the blues manifests itself culturally see chapter one of this study.
to homogenize poor colored communities because Scooter finds not depravation and despair in his community but inspiration, hope and joy. Speaking of the tendency of scholars to stereotype black urban culture Robin Kelley notes, “Few scholars acknowledge that what might also be at stake here are aesthetics, style, and pleasure.”

Murray’s series is an effort to extend, in fiction, themes he first addressed in *The Omni-Americans*, and was “written in an effort to make...an affirmative rebuttal to negative allegations and conclusions about some aspects of Negro life in the United States.”

Using the blues as a guide to understand culture, and in this case literature, reveals both the individuality and complexity inherent in any community. The individual angst such as that mediated in blues culture reveals, like the miner’s canary, immediate danger to the individual but serves as a warning call indicating poisons that threaten the vitality of entire communities. This chapter will demonstrate the ways in which a blues-based critical analysis enhances the reading of fiction, distinguishes the U.S. from European heroic tradition, and posits everyday heroes such as Scooter at the helm of more accurate renderings and understandings of communities of color.

Aligning Scooter with Malory’s Arthur, Murray reveals his solidly Western intellectual influence and improvises on the mold of the legendary figure in the creation of a blues-based American hero rooted in the tradition of democratic idealism. The heroes of tradition are identified in literature as having certain traits in common and also share

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the incidents “connected with the hero’s birth, those connected with his accession to the throne, and those connected with his death” or the “rites de passage.” Like the legendary Arthur, Scooter is an illegitimate child and does not learn of his biological parentage until the moment he heeds the call to adventure near the end of Train Whistle Guitar. Arthur is born to King Uther Pendragon and, with the magic of Merlin, Duchess Ingraine, the Duke of Cornwall’s wife. As part of the agreement between King Uther and Merlin, the newborn Arthur is given to the magician, who then delivers him to Sir Ector, “a passing true man,” to be reared. Similarly, adoptive parents, Miss Melba and Papa Whit, raise Scooter. This, too, follows Raglan’s assertion that “the circumstances of [the hero’s] conception are unusual” and he is “spirited away, and reared by foster parents in a far country.” When young Arthur alone succeeds in pulling the sword Excalibur from its lodging in the marble stone, all are amazed by the miraculous feat because it places the ‘low-born’ Arthur and not his ‘more qualified’ step-brother in the spotlight. Similarly, Scooter is placed in the spotlight when he separates himself from his sidekick by creating a blues-styled response to hearing the news of his illegitimacy. His retort—“Man you know something? One time I caught Old Lady Booty Butt Minnie Ridley—but Stovall trying to gossip some old hearsay stuff about me and Miss Tee. But she don’t know I heard her—and Mama and Papa neither”—is one that simultaneously acknowledges the

10 Raglan, The Hero, 190.
11 Thomas Malory, Le Morte D’Arthur, ed. John Matthews (London: Cassell, 2000). Regarding Arthur’s conception, Merlin tells King Uther Pendragon, “the first night that ye shall lie by Ingraine ye shall get a child on her ... after the death of the duke, King Uther lay with Ingraine more than three hours after his death, and begat on her that night Arthur” (5). Regarding Arthur’s rearing by foster parents, “so the child was delivered unto Merlin, and so he bare it forth unto Sir Ector, and made an holy man to christen him, and named him Arthur; and so Sir Ector’s wife nourished him with her own pap” (7).
12 Raglan, The Hero, 179.
intimacy of his pain and transforms it into personal fortitude.\textsuperscript{13} Having also earned a "certificate and the top prize" for excelling in school, Scooter is well prepared for life beyond Gasoline Point.\textsuperscript{14}

The nobles who comprise Arthur’s terrain are unprepared to honor Sir Ector’s son as “the rightwise king born of all England,” because Sir Ector, like Scooter’s Papa Whit, lacks a noble heritage.\textsuperscript{15} The sting of illegitimacy that causes Scooter to hibernate for two days, strikes Arthur similarly, for “it was great shame unto [all the nobles] and the realm, to be over-governed with a boy of no high blood born.”\textsuperscript{16} Illegitimacy threatens to prevent even young Arthur from ascending the throne and his birth must be made legitimate before he could command the proper respect and enter into the realm of adventure. Even the blessing bestowed upon him by his father, King Uther— “I give God’s blessing and mine, and bid him pray for my soul, and righteously and worshipfully that [Arthur] claim the crown, upon forfeiture of my blessing”—is not enough to secure Arthur’s place.\textsuperscript{17} Merlin must go to the discontent nobles and explain the conditions of Arthur’s birth; ultimately he tells them “I prove him he is no bastard.”\textsuperscript{18} Through the wizardry of Merlin, Arthur is made legitimate and so can reign as king.\textsuperscript{19}

Scooter has no access to such wizardry, but he does have the blues and a school certificate. As with the hero of tradition, the “mysteries of birth” give Scooter his first

\textsuperscript{13} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 182.
\textsuperscript{14} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 182.
\textsuperscript{15} Malory, \textit{Morte D’Arthur}, 9.
\textsuperscript{16} Malory, \textit{Morte D’Arthur}, 12.
\textsuperscript{17} Malory, \textit{Morte D’Arthur}, 8.
\textsuperscript{18} Malory, \textit{Morte D’Arthur}, 15.
\textsuperscript{19} It can be argued, however, that even Merlin’s explanation of Arthur’s birth was not good enough. Some of the noblemen were satisfied by Merlin’s explanation, but many others were not and made plans to overthrow Arthur.
blue feelings and “produce [the] anxiety” that spurs him into action. He is able to eliminate the sting of illegitimacy by invoking the legacy of self-chosen ancestors like Luzana Cholly, whose valid claims to community respect and the adulation of the boys is not based on blood-ties of any sort. When Arthur pulls the fateful sword from its lodging in the stone, Sir Ector reveals to the youth, “I was never your father nor of your blood, but I wot well ye are of an higher blood than I weened ye were.” Similarly, Little Buddy validates Scooter after Scooter has performed his first solo in verbally cutting down Miss Stovall. Little Buddy’s response is similar to Sir Ector’s, “man that’s as good as giving you the inside claim on old Luzana Cholly and old Stagolee and old Gator Gus and them and all that.” Having no known paternity allows him to assert agency in choosing forebears of his own by reaching into the richness of his community’s offerings. By actively participating in the game called “the dozens,” Scooter neutralizes the insult meted out by Miss Stovall and asserts himself by demonstrating an agency unknown to young Arthur. Scooter chooses to align himself with greatness, decides heredity will not determine his future and in so doing asserts the strength of his community despite sociological notions of the depravity expected of illegitimately born children.

Murray’s alignment of Scooter with legendary heroes like Malory’s Arthur demonstrates the power of the blues to transform esoteric wizardry by way of practical human application. No magic is needed in the blues; rather, humans transform their angst

21 Scooter also claims various characters from slave folktales, fairy tales, national athletes, and certainly local legends like Cholly and Stagolee Dupas as part of his chosen ancestry. Figures depicted in *Train Whistle Guitar* include Brer Rabbit, Jack the Rabbit, Puss In Boots, Jack and the Beanstalk, and boxer Jack Johnson.
23 Murray, *TWG*, 182.
by asserting themselves in the face of antagonistic conditions. Murray ‘plays’ with
Malory’s paradigmatic tale of heroism in a written improvisation. As with musical
improvisation Murray adheres to “constraints, arrangements, or plans for what will be
played [written]” in honor of (in Murray’s case) the literary tradition Murray reveres.24
Lessons in transforming the anxiety into self-affirmation have always been part of
Scooter’s rearing and are indicative of his blues-based learning experience. His blues
training has taught him that it “don’t make a difference in the world where you come
from you still got to do the best you can with what you come here with.”25 He need not be
burdened with circumstances he cannot change. Scooter cannot rely on a royal father or
personal wizard to save him from the brutality of life. However, as a hybrid entity
stemming in part from the spiritual, the blues offers Scooter a culture rich with life
affirming possibilities and methods for countermanding the humiliation of illegitimacy
including an attitude hailing from religion.26 As Scooter’s adoptive mother tells him,
“You just tell them I say the Christchild was born in a stall.”27 With this line of advice,
Scooter’s mother endows her child with a weapon to slay verbal assailants that is rooted
in the traditions of the community, exudes style and allows Scooter to be glib in the face
of such assaults in the spirit of the dozens. Though a child, he is trained to go bravely
forth in a world in which enemies may reside in the very same room.28

26 Southern, *Music*, 333. Southern notes that the blues stems from many sources including “the sorrow
songs among the spirituals.”
28 Miss Stovall questions Scooter’s biological legitimacy as he lies on his mother’s lap in a room filled with
community members.
Scooter’s handling of his individual angst serves as a metaphor for larger discussions of legitimacy. By facing his angst and transforming it by way of positive action, Scooter demonstrates the complexity inherent in his community; it can be simultaneously insidious and nurturing or to use Murray’s term, “antagonistically cooperative.” Scooter mediates this line between the pernicious and positive aspects of his community by going into hiding where he contemplates his response to Miss Stovall’s charges. Scooter’s verbal retort indicates his decision—the benefits he receives from his community overshadow all else. Rich in life-affirming lessons and practices, Scooter views his community as nurturing and not a web of pathology. Now having put to use its teachings in a practical sense and in response to a personal assault, Scooter legitimizes both himself and his community by focusing on positive aspects, even as he is cognizant of negative components. As with the blues, Scooter does not simply lament life, he celebrates its positive aspects by transforming his angst in unsentimental ways and has a good time while so doing. By representing Scooter and his community as culturally rich and nurturing, Murray counters the stereotypical view of communities of color in such a way as to not simply level the terrain of difference between communities of color and the mainstream but that heralds colored communities as dynamic, thriving complex locales where life is affirmed daily despite economic conditions. As Murray’s series makes clear through Scooter’s constant evocation of hometown memories to guide his development, Scooter’s success is possible in large part due to the community nurturing he has received.

29 Scooter’s community is economically poor but culturally rich and this is the view Murray expresses throughout his series. For more on this line of thinking see Robin Kelley’s discussion in urban American in Yo’ Mama’a Disfunktional: fighting the culture wars in urban america. Boston, Beacon Press, 1997.
By comparing Scooter’s illegitimacy to that of Christ, Murray raises the stakes regarding discussions of cultural legitimacy. Scooter’s characterization eliminates the distance of difference between the common-born, brown-skinned boy and the revered child of Mary, and in so doing, Murray’s work addresses issues of biological illegitimacy that have historically plagued communities of color. The transformation of the discourse surrounding charges of illegitimacy demonstrates the power of the blues as a cultural device to reveal and transform points of antagonism. Suffering is common to all and as Murray states, “its like Jesus Christ ... Heroes always have a questionable birth.” This questionable birth, however, should not stigmatize one for life or immobilize him, as with young Arthur. Rather, such moments of anxiety offer the opportunity for one to demonstrate the strengths of the traditions in which he has been reared—to improvise. Born illegitimately, Christ, Arthur and Scooter have been made to answer for the dealings of their biological parents. Murray levels the terrain between these heroes of tradition and Scooter by giving them the same burden of proof to mediate. However, in Murray’s depiction Scooter himself, unlike the others, transforms his angst in a manner consistent with community teachings. The miracle of Christ’s conception and birth forms the foundation of Christianity and the wizardry of Merlin serves as the basis for Arthur’s ascension to the throne. These dynamics indicate the power of privilege and the value placed on bloodline heredity. Murray’s alignment of Scooter with these heroes and his systematic reversal of the paradigmatic tale of heroism demonstrate the power of human agency made possible through an evocation of the blues as a cultural mechanism. If the

30 Conversation with Albert Murray, 13 July 2002.
Christian world has endured for thousands of years, standing undaunted by any claims of illegitimacy despite Christ’s elusive origins and Arthur’s legacy has endured similarly despite the timing of Duchess Ingraine’s conception of the royal youth, surely Scooter’s access to the realm of heroism is valid given the fact that he actually and actively participates in the transformation of his angst. In a sense, Murray challenges the validity of heroes who have not earned the right to the metaphoric throne but who have relied on privilege--they have not done the work of being prepared for the role of leadership but have been granted legendary power anyway. If heroism is to be, “measured in terms of the stress and strain it can endure and the magnitude and complexity of the obstacles it overcomes” then surely Scooter, not Arthur, is a hero. Through his verbal retort, Scooter exerts an agency unknown to Arthur, thereby making Scooter a real-world, earthly hero who does not rely upon miracles or sorcery. Murray’s work suggests a rethinking of traditional heroes.

Through the blues as a cultural device the realm of heroism is transformed from the unattainable to the humanly plausible because it puts the power of transformation in the hands of its practitioners. For those not born to a deity or royal father, the blues offers hope because it gives voice and so validity to the politically/culturally powerless and challenges them to act or improvise. Their improvisation, as with the on-stage variety, resonates through the community and serves as a guide to which others can respond in their own unique way. As with musical improvisation, this practice establishes a dialogue.

32 Scooter’s response in *Train Whistle Guitar* is unrefined and indicative of his youth, but as Murray’s series progresses, so does Scooter’s sophistication and the types of responses he devises are evidence of his maturation. While Scooter does not have miracles or sorcery, he does have common sense and heroic models, which play an important part in his success.
that gives voice to individual concerns. As with musical improvisation, one must listen acutely in order to respond. One improvises, "‘off something or ‘against’ something.”33 Scooter spends the majority of his time in Train Whistle Guitar (and in Murray’s series) listening because as with improvisation, one needs to have achieved a certain amount of training in order to respond in kind. “Even when the [musical] arrangements are minimal and not written down...there are nonetheless agreed upon principles as to what might be invented and how it relates to the whole.”34 These guidelines, loose as they might be, need to be learned and mastered before they are played. Scooter’s silent participation (though he moves around physically quite a bit) can be understood as active listening; he is, like Ellison’s narrator, in a state of “hibernation” waiting for his chance to act.35 In Murray’s first novel, Scooter’s action comes near the end because it is only then that Scooter is sufficiently prepared to render any response to the insult he has received.36 By placing the power of transformation in the hands of the politically powerless the blues serves as a vehicle for the transmission of power that endows individuals and so their communities with a voice.

The blues offers the opportunity for self-legitimization despite societal views because it is based on the individual, his angst and his hope. Such a notion of legitimacy is capable of transforming the discourse regarding race because it acknowledges the complexity of individual experiences even in the midst of alleged group despair. The blues offers no haven for ‘victims’ as individuals are engaged in the continuous process

33 John Szwed. Jazz 101: 49.
34 Szwed, Jazz 101: 44.
36 As a child, Scooter’s hesitation in responding to Miss Stovall’s charges may be influenced by the fact that she is an adult.
of self-assertion; they think, act, and function accordingly regardless of the conditions in
which they live, work or love. The mechanisms of their struggle may be deeply personal,
as with Scooter’s, but these concerns resonate culturally.\textsuperscript{37} To identify the blues as a
primary influence (as a personal philosophy and/or artistic strategy) is to signal the need
for in-depth analysis of influences that may be as numerous as they are varied. While it
had been common practice for the general public to assume group depravation based on
sociologically driven theories that align poverty with immorality and deviance, the blues
thwarts such imposed designations because in its focus on the individual the blues allows
each person to name for him/herself the angst he/she feels and transform it through
nonviolent, non pathological means into good-time music.\textsuperscript{38} The human agency implicit
in the blues allows individuals the power of choice associated with asserting their voice.
By prioritizing the circumstances of his birth, for example, Scooter chooses the cross he
will bear and determines where and how he will lay it to rest. In terms of racial discourse,
the blues allows the conscious theoretician to engage literature intimately by exposing the
variety of artistic nuances and other influences that guide the actions of the protagonist by
acknowledging self-assertion and so human agency. By revealing such nuances, texts
avert simplified groupings and retain the individuality of both artistic intent and character
variation by allowing the author and his characters to guide interpretations from within
the text. Though economically and materially disadvantaged, Scooter does not view
himself or his community as depraved, culturally, intellectually or morally deficient. The

\textsuperscript{37} In singing about lost loves, hardship and woe, (for example) the blues may speak to individual
experiences but the lyrics will express sentiments shared by audience members. An analysis of the lyrics
might yield better insight into problems that plague the nation such as domestic violence, infidelity, and
unemployment.

\textsuperscript{38} Murray’s \textit{Omni-Americans} was written in an effort to counter such allegations.
blues is the ‘bass-line’ of American culture in the United States and, for those conscious of its literary and so cultural presence, can provide a rich source for the artistic and theoretical engagement of various and varied types of symbolism because it can be used to restructure, guide, and/or transform through improvisation, even the ideologies it implicates.

In Murray’s depiction, Scooter’s blues training is stronger and more reliable than Arthur’s royal heritage. Scooter spends his childhood learning the various formal and vernacular educational strategies that prepare him survive into adulthood. Arthur is born with a bloodline connection that allows him to by-pass preparatory stages. His advantage in this regard grants him entrance into the realm of adventure but does not assure his survival; Merlin is needed periodically throughout Arthur’s reign. Readers learn of Arthur’s noble birth at the very beginning of Malory’s text and this knowledge allows readers to assume and expect Arthur’s eventual prosperity based on readers’ own notions of bloodline privilege. Scooter’s heritage is revealed only near the end of Train Whistle Guitar. Prior to making any judgment on the likeliness of his future success, readers are first acquainted with Scooter’s good character, solid commitment to formal education, briar patch common sense, intellectual and verbal acuity--his unique packaging of possibilities available through an attitude of self-affirmation reinforced through blues culture. Murray makes no excuses for depicting Scooter in this manner; Scooter simply is who he is. However, Malory and his Arthur need Merlin’s wizardry in

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39 Arthur has many dissenters amongst his countrymen; they do not support his access to the throne. While Merlin’s magic assuages, to some extent, their discontent it is significant to note that their primary concern is based on Arthur’s actual bloodline connection. If the countrymen could be convinced of Arthur’s heredity, they would be supportive of his reign because in their culture heredity is paramount.
order to set Arthur aright within the text, and so in the readership. Malory knew that
Arthur’s birth had to be accounted for if he was to become king. Relying on only the
credentials he alone has earned Scooter is prepared for the earthly realization of woe and
the earthly engagement of its transformation by way of practical human action separate
from the ethereal realm. Scooter is prepared to be an independent character in realms
beyond his hometown as is demonstrated by his personal and academic training. Arthur is
reliant upon his bloodline and personal wizard just as Malory is dependent upon, and so
is restricted by, social norms of the time to validate and make credible his protagonist.
This is indicated by the accident of Arthur’s birth being the thing that makes his ascent to
the throne valid. In Malroy’s rendering, the stigma of Arthur’s illegitimacy is so daunting
that it needs to be corrected. Arthur is unprepared to remedy his own situation, so Merlin
steps in and casts a spell in an attempt to save the ill-prepared king. In contrast, Murray’s
Scooter is steeped in the blues and while he too is overwhelmed by circumstances, he
actively engages the beast. Rather than trying to “fix” the “unfixable” Scooter makes the
best of a bad situation—there are no ‘mistakes’ in life, just a series of events and
experiences. This artistic strategy liberates both Scooter and Murray from the limitations
imposed by society. The blues allows Scooter to assert his individuality and create an
identity based on personal fortitude while Arthur’s self-assertion is shrouded by magic
and his identity is imposed.

As with the blues and its hybrid origins, Train Whistle Guitar is an open
acknowledgement and acceptance of the reality of varied ancestors. The fact that
Malory’s text legitimizes Arthur’s birth confirms Arthur’s genealogy and posits him as a
member of an elite class for whom success can be taken for granted. Everyone is made aware of Arthur’s royal blood and so he is made legitimate in the eyes of all—the people share a common view of the hierarchy granted by bloodline privilege. Arthur’s father, King Uther Pendragon, states as much on his deathbed when he determines that Arthur should, “righteously and worshipfully … claim the crown upon forfeiture of my blessing”; he and his countrymen know full well that Arthur’s future success is based on heredity. Scooter receives no such recognition and the town gossips are left wondering about “his own daddy that spermed and begot him.” Yet, in *Train Whistle Guitar* nobility is conferred on Scooter without the blessings of a noble father. Rather, Scooter’s blessings come from his Round Table of community members whose vested interest in him exists prior to any miraculous achievement. So when Luzana Cholly foils the boys’ attempt to run away, Scooter recalls Cholly’s blessing:

> He said that the young generation was supposed to take what they were already born with and learn how to put it with everything the civil engineers and inventors and doctors and lawyers and bookkeepers had found out about the world and be the one to bring about the day the old folks had always been prophesying and praying for.

More blessings are bestowed upon Scooter when Miss Tee—a.k.a. Miss Edie Bell Boykin, Scooter’s biological mother—teaches Scooter the lesson that slaves, New World settlers, and later immigrant groups had to learn—that created rather than inherited identities matter most. “In any case so far as [Miss Tee] was ever concerned there was no

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41 Murray, *TWG*, 181.
family name or ancestral bloodlines of identity and inheritance that was likely to stand you in much better stead than the also and also of the background you could create for yourself by always doing your best in school." Scooter’s lessons and blessings come from the best teachers, regardless of blood connections.

Miss Tee is introduced early in Train Whistle Guitar and, like Malory’s Merlin, her character is firmly established as being vital to the development of Murray’s hero. Murray presents Miss Tee as Scooter’s “protective figure” and she “provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass.” Realizing the power of knowledge, Miss Tee advocates the importance of education. The encouragement Miss Tee offers Scooter has a lasting impact on Scooter’s own identity as he develops a lifelong love of learning that will earn him the nickname of “Schoolboy” in The Spyglass Tree. Embedded into Scooter’s psyche are words of encouragement like those offered by Miss Tee, his most cherished ‘Auntee’.

_This is My Mister who can write his name all by himself. Show them My Mister. This is My Mister who can do addition and subtraction all by himself. Show them My Mister. And show them how My Mister can recite from his Reader all by himself. The cat said not I. The dog said not I. The little red hen said I will and she did. The little choo choo going up the hill said I think I can I think I can I thought I could I thought I could. Because it tried and it did._

43 Murray, _TWG_, 86–7.
44 Campbell, _A Thousand Faces_, 69.
45 Murray, _TWG_, 55. Author’s emphasis.
The rhythmic intonation of Miss Tee’s words permeate Scooter’s psyche and like an incantation form a permanent part of his memory.

Memory serves as a vital element in the establishment of Scooter’s heroic identity and also assists him in maintaining an attitude of affirmation. Linking Scooter to the past are sounds and images, as well as the actual and imagined recollection of events. Scooter’s memory is like a collage, a compilation of pieces assembled in such a way as to confer meaning. Stagolee Dupas is remembered for the sound of his fascinating keyboard arrangements; Dejean McCray brings to mind Jelly Roll Morton’s “Kansas City Stomp” because of the aura of her sex appeal, and Little Buddy makes Scooter think of the color sky blue. It is from these points of entry that layers of recollection are revealed. The process of re-membering, or assembling these pieces of experience, is a constant part of Scooter’s maturation. As such, he is perpetually linked to the rich community in which he was reared even as he traverses new territories; as Scooter travels, he takes with him the wealth of his community. As Melvin Dixon asserts, such memories “[force] the protagonist and the reader to rethink at every turn the most manifest expressions of a recaptured, remembered past.” Scooter is always cognizant of his community affiliation. The pain, suffering, and myriad achievements community members have experienced despite personal obstacles encourage Scooter to endure. Scooter’s memories of the briar patch of his youth link him to a heroic legacy of survivors. Like the blues, these memories as recorded in Train Whistle Guitar, are discerned in such a way as to transform woefulness into hopefulness. The aural aspect that is integral to Scooter’s

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recollection serves as the “liberating device” critic Fritz Gysin fears has been lost in contemporary renderings of jazz in fiction.\textsuperscript{47} In Murray’s use, music is not merely “conceived of as a function of writing.”\textsuperscript{48} Rather, in echoing the sounds of locomotion and in depicting the pernicious nature of the briar patch the blues is central to the development of Murray’s literary jazz series and grants access to history through the unveiling of multiple layers of memory. Infused with the adventure, intrigue and possibility of change represented by the railroad, the blues is the music of self-edification because it calls to mind the history of a people who were heroic by necessity. The proper way for Scooter to view himself is as a part of this heroic legacy. If contemporary jazz fiction is, as Gysin suggests, restricted in form and content and so perhaps by critical analysis, the solution may lie in the text’s maintaining its link with the briar patch, the railroad, and so the blues. Self-affirmation is maintained through the use of memory because the history of the blues is a legacy of triumph. Textually, this is demonstrated by Scooter’s commitment to overcoming blue feelings and never falling prey to thoughts of victimization and despair. In choosing his own ancestors and in remembering the briar patch, Scooter discerns positive influences from those that are negative and so can model his behavior in accordance with the legacy indicated by the blues.

As with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, Scooter receives advice and encouragement from an assembly comprised of locals. While Scooter is home surrounded by a host of company including Aunt Sue, Old Mayfield Turner, Mister Lige and Miss Emma Tolliver, Bro Mark Simpkins, Miss Willeen, Miss Lula Crayton, Miss


\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}
Liza Jefferson, and Miss Ida Jefferson, he learns a lesson in history that comes, only partially, from the text open before him. After Scooter reads about Valley Forge, Uncle Jerome takes the lead in offering Scooter his version of history. Armed with a fistful of bills, Uncle Jerome schools his audience on the contributions of legendary American heroes like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Ulysses S. Grant and Benjamin Franklin. Worthy of respect for his intellect and cunning, Uncle Jerome tells his audience, “Old Ben Franklin told them a lot of points about how to put them clauses in the Constitution ... And talking about cunning, old Ben Franklin was the one that took a kite and a Coca cola bottle and stole naked lightening.”

Like the knights of King Arthur’s Round Table who are acknowledged members of the royal court and can command authority based on such stature, Uncle Jerome commands authority based on his knowledge of history and his possession of well-respected greenbacks. Peeling off bills to emphasize his points on presidents and other great men, Uncle Jerome captivates and fascinates his audience. Taking a pause during his spiel, he offers Scooter “a five-dollar bill.” Like a good knight, Uncle Jerome then offers a blessing to Scooter and his own commitment to the promising youth saying that he “was going to be the one to stake [Scooter] to all the ink and paper [he] needed as long as [Scooter] stayed in school. All [Scooter] had to do was show [Uncle Jerome] [his] report card.” To this honor, Scooter said, “thank you ... [and] Miss Lula Crayton said Amen. And Miss Liza Jefferson said God bless the lamb.” Scooter’s parents were touched by

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50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
the emotion of the moment and everyone sat “looking at [Scooter] as if [he] really had become the Lamb or something.” Uncle Jerome’s history lesson adheres to the idea of stomping away the blues; one need not wallow in the realities of American racism and so deny oneself claims to a heroic American past. Rather Uncle Jerome’s message is innately optimistic and demonstrates how selecting ancestors based on heroic deeds rather than skin color, religious affiliation, gender, or sexual preference increases the pool of potential mentors and broadens the range of heroic possibilities for all aspiring kings and queens regardless of birth.

Murray’s U.S. version of the medieval legend complicates Scooter’s rearing with the idiocy of skin color bias. Papoo, a.k.a. Papa Whit, demonstrates the impact of responsibility and humility on the creation of heroic character. Skin-color bias was a very real and persistent threat in the life of Murray’s 1920s protagonist. Scooter’s adoptive parents, the brown-skinned Miss Melba and the white-skinned Papa Whit, were a “mixed couple.” As Scooter explains, Papoo was “himself as white as any out and out white man I have ever seen in my life.” Papoo’s ties to the white-skinned community ran deeper than the mere similarity of their skin tones. “Not only was he said to be a whole lot more than just half white, it was also said quite accurately that he was acknowledged by most of his white blood relatives much more readily than he himself was ever willing to acknowledge any of them (except when it came to such legal matters as clearing the titles to property inherited in common).” Scooter’s direct care, coming from a white-skinned

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53 Murray, TWG, 75.
54 Murray, TWG, 60.
55 Ibid.
man portrays the power of personal choices. When Papoo’s white-skinned kin saw him driving through town with Miss Melba and tried to pretend that “she was not his wife but only one of his black field hands,” Papoo’s strength of character in maintaining his connection with Scooter and Miss Melba despite the color line reinforces Scooter’s personal fortitude. A mere child, Scooter learns at least two lessons that are far more mature than his years suggest—that cultural and/or political affiliations are choices and not innately determined, fixed points; and, the benefits of group solidarity extend beyond any alleged skin color privileges. While attitudes regarding physical appearance and heritage are typical of the demons faced by people of color in general in the Jim Crow South, Scooter is nurtured within a segregated though diverse community that provides, abundantly, for his every need. Living in a community of color, Scooter is nurtured with a sense of race consciousness that “helps make individual blacks more psychologically resilient...by granting access to a sense of community and not just critique.”  Scooter’s group identification fortifies him with the individual courage he must exhibit in order to achieve his metaphoric throne. Papa Whit is one of Scooter’s primary (because he lives in the same house) mentors in this effort.

Murray improvises on the adoptive parents of Arthur with Papoo and Miss Melba. Scooter’s parents are of similar social stature to Sir Ector and his wife and both couples nurture their respective foster sons well. Unlike Sir Ector, Papoo has to “go off somewhere and pass for white to get a job” to help secure Scooter’s financial station.

56 For a compelling discussion on the politics of race as a state of mind rather than color and the benefits of group identification see Lani Guinier’s *The Miner’s Canary*, in particular Chapters 2 and 3.  
57 Guinier, *The Miner’s Canary*, 82.  
Although Papoo’s white-skinned allies considered him a “fool for being a durned ole niggie when he could be a wyat man,” Papoo’s commitment to raising Scooter and maintaining the integrity of his cultural alliances remains steadfast. In response to such comments he “just shook his head and said You don’t understand.”\textsuperscript{59} Papoo provides for Scooter a role model for heroism in his slaying the dragon of racism each time he demonstrates his commitment to raising the brown-skinned child and so aligning his ‘white’ self on the unpopular side of the color line. Scooter, like Arthur, is grateful for such allegiance, and his sentiments are reflected in the words of Little Buddy’s response to a story about Papoo: “everybody say, don’t care how much of his skin and his keen nose and his flat ass Mister Whit might have got from the whitefolks, he got his mother-wit from the getting place.”\textsuperscript{60} Likewise, Arthur is appreciative of the care he has received from Sir Ector and upon learning of the possibility of his royal blood Arthur responds, “ye are the man in the world that I am most beholden to, and my good lady and mother your wife, that as well as her own hath fostered me and kept. And if it ever be God’s will that I be king as ye say, ye shall desire of me what I may do, and I shall not fail you; God forbid I should fail you.”\textsuperscript{61} Papoo’s adherence to the responsibility of fatherhood despite the color line levels the playing field between Papoo and King Uther Pendragon, as both men serve as mentors for the heroic aspirations of their future kings.

Unka Jo Jo the African is also used to offset the stigma associated with the conditions of Scooter’s birth and so contributes to Scooter’s rise to the throne. A member of Scooter’s Round Table of support, Unka Jo Jo’s impact on Scooter is based, only in

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Malory, \textit{Morte D’Arthur}, 11-12.
part, on his hailing from a distant land. Young Scooter had not yet discovered the
significance of Unka Jo Jo’s heritage or history when he became awed with the man.
Rather, the fascination Unka Jo Jo held was based on his being the “local embodiment of
all biblical prophets, apostles and disciples” because he “wore the Afro-Chinese thin chin
whiskers of a seer and sayer and wiseman.” 62  Scooter knew Unka Jo Jo was the one who
pulled the church bells at the African Hill Baptist Church and who kept the keys to the
gate at the graveyard. Because of this, Scooter thought “Africa was short for African Hill
Neighborhood,” since the idea of Africa as a continent had not yet acquired any real
meaning for Scooter and so no memory, cultural or otherwise, could be associated with
the continent. 63  This view may have put Murray at odds with his contemporary African
American readers many of whom, in the 1970s, were eager to claim Africa as a homeland
and might expect the more mature Scooter to respect Unka Jo Jo for his African heritage
alone. However, Train Whistle Guitar rejects the idea of needing to claim Africa as a
homeland in order to establish one’s identity. One need not consider oneself illegitimate
because Mother Africa has been lost. Recognizing himself as part of a world community,
Scooter’s cosmopolitan sensibility is fostered in Gasoline Point, a city with a diverse
population seated at the mouth of the Seven Seas and on the outskirts of Mobile, “The
City of Five Flags.” 64

Rooted in the blues, a self-validating construct, Scooter’s memories are like the
musical genre; his identity is based on various cultural junctures. As Murray asserts,
“Naming all of your ethnic ancestors all the way back to Ham or even Adam and Eve is

62 Murray, TWG, 80.
63 Murray, TWG, 81.
64 Murray, TWG, 77.
not likely to do very much to help you cope with contemporary instability nearly so well as a blues-conditioned disposition to remain perpetually resilient and alert to the ongoing need for improvisation." As Murray says of himself,

The people who jumped overboard were not my ancestors. The people that came over, went to the auction block, went to the coffles ... worked in the fields, either went on the Underground Railroad or didn’t—those are my ancestors. That is the beginning of the tradition. That’s where I can get the blues culture. It’s improvisation from then on. That stuff [Africans] were doing don’t mean anything because there’s no such thing as freedom where they came from ... They had not lost their freedom. They did not have any freedom.

According to Murray, Africans had no ‘freedom’ to lose because they were not faced with the same types of cultural struggles faced by those Africans who arrived in the New World; their liberation struggles were different. Murray’s intention is to distinguish between Africans living on the continent who did not need to develop a method of resistance to chattel slavery faced by African Americans. African Americans in the United States, as per Murray’s discussion, are worthy of respect and have a valid cultural identity all their own distinct from, but in no way inferior to, that of Africans living on the continent. Murray’s hard-line attack on Africa and its influence on U.S. culture demonstrates that Murray found it necessary to nearly castigate Africa and its influence on U.S. culture in order to create a space where U.S. culture could be recognized as a

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66 Conversation with Albert Murray, 13 July 2002.
multiplicity of influences. However, the blues is a key indication of an African heritage in that the descendants of New World Africans, exposed to a new land and cruel living conditions, gave synthesis to the musical genre. Using the blues tradition and not Africa as the sole point of cultural departure, Scooter honors these ancestors who survived and thrived amidst the most horrific conditions this country has ever known. As noted by Melvin Dixon,

If family disruption and loss of precise genealogy distance black Americans from more solid, or literal, connections to an African identity, they nonetheless increase our predilection for the way figurative connections become charged with increasing symbolic importance. And here again, memory rather than history becomes a fruitful strategy for the recovery of the past.

In re-membering the harshness and brutality of the slave past through the blues, Scooter pays homage to his ancestors in a way black nationalists do not. Murray encourages building intellectual alliances and collaborating with peoples of color throughout the world, broadening one’s own sensibility and recognizing himself as part of a majority of the world population. As Murray asserts, “Part of the political failure of most Negro leaders...is that they really have been addressing themselves all these years to moral issues and not the actualities of local, state, and national power.” Rather than a narrow focus on a single-line connection to Africa, Murray suggests, “playing improvisations on

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67 This area of thought is rich for exploring the ways in which Murray argues (unknowingly?) for American studies as a formal discipline.
the gospels of Marx, Mao, Guevara, and Fanon” a move that could generate a far more innovative approach to advancing practical political agendas.\textsuperscript{70}

The blues offers no violent or rebellious means to evoke change. Rather, the blues represents a process of revolutionary transformation that requires no overt violence to dismantle hegemony or empower its proponents since it relies on individual fortitude, self affirmation, and improvisation in responding to personal challenges—aesthetic, psychological and intellectual tenacity rather than physical brutality. Indicating psychological self assurance and resilience, the blues as a frame of mind is what allows Scooter to transform his anxiety over illegitimacy by way of self-legitimizing action. For this reason, the blues is life affirming and runs counter to self-destructive activities. As Murray informs, “The spirit of the blues moves in the opposite direction from ashes and sackcloth, self-pity, self-hatred, and suicide.”\textsuperscript{71} Unlike rebellious upheaval that may manifest itself in the culmination of a single event, the blues is an ongoing progression capable of invoking change at any given moment due to its emphasis on individuality and improvisation. While he has sincere respect for Unka Jo Jo, Scooter’s adulation is not based on Unka Jo Jo’s connection to Africa but rather the cultural formulations and complexities ascertained and realized in the New World. Even when the more mature Scooter realizes the significance of Unka Jo Jo’s story of the ship \textit{Clotilde}, which “was one of the last if not the very last shipload of African captives … to be bootlegged directly into the continental limits of the United States before the outbreak of the War for

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Murray, \textit{Omni Americans}, 147.
Emancipation,” his level of respect for Unka Jo Jo is unaffected.72 There were so many interesting varieties of people in Gasoline Point, Alabama, that Unka Jo Jo’s African heritage alone was not enough to distinguish him amidst the likes of Blue Gum Geechee Silas the West Indian, JQ or Jacques Martinet the Creole fish and oyster peddler, Chastang Cholly the Cajun night watchman, Chief Big Duck the Chickasaw Indian, Lil Duck the Chocktaw Indian, or Miss Queen Minnie Jo-Buck (“who was supposed to be a Black Creek Indian because she had coal black velvet-smooth skin and jet black glossy hair that came all the way down to her waist”).73 Whatever Unka Jo Jo’s genealogical make-up, his story, like so many others, became part of what contributed to the development of the blues. In realizing the multiplicity of his experiences, one aspect cannot take precedence over others and it is a modeling of this type of complexity that can usher in the sophisticated revolutionary changes needed to combat charges such as illegitimacy.

Various community men help to educate Scooter and thus reinforce his group consciousness and psychological reliance. When Papa Gumbo Willie McWorthy looked out of his barbershop window and saw Unka Jo Jo coming, he said:

Goddamn, deliver me from all that old dried-up-assed elephant hocky about how he used to be so goddamn free and equal back over somewhere in Africa. Like he supposed to be better than somebody because them old Rebs fired on Fort Sumter before the man had a chance to sell his ass off up the river to pick cotton on the plantation like our old folks used to have

72 Ibid.
73 Murray, TWG, 82.
to do. Deliver me from all that old abba abba bullshit about them Hill
niggers being some kind of pure-blooded Africans. Because if that ain’t
trying to play the dozens on everybody down here I sure would like to
know what is.74

Soldier Boy Crawford continues the idea that one must accept and respect his or her
actual homeland. Speaking of those who would refute the brown-skinned Americans’
claims to the United States as a homeland, Crawford challenges,

You know what I tell them? ... I tell them it don’t make no goddamn
difference to me. And I mean it. What the goddamn hell I care? You know
what I tell them? The same thing I told them Germans. Fuck that shit.
Let’s go. Them som’iches over there talking about Nigger where your tail
at. I said up your mama’s ass, motherfucker, and this goddamn cold steel
bayonet right here up yours … Don’t make a goddamn bit of difference to
me if my goddamn granddaddy was a goddamn tadpole, LET’S GO …
Don’t care if my poor old grandmammy wasn’t nothing but a stump hole,
LET’S GO. And that’s exactly the same thing I say when another one of
them Hill Africans come trying to make out like his granddaddy used to be
sitting on a solid gold diamond studded stool somewhere on the left-
handed side of the Zulu River with his own niggers waiting on him. I say
that’s all right with me. LET’S GO.75

74 Murray, TWG, 83.
75 Murray, TWG, 83-4.
In drawing comparisons between the participation of the United States in World War I and a local situation in which a familiar face serves as the enemy by trying to belittle and demean, Crawford’s response demonstrates that world wars can be fought even in the tiniest communities, and that the fight against oppression is not limited to one of whites against blacks. Assaults from those who hold a badge of cultural superiority on one’s legitimacy come from assailants of any color. As Murray states, “the kinds of dragons I’m talking about can come in all sorts of subtle shapes... these various aspects of disorder, disruption, destruction—the dragon is just one symbol for that.”

The acutely individual scenario addressed by these barbershop men serves as a metaphor for handling larger combatants. Karen Fields explains, “in fights as small-scale and personal as this one ... the guerilla war went on in the worst of times, blasting away bit by bit the invisible mountains of the Jim Crow South.” One may need to defend his homeland even in his own backyard; Crawford’s response is a drill in verbal combat. The hostile tone, forceful words, and aggressive rhythmic presentation of his reply serve to stomp the blues away and so build the strength of the speaker while slaying the competitor, whether he be near or far, white or black. Murray recognizes and so Scooter learns that adversaries come in a variety of form and his work runs counter to views that narrowly depict assailants in one form. Speaking of scholars who are aligned along a simplistic dichotomy Murray asserts, “The only dragon for them is white prejudice.”

Africans arriving from the continent had no right to, like the supporters and enforcers of Jim Crow, stigmatize locally born Africans. Among the older men of the barbershop,

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76 Murray, Briarpatch, 160.
78 Murray, Briarpatch, 161.
Scooter learns to respect verbal prowess and to transform physical aggression with verbal assertion. Demonstrating a refinement in verbal ability, the barbershop men have not retired from the field of play. Rather, their games have assumed new form even as they retain the razor sharp weapons of their trade. These older men are “more insightful, more skillful, more resilient, and hence better prepared to cope with eventualities. Because there will always be other dragons, which after all are as much a part of the nature of things as is bad weather.”

It is their sharp minds and tongues (and only if necessary the blades poised at the throats of unassuming clients) that teach Scooter the subtle ways in which one might always maintain the upper hand.

Like young Arthur who earns the respect of his countrymen and wins the respect of disgruntled others because of his birthright and his skill in battle, Scooter earns community respect by being inducted into male society due to the strength of his character. Conversations he overhears at the local barbershop run by Papa Gumbo Willie McWorthy serve to teach the maturing Scooter the ways of the world and give him the practical information necessary to defeat the obstacles with which his journey to adulthood will be laden. “All you had to do was stop by as if you had come only because you wanted to watch old Cateye,” the shoeshine expert, because as more mature youths who had proven their character in the community, Scooter and Little Buddy were welcome and their presence was acknowledged by not being shooed away during otherwise adult conversations. As the men began to discuss “sporting houses such as those in New Orleans and San Francisco, or say shysters, pimps and streetwalkers … in

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80 Murray, *TWG*, 111.
Paris, France, they were only pretending that they had forgotten that you were there listening because somebody had decided that it was time for you to start hearing about something like that."81 These sessions provided the lessons in which Scooter and Little Buddy were introduced to manhood in ways Papoo could not instruct. "Everybody knew exactly what you were doing there, and all you were supposed to do was stay quiet and listen as interrupting would formally acknowledge the lesson and would thereby undermine the groups' efforts to incorporate the boys into the inner realm of male society."82 Group induction was based on certain shared regulations such as knowing how to keep barbershop wisdom to oneself. After receiving his lesson one day Scooter is challenged by Davenport Davis who wants the boy to understand the privilege involved in receiving such instruction. Davenport says to Scooter,

Boy you still here? Boy you heard all that? Well if you cunning enough to get away with that I reckon, goddammit, you also clever enough to know you supposed to keep it to yourself. You go around repeating this stuff you ain't going to show nobody how much you know. All you going to do is show how much you don't know about when to keep your mouth shut.83

Honoring the code of silence, Scooter is well aware that his adherence will assure continued group membership. Papa Gumbo Willie McWorthy also sanctions Scooter's induction into this male realm by validating his commitment to silence, and Scooter observes that "Mama and Papa were no less satisfied because it was suddenly as plain as

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81 Murray, TWG, 111-12.
82 Murray, TWG, 112.
83 Ibid.
day ... that they were in on the whole thing too. Here, the proverb, it takes a village to raise a child, is significant as all are considered vital contributors to Scooter’s ascent to the throne.

Barbershop sessions endow Scooter with the necessary armor for combating complex psychological dragons such as those presented by Bea Ella Thornhill and her violent pursuit and stabbing of her cheating husband, Emmett James Scott Weaver (a.k.a. Beau Beau Weaver). Scooter’s peripheral involvement leaves a deep impression on his psyche that helps shape his future endeavors. Bea Ella, who was “every bit as good looking as Creola Calloway” and had “always been as sweet and well-mannered and promising as Creola ... not to mention knowing how to record minutes and keep books” had let down her community. Rather than fulfilling all the promise she embodied by getting a good job, marrying a good man, settling down, and having a good family, Bea Ella “had not only run away from her guardian—(and set up housekeeping with Beau Beau Weaver of all people) but had also hired herself out as a maid for white people as if she had never even been near a school.” To top off all this senseless behavior, Bea Ella allowed her husband to spend all her hard-earned money on himself. People began to refer to her situation as “Bea Ella’s boll weevil epidemic.” Beau Beau had “nice-talked” Bea Ella into joining him at a hotel and according to Otis Smedley, “when she got there and it came time for her to pull her clothes off” she held onto her bed sheet, became frightened and as she stood in the middle of the room with Beau Beau unwinding her

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84 Ibid.
85 Murray, TWG, 109.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.

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from the sheet she, "started moaning and praying, saying Jesus forgive me, over and
over."88 The lesson of Bea Ella’s downward spiral is not lost on Scooter and transmits to
him as indicative of what happens when one forfeits one’s responsibility to the
community in which s/he is reared. While Beau Beau’s conquests over the hearts and
minds of women might be revered by some with similar aspirations, neither Scooter nor
his sidekick envy Beau Beau’s exploits. While the boys wanted to imitate the walk of
their hero Luzana Cholly, they despised Beau Beau’s walk and did not want to assume
his stride. “Sheet man” as Little Buddy would say, “that ain’t no goddamn mammy-
hunching patent leather walk. Sheet, look at that countrified granny dodger. Think he so
sporty and all he doing is looking like his feet killing him.”89 Beau Beau’s barbershop
bragging on his female conquests did nothing to endear the boys to him. So when they
later saw him “lying sprawled in nothing but his underwear and socks, cut to death” they
considered it his due for having behaved so dishonorably.90 Back at the barbershop, the
event was put into perspective by Vanderbilt Coleman who said that what had happened
was simply the “Law of Averages” and that everyone should be thinking about Bea Ella
since “she was the one who was going to have to suffer the consequences of murder, the
least of which was the prison term.”91 Scooter understands the murder not as an isolated
act that manifested itself with Beau Beau’s death but rather as a series of events having
community-wide impact with Bea Ella at the core. Like a wise man, Scooter must learn
from Bea Ella’s mistakes without repeating her actions. Having conditions similar to

88 Murray, TWG, 115.
89 Murray, TWG, 117.
90 Murray, TWG, 119.
91 Murray, TWG, 121-22.
those of Scooter, such as academic aspirations and a nurturing, Scooter must transform Bea Ella’s blues and create a variety and response all his own. By including Bea Ella’s lesson among his developing storehouse of weaponry, Scooter acknowledges that teachers, like dragons, come in many forms. As with all great men Scooter’s rise to heroism will depend, in part, upon his ability to acknowledge his duty to greatness and distinguish himself from all who are not so called.

Scooter conquers metaphoric virginity from the inception of *Train Whistle Guitar* as the keenness of his visual and aural perception penetrate the unknown realms of his environment and yet sexual virginity must also be subjugated during Scooter’s ascent to the throne. Deljean McCray, “who was as cinnamon-bark brown as the cinnamon-brown bark she was forever chewing and smelling like” is Scooter’s teacher in the amorous arts. Deljean is older than Scooter and is also Miss Tee’s niece, by marriage, and so part of the community that educates and nurtures Scooter. The seemingly more experienced Deljean McCray challenges Scooter sexually and he accepts her invitation with his fingers crossed all the while. Once their first sexual encounter is complete, Deljean, like the barbershop men, is interested in securing Scooter’s silence and says, “Boy if you tell somebody on me boy you sure going to wish you hadn’t.” As with the barbershop men, Deljean is convinced that Scooter is ready for such instruction and says, “you already know you all right with me don’t you Scooter?” Trusting in Scooter’s honor, Deljean, like the barbershop men, grants Scooter further instruction and so helps him become sexually competent. This new sexual confidence means that Scooter is finally able to

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92 Murray, *TWG*, 139.
93 Murray, *TWG*, 145.
94 Ibid.
have sex with “uncrossed fingers.”\textsuperscript{95} Now, Scooter finds himself in uncharted sexual territory, at risk of being annihilated by the dragon of premature ejaculation and its associated social stigma. Yet, like Miss Tee’s Little Engine Who Could, Scooter thinks he can survive amidst this wilderness, and while he is

Suddenly ... not sure that [he] was not about to spurt blood from somewhere in the very center of [his] being ... [he] didn’t even care.

Because in that same instant it was as if [he] was coming through the soft stream-warm velvet gates to the most secret place in the world, and [he]

had to keep on doing what [he] was doing no matter what happened. And

[he] did.\textsuperscript{96}

Scooter’s various teachers included some but not all of the willing co-eds in his community. His refusal to sexually engage Ela Lois demonstrates his ability to choose those teachers. Such discernment is integral to Scooter’s rise to the throne, as he must distinguish between helpmeets and dissenters along the path to nobility. Like Arthur’s union with his half sister that resulted in the birth of a child and the eventual downfall of Arthur’s reign as king, Scooter’s sexual unions could also thwart his own future achievements. His briar patch is replete with visible and invisible ghosts who, like Sir Gawain’s female temptress, might present a bounty of pleasure but end in ill repute.\textsuperscript{97}

Learning strategies for overcoming the powers of female seduction is a key weapon in

\textsuperscript{95} Murray, \textit{TWG}, 147.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}, trans. Brian Stone (New York: Penguin Classics, 1959). In Fit III, section 48 the poet relays the beginnings of the seduction of Sir Gawain by the Lady of the Green Chapel. If she succeeds in seducing Sir Gawain, he will be sentenced to death at the hands of the Green Knight.
Scooter’s arsenal and helps to secure his ascent to the throne by establishing his heterosexual manhood.98

In keeping with the heroic ideal and in relation to his sexual development, Scooter must demonstrate that he honors the code of chivalry. As with Sir Gawain whose “chivalry is called into question” during the hunts related to his stay at the Green Chapel, Scooter’s ultimate test in chivalry involves Deljean McCray, his most talented teacher.99 Scooter leaves Gasoline Point, Alabama, for college and eventually for points unknown while others such as Deljean McCray, who have been his teachers and so largely responsible for his ability to succeed in distant lands, remain at home. “Working behind the counter” at “Smallwoods Cleaning and Pressing Club,” Deljean’s life is categorically different from Scooter’s. Yet, Scooter does not use this difference to stave off Deljean’s interest in him. Rather, he is thankful for Deljean’s assistance in preparing him for life beyond Gasoline Point and tells her, “I been thinking about you Deljean. I been wondering what you doing.”100 Deljean recognizes that she is no longer the teacher and so feels as if she has no purpose to serve in Scooter’s life anymore. When Deljean says to him, “Boy you know good and well you not up there with all them high class college girls thinking about somebody like me … tell the truth now, you forgot all about me up there now didn’t you?”101 Scooter replies with all the chivalry of a future king:

How could somebody ever forget you Deljean … you know something? I don’t even have to think about you Deljean to remember you. Just like I

98 Gender is another area ripe for exploration in Murray’s fiction and will be the subject of later work on Murray.
99 *Sir Gawain*, 7.
100 Murray, *TWG*, 162.
don’t have to think about Little Buddy and Luzana Cholly and Stagolee
and Gator Gus and all that. Because that’s the way you really remember
somebody. I said you the one got my cherry Deljean. I said You remember
that time. I said You the one taught me what it’s made for Deljean. I said
You the one used to keep me out of a whole lot of trouble Deljean.¹⁰²

Deljean, entirely smitten replies, “Boy Scooter if you ain’t still a mess.”¹⁰³ Scooter’s idea
of not having to think about a person as being the “way you really remember somebody”
demonstrates a more mature Scooter who has, by novel’s end, internalized the lessons of
his youth. Gone are the days when imitation served as his guide; Scooter has now
developed a style of his own. When Deljean and Scooter resume their sexual relations,
she acknowledges his prowess and says, “I didn’t teach you that. Did she teach you that
... Didn’t no high class college girls teach you that.”¹⁰⁴ Intrigued by her schoolboy’s
newfound expertise, Deljean is proud of Scooter and his accomplishments and even
hopes that her son will grow up to be like him, as she tells him, “you was born marked
for it Scooter.”¹⁰⁵

On the occasion of their last rendezvous the more experienced and sexually self-
assured Scooter remains loyal to his teacher and will not let her feel dishonored.
Remembering the times when she, not he, was the teacher, Deljean says, “I used to be
able to make him blush anytime I want to,” and Scooter replies reassuringly, “You still

¹⁰² Murray, TWG, 162.
¹⁰³ Murray, TWG, 163.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
¹⁰⁵ Murray, TWG, 164.

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Always respectful, Scooter will not allow Deljean to think of her relations with him as one-sided. Such chivalry is part and parcel of being a good knight as with King Arthur's nephew Sir Gawain who offers a kind refusal to engage in an adulterous affair with the Lady of the Green Chapel, who is the wife of his host. Flattered by the Lady's adulation and willingness to offer sexual pleasures, Sir Gawain declines the proposal from the "lady fair of face" and her "free-hearted generosity." Heinrich Zimmer's observation of Sir Gawain suits both his and Scooter's case. Zimmer says, "but the knight was skillful; not only did he withstand his pressing hostess, but he also comforted and assuaged her, so that, though dismissed, she was not humbled." As with Sir Gawain, if Scooter were to yield to Eros "his fault would not be carnal license" because it is normal for a heterosexual man to desire a woman, "but insincerity and infidelity, and this would have signified the disintegration of the self-consistency of his being" because as a hero and future king, Scooter is expected to aspire to heights beyond those of the average man. As a member of his community of supporters, it is necessary that Scooter does not shame Deljean. His efforts to court her as a future spouse would be insincere and so Scooter leaves Deljean with her dignity. Engaging Deljean in false hopes of a future would indicate an infidelity regarding Scooter's commitment to personal and so community edification and would also undermine his academic aspirations. Chivalry is a trait respected by both men and women and would likely endear either gender to the hero's cause.

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106 Ibid.
107 Sir Gawain, Fit III; section 50, line 20; section 51, line 2.
109 Zimmer, King and the Corpse, 71-2.

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The end of *Train Whistle Guitar* marks the end of Scooter’s boyhood and the beginning of young adulthood—the period in which he will begin to apply all that he has learned. Readers learn during Scooter’s last rendezvous with Deljean that Miss Tee has died. Miss Tee was his “goodfairy godmother” or “guard-mother, because she the one supposed to help your sure-enough mama watch out over you” and Scooter had had the benefit of her guidance during his formative years.\(^\text{110}\) Although Miss Tee will not be present to actively guide Scooter in his future endeavors, her lessons remain and “the hero who has come under the protection of the Cosmic Mother cannot be harmed.”\(^\text{111}\) Miss Tee’s influence is infinite and as such represents “the benign, protecting power of destiny.”\(^\text{112}\) There will always be protective influences to assist Scooter in his journey. But while influential male mentors including Luzana Cholly, Stagolee Dupas, and the barbershop men have helped guide Scooter in his transition into manhood, these early figures no longer play an active role in Scooter’s rearing by novel’s end; their lessons are part of Scooter’s psychological make-up and he draws on his mentors whenever and wherever he needs their help.

Scooter’s maturation in the novel is marked by the isolation typical of traditional heroes and he is positioned, strategically, to assume the leadership role for which he has been nurtured. This is in line with Raglan’s assertion that the literary hero rarely has companions, but instead must often pursue his goals alone, for “our hero’s followers ... are out of the way or killed off when his crucial fight takes place.”\(^\text{113}\) Little Buddy might

\(^{110}\) Murray, *TWG*, 167.


\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Raglan, *The Hero*, 194.
be Scooter’s sidekick but as the story progresses, his role is diminished while Scooter’s prominence is continuously reaffirmed. That Scooter must embark upon his journey alone is demonstrated by the less obvious and less direct influence of all of his teachers upon his behavior and actions as he matures. “Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold, the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side... he seems to ride on the great rhythm of the historical process.”14 Scooter no longer imitates the sporty walk of Cholly, but rather his “hop-skipping” to Miss Tee’s house in the novel’s closing paragraph proves that he has adapted the influences of his various teachers, coupled them with childhood play, and created a walk of his own. This upbeat, self-styled walk demonstrates that Scooter has successfully stomped away the blues and is advancing to new geographic and psychological destinations. As Murray states in *Stomping the Blues*, such a walk is “far more a matter of imitation and variation and counterstatement than of originality” because Scooter’s walk has built on “existing conventions” set forth by his host of teachers and mentors; in his stride, Scooter takes his teachers with him.15 If, as Raglan states, “the chief qualification for the throne has always been the possession of power,” then Scooter’s plethora of useful information, life experiences, community support, and “certificate and the top prize” for excelling in school, allows Scooter to enter young adulthood with impressive weaponry.16

*Train Whistle Guitar* improvises on the heroic legend depicted in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. At novel’s end, Scooter who has been nurtured by his community has a

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15 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 126.
foundation that allows him to venture out into the world armed for challenges like those faced by aspiring kings. He has recognized the ancestral call to adventure and will enter into the realm of college life, away from Gasoline Point and miles away from community support, in order to test his briar patch skills, academic/intellectual muscle, and psychological fortitude. In order to fulfill his role as a hero in the vein of Arthur’s legend, Scooter must depart from familiar surroundings, but this separation indicates a new level of individual assertion and moves Scooter into a larger group dynamic. Scooter’s separation indicates the new type of solitude experienced by the classic blues musician whose professional endeavors removed the artist from his home community. As Joseph Campbell explains, “the familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand.”

In the final paragraph of *Train Whistle Guitar*, the symbol of this ancestral call to adventure takes the form of the piece of paper in Scooter’s hand when he comes, “hop-skipping up the steps” to Miss Tee’s house with his “certificate and the top prize” he has earned from taking high honors at his school. Like the green girdle Sir Gawain has accepted from his would-be mistress indicating that he has successfully resisted the Lady’s advances and so is spared the Green Knight’s deathblow, Scooter’s school certificate proves that he has successfully—and with honors—completed the courses required for graduation and so is granted leave from the life he has outgrown in Gasoline Point.

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118 Murray, *TWG*, 182.
Point, Alabama. The certificate is also like the sword Arthur pulls from the stone and thus grants Scooter entrance into the realm of his birthright. Train Whistle Guitar even improvises on the secret agreement made between Sir Gawain and the would-be mistress and the shame he feels when the Green Knight acknowledges Sir Gawain's possession of the girdle. Accepting a wink from Miss Tee, Scooter acknowledges her as his biological mother, and shows her his school certificate first. While Scooter says he, "has no way of knowing when and how [Miss Tee] learned that [he] had found out who she really was," the wink she offers secures their secret bond. "Without realizing that she was winking as if for me to remember some secret agreement," Miss Tee says to Scooter, "but My Mister don't you think we better let Miss Melba always be the one to see things first and then ask her if it's all right to come let Miss Tee be next?" Like Sir Gawain who has momentarily forgotten the code of honor, accepted the Lady's girdle, and whose "blood from his breast burst forth in his face" when the secret agreement has come to light, Scooter feels a momentary sting of shame and admits to Miss Tee that he'd forgotten that the pact was to remain secret. As with the Green Knight, Scooter's error is not fatal. He secures the respect of his community (as Sir Gawain does with the Green Knight) and so is allowed to enter the next phase of development and adventure, college matriculation for Scooter (rejoining Arthur's court for Sir Gawain). Scooter's school certificate, like Sir Gawain's green girdle, is the physical mark of his achievement and the physical link

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\[119\] Sir Gawain, Fit IV, section 95, lines 1-8. The Green Knight nicks the neck of Sir Gawain but does not give a deathblow because Sir Gawain had resisted the Lady of the Green Chapel. The girdle given to Sir Gawain by the Lady is proof of the resistance.

\[120\] Murray. TWG, 182-83.

\[121\] Sir Gawain, Fit IV, section 95, line 14.

\[122\] Murray. TWG, 183.

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distinguishing the human from the divine. But because Scooter is reared in the blues tradition, the shame he feels in forgetting the pact is only temporary. Knowing he is human and able to celebrate this fact, Scooter accepts this inevitable truth and continues skipping along his way. Sir Gawain, however, wears the green girdle as a permanent mark of his shame and is deeply wounded by the open acknowledgement that he is human and so, in his estimation, an imperfect being. By improvising on Malory's legendary hero, *Train Whistle Guitar* demonstrates the ways in which the blues offers a literary device for transforming tradition and creating, in this case, an innovative blues-based wholly human heroic prototype.

Murray's use of legitimacy as the catalyst for the realization of heroic activity is an intellectually sophisticated cultural weapon. When one's heredity is questionable like Scooter's, like so many U.S. American blacks with no direct link to Africa and for whom slavery distorted any extended claims to heredity on New World shores, illegitimacy becomes a cultural stigma that can be used to deny or restrict access to various social, political, economic, and educational facilities. The Jim Crow legislation that endured in the United States until the May 17, 1954, unanimous Supreme Court decision in the case of *Oliver Brown et. al v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* speaks to this reality. Arthur needed to be made legitimate before he could reign as king; pulling the sword from the marble stone, while miraculous, simply wasn't enough; the wizardry of Merlin was needed. Born a mortal bastard, devoid of royal blood and with brown skin, Scooter does not have the wizardry of Merlin upon which to rely but he has the blues—a

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historically and culturally significant mechanism for transforming woefulness into hopefulness. Coupled with formal educational training, the power of the blues is magnified. Scooter knows that his was a common birth to a mortal woman and that he has no miracle with which to explain his conception. By artistically, intellectually, and textually engaging the dragon of illegitimacy Murray threatens to behead the social, political, economic, and geopolitical beast that is racism by granting all who have been deemed cultural bastards access to the mechanisms by which they can transform the durative nature of their environment and justly claim self-validation personally but also artistically, intellectually, and textually within the realm of critical discourse. As Murray asserts, “There are homegrown Negroes who are the very embodiment of all that has ever qualified anybody for heroism. They are in fact beyond number. They are found in every section of the country. And they have always been there.” Murray’s alignment of Scooter in the tradition of heroes is a way of honoring the everyday heroes who live and have always lived in our midst.

\[124\] Murray, Briarpatch, 89.
Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison were close friends who enjoyed an artistic, intellectual, and personal relationship. As an upperclassman Ellison was not a close companion of Murray’s during their years at the Tuskegee Institute. However, the bookish Murray often found Ellison’s signature in the backs of the library books he checked out, indicating their similar interest. It was not until they had reached adulthood that their paths crossed in New York City and their longtime friendship began. The sharing of artistic sensibilities marked the professional side of their friendship. Trading Twelves, the written correspondence between Murray and Ellison, reveals the role each played in the other’s developing artistic ideas and the reassurance and encouragement they gave each other that their published work would make a significant contribution to the canon of American literature. The two viewed the importance of the blues in very similar ways and thought that an understanding of the blues was central to an understanding of American culture. Viewing artistic expression as the culmination of intellectual and aesthetic sensibility, Murray and Ellison chose literature as the way to best capture the complexity of their thoughts regarding American culture.

Of the two aspiring writers, Ellison published first. His 1952 publication of Invisible Man that placed the 38 year-old Ellison securely within the ranks of the best writers in American literary history.\(^1\) Ellison accomplished what he had set out to achieve. He had used the lens of the blues and the myriad complexities of jazz as aesthetic devices to create an African American character whose unique circumstances

indicated the comic-tragic centrality of his presence in American culture. Invisible Man’s story is one of fits and starts; he is continuously confronted with chaotic and bizarre circumstances and/or conditions that demonstrate the haphazard nature of his life. The events that shape Invisible Man’s life are central to understanding the ways in which individuals sustain themselves and are resilient despite the obstacles, no matter how bizarre, with which they are faced.

Murray’s foray into the realm of professional writer took a different path. He published book reviews and also toyed with the development of a fictional character who would later become the protagonist of his Scooter series, but Murray’s first acclaimed writing was a non-fiction analysis of American culture entitled, *The Omni Americans* published in 1970 when the author was 54. In this critique, Murray developed his intellectual framework for understanding the centrality of Americans of African decent—particularly those with southern roots—to American culture in the U.S. as a whole. In his view, the commonalities of the American experience in the United States superseded the color line. In his 1973 book titled, *The Hero and the Blues*, Murray further refined his cultural analysis and demonstrated how storytelling and vernacular expression provide key ingredients for heroism in the rich culture of African Americans by endowing their progeny with the ability to view themselves as being capable of mythical success. In this view the blues, as both a musical genre and way of life, formed a significant group commonality. It brought together the aural, oral, visual, and performance aspects of the human condition in such a way as to highlight individual expression or improvisation that

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could inspire heroic action. By 1974 Murray had reached a level of intellectual maturity that allowed for an artistic synthesis in his first fictional work, *Train Whistle Guitar*. In his second novel, *The Spyglass Tree* written in 1991, Murray relies on the blues base of his first novel, but broadens the realm of action for his series protagonist, thus revealing a more sophisticated artistic sensibility and presenting readers with a character who is intimately connected to his past, secure in his present, and psychologically and emotionally prepared to embark upon his future. While blues-based novels may share certain motifs and idiomatic structures, their differences indicate variations in the manifestation of artistic sensibility within the blues as literary genre. Of the divide between Ellison and Murray Robert O'Meally asserts the difference "has to do with Ellison's unwavering insistence that issues of racial and national power politics are boldly stitched into the fabric of the music itself." Without a doubt, Ellison's literary statement is more overtly political than Murray's; *Invisible Man* is obviously and actively physically engaged in his struggle to assert his intellect in the face of the chaos with which he is surrounded. In contrast, Murray's Scooter bides his time moving along slowly but progressing steadily as the action of each novel unfolds. Ellison's approach, like bebop, is intellectually and emotionally daunting; Murray's, like swing, is smooth and steady, providing reliable outcomes to anticipated scenarios. Each novel, however, achieves the same overall goal and ends on a note of hopefulness with the protagonists

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poised for further action. This chapter will detail the blues as the basis for the literary manifestation of bebop-style jazz in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man.

Ellison begins *Invisible Man* with two excerpts that ingeniously capture his understanding of American culture and the artistic sensibility of his entire novel. He quotes Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* first—“You are saved, cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?” This lets the reader know that Ellison’s is a novel that will call into question the complexities surrounding issues of liberty and human agency. Like Benito Cereno, Invisible Man is legally free but his sense of liberation is inextricably bound to his level of self-consciousness and is relevant to a prior condition of captivity. In addition, Benito Cereno’s notion of freedom is perpetually linked to his memory of captivity even once his bondage has ended; it is his memory that fuels the inner turmoil that is so obvious on his face. Noticing the unrest of Benito Cereno, Captain Delano is perplexed and asks “what has cast such a shadow upon you?” In other words, Captain Delano believed that Cereno should be happy, not blue that he had been rescued from his prior condition; the implication is that one should forget the past and focus only on the moment at hand. Captain Delano assures Don Benito, “the past is passed” and instructs him to “Forget it.”4 However, the unrest apparent on Don Benito’s face makes clear that such actions are impossible.5 The complex and conflicting emotions of simultaneously being glad and blue (glad to be saved but blue due to the haunting realities of the past and its uncanny

4 Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* in *Billy Budd and other Tales* (New York: Signet, 1979), 222.
5 One would need a lobotomy for this to be possible but as Ellison’s novel demonstrates, even a lobotomy cannot extract memory.
ability to be part of the living present) leave an indelible mark on Don Benito and his consciousness. Though physically free, Don Benito is bound by his own memory of physical and psychological captivity and terror no matter how physically free he appears. The ways in which this complex conflicting reality is negotiated form the foundation of Ellison’s novel. Don Benito ascribes the volatility and complexity of his current emotional/psychological state as being brought about by “The Negro.”¹⁶ In developing his protagonist as an intelligent, self-reflective being who is also Negro, Ellison takes the angst depicted by Melville to new depths. Ellison’s protagonist will negotiate myriad competing identities, those imposed upon him by outsiders and the other, self-created within the confines of his own mind. These are the dynamics of Invisible Man’s blues.

Ellison’s next excerpt comes from T.S. Eliot’s, *Family Reunion*. Here the character Harry soliloquizes, “I tell you, it is not me you are looking at / Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks / Incriminate, but that other person, if person / You thought I was: let your necrophily / Feed upon that carcase.” Here Ellison suggests that Invisible Man is invisible precisely because others refuse to see him for who he is.

The external being may connote wild and extravagant images in the mind of the seer but these are likely to be wholly and even grossly inaccurate in terms of categorizing the individual being viewed. Ellison’s protagonist will try to kill the image held by the viewer—for example, in the Prologue’s mugging scene—by doing things to assert himself and feel significant. However, as Ellison’s novel demonstrates, one need only

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come to terms with himself for himself as this acutely individual struggle against the self is most daunting.

Believing that by his actions he can gain recognition for and recognize his own humanity, Invisible Man thinks he can change the view of himself held by others. Propelled by the anxiety of a tormented identity, Ellison’s protagonist tries to reconcile this inner conflict, what W.E.B. DuBois termed “double-consciousness,” even as he tries to resolve the conflict between himself and others. However, the tragic and ironic twist to Ellison’s novel is that all such attempts prove futile he cannot change the way others view him. Not only does the protagonist fail, miserably in some cases, to accomplish any meaningful triumph over circumstances he cannot control, he also comes to view his failures as being vital to a system of maintaining racial and class relations. In terms of Ellison’s epigraph, necrophilia drives the American cultural machine because keeping individuals unaware of their potential and vitality allows their energy to be consumed by the lascivious greed of others. However, despite his struggles and apparent failures the Invisible Man comes to realize that he is invisible. This is his self-definition and as such makes sense of Invisible Man’s earlier days of floundering and indicates his indefatigable persistence in continuing in life (to keep on keeping on) despite the many setbacks he encounters. Self-affirmation is the outcome of Ellison’s novel as the protagonist comes to

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8 Commonly referred to as the “Tuskegee Machine,” Booker T. Washington’s project for developing individual and group self-worth functioned according to very specific guidelines that were implemented meticulously. Students at Tuskegee Institute followed courses in agriculture, general labor, home economics and personal hygiene along with a classical educational regimen. As “fuel” for blacks of the future, this coursework provided energy for Washington’s machine and also endowed blacks with the “energy” (training) they would need to have their talents consumed by the broader marketplace.
accept his mixed-up self and all the contradictions and complexities of his existence. Ellison’s use of Melville’s and Eliot’s excerpts is one way of demonstrating textually the amalgamation of cultural and aesthetic influences in the development of an African American, and hence, an American identity.  

In the *Prologue* Ellison establishes the identity/invisibility of his protagonist. Self-assuredly proclaiming, “I am an invisible man,” the protagonist claims his humanity in print, as did Frederick Douglass more than 100 years earlier. Nameless and faceless, the narrator acknowledges his invisibility and views it as a problem for himself and also for those who refuse to see him. Accepting his condition after the bizarre events in the novel have passed he uses his invisibility to his advantage, attacking a man on the street without being held responsible for his actions and successfully drains electricity from the local power company. However, being invisible has its drawbacks and the narrator says his condition is “wearing on the nerves” to the extent that it causes violent outbursts that the narrator realizes are “seldom successful.” Usually capable of nonviolent self-assertion, the Invisible Man capitalizes on his condition by not waking the “sleepwalkers”—those who refuse to acknowledge his humanity—and lives rent-free in the basement of a building where he is surrounded by 1,369 blazing lights. These lights help him realize his humanity. They heighten his sense of reality and give him form.

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10 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3. In particular, see the opening paragraph and observe the number of times Ellison uses the word, “I.”


Driven into his hole-in-the-ground after a confrontation with Ras the Destroyer, a black nationalist with a West-Indian accent, an event that occurs near the end of Ellison’s novel but that actually marks the beginning of the narrator’s self-realization, the narrator is in a state of “hibernation” in which he is biding his time waiting, planning, and preparing for his next venture above-ground.13

Aligning his narrator with Jack-the-Bear, Ellison links Invisible Man with the past and demonstrates its relevance to contemporary situations. Like Jack-the-Bear, the narrator intends to emerge from his hole and come “strolling out like an Easter chick breaking from its shell.”14 Born anew and filled with youthful exuberance, the narrator intends to use his voluntary exile as a way to muster his personal fortitude and reemerge having learned from his previous above-ground fiascos and exert a more skillful self. By evoking the image of Jack-the-Bear, Ellison aligns his narrator with the U.S. folkloric tradition and gives Invisible Man a group identity and rich history that the narrator will rely upon as he engages contemporary issues. “As the title of a Duke Ellington composition and the stage name of a 1920s Harlem pianist, Jack the Bear is also a folk epithet evoking survival and wisdom in the modern world of urban black performance.”15 Ellison’s use of folklore through Invisible Man’s reliance upon it is an example of how the past is part of the living present.

While jazz forms the parameters of Ellison’s story and symbolizes Invisible Man’s identity struggle it also lends insight into the novel’s political dimension. Invisible

14 Ibid.
Man describes his hibernation as a “covert preparation for a more overt action,” and entertains himself by listening to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue.” Listening to music in preparation for an overt act of some sort is a volatile combination especially since this song “came to be regarded as one of the first overt instances of racial protest in American popular music.” Readers are to assume that whatever Invisible Man does when he emerges will be in a willful act of self assertion designed to counter any preconceived notions about race. Having achieved a sense of self realization during his hibernation, Invisible Man will emerge at least, endowed with the psychological strength of self-consciousness, a trait he lacked during his prior above-ground-days. The narrator’s sensory perception is heightened by the musical vibrations and from having smoked a reefer that allows a deeper appreciation of the music’s nuances. Though he describes himself as being “one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived,” the narrator assures readers that this is part and parcel of being invisible.

The narrator admits that had he been acting responsibly, he would have killed the man in the street that had earlier bumped into him. While this seems like a contradiction, indicates the ambiguity of being cognizant of one’s humanity but simultaneously denied public recognition as a human being. In addition, the struggle indicated by this paradox is intellectual; Invisible Man controlled his rage by asserting his intellect, halted his actions and so spared a man’s life. The heinous admission of contemplating murder shows not

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17 Sunquist, *Cultural Contexts*, 115. Sunquist explains that the song was allegedly commissioned by mobster Dutch Schultz who wanted a funny song about the “tragedy of being black.” The song “evoked a mixture of laughter an stunned discomfort in the first audience who heard it sung onstage by Edith Wilson” because it dealt with prejudice in such a serious way.
the monstrosity of the narrator but the banal nature of society in making barbaric acts such as murder seem an attractive option for self-expression. Black because he identifies culturally and physiologically with the group of people who have some ancestors from Africa, and blue because he has been repeatedly pummeled by society and rendered emotionally distraught in the process, the Invisible Man ends the Prologue and begins his story by remembering the various events that propelled him, like Dante, deep into a hole-in-the-ground and deeper into forging an understanding of his complex place within American culture.

The catharsis of self realization experienced by Ellison's narrator is akin to the euphoria musicians experience through improvisation. The entire italicized section of the Prologue, and Ellison's novel as a whole, mirrors the musician's departure from the standard, traditional composition of the group, or his break. As with the narrator, the musician descends deeper into mental oblivion reaching new levels of meaning at each temporary station where his continuous questing serves to deepen, his ethereal mental state--another descent and ascent paradox. The musician's journey to self-expression is anxiety ridden as he seeks to create his own tonal response in consideration of the group's overall musical direction. As John Szwed notes, "The burden that improvisation puts on musicians can be daunting" because constant, unceasing innovation is expected.19 "The level of creativity demanded here is incredibly high, as well as unrealistic: musicians are asked to sound different from all others, but also different from themselves

19 John Szwed. Jazz 101, 44.
The bizarre twists and turns of fate Invisible Man experiences, from the Battle Royal, Trueblood and Golden Day events to the paint factory, lobotomy, and Brotherhood experiences and beyond, indicate Ellison’s keen insight regarding unrealistic expectation (he was a jazz trumpeter) and his literary genius in creating a protagonist who allows readers insight into his intellect in such a way that readers can appreciate the bizarre nature of such extreme demands. The internal chaos of the musician may be revealed, in part, by his facial expression but is ultimately controlled by his technical skill, for only highly skilled musicians can improvise. Similarly, Ellison’s narrator controls his psyche by exerting incredible intellectual strength. Invisible Man’s success in transforming each bizarre event is indicated by the onset of each new scenario; he has survived physically, intellectually and emotionally and so is able to meet new challenges.

In contrast to the haphazard nature of events that mark Invisible Man’s experiences, Scooter confronts no obvious chaos. The turmoil in Murray’s novel is subdued indicating smoothness in narrative style. Scooter’s characterization demonstrates the period of intense training required as a musician learns his craft; his silence is akin to acute listening. As the more mature Scooter remembers the events of his childhood, readers are made privy to the ways in which the community of his youth has influenced his mature sensibility; it is part of his living present. Similarly, the musician’s foray into the uncharted territory of improvisation is always relative to the group’s compositional objectives and forms the parameters of the musician’s tonal exit and reentrance into the group. While he is musically at bay, the anxiety-ridden musician is granted a temporary

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Ibid.
reprieve from the formal demands of group interest and is allowed a limited time in
which to exhibit his personal stylization on the band’s composition but he must be self-
expressive and impressive within a limited amount of time. After he has showcased his
talent the musician is signaled by the group and brought back tonally so he can rejoin the
communal objective. Near the end of *Train Whistle Guitar*, for example, Scooter
transforms his first blues feelings by forming an individual verbal response to an insult
but then rejoins the group by ending his hiatus and participating in his community and
trusting them again. Murray’s novels, these individual forays and reentries occur after
long periods of training and preparation.

In contrast to this silent participation, Invisible Man’s narrative is pro-active even
in the *Prologue*. Ellison’s narrator hears “rhythmic footsteps” demonstrating his time at
bay, on his own during his improvised forays in the above-ground world has come to an
end. After a series of fits and starts, as indicated by the bizarre events detailed and
encapsulated in each chapter, *The Invisible Man* rejoins the realm of worldly, albeit
underground dwellers. The print in Ellison’s text becomes standard once again, and the
effects of the reefer dissipate, in the same way that the musician rejoins the tonal
demands of his band. The questions, answers, ambiguities and even the punctuation used
in the italicized section of the *Prologue* indicate the nuances and varying emphases of
musical improvisation, the strain of emotional and intellectual demands and compound
the magnitude of the musician’s performance anxiety.\footnote{Of course, this section can also be interpreted according to its strong sexual symbolism, i.e. the rapid succession of events similar to reaching for and achieving orgasm and the reentrance into the community} Ellison captures the intensity of
this complex psychological experience in the Prologue as he does in the remainder of his novel, by relentlessly and painstakingly demonstrating the mental life of his protagonist as a series of firing synapses. In fact the metaphoric spark generated by the narrator’s intellect flickers but is never permanently snuffed out; even in his warm hole, Invisible Man is surrounded by light. However, the narrator’s ‘big break,’ or his escape into the underground, signals a definitive break with tradition; though he surrounds himself with the sonic warmth of Armstrong’s song, he sequesters himself in a neutral territory, where he is alone and away from the actual influences of living people. This contrasts the characterization of Scooter who never breaks, definitively, from tradition but maintains and strengthens his actual alliances by always being physically and/or mentally involved with the mentors who have guided him. Invisible Man’s above-ground experience suggests, he is ill suited for life according to conventional modes of conduct—he does not fit in despite his Herculean efforts to do so.

Performance anxiety is experienced in the extreme when the practitioner is venturing into uncharted territory. Ellison states, “Those who know their native culture and love it unchauvinistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar.” Unlike Scooter who is always at ease when he encounters unfamiliar situations because he is self-assured and drenched in tradition, Invisible Man is driven by a quest to realize the nature of his true identity apart from tradition and begins chapter one with the admission that “all [his] life he had been looking for something,” and in his quest he sought teachers

\[\text{echoing the cooling down stage once climax has been attained. Like improvisation, each orgasm is unique as the performance anxiety one feels is new with each new sexual encounter.}\]

\[\text{Ellison, } \textit{Shadow and Act}, \text{ 198.}\]
from a variety of sources, accepting the random answers he was given and admitting to being “naive.”\(^3\) This search is complicated by the words spoken to the narrator by his grandfather on his deathbed. The old man told all within hearing range that “life is a war” and described himself as a “traitor” and a “spy in the enemy’s country” but then he dies before he can elaborate on the lesson he means to impart on his captive audience.\(^4\) Unlike Scooter’s teachers and mentors who actually live to offer instruction, Invisible Man’s grandfather speaks these troubling words and dies, leaving behind a “curse” or riddle that followed and confounded the narrator wherever he went.\(^5\) Invisible Man’s lesson is incomplete whereas as Scooter matriculates under the advice of each teacher. Still questing but haunted by his grandfather’s dying words, Invisible Man feels a sense of personal accomplishment when he is selected to deliver his graduation speech (on humility and patience as the secret to progress) at a gathering of community leaders and believes that only this group of white men “could judge truly [his] ability.”\(^6\) Scooter, however, reared in a nurturing community, relies on those who sincerely have his best interest in mind as he attains accolades for his academic success. As a result, Ellison’s narrator experiences degradation and humiliation in the extreme as he fights a battle that leaves him bloody and disfigured while he delivers his speech to a room filled with rowdy, drunken men with no interest in the boy’s betterment (as is evidenced by the ruckus aroused when he slips, switching the word equality for responsibility). Though he has been humble and patient, Invisible Man’s reward is a farce. Nevertheless, these are

\(^{23}\) Ellison, Invisible Man, 15.
\(^{24}\) Ellison, Invisible Man, 16.
\(^{25}\) Ellison, Invisible Man, 17.
\(^{26}\) Ellison, Invisible Man, 25.
the men the narrator seeks to please and having lived up to (down to) their expectations of him, he is awarded a calfskin briefcase and a scholarship to a Negro college. He is excited and proud but humiliated. In contrast, Scooter’s “hop-skipping up the steps” to Miss Tee’s house once he has been awarded a “certificate and top prize” for excelling in school indicate that neither his joy nor his dignity have been compromised.27 Scooter, unlike Invisible Man, is rewarded for adhering to convention. Invisible Man’s lack of fundamental self-assurance and the source of his internal anxiety, in large part, results from his inability to recognize and rely upon community support. Unlike Scooter, Invisible Man’s nurturing and so his communal knowledge is incomplete and he is ill at ease with accepting convention.

Ellison’s first chapter is indicative of ensuing events in the narrator’s life in that he functions on a level where self-realization is being forged; he negotiates the fine line between tradition and renegade behavior. Invisible Man is in a quest for identity and as he states in the chapter’s opening paragraph, “I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I and only I, could answer.”28 With no influential mentors in his life—his grandfather is dead and his parents are not mentioned in any meaningful way again—the narrator is ultimately alone to determine the parameters of his conduct. Invisible Man seeks answers from others but, unlike Scooter, he serves no lasting apprenticeship with any would-be teachers and though he is guided by various teachers he does not trust fully (as with Scooter) his instruction. However,

27 Murray, TWG, 182.
28 Ellison, Invisible Man, 15.
antagonistically cooperative, even this nominal distrust helps to shape his worldview. Compared with Scooter whose identity is forged within the parameters of the advice he receives, Invisible Man tries to go it alone. Unlike the musicians struggling to master their craft, Invisible Man does not learn “tradition, group techniques, and style” from the older generation but devises his own methods based on tenuous guidance from the group. While there are “agreed upon principles as to what might be invented [regarding improvisation] and how it relates to the whole” Invisible Man pushes the parameters of what is acceptable. As with the music Murray’s and Ellison’s novels model, such stylistic differences center on form. Murray’s series is a lyrical series of reminisces; Ellison’s is a novel that depicts the life of the mind and all its fascinating struggles to achieve form over mental chaos.

With no lasting or nurturing community ties, Invisible Man serves no period of “apprenticeship,” and though his life, as depicted in the novel, is replete with “ordeals, initiation ceremonies, [and] rebirth,” meaningful and necessary community connections are tenuous in Ellison’s novel. Unlike Scooter whose community affiliation is obvious and demonstrated as being vital to the development of his character (Murray’s first novel is entirely dedicated to Scooter’s character development and community foundation) the Invisible Man has no such solid foundation. He flounders around from mishap to mishap in bizarre attempts to “achieve a realization everyone else [including Scooter] appears to

\[30\] Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 44.
\[31\] Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 44.
have been born with: 'That I am nobody but myself.'\textsuperscript{32} That the narrator's early attempts to have others offer him an identity are unsuccessful and remain so throughout the novel allows Ellison to reveal the process of forging an identity.

Unsuccessful attempts toward self-realization occur throughout Ellison's novel and serve to demonstrate the vital role a community foundation can play in the development of personal identity. Distrustful of community members because he is confused by the lessons he is being taught, Invisible Man's journey inward is comprised of various pieces of advice assembled as he moves from one event to the next. Invisible Man encounters many would-be teachers throughout the course of the novel's action but he is not steeped in the instruction he receives because, unlike Scooter, he does not serve a long enough tenure with any given mentor. Invisible Man is not made privy to ongoing casual but significant teachings such as those received by Scooter and Little Buddy Marshall. Rather, Invisible Man receives advice, misses its significance, and moves on to the next escapade before the lesson has had a chance to set in and before convention can confine him psychologically. Such convention, however, does not necessarily result in psychological stagnation. Rather, an adherence to the group's teachings could strengthen, like Scooter, one's ability to face adversarial conditions. In this way, "Race becomes a signifier of cultural heritage, not biological inferiority, of kinship...of survival against the odds through mutual support and reciprocal connections to others"; race becomes a source of individual power and a vehicle for psychological liberation.\textsuperscript{33} While in

\textsuperscript{32} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 15.
\textsuperscript{33} Guinier and Torres, \textit{The Miner's Canary}, 84.
Ellison's novel there are no barbershop scenes as in Murray's that can drench Invisible Man with ritualistic insights into community ties, various experiences and interactions with community members make Invisible Man pause to think. No group of male mentors guides the young man long-term as he matures and develops his communal knowledge. However, Invisible Man takes from various mentors' lessons that allow him to forge and independent identity. Invisible Man struggles to achieve his identity; Scooter's is designated for him. Invisible Man's struggle for self is one in which the individual fights against the society that seeks his psychological and, to a degree, physical submission.

Scooter learns how to verbally respond to insults such as those posed by Unka Jo the African but Ellison's narrator is never taught the 'proper' response to such verbal attacks, physical or psychological challenges. Invisible Man's college education is abbreviated, and as Dr. Bledsoe says to him in exasperation (in response to the fiasco with Mr. Norton, a northern benefactor), "Boy, you are a fool...Your white folk didn't teach you anything and your mother-wit has left you cold." Unlike Scooter, the Invisible Man demonstrates no cognizance of far away lands, fantastic travels, and never participates (even vicariously) in the triumphs of local or national sports heroes like Gator Gus or Jack Johnson, and so he is ill prepared to realize such glory for himself or his birthright as the progeny of heroes. Invisible Man's mind is constantly bombarded with thoughts of the present and how to circumnavigate the conditions with which he is faced. Scooter, adept in the teachings of his community, has the mental space to dream and imagine myriad possibilities for his life but always within socially acceptable

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34 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 141-42.
limits. Unlike Scooter whose mother supplies him with a cutting verbal response for him to use with those who question her son’s heritage or biological legitimacy, Invisible Man has no mother (though Mary Rambo comes closest). Mary Rambo leaves an impact on Ellison’s protagonist but since he meets her during his adult years her actual interaction with him is limited in the novel and so even her potential as a teacher or dominant influence in Invisible Man’s life is abbreviated. Unlike Scooter, the Invisible Man has no fairy “guard-mother.”

In Ellison’s novel there is no local hero like the notorious Luzana Cholly, to serve as a model for the adventuresome antics of young boys or to encourage him in the proper ways to be ‘cool.’ While Trueblood and Peter Wheatstraw serve as guides for Invisible Man, neither is shown as having a lasting impact on Invisible Man. Dr. Bledsoe, like so many others who Invisible Man meets along his journey to self discovery, is an inadequate mentor for the narrator because Invisible Man does not comprehend Bledsoe’s message. There are no formal teachers in *Invisible Man* who serve as academic guides in the narrator’s attempt at college matriculation such as Scooter’s beloved, Miss Lexine Metcalf. There are no willing co-eds, like Scooter’s Deljean McCray or Eunice Townsend, to flatter the young man into

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35 Lani Guinier’s *The Miner’s Canary* offers a discussion of magical realism as a way to realize the latent potential to access fuller democratic freedom. “It is that move across conventional racial boundaries that creates a full flowering of new possibilities. Thus, magical realism has traction both as an idea and as an application.” (24) See Guinier and Torres, *The Miner’s Canary*, “Political Race and Magical Realism.” Also Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination* for a compelling argument for dismantling various types of barriers by evoking psychological fortitude in the service of active political engagement.


37 I think the influence of Trueblood and Wheatstraw on Invisible Man is great. However, since the physical and intellectual interaction with them is limited readers cannot know for sure if their impact on Invisible Man is lasting. This is in contract with Scooter’s influences whose impact is shown to be lasting due to the constant evocation of them in his active use of memory.
defining the parameters of his identity as a heterosexual male. Ellison’s protagonist has no life-long best friend to help guide and shape his identity as Scooter’s is defined in conjunction with and in opposition to that of Little Buddy Marshall.

By allowing the guiding influences on the development of Invisible Man’s psyche to remain unclear Ellison suggests disdain for outside pressures that might dominate and so obscure the protagonist’s independent intellectual growth. While Ellison asserts reverence for the “rich oral literature” of African American culture that thrived in “churches, the schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps,” his protagonist remains undecided as to how the guidance of such localized communities might strengthen his foundation of ease his quest for identity.\(^{38}\) Ellison’s narrator tries to build the framework of his identity of sticks rather than stone—but this is not a bad thing. This metaphor is useful in illustrating the difference in aesthetic and political inclination between Murray and Ellison. Light or moderately weighted sticks can be gathered from various places, arranged and rearranged according to one’s will and in the multiplicity of arrangements possible; a framework of sticks suggests variety, creativity and mobility. Invisible Man forges creates an identity based on varied influences and assembles his lessons in innovative ways. A stone, on the other hand, is heavy, cumbersome and so cannot be moved easily from place to place; a stone is unchanging. Scooter’s crafting of identity is rigid and defined in full accordance with his community’s desires. Invisible

and essentially alone amidst a chaotic world, the variety of Invisible Man’s experiences is not merely daunting and emotionally taxing but overwhelming.39

Ellison’s novel suggests that a comprehensive community foundation is necessary for ‘successful’ ventures into the unknown.40 The haunting words of the narrator’s grandfather stay with the young man like a curse, guiding his development precisely because he is unsure of their prophetic meaning.41 Serving as a link between the present and the past, the grandfather’s early death but continuous presence within the text illustrates the importance of history in forming self-identity. Though family members think the old man has gone insane, his words heavily influence the protagonist who is told he resembles the old man. While the biological connection is obvious, the cultural connection between his grandfather and Invisible Man is the link that guides the narrator’s quest for understanding. “[P]olitically weak, the grandfather has learned that conformity” is to be questioned.42 He represents “the ambiguity of the past for the hero [Invisible Man], for whom the sphinxlike deathbed advice poses a riddle which points the plot in the dual direction which the hero will follow throughout the novel.”43 Invisible Man realizes he needs a bit of his past in building his future but not all of it; the struggle

39 John Szwed states, “The level of creativity demanded here is incredible high, as well as unrealistic” (Szwed 44) and while the variety or bizarre nature of events described in Ellison’s novel seems improbable, I think his work expresses a hopefulness that is hard to imagine. Magical realism, then, might well offer insights into how to better understand Ellison’s work and artistic efforts. Also see John Szwed’s Space is the Place: the Lives and Times of Sun Ra, New York, DaCapo Press, 1998.
40 Here I mean success to indicate more than the biological survival—a measure of one’s quality of life.
41 I think Invisible Man does this with other lessons he receives as well. He is never clear on any one message he receives and I believe this compounds Invisible Man’s struggle. One example of this is Invisible Man’s interaction with Peter Wheatstraw and Invisible Man’s mental anxiety in trying to make sense of the man’s words.
42 Ellison, Shadow and Act, “Change the Joke and Slip the Joke”: 56.
43 Ibid.
in the novel is in the protagonist’s trying to figure out what to keep and what to leave behind and how to remain psychologically, emotionally and physically whole in the process. Invisible Man is perplexed by his grandfather’s last words for the same reasons he is perplexed by Dr. Bledsoe’s comment, “My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?” The insight the two older men attempt to convey is related and is linked to the narrator’s history and would be useful in helping the narrator find his way amidst the chaos with which he is faced; yet, Invisible Man cannot understand how these lessons are helpful. He wants to exist in a realm where ‘lies’ are not necessary or expected; Invisible Man wants to change the rules of this age-old game.

The atrocity of Trueblood’s offense and its uncanny ability to implicate members of the white population indicate the insidious and inextricably linked genealogy and history of black and white America; Invisible Man wants to break from this past but knows he cannot. In its horrific rendition of deviant sexuality, Trueblood’s story is also Invisible Man’s history. Mary Rambo’s southern hospitality even in the cold and uncaring North endears her to the narrator. Yet, he even breaks away from her though she is a mother figure to whom Invisible Man yearns to return. When he first meets Ras the Exhorter, the narrator is intrigued by the way Ras has excited the crowd. On his way to Men’s House, the narrator sense the vitality of the crowd but is “careful not to look back lest [he] sees a riot flare” or is reminded about the violence and volatile nature of his historical past; Invisible Man is enticed and repelled by his history. The blues singing of

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44 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 139

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Petie Wheatstraw brings a wave of “homesickness” to the narrator and although he wants to leave the seemingly delirious man whose down-home queries (“is you got the dog?”) are embarrassing, the narrator finds “a certain comfort in walking along beside him, as though [they’d] walked this way before through other mornings, in other places.”

Wheatstraw’s words to the narrator are prophetic. Wheatstraw tells the narrator, “Harlem ain’t nothing but a bear’s den,” and though the protagonist accepts the comment he remains unsettled with and distrustful of his past and so does not know how Wheatstraw’s insight is meaningful. Thinking conventionally (but not entirely secure in this way of thinking), Invisible Man believes teachers must have academic degrees and college appointments and so the narrator misses the opportunity to seriously engage Wheatstraw. Pushing a cart filled with blueprints, the seemingly delirious man sings the blues. His song about a woman with legs like a “maaad/Bulldog” is familiar to the narrator and suddenly the blatant and contradictory nature of the song’s lyrics fill him with a “strangeness” that reminds him that his past is something with which he will need to come to terms.

Believing that “in order to travel far you had to be detached,” the narrator is determined to consciously reject images of his past, despite their sweetness (i.e. eating a yam from a street vendor), despite the durability of a Sambo doll bank, and despite the relics of his past contained in his calfskin briefcase that when set afire provide the

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47 Pete Wheatstraw was actually the stage name for William Bunch, a blues singer whose recordings Ellison knew. Ellison also performed with Wheatstraw on one occasion in St. Louis. See Sundquist, *Cultural Contexts*, 123.
narrator his actual and metaphorical first light.\textsuperscript{49} Lucius Brockway, does not simply block the way to the “Danger” zone on the deep levels of the machine shop, he represents the depth of knowledge to be gained by spending time and doing the work of hands-on training with one’s elders. The danger, as is demonstrated through the protagonist’s numerous starts and fits, is the perilous terrain of the road to self-discovery. Brockway has been with the shop from its very beginning and knows the make-up of the building, its internal structure, and its workings better than the engineers to whom he is constantly sent as help. As with Scooter’s barbershop days and time spent listening to the conversations of other grown folks, Ellison’s text demonstrates the need for and significance of unlettered training and the guidance of non-formal teachers in one’s character development and ultimately of being strong enough to carry one’s past as a useful part of one’s future. As Ellison suggests, such knowledge and teacher/group acceptance is vital to determining one’s own identity. Ellison states that the amateur’s “recognition of manhood depends upon” one’s acceptance by “acknowledged masters” who determine whether or not the novice has “reached a standard which is all the more difficult for not having been rigidly codified.”\textsuperscript{50}

By the \textit{Epilogue}, Ellison’s narrator believes he is ready to emerge from hibernation. Still haunted by his grandfather’s words, he makes a conscious attempt to make sense of the old man’s advice. In fact, his mind will not let him rest and his thoughts return continuously to his grandfather. The narrator admits that unlike himself,

\textsuperscript{49} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 177
\textsuperscript{50} Ellison, \textit{Shadow and Act}, 209.
his grandfather never suffered from an identity crisis and never “had any doubts about his humanity.” The narrator thus begins to appreciate the differences between himself and his grandfather. Seemingly ready to gather the sum of his above-ground experiences into some unified plan for action, the narrator determines that “the hibernation is over.”

Having run himself into a hole in the ground trying to escape his past, he realizes he must accept what he cannot change and commits to use his life and all its hardships and pains in the crafting of a philosophy that will sustain him. He asserts, “the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived.” In other words, he must not block the past no matter how difficult and bizarre. The past has made him who he is, or as the narrator so aptly says, “I yam what I am.”

Ellison’s novel ends on a positive note. Hope is expressed in the narrator’s commitment to emerge from his hole and become a “socially responsible,” albeit invisible, man by actively participating in life above ground which is, after all, where it counts.

Ellison’s novel is based in the blues but indicates a stylistic departure from this genre. The blues base of Ellison’s novel is first suggested in the opening excerpts of Ellison’s text as these two quotes indicate the internal struggle of an individual to come to terms with the reality of his life. In the first quote the non-speaking subject, newly

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 266.
informed that he has been “saved,” is seen through a shadow. In the second quote, the speaker inverts the subject, speaks for himself, and effectively separates himself from being a mere image in subject’s imagination. “In the beginning was not the shadow, but the act....”56 Likewise, in the opening pages of Ellison’s novel the protagonist asserts himself through the constant use of the word “I,” indicating Ellison’s novel will focus acutely on the struggle of the individual and will not emphasize any localized community. However, the protagonist is linked to a community of African Americans, its richness and complexity, and he delves into the history of this people—using multiple influences including religion, slavery, music, violence, love, hate—as he descends into the depths of his own mind and into the cultural history of this people after having smoked a reefer. Using Armstrong’s song as a gateway into the cultural history of African Americans the narrator, who has psychologically separated himself from this community throughout the course of the novel, can only descend into its depths and access its richness through an altered mental state. The narrator’s journey backwards/inwards is complex because of the multiplicity of networks stemming from his cultural core. One line of inquiry is insufficient for articulating the narrator’s complex history. Only the richness of jazz with its multiplicity of instrumentation and complexity of sound compounded and then merged into the synthesis of a single composition can adequately convey the culture from which the narrator hails. “Emerging from the ‘oppressive experience of blackness,’ jazz and the blues are hybrid forms that exemplify

a balance between the individual and the collective." Similarly, Armstrong’s song is captures the complexity of collaborative experiences. Comprised of multiple influences, Armstrong’s tune exudes traces of the blues in its lyrics and slow-whining trumpet solo but is made more complex than a standard blues tune because of the variety instrumentation and the complexity of sound created (through both the written score and also the variety of instruments contributing to the execution of the score). The narrator’s continuous links with his past through his grandfather, the link of chain and papers he accumulates in his briefcase, as well as various people he meets all conjure images of his past. The vast majority of the novel’s action takes place in Harlem miles away geographically from the realm of the narrator’s youth. The psychological distance the narrator attempts to secure mentally compounds the geographical distance between the South and Harlem. As Ellison notes, “in the North [the Negro] surrenders and does not replace certain important supports to his personality.” Unlike Scooter who uses the lessons of his southern rearing in the transformation of the angst that plagues him in each new setting, Invisible Man is not sure how to make sense of his early teachings although they dot his memory and so beckon his recollection. This uncertainty makes it difficult for Invisible Man to make smooth transitions in each new setting. When Scooter enters into new situations he links himself to a community of mentors or teachers who help guide his progress through the new environment. As a result, Scooter progresses through new experiences with apparent psychological ease because his actions are guided by

57 Guinier and Torres, *The Miner’s Canary*, 83.
tradition while Ellison’s narrator is anxiety ridden at each juncture of change because he does not rely on or make complete sense of such standards. Invisible Man tries to deny his folk wisdom led by “the mistaken notion that it in no way applies to urban living.”

Invisible Man lacks what Ellison refers to as “an ease of movement within explosive situations,” in the Northern environment because he never forms lasting ties with any of his guides, never fully comprehends the messages they impart and so is lacking in a synthesized communal knowledge that might help ease his transitions. Instead of achieving the glorious Promised Land of lore Invisible Man finds himself “ever against a wall” but this is the price of thwarting convention. As Emerson says, “For non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure” and Invisible Man is mentally battered throughout the course of Ellison’s novel. The break the narrator hopes to achieve is not clean. As Invisible Man’s experience when eating a yam makes clear, the inhabitants of the northern metropolis bring with them the worldviews and ways of their former lives. They all seem to know the proper codes of conduct, like Scooter, that help guide them through various experiences with apparent ease. Invisible Man’s attempt to commit to the Brotherhood is based on a feeling of deep connection to the elderly couple who are evicted from their home. Ultimately, his ties to the Brotherhood are severed and through a series of events the Invisible Man is separated from the group and begins his period of hibernation. Although memory informs his actions, there are no lasting

relationships formed in *Invisible Man* because the novel is one that emphasizes acute individuality through the deeply intimate psychological struggle of the narrator.

Invisible Man wants to fit in somewhere, discovers at each turn that he does not, and so as a consequence, demonstrates a life that is atypical. As with the blues, the narrator’s angst is transformed into willful acts. Like the wandering bluesman of legend, the Invisible Man meanders through life facing his troubles head-on, his solitary struggle indicating the minutia of human life. Yet, beyond the scope of the wandering bluesman, Invisible Man’s territory is wide and his problems bear the complexity of his northern environment although he is reminded at each turn of the significance of his past in the formation of his new identity. Unlike Scooter whose action is based on communal knowledge as a foundation for his actions, Invisible Man takes snippets of information as he consciously develops a mode of conduct that ultimately renders him incapable of life in the mainstream. While his life is fraught with the blues Invisible Man’s characterization seems to say to Scooter, “your blues ain’t like mine” because Ellison’s protagonist takes tangential aspects of the teachings he receives from others as he crafts his life in opposition to convention; whereas, Scooter takes lessons in their entirety using the instruction and advice of his mentors as a conscious guide that informs his every action in accordance with tradition. As with jazz music, each author’s protagonist is intrinsically linked to the blues, although to varying degrees. Likewise, the singular expressiveness of the jazz musician, Ellison’s or Murray’s protagonist, cannot be achieved without the blues as a basic guiding element.
Ellison’s novel emphasizes acute individuality in its depiction of a protagonist with only tenuous roots to any community foundation and so improvisation takes on enhanced significance as a guiding element in the narrator’s character formation. Each chapter represents an opportunity in which the protagonist tests his ability to survive in the face of chaotic and bizarre situations. From the battle royal to the Golden Day to the events at The Liberty Paint Factory to the Brotherhood speeches to the wearing of sunglasses in an attempt at disguise, the narrator’s experiences are all opportunities to exert himself amidst controversy. Each chapter builds on the bizarre nature of the previous chapter and takes readers on a fantastic voyage entirely removed from normative or anticipated action. While Invisible Man’s and Scooter’s actions are initially guided along seemingly logical paths, Invisible Man’s situations turn bizarre in unexpected ways while Scooter’s remain choreographed as readers come to expect the outcomes associated with Scooter’s development. Like the jazz musician, Ellison’s narrator (and certainly readers) cannot accurately anticipate the novel’s sequence of events. Despite the vast realm of the unknown, Ellison’s narrator responds to each scenario independent of the solid foundation of community support that assures Scooter’s success and ease of transition. Unlike Scooter, Invisible Man cannot rely on methods used in one situation to help him through the next. As with improvisation, and so life, each situation is unique and demands individual attention.

Complex and sophisticated, Ellison’s literary improvisation is the stuff of bebop. Like the musical genre it imitates the stylistic nature of Ellison’s novel is “characterized by complex, polyrhythms, shifting accents, exciting dissonant harmonies, new tone colors
and irregular phrasing.” Ellison’s distinctive format includes the trumpet and saxophone in Armstrong’s signature piece announcing Ellison’s theme in unison as the instruments musically form the complex scope of the narrator’s thoughts and define the parameters of his journey as he descends backwards into time. The series of improvisations that follow the Prologue are contained in chapters that reveal intrinsically complex events and actions within a specific range of pages. Ellison’s novel concludes with a repeat of his theme as is indicated by the cyclical nature of the text and the narrator’s hibernation forming the textual boundaries of the story. As the narrator explains, “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.” Invisible Man’s continuous separation from various groups of would-be supporters (as compared to Scooter’s community based method of self-realization) indicates the type of staunch individualism and renegade mental persona associated with bebop and its musicians. As John Szwed notes of bebop musicians, “Many of the black musicians who first played bebop were migrants from the South and Southwest, their musical abilities developed within a framework of local intellectual activity and political thinking.” Like bebop that was regarded as “revolutionary” because it seemed “the most unique and clearly differentiated style of jazz” Ellison’s novel offered for his contemporary readers an innovative approach in depicting black-male protagonists as acutely intellectual beings. While Scooter’s characterization is consistent with mainstream ideals (he always does what is right and is duly rewarded), Invisible Man’s sense of ‘right’ is different than what others expect of him (Dr. Bledsoe

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62 Southern, Music, 490.  
63 Ellison, Invisible Man, 6.  
64 Szwed, Jazz 101: 161.  
65 Szwed, Jazz 101, 161.
is one example) because his life, unlike Scooter’s, takes unusual and unexpected turns. Invisible Man creates a path that is all his own and fraught with innovation with each chapter. Ellison’s novel is unsettling and provides the reader with a series of seemingly unrelated and chaotic situations that subvert readers’ attempt to impose order on the text. Similarly, bebop exudes with the “giddiness of experimentation” particularly noted in the rhythm section but also its melodies were, “broken up and somewhat discontinuous” all leading to an overall effect that seemed, “erratic or disorganized” because the aim of the bebop combo was, “not to play for dancers or floor shows at nightclubs only, and certainly not to play for a pop market.” Invisible Man struggles with the workings of his mind at each new juncture of change and as he grapples intellectually the impact of each new situation makes an indelible mark on his brain. In this way, Invisible Man’s characterization is reminiscent of bebop musicians who by, “creating a new music, adopting a renegade style, asserting their intelligence, and demanding to be treated as artists...forged a cultural politics that challenged all at once the banality of popular swing music [and] the complacency of older musicians...”

Some of the first apparent and most obvious literary influences on Invisible Man include H.G. Wells’ novel of the same title, Herman Melville, T.S. Eliot, Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative, Armstrong’s popular tune, Dante’s Inferno, and certainly Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s Notes from the Underground—all standards in the literary and musical realm. Ellison’s novel reflects the influences of these works but is decidedly its

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66 Szwed, Jazz 101: 165, 161-162.
own masterpiece. As Southern notes of bebop, "generally the melodies of these pieces were discarded and entirely new melodies created over the old harmonic progressions."\textsuperscript{68} Ellison's novel indicates a bebop literary style because the narrator's journey inward is primarily intellectual, his characterization demonstrates a definitive break from convention, and so his portrayal as an individual is heightened. Like Dizzy Gillespie, who spoke of not wanting his music to be "restricted to just an American context," Ellison's narrator is an innovator.\textsuperscript{69} Ellison's protagonist brings to mind Southern's comments on bebop. She says, "the average listener lost his bearings with bop; it was difficult to follow the melody or anticipate what was to come."\textsuperscript{70} Surely Ellison's novel works similarly, frustrating first-time and seasoned readers alike as they struggle to make sense of the chaotic events faced by the narrator. Readers are likely to become frustrated with Invisible Man because the events of his life and his associated responses simply do not unfold 'the way they are supposed to.' Invisible Man goes against the grain despite the consequences of doing so because he is committed to being an individual and doing things in, decidedly, his own way. Gillespie's comments on bebop musicians are again useful. He says, "We refused to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation.... nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival."\textsuperscript{71} Ellison and his protagonist represent what Houston Baker Jr. might term a "generational shift."\textsuperscript{72} Ellison's artistic mission was to be innovative, not merely repetitive. Ellison's comments

\textsuperscript{68} Southern, Music, 490-91.
\textsuperscript{69} Porter, What is this thing called Jazz? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 59.
\textsuperscript{70} Southern, Music, 492.
\textsuperscript{71} Porter, What is this thing called Jazz?, 59.
on bop are useful in understanding his artistic endeavor. He explains that "the inside dopesters will tell you that the 'changes' of chord progressions and the melodic inversions worked out by the creators of bop sprang partially from their desire to create a jazz which could not be easily imitated and exploited by white musicians." As with bop, Ellison's artistic endeavor and the experiences of his protagonist represent a definitive break from traditional and easily assimilated modes of artistic and literary representation in print.

CHAPTER IV
YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE, ALBERT MURRAY—COUNTERPOINT

Albert Murray’s *The Spyglass Tree* stylistically models swing-style jazz, in large part, because the novel is structured in a predictable way. The action in the novel is subdued beneath a façade of seamless and steady progression. There is always action in the background of Scooter’s tale yet he seems to be ushered along in seamless fashion, advancing to new experiences and opportunities with a gracefulness that belies any struggle. Similarly, the flexibility of swing rhythm creates a “forward-driving pulse that seemed to be (and often was) accelerating, the product of the interaction of the members of a rhythm section, each of whom approached the beat differently.”¹ Swing music caters to the needs of dancers who need to rely on a steady, if changing, rhythm in order to support their movements. Like an arranger, Murray depicts the action in his novel in such a way as to emphasize the overall unity of the community’s group effort toward advancement, even as he highlights, on occasion, Scooter’s forays as a way to emphasize how the group strengthens or empowers individuals. As John Szwed notes, “The great arrangers could make the band phrase and move as if it were a soloist, so when the actual soloists played they meshed perfectly with the ensemble. No longer would a great player like Armstrong or Beiderbecke stand out against stiff background rhythm or accompaniment, as if they had arrived from a different musical universe.”² This is in stark contrast to Ellison’s novel that depicts the heightened individuality of the protagonist with only tenuous connections to any group.

² Szwed, *Jazz 101*: 128.
stark contrast to Ellison’s novel that depicts the heightened individuality of the protagonist with only tenuous connections to any group.

Demonstrating the strength of obvious and tenacious roots, Murray’s second novel begins like his first, with a description of Scooter’s surroundings. This serves to place the protagonist squarely within the geographical and psychological community of his fellow inhabitants and defines his identity based on his connection to the people and the community in which he lives. This strengthens Scooter and provides him with psychological armor that helps him ward off any charges of his alleged inferiority, biological, cultural or otherwise. As Lani Guinier asserts, “Racial group consciousness not only makes blacks more politically active and effective as a group; it also helps make individual blacks more psychologically resilient.”

While Scooter is “that many miles north by east from the sawmill whistles along Mobile River and Chickasabogue Creek” and in a realm that is entirely new, he is at home mentally because he psychologically blends the old with the new. Stricken by anxiety when he “realized that [he was] actually on [his] own,” Scooter “felt so totally alone that it was almost as if everything that had happened before ... was now already a very long time ago and in a place very far away.” Everything he saw at college, everything he would experience, and everyone he would meet would be entirely new. Alone, Scooter has no one to whom he can turn for help in negotiating the anxiety he feels. Since he cannot afford the bus fare home, he is stuck and left to fend for himself. In the very next paragraph, Scooter tells himself that “even so there was also the also and also of L&N express train whistles and creosote trestles, and

3 Guinier and Torres, The Miner’s Canary, 82.
the marco polo blue skyline mist that is always there when you remember the spyglass view from the chinaberry tree in the front yard.”\(^6\) This exertion of intellectual muscle succeeds in breaking down the barriers of newness that cause unease and anxiety and transforms them into familiar form. In this way Scooter demonstrates control over his environment and psyche. In fact, the entire first chapter of *The Spyglass Tree* is dedicated to transforming Scooter’s fear into a functional approach to negotiating his new circumstances.\(^7\) The reader is introduced to the college campus but is immediately taken back in time to Scooter’s youthful days in Gasoline Point. Scooter’s memory descends even into his infancy when he “was still trying to crawl” and his mother called him “Mama’s yil man mamam yil gootabout man.”\(^8\) The depth of his memory indicating the depth of his anxiety, Scooter must go ‘deep’ in order to transform the angst he feels. A mere novice in the collegiate realm, Scooter knows he must rely on foundational skills honed in his childhood and so he consciously evokes his blues rearing through active memory.

Stylistically, the literary technique of linking the present with the historical past helps create the smoothness of narrative style reminiscent of the instrumental collaboration that guides swing-style jazz. The orchestral sound mastered by Duke

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\(^6\) Murray, *The Spyglass Tree*, 3.
\(^7\) This brings to mind Edith’s Wharton’s novel *The Age of Innocence* and the character, May Welland. May is uncomfortable in the presence of ‘foreigners’ but in order to maintain the façade of gentility she makes local references thereby surrounding herself with topics of conversation that are familiar to her so that she is put at ease. As this eases the tension May feels it heightens the psychological distance between herself and the ‘foreigner’ in her midst by accentuating the differences between her world and his/hers. Wharton’s narrator describes the situation this way, “Archer noticed that his wife’s way of showing herself at her ease with foreigners was to become more uncompromisingly local in her references, so that, though her loveliness was an encouragement to admiration her conversation was a chill to repartee.” Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, New York: Simon & Schuster: 1920, 217. This tactic of becoming intensely local is used to heighten the distance May Welland feels in the presence of ‘others’ but is reversed by Scooter who uses it to eliminate this distance and otherness.
\(^8\) Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 5.
Ellington was marked by what Eileen Southern calls an “ingenious handling of solo and ensemble relationships.”9 Similarly, Murray’s second novel expands the relationships between secondary characters and his protagonist by making memory an active medium to guide Scooter’s character development thereby demonstrating a continuum of influence. The relationship Scooter has with his past—members of his former community and the environment in general—is unblemished, and although he embarks upon collegiate training solo, he is still part of the ensemble elements of this past and they are part of him. Southern notes that Ellington’s success was based, in part, on his ability to work harmoniously with the various personalities in his band and so maintain band members over long periods of time. Likewise, Scooter’s congenial relationship with his former community and its members allows him to carry with him lessons they imparted without feelings of disdain or suspicion; he trusts the goodness and soundness of his foundation. As with swing-style jazz, The Spyglass Tree is marked by smooth transitions rather than random fits and starts. Like Ellington’s band which worked out the kinks and quirks of new material during “creating sessions” in order to “find out whether [new material] worked,” Scooter’s trials and mishaps are not made obvious in the pages of the printed text.10 What the reader sees is the finished product, flawless and complete, and as with Ellington’s band, if other changes are necessary, they too will be worked out in private.11 While live performances allowed audience members to see and hear musical

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11 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 210. Ellison speaks of Minton’s, a hot spot for jam sessions in NYC popular during Ellison’s and Murray’s younger days. These sessions were “private” in the sense that the spots were reserved for musicians who were noted as being the most serious about their craft. Ellison tells the tale of a tenor saxophonist, Eddie Lockjaw Davis, who was repeatedly shamed during poor performances before earning the respect of his musical peers.
techniques being worked out on stage, recordings obliterated this level of involvement by presenting hearers with, only, the finished product.\textsuperscript{12} The big band turned swing band depended on such smoothness in order to provide music to which people could dance. The flow necessary for the success of a swing band, the steady and reliable beat, was not the same as that required of bebop musicians whose music became so “esoteric that it lost the audience who wanted to dance.”\textsuperscript{13} Similar to swing, Scooter’s story is smooth as a matter of literary technique and artistic enterprise.\textsuperscript{14}

Scooter’s college experience differs greatly from the Invisible Man’s. Murray recalls his college days as being “in a castlelike situation” and says “I was doing what you do in a castle” thus indicating the fascination he held in regard to his collegiate setting.\textsuperscript{15} This awe is transferred to Scooter who surveys the lay of the land as he travels from Gasoline Point to his college town and describes his dormitory and new roommate with exacting detail. Scooter has brought with him relics of his past: a Gladstone bag from Miss Slick McGinnis, a cowhide loose-leaf notebook from Miss Lexine Metcalf, and an Elgin wristwatch from “Mr. B. Franklin Fisher himself.”\textsuperscript{16} Unlike the gift awarded to the Invisible Man at the end of his battle royal speech, Scooter received his briefcase already filled with the tools he will need for a successful start in college. His gifts are tokens of his community’s sincere faith in his ability to succeed; a continuation of their nurturing and his hometown affiliation. And unlike Invisible Man, Scooter does not look

\textsuperscript{12} An analysis of live performances as opposed to studio recordings would be useful to expanding the analysis of both Murray’s and Ellison’s fiction. This will certainly form a part of my later work on Murray and Ellison.

\textsuperscript{13} Southern, \textit{Music}, 492.

\textsuperscript{14} See the Preface of this study, “Scooter is a Hero.”


\textsuperscript{16} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 13.
to the white community for intellectual or personal validation. Scooter does not have to endure humiliation and insult in order to receive his gifts, thus he goes to college filled with self-assurance regarding his imminent graduation. As Stanley Crouch notes, “from baby talk to college chatter, [Scooter] gets everything necessary to assess the world and adapt to its demands through the folk and formal instruction of his own background” and “white people play no significant part in the flesh.” Scooter is “Miss Melba’s Scooter” and “Miss Tee’s Mister,” and thinks of himself first as part of a community. His respect for this fact obligates Scooter to always do his best, and if he ever ‘forgot’ himself, community members were there to “remind [him] of precisely that which everybody knew [he] was supposed to be mindful of already.” While such guidance gives Scooter the mental fortitude to meet new challenges and broaden the scope of his life, such expectations also form the parameters of ‘acceptable’ action and constrict Scooter’s foray into the unknown in ways that Invisible Man is liberated. Similarly, in swing music, improvisation is restricted, in the sense that an ensemble sound is preferred, while in bebop, individuality is heightened and improvisations are freed from such conscious restraints. The hope of his community, Scooter goes to college cognizant of his responsibility to matriculate and graduate, though “Miss Lexine Metcalf never did actually say what you were supposed to become” because “there were always plenty of others who had been doing so for her all along.” Scooter’s identity is formed as a part of his community, not apart from it as is Invisible Man’s, and although he learns to define

18 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 62.
himself according to his unique circumstances, he is always aware of himself as an extension of his home community.

In the first section of *The Spyglass Tree*, entitled “Benchmarks,” Scooter’s story alternates between memories of his hometown and his new experiences at college, indicating his struggle to achieve mental balance. In this way, Scooter is like Invisible Man in that his dual awareness indicates the ways in which one’s past is part of the present. While Scooter advances in the college realm, he takes with him the psychological remnants of his past and does not view a complete break from his community as desirable. When he sits in a lecture hall and responds “Here” when his name is called, his answer indicates individual community responsibility. The meaning of his response is “not only prescribed and thus required by attendance codes and regulations but also as promised on [his] own way in all sincerity ... as in partial fulfillment of that which has long since been intended.”20 When Scooter decides to share with his roommate the painful truth of his parentage, he does so with ease because he has seamlessly blended his past and present in a way Invisible Man never achieves. Scooter takes control of his story, only telling Geronimo what he decides is necessary. In thus crafting the story and circumstances of his birth, Scooter asserts himself by reclaiming the pain of illegitimacy and using it to forge his individual identity. Miles away from the community of his youth, Scooter can do this successfully. When Scooter finally graduates from college, he takes with him the experiences of his childhood and college years and is prepared to use these as the foundation for building a life as a mature adult. Unlike Invisible Man, whose past is presented through confusion and items stored in a briefcase

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given through shame, Scooter's past is presented as an unproblematic part of his present and is a reliable source from which to procure the courage and tenacity to achieve individual aspirations.

Scooter views his college environment as an extension of home. The campus is like a "complete town in itself" with its own history that had "begun back at the end of the post-Civil War period as a makeshift elementary school for freedmen and their families."21 His matriculation makes Scooter part of this history and extends the person he is by adding a layer of history to his own story. He is carrying on the legacy of freed men and women, and viewing himself as the progenitor of this tradition reinforces Scooter's obligation to his home community. In attending this historical college, Scooter joins the ranks of heroic student ancestors who "were summoned to and from field, shop, and classroom alike by the same old bell that had once regulated life on the plantation before the war, and they planted and processed the food they ate."22 Scooter is proud of his having earned the opportunity to matriculate. He has sincere respect for the hard work done by his academic ancestors and is proud to define himself according to their legacy as this adds to the pride he has already gained from his home community. The wonderment Scooter felt viewing Miss Lexine Metcalf's classroom globe is compounded by the fascination he experiences when he encounters the vast holdings of his college library. Though he feels the "old pang of isolation" in the library because he's in a place "he's not yet used to," his anxiety is transformed by the excitement he feels over the privilege of being a student with full access to college facilities.23 Realizing he is part of

21 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 23.
22 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 25.
23 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 28.
an academic class, Scooter understands his identity as that of a fellow student required to participate in group discussions, faculty led queries and campus activities including football games and social events. However, Scooter is also aware of himself as an individual, and his trips to the library become havens for personal, intellectual development. With private access to the “biggest globe (revolving on a tilted axis) [he] had ever seen, and what with all the maps and atlases and mileage charts along with all the books and documents and pictures and relics and artifacts” it was “almost as if [he] had a sand table of the whole world always all to [himself].”

Representing a complexity of instrumentation beyond the scope of that experienced as a child at the Mobile County Training School, college built upon and broadened Scooter’s personal and intellectual development.

As Scooter’s college experiences broaden he moves beyond the friendship of his childhood friend, Little Buddy Marshall. Though Scooter still enjoyed his time with Little Buddy, when Miss Lexine Metcalf became Scooter’s favorite teacher, he “began to make up more and more excuses” for not playing hooky with his sidekick. Admiring her student’s commitment to education and his initiative in coming to school early to do advanced work, Miss Metcalf would tell Scooter, “who if not you,” fueling his drive to do well in school. This encouragement allows Scooter to feel comfortable with Geronimo, his cool and knowledgeable college roommate. Scooter admires his roommate’s intellect and appreciates his adventurous nature. He observes that Geronimo was “even more a gambler and a rambler than Little Buddy Marshall” and that “the

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24 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 30.
25 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 19.
26 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 20.
chances he took were more a matter of calculated risk” because like Scooter, Geronimo had a strong sense of community responsibility and did not take his educational opportunities for granted.27 Geronimo wanted to “study and master the entire curriculum” even though his major was architecture, and so like Scooter his interests were varied and broad.28 Sharing with Scooter the idea that everything in one’s storehouse of information should be used to advance one personally and by default one’s community, Geronimo “really believed that everything you studied in a classroom should become just as much a part of what you did everyday as everything else.”29 On return trips home, Scooter and Little Buddy’s differences become more obvious and Scooter finds that he “couldn’t bring up anything about school with him anymore.”30 Thinking Little Buddy is ill prepared to embark upon the adventure he seeks beyond the range of his hometown, Scooter is worried about his friend. When they were kids excited about jumping rail and leaving town, their adventure was thwarted by Luzana Cholly but now as adults, they are free to make such decisions on their own and Little Buddy is ready to skip town permanently. When he invites Scooter to join him on this adult adventure, Scooter asserts the agency he lacked as a child and declines saying, “I got to stay here and finish up all this stuff first. I promised. I promised Mama, man, I promised Miss Tee and I also promised Old Luze.”31 The difference between Scooter and Little Buddy is ultimately revealed not by Little Buddy’s imminent departure but when he speaks the words Scooter dreads:

27 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 32.
28 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 38.
29 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 41.
30 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 52.
31 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 88.
man, I didn’t really promise Old Luze nothing because I didn’t really swear to all that old stuff he was talking about. I just promised him that I wouldn’t try to follow him no more like that, and I ain’t … I would have said anything under that bridge that time.32

This makes Scooter aware that the differences between them existed all along and also suggests the innate danger of having a friend whose basic philosophy is fundamentally at odds with his own. Here, too, the benefits of having a caring community of adults is made clear as they knew such truths all along. After one of Little Buddy’s exploits, he returns to town still recovering from “some illness” and ventures away again to points unknown and Scooter never sees him alive again.33 As the hero outgrows the realm of his youth, Scooter outgrows—and outlives both metaphorically and physically—his first best friend.

The sexual pleasures Scooter had found in willing hometown girls is replaced by paid sex with a local prostitute in college. Knowing the intention of the young men is to study and make something of themselves and not get locked into fatherhood, Geronimo’s uncle pays for a night at a local brothel. Here Scooter’s sexual intentions are obvious the moment he walks in the front door. The teenage hope to get ‘lucky’ is replaced by the security of knowing sexual pleasure is assured and the innocent teasing between Scooter and hometown steady Deljean McCray is replaced by the sophistication and high stakes of the brothel environment. The women employed at the Madam’s home are well-trained professionals capable of sending men of any societal rank “pussy-whipped and back out

32 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 88.
33 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 92.
on the sidewalk.” At the brothel, Scooter can exert agency in choosing his mate for the evening because everyone is willing to oblige him. When his “Pretty Lady” teases him about his assumed sexual prowess—“They tell me you young sports from down around the Gulf Coast ... supposed to be real hot-natured from all that salt air and fresh seafood”—Scooter blushes and becomes anxious. If he promotes himself as a strapping buck and then falls short of the mark, he will find himself out on the sidewalk in no time, money wasted, and with time to spare along with rumors of his shortcomings to mark his return. If, on the other hand, Scooter negotiates wisely he will ensure himself a night of delight and a sincerely welcomed return. With the manners of a gentleman learned at home, Scooter treats the prostitute with respect to which she replies, “Nice, very nice.” Confident that he has passed some sort of initial test, he prides himself in being “smart about things like that” even before he had “come to college that year.” Once their business is complete (and not prematurely), “Miss Stuff” talks with Scooter expressing sincere appreciation for his bedside manner. Catering often to the campus trade, she is accustomed to young college men coming into the brothel with attitudes of superiority. Scooter’s chivalry, despite the differences in their professional endeavors, is rewarded by Miss Stuff’s giving him “some very special brown-skin service” and telling him “you better come back to see me ... I really mean it.” Like Deljean McCray who wants her son to grow up to be like Scooter, Miss Stuff wants her son to adopt the ways of the well-mannered “schoolboy.” Impressed that Scooter knows more than books, Miss Stuff tells

34 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 54.
35 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 53.
36 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 55.
37 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 55.
38 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 56.
39 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 56.
him that "the one that schooled you about" knowing when to "keep it in your pants" deserves "a lot of credit."\textsuperscript{40} The threats common to sexual activity like disease and pregnancy exist whether in his hometown or college town. However, Scooter’s hometown experience avails him of the opportunity to enjoy a brothel because he uses his prior experience in flirting, having sex, being chivalrous, discerning among mates, and developing friendships in the formation of his mature college persona. By using his past to create his present, Scooter widens his realm of opportunity and finds a measure of security in being able to make informed decisions.

Scooter’s experience in the brothel is an example of improvisation. Finding himself in new territory, he must decide on the proper way to survive his brothel experience without failing. Scooter is no virgin and so comes to the brothel ready to have intercourse as he has done before, but as with sexual relations and improvisation, each opportunity is brand new. Scooter wants to come out having succeeded in such a way as to feel proud of his accomplishment. Filled with anxiety because the stakes are higher and the circumstances are different in a brothel, Scooter is on the foreign terrain of the prostitute and in the realm of the Madam. Once inside the brothel, Scooter breaks away into the woman’s chamber where he, alone, must perform. The success of his technique is determined by Miss Stuff’s giving Scooter extra special services and verbal compliments that mark her satisfaction. During their sexual encounter, Miss Stuff and Scooter trade verbal remarks to heighten the experience, and their action also mimics the rhythmic progression to sexual climax. "Talk to me, big mama, talk to me hot mama ... and she said, me and you snookie pie, me and you sweet daddy me and you sweet papa

\textsuperscript{40} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 91.
Like a musician’s dizzying approach to musical ecstasy, there is a rhythm to the couple’s verbalization that is controlled by the bass-like rhythm of bodies pulsating, the “snapping [of] fingers” and interjections of “sic ‘em baby or sic’em daddy.” With his individual foray into the unknown complete, Scooter comes out of the private room and rejoins his roommate. Reflecting on his night of adventure, Scooter knows he has performed well and also knows the success of his experience is linked to his hometown training. The vernacular expressions, the way of interacting with and surveying new customers is the stuff of Scooter’s hometown and is familiar. There are no surprises regarding his ability to perform. Readers are confident Scooter will accomplish his goal and maintain his self-respect because Scooter has created a habit of playing it cool and making what seem to be the right choices. As he later says to Geronimo, there was “something idiomatic” about their experience that night. Not even a college man raised in the big city like Geronimo can pull one over the down-home brothel women who know how to treat a man and read his intentions. Bragging on the quality of his communal knowledge and acknowledging the same in his date for the evening, Scooter tells Geronimo that the brothel sweetheart gave them “a little down-home stuff for the city boy from up north. Man, she had your number as soon as she saw us.” Rooted in the Deep South, improvisation based on localized communities makes for a strong foundation capable of impressing home-grown men and big city sophisticates alike.

Personal threats continue to plague Scooter but having learned well the lessons of his youth, he is prepared to meet such challenges head-on. Outside of campus limits,
Scooter finds himself walking through certain streets where gambling is a lively activity. With clear distinctions between the college and local communities, Scooter is summed up by the gambling and whiskey-drinking men. He knows he has rounded the wrong corner and is "scandalized, outraged and, all but exasperated" when he spies the gathering of men.\textsuperscript{45} Knowing it is too late to turn around, Scooter must continue on his path, come what may. One of the men spots Scooter and says, "Well, goddamn, if here ain't another one of them" and so begins the challenge.\textsuperscript{46} The men tease Scooter and make jokes about college boys and their studying "bookkeeping and joggerfy" and not knowing how to satisfy women through intercourse but rather by oral sex or "stick[ing] their nose up in[side], if you get [the] latter clause."\textsuperscript{47} When the most boisterous man approaches Scooter—the other men have been teasing him from the sidelines—he slows his gait and turns to face his aggressor, responding, "sounds to me like somebody is just about to let his big loud snaggle mouth get his bony ass kicked raw."\textsuperscript{48} Ready for action, the instigator challenges, "who you think you talking to."\textsuperscript{49} Standing his ground, Scooter replies,

\begin{quote}
ain't nothing to think about, old pardner. I'm talking to anybody too square to know that when the son-of-a-bitch he woofing at get through stomping his ass, he won't want to hear about no pussy for a month of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{45} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 82.  
\textsuperscript{46} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 82.  
\textsuperscript{47} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 83.  
\textsuperscript{48} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 83.  
\textsuperscript{49} Murray, \textit{Spyglass Tree}, 83.
Saturdays ... If you looking for somebody to cut you a new asshole, I'm just the son-of-a-bitch to oblige you.\(^5\)

This verbal retort, far more sophisticated than any conceived by young Scooter in *Train Whistle Guitar*, echoes the barbershop jive of Papa Gumbo Willie McWorthy and Soldier Boy Crawford that Scooter overheard as he learned to fight with words. If one’s verbal retort is sufficient, physical aggression can be avoided. The mature Scooter does not need a two-day hibernation in order to develop his comeback. Now capable of improvisation, Scooter performs on the spot. His barbershop lessons are augmented in college by local thugs such as Daddy Snakehouse Anderson, Big Shit Pendleton, Speckle Red, and Sneaky Pete Davis. Steeped in the vernacular traditions of African Americans, Scooter’s comeback transforms the threat of physical aggression and the blue feelings of insult into verbal violence. Having decided that “moral outrage was the better part of valor,” the loud mouthed gambler turns away letting Scooter pass.\(^5\)

The second section of *The Spyglass Tree* is titled “The Briarpatch” and reveals the consequences of one’s action when ill-prepared to meet adversity. Will Spradley is in trouble with Dudley Philpot, a local white businessman, for having his checks cashed by Giles Cunningham, a local black entrepreneur. Will, who has been beaten bloody by Dudley, is in a rush to let Giles know of the impending trouble with Dudley. Running for miles in the dark of night, “sucking and spitting blood” all the way with a “gash on his cheek” and a “raw place behind his ear [that] burned all the way to the base of his neck,” Will cannot stop until he reaches Giles.\(^5\) He does not dare look back because he is

\(^{50}\) Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 83.

\(^{51}\) Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 83.

\(^{52}\) Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 96.
determined to intercept Dudley’s and his boys surprise meeting with Giles and his posse. So Will keeps running despite his physical pain and psychological trauma because having “screwed up,” innocently, with Dudley, he is not about to make the same mistake twice. He knows that his “second chance [to do right] was out in front of [him] now.”53 Through the rain, around street corners, and through alleyways, Will Spradley continues on his mission to give Giles the pressing news. His “arms and legs [are] numb” as he crawls through a railing and his “head [is] splitting with pain,” but still he continues.54 All he can do is “keep on doing what he was doing right now” because “everything depended on how lucky he was now.”55 Will had proven he had no communal knowledge and so all he had left was luck and unlike the blues, luck is not reliable. Will reaches Hortense Hightower (a.k.a. Boss Lady), not Giles, first. Will tells her the news, she calls Giles, and then gives Will the medical attention he so desperately needs. In the basement of Boss Lady’s home, Will thanks her for helping him as she expresses her incredulousness at his profound stupidity for getting into trouble with Dudley Philpot in the first place. She demands, “How in the hell did you go and get yourself all tied up with some old bloodsucker like Dud Philpot”?56 Assigning Will’s actions to “plain old dumbness,” Boss Lady tells him that common sense should have prevented such an interaction.57 After all, “there are white folks and there are white folks and [Will has] been around long enough to know what kind of white folks Dud Philpot is.”58 The trouble Will has caused is not merely his own, because in not using his head and instead interacting with the wrong kind

53 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 97.
54 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 97.
56 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 175.
57 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 175.
58 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 176.
of white folks, he has put the entire black community at risk of a race riot, including possible lynchings. Will’s offense is not a lack of knowing his place on the right side of the color line, but rather, his wrongdoing is not having sense enough to employ communal knowledge and avoid such trouble.

Scooter links Will’s anxiety-ridden experience to a jam session. Scooter had come to Boss Lady’s house that evening to listen to her record collection and Duke Ellington’s “In a Jam” was first on his list before his help was needed with Will. Scooter links the retelling of Will’s story to Ellington’s recording, “not because it was a song with lyrics about being in trouble,” but because

a jam session … is a musical battle royal, and as such it is always a matter of performing not only with hair-trigger inventiveness and ingenuity but also with free-flowing gracefulness which is to say elegance, not only under the pressure of the demands of the music itself but also in the presence of and in competition with your peers and betters.⁵⁹

Will Spradley has evidently failed the test and has indicated, or confirmed to all, he is no inventive genius and cannot think on his feet. In short, Will Spradley cannot improvise.

Framed by Fletcher Henderson’s song “The Stampede” Will Spradley’s tale is a riff on Ellison’s fumbling narrator.⁶⁰ Will’s tale occupies the majority of action in the second half of Murray’s novel; Scooter is ushered along as if in a stampede. He must go along with the crowd, and despite any urges to assume a leadership role, Scooter must

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⁵⁹ Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 178.
⁶⁰ Fletcher Henderson’s “The Stampede” and Duke Ellington’s “In a Jam” are considered in detail in a paper I delivered entitled, “Everyday Revolutionaries: Murray, Marsalis and democracy” in Nottingham, England, June 2004. This separate essay will be expanded for the book length project I have in mind for Murray’s work.
place the group objectives above his own, subduing his individuality for the sake of group advancement. Like Invisible Man's, Will's tale is incredulous and bizarre. The action takes place at a dizzying pace from the moment he first meets with Giles and cashes his check to his meeting with Dudley and his high intensity race to get back to Giles before Dudley does. Boss Lady repeats often her disbelief in the reality of Will's getting himself into such a mess. Will's story is set against the depth of Scooter's own communal knowledge. Scooter, who goes to the barbershop regularly and who has honed the skill of listening, has learned Giles Cunningham is a fellow shop customer and a businessman with an impressive reputation. Conversely, Dudley Philpot "didn't have any kind of reputation that [Scooter] had ever heard anything about."61 Scooter, having known people like Giles, Will, and Dudley prior to his arrival on campus, knows full well the type of trouble that could ignite if he does not employ common sense. Further, Scooter understands that such individual trouble has community-wide consequences. The meeting between Giles and Dudley represented a "very old and very grim down-home game."62 The proper way to handle this type of game is demonstrated by Giles' smooth and controlled demeanor when dealing with Dudley. Giles knows the seriousness of his interaction with Dudley, but while Dudley stood in Giles' office with his "hands on his hips"—an "unmistakable part of the game"—Giles maintains his calm demeanor and pretends "not to notice how much more upset Dudley Philpot was becoming."63 "Cross-talking" Dudley and masking any anxiety over the current situation, Giles stood stone-faced as Dudley swore wondering about having the "mud washed off his white

61 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 156.
62 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 157.
63 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 157.
sidewalls." Dudley, realizing he is having no effect on Giles, becomes furious and starts screaming, "nigger nigger nigger, you nigger you nigger..." and realizes that he sounds like a "puppy dog in a small-town neighborhood running along inside the fence line up yap-yap-yapping at a passerby who was annoyed but alert but was also trying to keep himself from busting out laughing." Frustrated and insulted, Dudley falls back on the privilege of white skin and tells Giles he has "one night to get [his] black ass out of this county" because there can be no peace between races if one does not know his 'proper' place. Giles has no trouble breaking down Dudley and exposing his irrational and unearned sense of superiority.

Will, on the other hand, is ill prepared to avoid such trouble and once he finds himself in a jam, is incapable of affecting such a response from Dudley. The professionals, the bearers of communal knowledge, like Giles, the Boss Lady, and Giles’ staff members who are informed of the impending trouble prior to Dudley’s arrival at Giles’ office, handle the situation with obvious grace and ease like Henderson and Ellington, big-bands leaders whose songs offer a synthesis to this section’s action. Behind the scenes, everyone operates as a unit in order to maintain social order even if they cannot change the conditions with which they are faced. Will is too beat-up to be of use to anyone but as with a stampede, he is ushered along by the momentum he has helped create. In the basement of Boss Lady’s home, Will, like Ellison’s protagonist, gets a reprieve from the trouble he has unwittingly caused. The race riot that seems imminent will not be Will’s to fight alone. Rather, those better trained in communal knowledge will,

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64 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 157-58.
65 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 158.
66 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 159.
heroically, carry on the above-ground action come what may. Will, as his name suggests, has great potential but it remains unrealized. At best, his energy is resigned for some future use—as in he “will” do thus and so at some future point—once his underground healing has taken place. Hopeful but not meaningful, Will’s underground realizations no matter how profound are like the Invisible Man’s, ineffective.

The crisis comes to an end thanks to the collaborative efforts of Giles and local white aristocrat, Gus Strickland. As a descendant of the family who owned and deeded the land to start the local Negro college, Gus Strickland was sole owner of the family’s mansion and another, more astute property, within town limits. Giles and Gus knew one another through various business dealings and through their mutual respect and agreement, had worked together on several business concerns including Giles’ privileged knowledge about which real estate properties to buy. A conversation between Giles and Gus in order to alert Gus about the impending racial trouble, leads Gus to decide to find out what has gotten Dudley riled and also to alert Cat Rogers, the local sheriff, of the trouble brewing. Though Giles is confident the threat Dudley represents is minor, he nevertheless takes the steps necessary to offset any difficulty because race relations are volatile. Giles is confident that “the kind of white people we have around here [would not let] themselves be rounded up and led anywhere by some baggy-britches redneck like Dud Philpot,” but because of the volatile nature of southern race relations, Giles knows that “you never can tell.” Part of playing the deadly race game in the Deep South involves being aware of hidden dangers and paying respect to the proper people, black and white. One must never forget “how little it takes to set thousands of normal-seeming

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white people back not just to all of the old nightmares their fore-parents on the plantation used to have about the slaves killing everybody in their sleep," but beyond that to the days of the "panic the goddamn Indians used to cause among early settlers." Fear makes people act in extreme ways and as Giles says, "man, you don’t ever want to do anything that’s going to make somebody know how scared they are of you." Scooter sits listening to this lesson Giles imparts, but for Scooter this is already common knowledge. In a hospital being bandaged and stitched, Will Spradley has plans to move “somewhere up north with one of his cousins” because he has not the skills or finesse to survive life in the Deep South—this briarpatch is not his home. The history of the South is embedded in the relationships of its people both black and white and they must know the rules in order to survive.

Will Spradley’s story is one that demonstrates variation in skill levels. A member of the African American community, Will’s communal knowledge is different from that of his peers. One cannot take for granted the homogeneity of experience. Simply because Will has been a member of a particular community does not mean he has excelled at learning or making sense of certain lessons. Boss Lady finds Will’s behavior unbelievable because she expects him to know better. Giles accepts Will’s naïveté and remains focused on the larger problem of community repercussions. Will innocently and often repeats variations of the phrase, “All I was trying to do was what I was supposed to be doing and now look at all this.” Similar to Ellison’s narrator always trying to do the right thing but finding out his efforts are not sufficient, Will’s thinking does not reflect.

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68 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 204.
69 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 204.
70 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 205.
71 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 174.
communal knowledge; rather, he seems propelled by the current of the moment. His actions prove he is incapable of handling smoothly the randomness of his situation. He breaks under pressure and has no method of transforming the situation into one of empowerment as Giles does when he engages Dudley in the cross-talking that reveals Dudley's rage and Giles' calm demeanor. Like Ellison's narrator when he drives Mr. Norton to Trueblood's house and then to the Golden Day, Will fumbles around making a bigger and bigger mess of things as he goes because his training in this aspect of community knowledge is insufficient to meet the demands of this type of "down-home game."\(^2\)

Even those musicians who attain fluency at reading music and can play with relative ease do not necessarily know how to improvise. As Jon Panish notes, "improvisation requires a specific kind of knowledge, training, and skills, and thus is inseparable from the tradition within which it is embedded."\(^3\) Will's actions prove his specific knowledge, training, and skills are inadequate. Boss Lady, Giles, and Scooter demonstrate their ability to improvise by making smooth transitions from one phase of events to the next. Boss Lady shows no signs of outward anxiety even as she bandages Will's wounds, chastises him for being so naïve, and makes the calls necessary to alert Giles of the impending trouble. Giles, who never actually sees Will until after his interaction with Dudley, handles the enraged white man with grace and ease even though he is fully aware of the violent community-wide consequences of their interaction. Giles covers all his bases by both arming his men and preparing them to meet an aggressive

\(^2\) Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 157.
\(^3\) Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson, MI: Univ. of Mississippi, 1997), 124.
white mob and in contacting Gus Strickland and paying his dues to respectable whites by letting them know the basis of the trouble. Scooter, having learned when to keep quiet in the barbershop sessions of his youth, offers his help where it is needed without showing overt concern and anxiety about the possibility of being lynched, killed by other means, or simply being expelled from college. When Giles tells Scooter of the possible dangers involved, Scooter replies, "I'll take my chances" because he has calculated the risks and trusts in the proficiency of Giles's and Boss Lady's skill in negotiating such intricate affairs. His silent participation in this matter provides him with a deeper level of community knowledge for which he earns a summer job, new clothes, and ultimately the bass fiddle (a gift from Boss Lady) that he uses professionally in *The Seven League Boots*.

As Scooter delves deeper and deeper into the chaos that unfolds in the second half of the novel, he sustains himself and maintains his cool by using the lessons learned in his youth as a foundation for the new information he acquires. In the first chapter of "The Briarpatch" section, Will's trouble is introduced. In the second chapter, Scooter relates Will's character type to people he had known in Gasoline Point, saying, "I have always known and heard about people like him." In fending off the anxiety of the impending race riot, Scooter relates the tale of Evil Ed Riggins, a "somewhat foul-mouthed" and "down right badassed when crossed" black man from Gasoline Point whose standing up to a local white businessman threatened to set off a riot. As with Evil Ed's situation, the trouble with Giles and Dudley revealed the deep connections between whites and blacks.

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74 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 189.
75 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 110.
76 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 110.
who shared a common interest in maintaining community peace. Boss Lady is Scooter’s replacement for Miss Slick McGinnis of Train Whistle Guitar, an older, sophisticated, and desirable woman who takes Scooter under her wing. Scooter is confident in his dealings with Boss Lady because he has had the experience of Miss Slick McGinnis.

Gasoline Point’s barbershop is traded for the barbershop of Scooter’s college town. In similar fashion, Scooter takes his seat among the men present, waits to have his hair cut, and all the while takes in the valuable information to which he is made privy. Here Scooter learns about local politics and the area sheriff Cat Rogers. The lessons at this barbershop are broader than those of his youth because they focus on the importance and power of voting, forming political alliances, and aligning oneself accordingly. However, there are still lessons on general community survival. Deke Whatley tells customers that according to his “grandpappy,” masking or “all that grinning and laughing” is a part of black culture, “part of our African mother wit” and is a necessary way of fending off scared white people. According to the old man and Whatley, “the first thing our African forefathers found out after they realized that all them hungry-looking perckerwoods was not going to eat them was that if you don’t grin at them, white folks would be scared shitless of us all the goddamn time and ain’t no telling what they might do.” Maintaining one’s cool, or at least presenting that façade, is a survival technique that Scooter learns is necessary for his personal development and one that Invisible Man never masters. While he pursues individual achievement, Scooter’s accomplishments are gauged by and linked to his community. As Dewitt Dawkins of the

77 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 147.
78 Murray, Spyglass Tree, 157.
Gasoline Point barbershop once told a customer, “if you got the problem and don’t buckle down and come up with a solution, hang your own goddamn head in shame, and if you go all the way through college and don’t come back with some answers, shame on us all.”

As a college junior, Scooter parts with his college roommate but learns to incorporate his experiences with Geronimo as he develops his own academic personality. Not a competitor but a colleague and mentor, Geronimo reminds Scooter of the academic excellence first encouraged by Scooter’s early teachers. In developing his street smarts, Scooter must also advance his book learning in order to achieve a balance of knowledge. He carries his past with him as part of his living present.

The fundamental difference between the jazz novels of Ellison and Murray is in their textual depiction of the blues. Ellison’s textual use of the blues is revealed as icons of the protagonist’s past and depicted as necessary but confusing and complex parts of the character’s personal development. This is demonstrated by the protagonist’s constant bombardment with and confusion over the various relics and memories of his cultural history (such as Dr. Bledose’s shackle from slavery, the blues song sung by Petie Wheatstraw, the yam he eats from the street vendor, the Sambo bank, etc.). While the blues and its people are shown as being inextricable to one’s personal evolution and while Invisible Man knows he needs these relics in order to gain the self-awareness he seeks, Ellison’s narrator is not entrenched in his past. The abrupt and unsettling ways in which Invisible Man’s past is brought to the fore and the paradoxical disdain and elation he feels—i.e. when listening to the spirituals of Jim Trueblood and when eating a yam from a street vendor—when faced with his history indicate the distance the protagonist

79 Murray, *Spyglass Tree*, 151.
desires to place between himself and the reality of his past. Each chapter of *Invisible Man* represents a solo performance in that the protagonist is faced with a set of circumstances that seem, at first, related to his journey but that take unusual twists of fate that propel the narrator into the realm of fantastic adventure. While the relics and momentary occurrences that indicate the narrator’s past serve as a conscious part of his solo (each forms an aspect of his memory and is recalled by the protagonist as he forges the path to self-realization in his basement dwelling), what the narrator creates is decidedly different and more complex than any one specific relic of his past suggests. The narrator does not simply envision his life as one of simple dichotomies such as the most obvious interpretation of shackles, blues songs and yams as used in the novel might suggest (oppression/liberty, despair/jubilation, disgust/elation). Rather, *Invisible Man* views his existence a complex synthesis of all these relics and experiences. Like the blues, *Invisible Man*’s identity is a matrix, comprised of good and bad experiences and is forged through an indefatigable will to survive despite the wavering hand of fortune.

In Murray’s *The Spyglass Tree*, the blues that defines Scooter’s identity is subsumed by the complexity of his characterization and marked by a smoothness of personal style. At each moment of anxiety, Scooter falls back into memories of his past that are comprised of the peoples, places, music, and sayings that informed his childhood. Scooter consciously evokes these memories wherever he goes and whenever the threat of personal angst exists. Scooter never has concerns over his identity because he is solidly rooted in his community and considers himself a down-home boy destined to do great things. His development through the novel is smooth because he is not suffering an identity crisis, and he views the person he will become as an extension of what he has.
always been, just broader, more experienced, and more sophisticated. As Stanley Crouch notes, "that down-home bottom is the swing porch of Scooter’s Alabama childhood; or it is the preparation for swinging in a jazz band that he draws from the communal wisdom of the many different kinds of adults who give him much more than the time of day."80 Scooter is able to swing through his experiences in *The Spyglass Tree* because of his prior learning. The blues of Scooter’s past is not an obvious part of his characterization in Murray’s second novel because Scooter is more mature, more sophisticated and miles away from home. As Crouch notes of *The Spyglass Tree*, “in this virtuoso fairy tale, there are no dues and no blues.”81

However, far from being the intellectual and aesthetic paradox in Murray’s writing that Crouch believes this to be, Scooter’s apparent lack of struggle is precisely Murray’s point. The deep-seated anxiety that causes Scooter to hibernate for two days in *Train Whistle Guitar* is the mark of youth and inexperience. In *The Spyglass Tree*, Scooter is prepared to handle bizarre challenges such as that posed by his interaction with Will Spradley, Boss Lady, and Giles Cunningham. Moving seamlessly from event to event, Scooter’s responses flow with the rhythmic smoothness of a swinging jazz band and the reader is carried along, as are dancers, to the steady beat. Though his analysis of Murray’s Scooter series provides an insightful and useful critique of the author’s fiction, Crouch seems to have needed a different set of novels. Wanting Scooter to be more overtly active in some obvious antagonism, Crouch interprets Scooter’s world as being “contrived” and “emotionally narrow.”82 Nevertheless, Crouch makes an important point

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81 Crouch, *Always in Pursuit*, 177.
82 Crouch, *Always in Pursuit*, 176.
when he suggests that if Scooter’s world had been more blatantly hostile, Scooter “might have gotten heated up about something, or felt the weight of the age with some actual depth” (as does Invisible Man). Yet, in modeling swing-style jazz (and not bop), the storyline of *The Spyglass Tree* proceeds flawlessly and is framed by such big-band leaders like Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington whose musical legacies are marked by their smooth flowing rhythms upon which dancers can rely. This type of aesthetic device is consistent with Ellison’s view on the subject. Ellison explains that, “those who know their native culture and love it unchauvinistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar.” Scooter is never lost and never misses a beat. Readers rely on the fact that Scooter adheres to the lessons he has been taught, just as dancers rely on the continuity of sound so that they are not haphazardly thrown off beat by a flurry of random musical expressiveness.

As if to say, “your blues ain’t like mine,” Murray’s *The Spyglass Tree* demonstrates a smoothness of narrative style that counters the haphazard events that shape the action in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The difference in characterization between Scooter and Invisible Man illustrates a difference in aesthetic sensibility between authors that ultimately demonstrates the variation of literary possibilities made manifest through a modeling of the blues and its use as a foundation for literary and artistic creation. The blues as a musical genre has influenced jazz and other forms of musical expression and when used as a model for literary (or other) artistic creation, the blues can open new possibilities for analyzing literature (and other mediums) because it subverts efforts to

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homogenize. Perhaps the most obvious purpose of such an endeavor is to demonstrate the variation inherent in artistic expression even within seemingly homogeneous groups (i.e., African American writers) by modeling the behaviors of musicians—listening and allowing the authors' texts to speak. Through such blues-based literary analysis, individuality is rescued from obscurity, methods of individual survival are ascertained, and the particularities of artistic sensibility are acknowledged—human agency is revealed. While it may be simple enough to classify both Murray and Ellison as African American writers, to align them by analyzing their common artistic, political and/or cultural concerns and aesthetic achievements is a more informed approach to making such an assertion because it lends insight into the traditions to which they adhere. Revealing the differences that occur in each author's work despite their shared ancestry reveals the complexity of the human condition as expressed by each. However, the more significant enterprise lies in acknowledging the endurance practical nature of African American cultural traditions. This endeavor is similar to Scooter's as he struggles with the knowledge of his biological illegitimacy and Invisible Man's as he grapples with the riddle of the link between his personal identity and that of his grandfather.

Comprised of many things and depicted and made manifest in various ways including the tenacious drive of locomotion, African American cultural traditions are based on continuation, variation, and improvisation. As Murray asserts, "to refer to the blues idiom is to refer to an established mode, an existing context or frame of reference."\(^{85}\) Based on improvisation, the blues as cultural index indicates the variety inherent in creating and sustaining individuals and entire communities, and thus its

literary and artistic depictions must vary. Tried and true, the blues as the foundation for self and community sustenance speaks to a powerful tradition of personal, professional, and psychological creativity and survival. As Murray states, “the more any art form changes, by whatever means and by whatever methods, motivations, or infusions, the more it should be able to fulfill its original function,” which in the case of the blues is evolution through time by way of improvisation.86

86Murray, Hero, 2.
Demonstrating his belief that the work of the artist is political, Richard Wright creates Bigger Thomas, a violent, aggressive, animalistic being who views the religious traditions of his mother’s generation as being insufficient for grappling with the pressing questions of his day. Through the characterization and experiences of his protagonist, Wright takes a defiant stance against poverty and despair. In his depiction, some collective action is viewed as a practical solution for the actual problems facing those living in dire conditions. Or in Bigger’s words, “one way to end fear and shame was to make all those black people act together.”1 Bigger rejects the views of his mother’s generation because he believes they are pacifist; action is needed, here on earth and right now. Bigger needs the blues as a frame of mind but Wright does not grant this tradition of transforming hardship to his protagonist. Serving as the ideological bridge between Wright’s and Murray’s novels, Ralph Ellison’s text concedes Wright’s point that something other than, more than, religion is needed to combat the despair that shrouds the lives of so many. Ellison credits Wright for creating, in Native Son, a novel that lays bare the insidious horror of race relations in the United States, and that in its clarity and superb technique, Wright’s novel expresses the type of writing that will set the example for future writers to follow. However, Ellison did not think Wright’s novel had achieved the artistic synthesis for which he himself strove. Ellison says that Wright’s novel “represents a take-off in a leap which promises to carry over a whole tradition,” and that Wright’s

Native Son has merely, "suggested a path which [fellow writers] might follow to reach maturity."\(^2\) In accordance with Ellison's view that the United States represents a synthesis of cultural influences, his protagonist maintains periodic links with a variety of cultural traditions, including religion, even as his worldview is shaped by his grandfather's dying words. In agreement with Ellison's aesthetic viewpoint that one must forge his identity amidst his own traditions, Albert Murray creates a protagonist who is steeped in the traditions of his community, whose conscious and contemporary sense of self is forged within the parameters of cultural conventions. The opposing philosophies depicted in Richard Wright's Native Son and Albert Murray's The Seven League Boots is illuminated by using Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man to demonstrate the continuum of thought that establishes Wright's and Murray's novels as literary polar opposites; the characterization of Bigger, Invisible Man and Scooter lends insight into the ways in which a rejection of cultural traditions reinforces negative self-images and constricts possibility while an adherence to such conventions promotes group consciousness and serves as a platform of opportunity upon which individual potential can be realized.

**Textual Strategies**

Wright, Ellison, and Murray use several textual strategies that provide insight into the aesthetic foundation of their novels. The title of Wright's novel, the characterization of Bigger, Bigger's dependency, intellectual, emotional, and psychological immaturity, connote a lack of human agency. As a native son, Bigger dreams of doing great things but is characterized as being constricted by the very nature of his being and the urban ghetto

\(^2\) Ralph Ellison, "Book Review of Native Son" in New Masses, August 5, 1941. Emphasis is mine.
in which he lives. The excerpt that opens *Native Son* is taken from the Biblical book of Job, “even today is my complaint rebellious, My stroke is heavier than my groaning,” a statement that posits Bigger among the realm of God’s persecuted. As a natural victim of circumstances he cannot control, Bigger is like Job, a reactionary figure meant to suffer perpetually. Bigger’s intrinsic link with Job effectively eliminates any agency he might have had, as, like Job, Bigger’s fate is not in his own hands; he can only endure that which has been designated for him.

Ellison and Murray reverse this ideology of inherent victimization. Seeing no reason why he should align himself or his protagonist with the likes of Wright’s culturally impoverished Bigger Thomas, Ellison’s remarks suggest an air of incredulousness when he asserts, “He [Wright] had his memories and I have mine” and “Must I be condemned because my sense of Negro life was quite different?” Ellison’s narrator is a self-proclaimed invisible man who boldly declares his manhood in the title of his text and asserts his adulthood and autonomy in the tradition of Frederick Douglass, thereby linking himself to a history and culture of proud individualism and heroism. The two excerpts that open Ellison’s *Invisible Man* suggest the protagonist’s inner struggle to assert an identity of his own choosing. Continuing this line of thought, Murray expresses the view of one who is determined to render his own view of Negro life despite what others might think. He asserts, “I was not impressed with certain things as achievements that they [white people] thought of as achievements” because he viewed his economically deprived environment as one rich in cultural wealth and so never considered himself as a

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3 See Wright’s first section where Bigger dreams of flying and airplane and securing ransom money from the Dalton family.
5 Both Ellison’s novel and Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* each begin with an opening paragraph that asserts the speaker’s individual selfhood.
Building on Ellison’s notion of what a protagonist might be, Murray’s Scooter does not name himself, but rather is given a name by his community that expresses its adoration for the promising youth.\(^6\) The title of Murray’s novel, *The Seven League Boots*, is reminiscent of the popular fairy tale *Puss in Boots*, in which a wily talking cat acquires untold riches for his poverty stricken master. As Murray’s title suggests, his novel is one of incredible experiences and chance happenings that test Scooter’s ability to negotiate the extraordinary circumstances with which he is faced. Murray’s novel broadens the scope of action depicted in Ellison’s novel by extending the potential for individual achievement into the realm of fantasy.\(^8\) *The Seven League Boots* opens with a quote by Franz Kafka that suggests the complexity, grand-scale adventure, and mystery of Scooter’s journey. “The castle was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there.”\(^9\) The alleged castle is hidden and may not even be real, but Scooter will pursue it without even a “glimmer of light” to guide him. Contrasting the stylistic basis of Ellison’s novel, Murray’s use of allegory juxtaposes Scooter’s light of self-awareness with the 1,369 bulbs that force light upon Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The initial premise established at the onset of each of Murray’s novels demonstrates a stylistic textual progression from constriction, to mediation, and finally to expansion, thus positioning Murray’s *The Seven League Boots* at the literary

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\(^7\) Such naming practices are continuations of African naming rituals. Eugene D. Genovese notes, “Africans commonly would name a child … after a particular personality trait discerned immediately.” See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 448. Scooter was given his name as a small child in *Train Whistle Guitar* when he started scooting around moving from place to place before he learned to walk. Similarly, the name Schoolboy was given to Scooter as his academic proclivities became clear to community members.

\(^8\) While the events experienced by the *Invisible Man* are fantastic it is not clear at the moment of each occurrence that these events benefit the narrator. Only by novel’s end can these bizarre events be seen as useful in the narrator’s journey toward self-awareness.

\(^9\) Murray, *Seven League Boots*. 

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polar opposite of Wright's *Native Son*—Scooter represents all that Bigger dreamed of being and all that Invisible Man tried to be.\(^{10}\)

Separated into three sections, the organization of Murray's and Wright's novels contributes significantly to the philosophical dichotomy between the two. "The Apprentice," the first section of *The Seven League Boots*, contrasts stylistically with Wright's section entitled, "Fear." While Scooter moves about geographically and surveys the wide expanse of land that unrolls before him as a passenger on a tour bus, Bigger's world becomes narrower with each experience. If Bigger learns anything, it is that the chasm between his world and the realm of whites grows steadily larger. Like the plane he views overhead, the white world is out of reach for Bigger who is incapable of metaphoric or actual physical flight because he does not view himself of being capable of such endeavors. In contrast Scooter is surrounded by elders who instruct him on the ways of the world. He views himself as part of their progeny and though anxious about his road trip he tells himself proudly, "I come from Alabama and so did Jo States, who by that time had been crisscrossing the country from border to border... for almost twelve years."\(^{11}\) Because his elders had achieved, Scooter believes he can too. Bigger, in contrast, has no notion of belonging to any legacy. He is surrounded by peers and alleged social superiors but no one who offers him meaningful advice. Scooter, however, listens to his elders and in paying homage to them gets all his nurturing and self-confidence within his segregated society. He trusts his community and views its teachings as sufficient and relevant in the process of personal development. By the end of Murray's

\(^{10}\) In presenting protagonists who represent heterogeneity in male character types, the novels of Wright, Ellison, and Murray stylistically revise the literary image of the black male. This type of gender specific study is the subject of several critical essays in *Callaloo* (Volume 26, Number 3), and I shall explore this topic in depth in my book-length study of Murray's work.

\(^{11}\) Murray, *Seven League Boots*, 3.
first section, Scooter has accumulated new layers of knowledge that contribute to his ability to succeed on his own as a freelance bass player. Although Scooter is no musical prodigy, he has accumulated enough skill to succeed. As Bill Crow notes, “a bassist doesn’t have to be a great soloist to be in demand”; rather, he should be able to provide “good notes” and keep “good time” and exude a “steady rhythmic feeling.”

Scooter’s steady determination contributes to his success, and by the end of Murray’s first section Scooter’s opportunities have broadened significantly. Scooter is fully conscious and eager to embark upon a new professional endeavor. However, at the end of Wright’s first section, Bigger’s fear has been compounded and he huddles into the small bed alongside his brother in a room they share with their mother and sister. Bigger is “sound asleep,” unaware of and unprepared for the flight that awaits in Wright’s second section.

Section two of Native Son builds on the action depicted in the first and demonstrates the author’s continuum of artistic and aesthetic enterprise. The momentary flight Bigger takes as he leaps from his window in the Dalton home is a metaphor for the chaotic action of this section entitled “Flight.” Bigger “leaped, headlong, sensing his body twisting in the icy air as he hurtled ... his body turned, sailing through the snow. He was in the air a moment; then he hit.”

His attempt at increasing the range of his experience is limited and his flight is aborted. Like Ellison’s Invisible Man (with his experiences with Dr. Bledsoe and in NYC) and Murray’s Will Spradley (as he tries to ‘do right’ by being honest with Dudley Philpot), Bigger acts rashly because he lacks the metaphoric wings for flight: intelligence, academic training, and communal knowledge.

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13 Wright, Native Son, 92.
14 Wright, Native Son, 207.
While Bigger devises a plan for thwarting the authorities, his one-line responses and actions are framed within the narrowly confined range of his thought process. When the ashes of Mary’s body are discovered, Bigger realizes that he has “trapped himself.”

When Bigger is questioned about his connections to the Communist party, “it was something he had not counted on, ever” because his intellect does not allow for such a broad range of thought.

Bigger acts irrationally and lacks physical control. He even wets his pants as he flies though his window in the Dalton home. Unlike Murray’s Giles Cunningham, Bigger cannot play the grim down-home game that might turn the tide of events in his favor because he doesn’t know the words and he is outside of the tradition that would train him accordingly. As Wright’s narrator says, “he just did not know how to put it.”

Invisible Man prides himself on being an intelligent man, “who might even be said to possess a mind,” yet such admissions are out of context for Bigger. Thinking is tiring for Bigger because he has no experience in exercising his brain. As with the events surrounding Will Spradley’s trouble with Dudley Philpot and Invisible Man’s excursion with Mr. Norton’s campus visit and onward into his Harlem years, the series of events surrounding Bigger’s “Flight” unfold in rapid succession. As Bigger explains, “things were happening so fast that he felt he was not doing full justice to them. He was tired. Oh, if only he could go to sleep!”

The unraveling of events leading to the discovery of Bigger’s having killed Mary is daunting because in being called upon not merely to act

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15 Wright, Native Son, 205.
16 Wright, Native Son, 152.
17 Wright, Native Son, 207. When Bigger hits the ground and as he gathers his wits he realizes the wet sensation he feels is “his urine.”
18 Wright, Native Son, 153.
19 Ellison, Invisible Man, 3.
20 Wright, Native Son, 187.
but to think, Bigger is out of his league. "He was trying to make his tired brain work fast" but could not. 21 "Sweating and breathless from running," like Murray’s Will Spradley, Bigger has no community support and is ultimately alone to face his anxiety. 22

Wright’s novel suggests that political ideology, in and of itself, provides a weak foundation for the support of individual endeavors. Like Ellison’s Invisible Man, Bigger Thomas finds himself lost because he lacks the type of community support in which Scooter has been reared. The quick succession of events in section two of both The Spyglass Tree and Native Son, and Ellison’s entire novel is exhausting and each protagonist needs a reprieve, or a definitive break from the chaotic events that surround him. Will Spradley finds rest in the basement of Hortense Hightower’s home, Invisible Man in his hole in the ground, and Bigger in a jail cell. But “The Journeyman” section of Murray’s novel finds Scooter living comfortably in a Hollywood mansion with a noted white actress and developing his profession as a solo bass player. In contrast to the action depicted in Murray’s second section, the end of Wright’s section two finds Bigger caught in the midst of a blizzard, his fear compounded by the white faces of the authorities who surround him as he lies in the snow. His world has grown even narrower than it was in section one.

By the end of each novel all the preceding action comes to fruition. With Bigger in a jail cell effectively separated from society and Scooter returning from overseas to the Deep South and to the terrain of his beloved, the structure of each novel is firmly intact. The opposing dichotomies of constricting and widening worlds serve as metaphors for the action and breadth of experience explored in each novel, indicating fundamental

21 Wright, Native Son, 202.
22 Wright, Native Son, 156.
aesthetic and/or philosophical differences between each text. Music played a big part in Murray’s rearing and so in the experiences he created for Scooter. As Murray states, “Music actually functioned to enable people to survive. It is about what is around you.” Murray’s protagonist uses music as a source for inspiration and personal expansion. In direct contrast to Bigger’s musically silent world, Murray’s novel demonstrates the wide variety and ever increasing opportunities for Scooter’s personal and professional development, and like jazz music, is an amalgamation of experiences merged into a synthesis based on and rooted in all that has come before. Like jazz musicians who incorporate myriad aesthetic styles and tastes into the development of their personal voices, Murray’s text extols variety as mandatory in the development of identity. Rather than rejecting some experiences as useless, Murray’s Scooter uses even the most innocuous as a potential tool for personal advancement and opportunity for growth. Exuding a sensibility that is based on varied and various influences, Murray’s creation of Scooter demonstrates the fantastic possibilities that exist when one commits to constant and continuous integration—doing and learning everything in order to perpetually expand one’s mind and experiences. Murray explains, “Freedom of expression does not come from ignoring great books but from reading as many as possible and thus increasing one’s own range of awareness.” Like jazz, evolution is based on the constant integration of sounds, ideas, struggles to overcome personal and artistic barriers, continuous forward movement and personal improvement, both psychologically and physically. As Wynton Marsalis said speaking of Duke Ellington, Duke’s mantra was to “integrate, integrate,

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24 Murray, *Briarpatch*, 81, 82.
integrate." Like Bigger’s, Scooter’s (and Invisible Man’s) was legally segregated but unlike Bigger, Scooter pursued and nurtured possibilities wherever he could find them.

Wright’s novel, in contrast, indicates constriction in almost every way—geographical, psychological, professional, educational, and physical—thereby suggesting an artistic paucity and the inadequacy of following a single line of thought or approach en route to creative or personal development. While Bigger is depicted as being hemmed in by circumstances and conditions he cannot control and is cast as a victim, Invisible Man is portrayed as being unable to control his circumstances but able to negotiate a space for intellectual self-assertion. Scooter takes Invisible Man’s intellectual endeavors one step further by demonstrating how intellect coupled with communal knowledge forms the psychological armor that allows Scooter to be in control of the circumstances he creates. Wright single-line approach (being hemmed in by that which one cannot control) to personal development as depicted in Bigger’s characterization is a road that leads to a dead end. As Ellison asserts, “Wright had to force into Bigger’s consciousness concepts and ideas which his intellect could not formulate.” Bigger’s impending physical death seals his fate and offers no alternative mode of conduct that might allow Bigger to realize his humanity or exercise his intellect and so transform the dire circumstances with which he is faced.

Variety of Experience

The depiction of education and the idea of hope are linked in the novels of Wright, Ellison, and Murray, and are key features explored in each text. Having finished

26 Ralph Ellison. “Richard Wright’s Blues” in Shadow and Act, 89.
school only "to the eighth grade," Bigger Thomas is ill prepared to meet the demands of social productivity. He lacks verbal acuity and fluidity, social graces, and an intellectual control over his raw emotions.\textsuperscript{27} Bigger decides to fight Gus rather than intelligently address his fear of robbing Blum's store. Whereas formal educational training might socialize Bigger, even marginally, into the mainstream by giving him academic, vocational and personal character training, his lack of instruction affirms his status as a perpetual outsider.\textsuperscript{28} He spends his days idly, smoking, passing time on street corners, and in the pool hall. These are the activities that define Bigger's life before his accidental killing of Mary Dalton. He is afraid to read the pamphlets given to him by Jan and only begins reading newspapers after he commits a crime that places him at the center of media frenzy. Prior to this point, Bigger is not cognizant of the ways in which current events might impact his life. There is no notion of hope contained in Wright's novel because hope requires an imagination and Bigger's world is too narrow for that. Bigger laments his life and feels the weight of his oppression in the white world. He says they "don't let us do nothing."\textsuperscript{29} Viewing themselves only in terms of a void, Bigger and his friends never forge a plan of successful entrepreneurship that they might have given their collaborative efforts to earn money. Their ideas stagnate because of a lack of vision or imagination. These men only think of criminal acts as a way to get money. As in Ellison and Murray's novels, education and hope are directly related. Academic training provides intellectual nourishment and nurturing and also serves as a pathway into mainstream society for both Invisible Man and Scooter.

\textsuperscript{27} Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 48.

\textsuperscript{28} For some background information on the methods and philosophy of educating Blacks in the South see James D. Anderson, \textit{The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935} (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, 1988).

\textsuperscript{29} Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 22.
The characterization of Invisible Man as an educated, hopeful protagonist, refutes, philosophically, Wright's Bigger Thomas. Understanding his "concept of the individual" as vastly different than Wright's, Ellison "found it disturbing that Bigger Thomas had none of the finer qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, none of the gaiety." A curious omission indeed Ellison knew Wright personally and knew Wright had grown up in poverty but also knew Wright himself was a living example of all he denied Bigger. Invisible Man, therefore, was created as a precocious youngster who excels in high school and receives a diploma and a scholarship to college. Verbally articulate, Invisible Man delivers a speech, albeit to a crowd of rowdy, drunken white professionals, and proves his ability to perform under pressure early in the text. He is a thinking being whose constant struggle to forge an identity indicates the intellectual battle to assert himself despite the chaos with which he is surrounded. The sentiment Invisible Man expresses in the beginning of the text—"I might even be said to possess a mind"—is repeated near the novel's close as he brings synthesis to his inner journey, saying, "because, damn it, here's the mind, the mind," which, after all, is what allows him to be haunted throughout the novel by his grandfather's dying words. Formal education broadens Invisible Man's worldview by providing him with the opportunity to engage various character types in college and to embark on a northern excursion. Invisible Man's Harlem experiences bring him closer to the self-realization he claims at novel's end, made possible, in a practical sense, only because of his college expulsion. Hope is an integral part of Invisible Man's experiences throughout the novel and is directly linked to education and intellectual endeavors. At

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30 Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure" in Shadow and Act, 16.
31 Ellison, Invisible Man, 3, 573.
each juncture of change, literally with the onset of each new chapter, Ellison’s protagonist is engaged anew intellectually, physically, and psychologically. By willfully asserting his intellect to grapple with each new reality, Invisible Man transforms the chaos of his environment into meaningful insights coupled with self-conscious physical action. For example, as he walks through the Harlem streets trying to get away from his “hot thoughts” and “inner fever,” Invisible Man exercises his intellect over brute force and “suppress[es] a savage urge to push [his] fist through the window pane” of a store that features skin-whitening products in its display windows.32 Called home metaphorically by the smell of a street vendor’s freshly baked yams, Invisible Man’s anxiety is transformed; he welcomes the soothing psychological ointment of the yams as his “mind [begins] surging back, back.”33 Unlike Bigger, Invisible Man’s intellect is exercised through formal academic instruction and, though abbreviated, this instruction serves to facilitate the transformation of personal angst by granting him the ability to control his savage impulses and thereby realize his humanity. Education is one way (community support and nurturing is another) of fine-tuning the ways in which individuals exercise the muscle of thought, employ sophisticated responses to complex situations and so distinguish themselves from any feelings of victimization.

Like Ellison’s, Murray’s depiction of Scooter refutes Wright’s characterization of Bigger. Consistent with Murray’s view that the blues is a “ritualistic counterstatement” he uses the breadth of cultural complexity in his creation of Scooter as a way to contrast Bigger’s paucity of imaginative, intellectual and cultural resources.34 Like Ellison, Murray finds it surprising that Wright created a character so depraved. Acknowledging

32 Ellison, Invisible Man, 262.
33 Ellison, Invisible Man, 262.
34 Murray, Briarpatch, 195.
Wright's basic fictional thesis of “People who are forced to live in subhuman conditions develop subhuman traits; they act subhumanly and become bad people through no fault of their own,” Murray grants this reality but asserts its opposite. He states, “[This] generalization is fallacious and misleading...” Speaking of the actual people who are castigated in the process of generalizing Murray asserts “Most do not!” become Bigger Thomas. “Many by one means or another maintain a level of conduct which is quite as normal as that of people in normal circumstances—and so achieve another glory for humanity.” Scooter’s educational training is compounded by the nurturing he has received from his community and makes possible the myriad opportunities he is granted in Murray’s *The Seven League Boots*. By earning a college degree, Scooter proves not merely his ability to complete a proscribed course of college instruction but, significantly, his ability to appropriate mainstream values; this effort/achievement merges the realm of the haves and have-nots by giving them the same end-point despite prior circumstances. Though he is a down-home boy from the notorious Deep South and endowed with communal knowledge that might be considered the antithesis of formal academic training, Scooter’s ability to transform local learning into the wider context of the academy and ultimately into his post-collegiate experiences indicates simultaneously the homogeneity and heterogeneity of identity because he successfully meets both demands.

36 Murray, *Hero*, 94.
37 Murray, *Hero*, 94.
38 Murray, *Hero*, 94.
39 At least two examples of this occur in *The Spyglass Tree*. In the first, Scooter is teased for being a schoolboy by a gang of street corner gamblers, who question his manhood and one of them confronts Scooter physically. Scooter, who is an accomplished student, relies on his down-home training and verbally asserts a streetwise attitude that stops the assault cold. In the second, Scooter, again noted as a preeminent college student by his peers, falls in line with Giles Cunningham and the Boss Lady when Will Spradley’s...
Scooter transforms his anxiety by using his cultural wealth, recalling mentors and their words of wisdom through active memory. As an example of this, Scooter is alone when he takes his first cross-country flight that is also his first transatlantic flight. With no one to guide him, save the pilot in the cockpit, Scooter is anxious. However, he delves into his memory and resurrects images that help transform this angst into comfort. As Scooter recalls his cross-country trips with the band as being “a matter at least of several weeks of one night stands and theater dates at best,” his current journey, with merely one stopover in New York, is thus made easier by comparison. Recalling his hometown, Scooter recognizes Mobile as being more than another Confederate town. Unique in its human diversity, the Mobile of Scooter’s recollection is the “City of Five Flags (Spanish, English, French, Confederate, and American)” and “was not only an international seaport into which ships and seamen came from all over the world,” but had a thriving downtown area whose streets were laden with “people representing so many of the languages and customs and even costumes of so many of the lands that Miss Lexine Metcalf’s” third grade geography class had introduced. In his mind, the towns Scooter will encounter in Europe will share the same cosmopolitan atmosphere as Mobile, but in a different geographic terrain. Scooter delves even deeper into the chambers of his mind and settles his emotional anxiety by relating the new experience to those in his past. He even relates his current journey to the excursions of frontiersmen and his own childhood days of pretend play. As he explains, such traveling is “very much the same as if alone on

mix-up with Dudley Philpot promises to ignite racial tensions in the town. Here Scooter’s social alignment indicates the assertion of local learning over his academic training.

40 Murray, *Seven League Boots*, 262.
41 Murray, *Seven League Boots*, 263.
horseback with saddle pack." During his layover in New York, Scooter makes the rounds, gathering the “latest editions of the Michelin and Blue guidebooks” to several European cities he will be visiting, buying a French language guide, touring a few art museums, and visiting old musician friends, all in order to reinforce his intellectual fortitude as he embarks on the strange new overseas land. In preparation for his new overseas exploit, Scooter studies the area in order to get a preview of what to expect. Such preparation makes him hopeful of his success in foreign territory. The notion of hope is expressed in Murray’s series through as an attitude of self-affirmation born from a rich and complex environment in which he was reared.

Integration and segregation are concepts that help shape all three novels. Bigger and his family are migrants from the Jim Crow American South, and while the geographic location of their home has changed, much more has remained the same. In Wright’s depiction, Bigger’s substandard housing as well as his inferior and abbreviated education are markers of his abject poverty. That Bigger lives in the midst of whites whose material wealth is obvious makes his own living conditions even more atrocious. As Wright notes, “because the blacks were so close to the very civilization which sought to keep them out … oppression spawned among them a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet, other worldly submissiveness.”

Having left the south at an early age, Bigger has “become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race,” suggesting that he has no foundation upon which to rely as he matures. Bigger separates himself from a community that could provide him with a

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42 Murray, Seven League Boots, 263.
43 Murray, Seven League Boots, 264.
44 Wright, Native Son, xii.
45 Wright, Native Son, xiii.
sense of his own wealth through cultural heritage. He is culturally illiterate because Wright denied him a cognizance of local heroes and wise elders whose examples or advice he might follow. He never has conversations with Doc or any community elder. Wright’s revelation that, upon moving to Chicago, “Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too,” leads to the characterization of Bigger as having a systematic and conscious break with the folk culture of his community. Wright aligns Bigger with “the millions of Bigger Thomases in every land and race,” and by so doing compounds the politics of race and labor because the poverty Bigger experiences is not solely a problem of African Americans but is part of a larger problem of class. Linking Bigger with millions, however, has the adverse effect of isolating him all the more because the community to which Wright imagines Bigger belongs shares with him no fundamental philosophical or cultural base. The unifying theme imagined for Bigger, labor, is abstracted. While Wright envisions a nameless, faceless and cultureless band of workers aligned beneath labor’s banner. However, such commonality represents a contrived sense of belonging since it would be a learned achievement, and Wright has not given Bigger the intellect to bridge this chasm. Bigger views the spirituals sung by his mother, the prayers she recites, and the weak attempts of Mary and Jan to render an authentic Negro spiritual, as inadequate to convey the depth and complexity of his woe. His torment is transformed only into violence. As Wright explains, “the civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold

46 Wright, *Native Son*, xiv.
47 Wright, *Native Son*, xix.
48 Bigger lacks the intellect and agency to pursue seriously the idea of any unified community. While fascinated by the thought of existing within such a community of like-minded comrades, Bigger has no method of transforming or bridging the gap that might place him within such a group successfully. He needs a cultural foundation in order to do this or any other meaningful thing.
49 Wright, *Native Son*, 14, 37, and 77.
and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and left him stranded." When Bigger tells Mary and Jan that he cannot sing, he metaphorically separates himself from the spirituals and culture that sustained his mother’s generation and those previous. This type of distancing perplexes Ellison who states, “his folk wisdom is discarded in the mistaken notion that it in no way applies to urban living.” Culturally blind, Bigger cannot see the wealth of his own heritage and so finds himself without the shelter of a community. His despair is largely one of self-imposed separation compounded by legal segregation.

Invisible Man also has bitter experiences with integration. As an emerging college student he is led to participate in a battle royal held for the entertainment of local well-respected whites. While he delivers his graduation speech at the community event, Invisible Man is beaten and bloodied, humiliated and mocked. The naked white woman who dances before the group of teenage boys participating in the event reveals the intimacy of each child’s shame. Invisible Man’s emotions on seeing the woman and standing in such close proximity to her run the gamut from lust to hate. He is torn between wanting to “run from the room ... cover [his] eyes ... feel [her] soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her,” simultaneously experiencing the complexity of human emotion and sexuality and exposing the fine line between pleasure and pain. Invisible Man suffers expulsion when he ruins Mr. Norton’s campus visit and is filled with disgrace when Jim Trueblood tells Mr. Norton the shameful story of incest.

While Mr. Emerson in New York is truthful with Invisible Man, the protagonist is ever distrustful of his experiences with whites. As an adult, the notion of sex with a white

50 Wright, Native Son, xix.
51 Ellison, “Harlem is Nowhere” in Shadow and Act, 300.
52 Ellison, Invisible Man, 19.
woman fills him with anxiety. While a member of the Brotherhood, Invisible Man’s opportunity to capture the forbidden fruit results in his revisiting familiar uneasy territory. In one scene the protagonist wants to get away from his white mistress in order to eliminate his fear, but he cannot because he is trapped, like Bigger, by circumstances beyond his control (he cannot get out of the apartment before her husband arrives), even hiding, at one point in a closet. Cornered, Invisible Man must transform his anxiety, and though he wants to “both smash her and to stay with her,” he is a thinking being, unlike Bigger, and realizes that overt violence is only a temporary solution. Invisible Man never comes to terms with the despair he feels regarding whites but instead of resorting to violence or timidity he relies on his own cultural background for sustenance and his intellect to transform his anxiety, creating for himself a mental if not physical hibernation-like safe haven.

In Murray’s novel integration is used to transform ideology and place Scooter in charge of his destiny by forcing him to confront the fear and complexities of race relations. Like Bigger and Invisible Man, Scooter lives within a segregated world and while his father, Papa Whit, provided for him a safe and secure childhood environment, Scooter’s experiences with the white world have been typically marked by fear. As a child in *Train Whistle Guitar* Scooter and Little Buddy Marshall sense the imminent danger in finding the dead body of a white man in a local waterway and hide in the swamp when they spot the alleged killers. Years later outside a juke joint, Scooter witnesses a raid conducted by the local white sheriff. During his college years in *The
Spyglass Tree, he is part of a community on the verge of a race riot due to the antics of Will Spradley and local white businessman, Dudley Philpot.

As a young man in The Seven League Boots, Scooter has several opportunities to engage in intimate relations with traditionally forbidden white women. The advice he receives from legendary jazz musician His Royal Highness and band members alike instruct Scooter to be mindful in his dealings with “mane tossing ponies prancing around with all that ofay enthusiasm for flesh and blood and nitty gritty.”54 White women form the vast majority of the groupies who attend the band’s notorious after-set private parties. Although Scooter’s interactions with the white realm have been marked by violence, he transforms his fear by heeding the advice of those more experienced and decides that intercourse with white women is “as much a part of [his] birthright as anything else out here.”55 Having definitively erased the color line by addressing an age-old U.S. racial taboo, Scooter views all women equally as sexual beings; he can therefore approach them confidently. The fear of sexual interaction across the color line and the associated violence and eroticism of lynching is inverted in Murray’s novel as white women hotly pursue sexual relations with Scooter and other black band members.56 By revealing the common denominator between men and women as gender rather than color and in making women the sexual aggressors, Murray reverses the image of the black male rapist (Bigger) and aligns men in a pact of masculine heterosexuality while simultaneously acknowledging the power and reality of female sexual desire.57 Scooter’s relations with Faye Morgan, Jewel Templeton, and women in general are more than just sexual

54 Murray, Seven League Boots, 53.
55 Murray, Seven League Boots, 69.
56 Male genitalia was often displayed and then cut off during lynchings.
57 I will explore gender themes, among others, as they relate to Murray’s fiction and the blues in some of my upcoming projects.
excursions; they are stepping stones that help Scooter achieve personal and professional objectives. As Royal Highness tells Scooter, "just remember that [white women are] supposed to be able to put you next to something else besides what’s between her legs, and even in her pocketbook."\(^5\)\(^8\) Scooter’s fear of the integration/segregation dichotomy is transformed by heeding the advice of his elders, employing down-home carnal knowledge, and his sophisticated sexual experiences in a local brothel during his college years. Preparation is the key to success in any arena, in this case sexual, and a vital part of having self-assurance rooted in a substantial base. Because Scooter’s skills in the amorous arts are sharp he can self-confidently diffuse color line angst and claim center stage in the overarching system of patriarchy.\(^5\)\(^9\)

Mobility is a textual strategy used by Wright, Ellison, and Murray that grants further insight into the aesthetic and stylistic foundation of each novel. The action in Wright’s novel is confined to a few blocks on the city’s Southside and Bigger’s physical movements throughout the text are vertical. Wright’s novel opens with Bigger upstairs in his family’s apartment, he goes down to street level, up to Mary Dalton’s room, to his own room in the Dalton home above the kitchen, down into the basement where he tends to the fire and disposes of Mary’s body, upward into the abandoned building in which he murders Bessie and hides from authorities, and eventually downward through a tunnel that takes him from the courtroom into his jail cell.

Engaged in an identity struggle, Invisible Man’s psychological journey is broad but his physical movement is vertical. He travels from south to north and eventually straight downward into a hole in the ground in order to arrive at the self-awareness

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\(^5\) Murray, *Seven League Boots*, 54.
\(^9\) Faye Morgan, an obvious take on Mallory’s Morgan Le Fay, is meant to introduce the specter of trouble for Scooter in the potential for lynching and other types of danger for the aspiring jazzman.
Scooter takes for granted. As Ellison’s narrator states, “it took me a long time and much painful boomeranging ... to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself.”\textsuperscript{60} It is only by the novel’s end that Invisible Man seems ready to come out of his hibernation. Once the psychological weight of identity struggle is lifted, Invisible Man may be able to pursue greater and more opportunities than he could when weighed down by his inner turmoil.

Murray’s novel opens with a sense of fascination and grandeur as Scooter surveys the vast territories of the United States that unveil before him as he tours the country with a jazz band. Scooter travels the span of the country more than once in Murray’s third novel and his movement from west to east, north to south, across the Atlantic Ocean and back again indicates a freedom of movement and a courageous claim of territory.\textsuperscript{61} Like the successful transnational tours of artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, Scooter’s journeys are a bold and masculine traversing of geographical boundaries and a claiming of territory that demonstrates individual successes despite obstacles, including financial hardship and legalized segregation.\textsuperscript{62} Scooter’s movement is also vertical and at novel’s end he is landing in Alabama from an overseas flight. Suffering no identity crisis, Scooter’s journeys are multi-directional; he

\textsuperscript{60} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 15. My analysis discusses the protagonist’s vertical movement. However, Invisible Man’s movement could also be described as being horizontal (Ellison’s use of “boomeranging”) and this could describe the intellectual stagnation (moving around but not advancing) suggested by the confusion Invisible Man feels as he tries to learn from his mentors. Boomeranging could also be used to describe the cyclical nature of Ellison’s text. As is always the case with Ellison’s novel, there are many ways to explore his narrative complexity.

\textsuperscript{61} My book-length study on this topic will address the ways in which geography is used to stake one’s claim or to mark one’s territory and so assert one’s masculinity. Women typically did not have the same freedom of movement and were bound by family constraints in ways men were not.

\textsuperscript{62} Lawrence Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” in \textit{Jazz Cadence of American Culture}, ed. Robert O’Meally (New York: Columbia Univ., 1998), 442. Levine notes especially the tours of famous jazz musicians and says that these tours “brought national attention to the stature of jazz music, American jazz music, Afro-American jazz music, throughout the world.”
can do what Invisible Man does and more because he is free of the psychological constraints that bind Ellison's protagonist. Scooter's movement through the novel (and through Murray's series) indicates a freedom of geographic movement that compliments his psychological liberty.

Beginning with the 1970 publication of *The Omni Americans*, Albert Murray's non-fiction addresses eloquently the idea of ethnic difference being at the heart of cultural diversity and national identity. In asserting his idea that "young black radicals" of the 60s and 70s abandon their "academic reverence for radicalism per se and begin playing improvisations on the gospels of Marx, Mao, Guevara, and Fanon," Murray suggests that they instead create a philosophical base for their assertions that is made complex and cosmopolitan by including useful strategies from their own cultural heritage. Murray scolds so-called revolutionaries and implores them to "do more homework in general culture and remember the richness of their actual experience with black complexity and become less glib with fancy jargon" as this is likely to broaden their arguments and align them with the people whose philosophies they espouse. Murray continues, "There are any number of techniques that black revolutionaries can use to undermine the symbols of white authority." The characterization of Scooter is a synthesis of Murray's philosophy on American culture and serves as an exemplary model for revolutionary change because what Scooter attempts and achieves is made possible because he imagines no limits on what he can accomplish. As Murray states, "I wanted to create affirmative images that would make people wish they could be that way."

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63 Murray, *Omni Americans*, 61.
64 Murray, *Briarpatch*, 83.
65 Murray, *Briarpatch*, 83.
Scooter’s mind is free and because of this he is capable of imagining myriad possibilities for his own existence despite the reality of, for example, legal restrictions. Scooter is the embodiment of so many jazz musicians who “refused to be governed by the categorical orthodoxies that prevailed” and that sought to define the music they played. Created in the legacy of such heroes and cognizant of their value, Scooter makes practical use of everything within his range of experience as he develops his individuality. Like legendary jazz musicians whose primary focus was on crafting and refining their musical repertories rather than on race relations, Scooter maintains a focus on his development and in so doing widens the possibilities for people of color despite the reality of racial bias. As Ellison’s narrator asserts, “Damn it, there’s the mind, the mind.” Dizzy Gillespie’s point is clear. He says, “We didn’t go out and make speeches or say, ‘Let’s play eight bars of protest.’ We just played our music and let it go at that. The music proclaimed our identity; it made every statement we truly wanted to make.” Scooter is not a complainer (like Bigger) but a doer (like Invisible Man). In this way, evolution is accomplished as a by-product of conquering first the inner most battle of transforming his mind; this is the power of self affirmation that comes through the blues as a frame of mind. Levine states that, “in their insistence that they were just attempting to play music … [and] in their determination to utilize the entire Western tradition, as well as other cultural traditions, jazz musicians were revolutionizing not only music but also the concept of culture.” In maintaining their focus on music and not some external force,

67 Levine, Jazz, 444.
68 Ellison, Invisible Man, 573.
69 Eric Porter, What is this thing called Jazz?, 58.
70 Invisible Man also functions according to this ideology. By novel’s end he is ready to begin the process of effecting revolutionary change because he has conquered his inner identity struggle.
71 Ibid. Emphasis is Levine’s.
musicians asserted agency and simultaneously rejected definitions and categories imposed by others, thus transforming the concept of culture by defining it from within their individual and group (as jazz musicians) experiences. Scooter's reliance on his upbringing forms his character, obliterates issues of identity, and sustains him as he matures from one novel to the next because he views himself as a member of a world community.

In his characterization, Scooter reverses the hopelessness that shrouds Bigger's entire existence. Murray's series stems from a different philosophical base than Wright's novel. While the reality of dire conditions for people of color is irrefutable (particularly during the time period of Wright's and Murray's novels), Murray's series takes the brutality of those conditions and uses them as a springboard from which to create possibility. Scooter cannot change the world around him but he can take charge of his own destiny by asserting the human agency granted through the mental exertion Wright has denied Bigger. Scooter improvises on all his previous experiences and adapts, adjusts, and advances to new levels of opportunity and mobility as he matures. The Scooter series is a manifesto that illustrates the ways in which individuals can model their lives by integrating or continually amassing the totality of one's experiences into a synthesis of being through honing their intellects and nurturing their imaginative possibilities.

Transformation: Rejection

Wright's novel suggests the plausibility of some collective action as a way to address the issues of poverty, labor, and class practically. If any hope is expressed in

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Wright’s novel it is that of political revolution. While this method may be useful in changing the outward manifestations of dire circumstances long term it does not change one’s immediate circumstances and such immediacy is the stuff of the blues. In this vein, the blues can be thought of as a starting point in the process of revolution because the blues offers a method of changing one’s mindset regardless of any change in circumstances or condition. One must intellectualize his situation (as does Invisible Man) and then actively assert himself in order to imagine change. In addition, one must be tenacious and nurture his imaginative view of betterment despite the chaos or bizarre situations that might provide daily assaults. Whether or not Invisible Man does the ‘right’ thing is inconsequential, what matters is that he asserts himself through the work of thinking and imagining a way out of bizarre situations; he is never cornered mentally. He experiences no dead ends. While Scooter’s actions are informed by the teachings of his community, he operates in a manner similar to Invisible Man. Scooter asserts himself by imagining possibility, doing the various things he imagines possible (such as going to college, graduating, learning to play a bass, touring with a jazz band, traveling to Europe, etc.) and creating broader and more complex opportunities for himself (and so serves as an example to others) as a result. While grand-scale revolution may or may not be the outcome of such highly individualized efforts, only individual change can be assured because it is all one man (or woman) can ultimately control. What Invisible Man and Scooter create is the space for imagination. When viewed as a necessary component of revolutionary change, the blues indicates a mindset that embraces possibility. Any collective action that might change the outward conditions of Bigger’s life will not transform his inner poverty; his psychology of depravation will be left firmly in tact. As
depicted by Wright, Bigger is incapable of any overt, organized, thoughtful human agency and so cannot participate in any mass movement for change.

Wright’s novel demonstrates the chaos that emerges from a rejection of heritage and a lack of communal knowledge. Bigger tries to wear a mask of calm as he ponders the risk of being tagged as Mary’s killer. Relying on racial stereotypes and notions of white superiority, Bigger convinces himself that the police and media would never think him capable of such a crime, “not a meek black boy like him.”72 So as Bigger verbalizes parts of his story, he is aware of the reasons for his assumed innocence and plays the so-called ‘race card.’ He treats the queries of the local police and media as a game in which he has the upper hand. “In the past had [the authorities] not always drawn the picture for him? He could tell them anything he wanted and what could they do about it?”73 However, this type of masking is contrived and deeply flawed because it is not rooted in communal knowledge and the action that precipitates the masking defies moral authority. Mary’s death haunts Bigger because he knows her killing was morally wrong even though in his faulty way he thinks that by killing her he has somehow “evened the score” between whites and blacks.74 As Bigger lies in his bed inside the Dalton home he dreams he hears a church bell. Though he has never accepted God or religion as meaningful, he cannot escape the impact of religion on his rearing. The house of God calls Bigger from a dream. The sound of the church bell grows louder and louder until it sounds as if it is “directly above his head” filling him with an “urgent need to run and hide as though the bell were sounding a warning.”75 “So deeply conscious was [Bigger] of violating

72 Wright, *Native Son*, 179.
73 Wright, *Native Son*, 149.
74 Wright, *Native Son*, 155.
75 Wright, *Native Son*, 156.
dangerous taboo, that he felt that the very air of the sky would suddenly speak, commanding him to stop.”76 His mother’s expression of faith is part of him and as he conducts his life his actions are influenced by the philosophies that sustained hers and previous generations. Distraught and with nowhere to turn, he metaphorically turns to prayer because he needs something upon which to rely. His strength “ebbed from him. He sank to his knees and pressed his fingers to the floor to keep from tumbling over.”77 Though he has fought against religion as a source of support, and though he will toss aside the crucifix given to him when he is in jail, he instinctively goes back to that which he first knew when “seized” by “an organic sense of dread.”78 When Bessie “sank to her knees” and began to call on God for help, Bigger views her actions as a sign of weakness and thinks she is incapable of engaging in the practical actions necessary to effect change in their current troublesome situation.79 Bigger believes something more is needed, though he does not know what, and resolves to kill Bessie so that he alone can figure out a course of action. “What his mother had was Bessie’s whiskey, and Bessie’s whiskey was his mother’s religion. He did not want to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep.”80 Narrow in thought and lacking communal knowledge, Bigger suffers from the blindness he accuses others of having. He wishes, “If only someone had gone before and lived or suffered or died—made it so that [the path to personal fulfillment or success] could be understood,” thereby rejecting the burden Christ bore upon the cross and also the entire legacy of African American heroes from slavery onward.81

76 Wright, Native Son, 173.
77 Wright, Native Son, 174.
78 Wright, Native Son, 174.
79 Wright, Native Son, 215.
80 Wright, Native Son, 226.
81 Wright, Native Son, 224.
The would-be alliance between Bigger and Bessie is destructive. Bigger’s rape and murder of Bessie is indicative of his rejection of black culture, mothering, and women in general. He goes to Bessie to confess his crime and to solicit her help in his mission. He is tense and anxious when he arrives at Bessie’s house and he wants a drink. Feeling his need, Bessie tells him, “Naw; no whiskey. You need hot milk.”\(^{82}\) When the milk on the stove boils over and scorches, Bigger drinks it anyway, finding comfort in it because such harshness has been his life. As Bessie “clenched her hands in front of her and rocked to and fro with her eyes closed upon gushing tears,” Bessie and her prayers represent all that Bigger despises.\(^{83}\) Bessie’s timid demeanor and her personal despair resonate with the intimacy of the blues. She wails, “God only knows why I ever let you treat me this way ... All you ever did since we been knowing each other was to get me drunk so’s you could have me,” and yet she resigns herself to stay with Bigger, the man she loves, and to whose fate she believes hers is linked.\(^{84}\) As a metaphor for the blues and its associated traditions Bessie Mears represents blues women (perhaps even Bessie Smith, a legendary blues singer who was known and adored by millions). In raping and murdering Bessie Mears, even after taking her milk as nourishment, Wright’s protagonist symbolically eliminates a metaphor for tradition. Bigger systematically breaks with the past by eliminating Bessie, her presence, and her reigning influence as being old, useless, and incapable of nourishing his generation. Bigger violates Bessie and after murdering her, shoves her body into an airshaft only to realize “that was a dumb thing to do” because he threw away all the money he had with her.\(^{85}\) Stereotypically linked with

\(^{82}\) Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 212.
\(^{83}\) Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 215.
\(^{84}\) Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 215.
\(^{85}\) Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 224.
passivity because of her religious beliefs, Bessie Mears represents for Bigger a useless element in society. In the flight away from black tradition, Bessie Mears is a necessary casualty. Yet Bigger’s cognizance of having done something stupid suggests he realizes there must be some good in Bessie, but lacking the intellect and personal depth to explore such issues, Bigger cannot reconcile the paradox of how to simultaneously keep Bessie and advance his own newly emerging worldview.

Bigger’s violent rejection of culture obscures his ability to view fully, and thereby realize, his own potential. So eager is he to feel a sense of accomplishment that he convinces himself that his killing of Mary was his own intelligent idea, a mark of personal agency, rather than an emotional response to anxiety. Released from his past, Bigger begins to see his life anew, having thus “murdered and had created a new life for himself....”86 This feeling of accomplishment fills him with elation because he has done the unthinkable and he is proud of his actions. In doing “something which even he had not thought possible,” Bigger momentarily reversed his own negative view of himself and society in general.87 But the joy Bigger feels is countered textually with admissions of guilt and despair. He feels intelligent for having figured out a plan for securing ransom money from the Daltons, yet when he enters the Dalton home, sees the furnace, and hears his name called by a detective hired by Mr. Dalton, the old sense of insecurity returns. He “said nothing … panic seized Bigger … [he] clamped his teeth,” and was scared again.88 Bigger’s self-confidence returns as he realizes the power he has in controlling the story he tells authorities. However, this feeling of superiority is short lived, and when asked if he had ever been to Russia, Bigger loses his cool façade because this was a question

86 Wright, Native Son, 101.
87 Wright, Native Son, 101.
88 Wright, Native Son, 146.
Bigger “had not counted on, ever,” and he “stood up trembling.” After leaving the ransom note under the front door of the Dalton home, Bigger comforts himself with the thought that no one would ever suspect him of the crime, because “they would think that white men did it; they would never think that a black, timid Negro did that.” Bigger feels free because he has duped the white world by using its racism to hide his guilt. Viewing, for the first time, his life as having options, Bigger ponders running away, staying put to face his crime, and confessing. These “avenues of thought” broaden his realm of possibilities, and yet Bigger begins to feel a sense of his inability to secure such magnificent ends. “I’d bet a million dollars that this is Jan’s smart idea,” says one reporter, effectively shattering Bigger’s own notions about possessing an intellect and having opportunities. The sentiment expressed in Bigger’s thought that “he was black and had done wrong” neutralizes any sense of his achievement. Potential for Bigger’s success is masked by his crime and the elation he feels is temporary because he knows he must answer for it. In imprisonment and an impending death sentence, Bigger’s sense of accomplishment is limited by time. Bigger’s crime is merely a mask for his inadequacy and insufficient for transforming the nature of his being. In rejecting his cultural heritage—the blues and religion—Bigger has no foundation and so the mask he wears is translucent. He cannot transform his anxiety because he has no foundation upon which to derive support. His “Flight” amounts to his having hurled himself through a window in the Dalton home. Bigger soars freely for a brief moment but finally crashes to the earth because he is not properly equipped, lacking a metaphorical parachute or pair of wings,

89 Wright, *Native Son*, 152.
90 Wright, *Native Son*, 176.
91 Wright, *Native Son*, 197.
92 Wright, *Native Son*, 206.
or prepared for flight. By the end of “Flight” Bigger’s range of possibility is permanently restricted and his fate is sealed.

**Transformation: Mediation**

Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as cultural mediation is the site of stylistic and aesthetic transformation—to use a musical term, a bridge—that links two artistic ideologies—the culturally negligent (Wright in *Native Son*) with the culturally endowed (Murray). Memories of his grandfather and the South in general, through various cultural symbols, work stylistically like blues music in Ellison’s text by creating a platform for individual self-expression and human agency ultimately creating a foundation for character formation and identity. By allowing for variation in the ways in which each memory or cultural symbol is appropriated or employed by the protagonist, Ellison’s example of the highly selective method of picking and choosing the images significant for self-expression are akin to a musician’s discernment when selecting notes and is the essence of improvisation because of the immeasurable variety it allows and the agency and liberation it grants. With a solid blues base, Ellison’s protagonist enjoys the jazz music of Louis Armstrong, with its myriad complexities, cadences, and thrilling and bizarre improvisational excursions that serve as the most accurate metaphor for Invisible Man’s experiences.

Jazz is also a metaphor for the cultural complexity Ellison believed the United States represented at the time of the novel’s writing. Placing his narrator in Harlem, a

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93 This study addresses Wright’s *Native Son* along with Murray’s *The Seven League Boots* primarily because Murray’s non-fiction addresses *Native Son* specifically (and does so often) and so, in my opinion, *The Seven League Boots* is designed as a counterstatement to Murray’s third novel. It’s as if Murray is on conversation with Wright and uses his novel as the medium of exchange.
locus of diversity, Ellison surrounds his narrator with a variety of personality types and experiences within a single neighborhood that exists within the bustling borough of Manhattan, a historical testing and proving ground for jazz musicians. The improvised efforts of Ellison’s narrator represent a literary struggle to achieve liberation through sound as did musicians. Invisible Man is a metaphor for the individual’s struggle to psychologically, intellectually, physically, and emotionally derive meaning from human existence. Representing what Houston Baker has termed a “generational shift,” the blues roots and jazz of Ellison’s novel demonstrates a shift in textual and artistic strategy and complexity beyond the scope of Wright’s work.

The American South is a point of stylistic and aesthetic contention between Wright, Ellison and Murray. Whereas Wright creates a character who is not cognizant of any useful cultural gifts hailing from the place of his rearing, Ellison and Murray’s protagonists demonstrate a commitment, although to varying degrees, to making use of what one has because the totality of one’s experiences can and should be used in the forging of one’s identity. Or as Ellison states, one should commit to “striving for the broadest possible range.” Bigger who is convinced he has nothing, actually has something of immeasurable value that he is not using and that might make the difference in his ability to assert himself intellectually, diffuse his rage, and stop his complaining. Bigger’s matter-of-fact attitude regarding his southern roots is in opposition, for example, to the Invisible Man’s struggle to make sense of his grandfather’s dying words. Invisible Man is intrigued by the elder’s words and the passion with which his grandfather makes

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96 Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” in Shadow and Act, 165.
his dying statement. He knows there is something of value hidden in the message and seeks, for nearly 600 pages, to decode its meaning. Scooter knows full well the value of such allegedly hidden messages. For Scooter, these messages are not veiled at all but have immediate and long-term practical value providing him with the mental fortitude, verbal acuity, and psychological know-how to meet a variety of situations with an attitude of cool self-assurance. The difference in the ways in which Wright, Ellison, and Murray envision the South reveals each author’s level of commitment to the realm of his youth. Scooter knows well his native land through memories of having been actively involved in his community. When Royal Highness interviews Scooter, the elder is impressed by the depth of the youngster’s learning. Too young to have actually been inside juke joints and honky-tonks, Scooter can, nevertheless, discuss Joe Locket, Papa Gladness, King Velvet, and other home-grown but nationally renowned musicians.97 Memories of boyhood and of the South in particular serve as a springboard for the artistic self-expression of Ellison and Murray.

In suggesting a philosophical movement away from religion Wright’s text is in agreement with Ellison’s and Murray’s, both of whom, like Wright, use a mainly secular method for effecting personal change. Used as an artistic device for shaping of literary protagonists, the blues, like the musical genre, addresses individual needs within the earthly realm. Salvation is immediate, if temporary, through improvisation because it allows the protagonist/performer to feel a sense of accomplishment and self-worth because the catharsis he experiences is the result of his own effort. Wright is correct, according to Ellison’s and Murray’s textual strategy, in that religion alone is insufficient

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97 Murray, *Seven League Boots*, 22-3.
to answer actual human worldly needs because it is ethereal and the blues is secular. However, by refusing to subscribe to overt political ideology, Ellison and Murray stay focused on cultural gifts as a source for individual strength in the development of their protagonists and subvert the negative philosophies that create self-designated victims. The "complain[ing]" and "rebellious" nature of Bigger Thomas is contrasted textually by Ellison whose protagonist says, "I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either." Wright's novel secured a place as the Book-of-the-Month-Club's (BOMC) main selection in 1940 by depicting the monstrous Bigger Thomas and leaving a legacy etched in stone. Wright's novel reinforced reasons for maintaining strict legal separations between blacks and whites and justified beliefs that blacks were culturally inferior, savage, and to be feared. In Wright's depiction, Bigger Thomas' rejection of his cultural heritage reinforced widely held notions of blacks in general and supported the idea that they had no meaningful heritage and so no culture to serve as a civilizing balm. As Janice Radway asserts, in choosing Wright's novel as a main selection BOMC editors served to "normalize certain experiences and a familiar range of legible emotion as appropriate to the professional-managerial class." As book sales of Native Son increased, the notions of black inferiority and blacks as cultural orphans could easily and legitimately (because Wright is black) find renewed legitimacy in the minds of the educated and/or middle-class and also serve to reinforce negative self-images within colored communities. As Houston Baker notes, "if one ... is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another's

98 Ellison, Invisible Man, 3.
99 Janice Radway, A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month-Club, Literary Tastes, and Middle-Class Desire (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina,1997), 287. Radway discusses the selection process regarding Wright's novel and shares the fact that three weeks after being listed, it had sold 215,000 copies.
100 Radway, A Feeling for Books, 287.
Bigger's jail sentence—his mental and geographic confinement as well—mirrors metaphorically the Jim Crow laws that continued to constrict the lives of people of color for nearly another 25 years after the publication of Wright's novel. Like Ellison's, Murray's novel can be viewed as an artistic slaying of the beast created by Wright. Scooter is free, both mentally and geographically, and in choosing his own course of action he remains rooted in cultural heritage. He is guided by communal knowledge and is sophisticated enough to use his formal education as a way to accentuate what he already knows. Scooter's use of memory compounds and complicates his knowledge base while demonstrating that all he knows is part of a continuum of learning. Murray's novel offers no reinforcement of stereotypes, though on an economic and material level Scooter's and Bigger's lives seem similar. While Ellison's Invisible Man is guided in action by the notes and suggestions of others, he exhibits a measure of agency beyond the scope of Wright's Bigger Thomas by actually, continuously and fearlessly effecting change in his geographic and psychological condition. Ellison's and Murray's texts demonstrate the inefficiency of Wright's wholly secular and culturally negligent artistic strategy and posit the blues as a foundation for human agency, and demonstrate the ability of art to transform pathology.

Ellison's Invisible Man demonstrates the ways in which one may run but not hide from his past. Haunted by the words spoken by his dying grandfather, Invisible Man tries to decipher the meaning of the old man's words even into hibernation. From his hole in the ground Invisible Man contemplates, "Once I thought my grandfather incapable of

\[101\text{Gates, Jr., and Appiah, Critical Perspectives, 210.}\]
thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong."\footnote{Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580.} Surely the link of chain *Invisible Man* secures from Brother Tarp, the yam he eats purchased from a Harlem Street vendor, and the down-home kindness of Mary Rambo are among the events that signal the narrator's historical past. Ellison's purpose is to convey the idea that one's past is necessarily part of one's living present. The trick or the infinitely complex struggle of human existence is in forging a synthesis of being in which one functions daily from a foundation built from the individual stones of what has come before. As Ellison's narrator discovers by the novel's end, hibernation is passive. It is an excuse for overt action. The narrator admits that "even hibernations can be overdone ... I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."\footnote{Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.} Guided by the illumination of such thoughts, Ellison's narrator tells readers he is prepared to embark upon the actual work of beginning a socially responsible life by, readers are to assume, functioning on the synthesis he has forged underground.

Ellison's novel revises and de-sexualizes Wright's use of the black woman. Mary Rambo provides a safe haven for *Invisible Man* when he comes to Harlem and is in need of a place to live. With the help of several neighbors she brings *Invisible Man* into her apartment where she nurses him back to health. Mary is older and is a mother figure for the *Invisible Man* and she feels his needs as if he was her child and gives him a home. She has, in fact, taken care of many youngsters who were in need of food and shelter in her Harlem community. The *Invisible Man* is unable to articulate his dilemma to Mary but she senses his need and offers him food and rest. Finding comfort in Mary's care, *Invisible Man* is no longer satisfied with his life at Men's House and is enticed to stay.

\footnote{Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580.}
\footnote{Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.}
with Mary because "you don’t get this kind of service up there at Men’s House." Mary inquires about Invisible Man’s “people” and upon learning he is from the South, she tells her new tenant, “it’s the one’s from the South that’s got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns.” Along with her generous servings of food, Mary nourishes Invisible Man with “constant talk about leadership and responsibility.” Unlike Wright’s passive, praying and pleading Bessie, Ellison’s text urges active participation and planned efforts in changing the course of one’s life. Learning to sense Mary’s needs, in time Invisible Man notices that the variety of foods that Mary loved had dissipated into a single dish, cabbage. Signaling her financial need, this singular and distasteful meal never results in a change in Mary’s demeanor or in her attitude towards her tenants. “What were Mary’s problems anyway,” he ponders, because despite her grievances Mary maintained a sense of calm and apparent ease as she served her tenants—some who paid room and board, some who, like the narrator, could not—the only meal she could afford. A blues woman incarnate Mary, the only mother type in Ellison’s novel, sings of her woe in a voice that is “clear and untroubled, though she sang a troubled song … The Back Water Blues.” Thoughts of Mary captivate and motivate Invisible Man. He longs to please her and to make her proud. She represents his past and he takes thoughts of her even into his hole in the ground.

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Man’s learning to sense another’s needs is a theme revisited in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* as Milkman learns to give himself to Sweet and helps her bathe, wash dishes, etc. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Penguin, 1977).
Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 297. This song is also the title of a song by Bessie Smith.
Transformation: Acceptance

In his deeply rooted blues rearing, Murray’s Scooter synthesizes the cultural legacies that came before him by evoking the blues as a frame of mind through his active use of and reliance on memory. Scooter’s expansive world view indicates a continuous amalgamation of learning and technique and an evolution of styles. This evolution is rendered more powerful and meaningful through continuous repetition. Throughout Murray’s series, Scooter goes back to earlier periods of his life because each new visit indicates a more mature understanding of the message. Memories are tools for advancing and testing the strength of one’s learning. As James Snead states, “in black culture, repetition means that a thing circulates,” and in Scooter’s case, the ‘thing’ is communal knowledge.110 Communal knowledge being repeated and compounded serves as the springboard for improvisation because it forms the basis for individual action. As Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres assert, “Racial group consciousness not only makes blacks more politically active and effective as a group; it also helps make individual blacks more psychologically resilient. As such it becomes an important resource in the black community, independent of the practical outcomes from political activism.”111 While an individual act may appear spontaneous, it is best understood as part of a continuum of behavior, for “without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, since the improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat.”112 Like a jazz musician constantly seeking to update his creative technique, Scooter is innovative and continuously amasses new information and refines it to suit his individual needs. He

110 Snead quoted in Levine, see O’Meally, Jazz Cadence, 69.
112 Levine quoted in O’Meally, Jazz Cadence, 70.
not only relies on down-home lessons or the blues of his youth but by playing jazz on his upright bass, he assumes a central role as the purveyor of cultural knowledge. The bass is known as the “heartbeat of jazz” because of its subdued but vital role in maintaining the group’s sense of rhythm.113 As Scooter matures from one text to the next he maintains a synthesis of being based on his reliance on and faith in communal knowledge and his repeated evocations of memory. This synthesis is transmitted textually through the metaphorical use of the string bass. Scooter’s smooth and steady movement from one event to the next is like a bass player’s ability to “play connected 4/4 lines all night long at any tempo without being concerned about running out of breath.”114 Mature in style and featuring a self-conscious protagonist Murray’s third novel is an example of sophisticated literary jazz in that it fuses the various traditions to which Scooter has been made privy and lends insight into the early and contemporary moments of influence in his life. Scott Deveaux notes, “the essence of jazz ... lies not in any one style, or any one cultural or historical context, but in that which links all these things together into a seamless continuum. Jazz is what it is because [like Murray’s characterization of Scooter] it is a culmination of all that has come before.”115 Always on time, Scooter’s use of the blues as ontology and his musical ability demonstrate the ways in which one’s individual cultural heritage provides a foundation that is instrumental to personal development.

In contrast to the chaos presented in Wright’s and Ellison’s novels, Murray’s text demonstrates how individuals of distinctly different communities can forge new pathways into the future by delving into their past. As a journeyman in Murray’s second section, Scooter moves from the foundation of communal knowledge of his apprentice

113 Crow in Kirchner, Oxford Companion, 668.
114 Crow in Kirchner, Oxford Companion, 669.
115 Scott Deveaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition” in O’Meally, Jazz Cadence, 487.
years traveling with the band to forging an alliance with a young white millionaire actress named Jewel Templeton who lets Scooter in on the inside dope regarding European travel, cuisine, art, and culture in general. As a purveyor of communal knowledge, Scooter reciprocates by teaching his interested fan about the blues and jazz. Scooter leads Jewel in listening to a catalog of tunes that starts with Kansas City greats and goes "south to New Orleans and Louis Armstrong and all of that ... to Harlem and Duke Ellington."\(^{116}\) The two forge an alliance based on a common musical interest but also learn that they are prodigies of their communities. As the "Miss Sparkle-eyed Goldilocks of Small Ridge, Wisconsin," Jewel is, like Scooter, her community's favorite.\(^{117}\) Commonalities continue to unveil between the two as Scooter learns that Jewel's interest in American music, the blues and jazz, developed as a result of her interactions with her mentor and "favorite twentieth century human being," the Marquis de Chaumienne.\(^{118}\) The Marquis is an older man who recognizes Jewel's exceptional acting ability. In introducing her to American blues and jazz music, the Marquis hopes to merge the actress's innate talent for acting with the music's deeply spiritual chords in order to broaden and deepen her abilities. A connoisseur of music, the Marquis received his training of "truly American chamber music" from "back alley honkey-tonks, juke joints, and barrelhouses ... gin mills, cocktail lounges, and small after hours hole in the wall joints."\(^{119}\) Like Scooter's many teachers, the Marquis is worldly and shares his wisdom with Jewel because he spotted her as someone special who would take his teachings seriously.

\(^{116}\) Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 175-6.  
\(^{117}\) Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 184.  
\(^{118}\) Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 176.  
\(^{119}\) Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 177.
That Jewel is cognizant of the gifts conferred by the elderly Marquis demonstrates her willingness to learn and expand her horizons beyond prescribed parameters and indicates the practicality and continued usefulness of the knowledge base of earlier generations. Having a ‘white’ mentor who is steeped in the traditions of ‘black’ music reflects a level of homogeneity or point of commonality in the experiences of Americans despite the color line. As a willing student of such immense cultural knowledge, the Marquis deems Jewel “one of Ma Rainey’s children ... The blue-eyed first cousin to Bessie, Mamie, and Trixie Smith.” This pedigree seems just fine to Scooter who accepts Jewel telling her that her home state of Wisconsin is just “on the upper Big Muddy as is Davenport, Iowa.” As partners in pursuit of a brighter future the relationship between Scooter and Jewel indicates commonalities more significant than the differences inherent in their individual experiences. As Murray so poignantly notes, “For all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.”

Like Ellison’s novel, Murray’s The Seven League Boots crafts black women as purveyors of history. Despite “them pink pussycats out there licking their chops” and with whom Scooter romps sexually, and despite their wealth and fame, Scooter prefers down-home women such as those represented by Gaynelle Whitlow. Similar to Bigger’s Bessie, Gaynelle is a native southerner who has come to the big city to make it on her own. She maintains her own apartment and is financially independent. And like

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120 Murray, Seven League Boots, 189-90.
121 Murray, Seven League Boots, 189-90. Iowa was also home to jazzman Bix Beiderbecke.
122 Murray, Omni Americans, 22.
123 Murray, Seven League Boots, 85.
Bessie, Gaynelle provides the male protagonist a source of sexual comfort and emotional release. Thankful for his good fortune in finding a “good fairy godmother” in Jewel Templeton, Scooter is nevertheless drawn to Gaynelle’s side and entertains thoughts of his beloved Eunice Townsend as he prepares to embark on his first European tour.\textsuperscript{124} Scooter does not share information about his recording contract with Jewel but is eager to do so with Gaynelle. He is enchanted by her and tells her, “You have hands like a princess.”\textsuperscript{125} Jewel’s Hollywood mansion is fraught with material comforts and boasts an incredible view of the California hillside but it is, alas, in no way superior to the “second floor apartment” with “hassocks and three fanback rattan chairs” in Gaynelle’s cozy abode.\textsuperscript{126} Hollywood glamour aside, Scooter is homesick and yearns to accompany Gaynelle home. When Gaynelle tells him she is eager to settle in and listen to “a stack of dirty low-down blues and get in the kitchen and cook me a good old home folks meal and sit right down and eat it barefooted,” his mouth waters, his loins throb, and his belly aches for the taste of home.\textsuperscript{127} Unlike Invisible Man who buys individual yams from a male street vendor and overtly experiences the erotic pleasure of eating them publicly, Scooter enjoys not individual yams but an \textit{entire} sweet potato pie baked by his own down-home gal, eaten in her company and topped off by a night of coital passion for which Scooter has longed. By having intercourse with Gaynelle, Scooter compounds the intimacy expressed between Invisible Man and Mary Rambo because Gaynelle satisfies Scooter’s longing for motherly and sexual love. Here Murray demonstrates that complexity on every level is necessary for the creation of Scooter whose experiences are

\textsuperscript{124} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 209.
\textsuperscript{125} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 231.
\textsuperscript{126} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 235.
\textsuperscript{127} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 233.
meant to be broad. Sexualizing the "motherly" relationship adds a level of emotional depth foreign to platonic relationships because the intimacy can produce another physical human being. As Gaynelle tells Scooter, "I know Jewel Templeton can serve you squab on toast every morning ... But just remember I did all this with my own two hands. Just remember that. Cotton field princess fingers and all, Mr. College Boy."\(^{128}\) As the first teachers of children, black women assume the role of transmitters of culture and the framers of identity in both Ellison's and Murray's novels and must not be destroyed.

By the end of Murray's second section entitled "The Journeyman," Scooter has proven and is prepared to further demonstrate the benefits of adhering to his cultural heritage. His early days in the band are marked by his getting under the wing of Jo States, a fellow band member who also hails from the Deep South. Jo and other band members teach Scooter much about what he should expect on the road and in the big cities they visit. So when Scooter meets Jewel Templeton he knows how to handle her fame and fortune without being awed into mistaking her success for his own. Scooter pursues his profession as a bass player by making recordings, putting in practice time and eventually trying his hand at composing full band arrangements. The opportunities to which Scooter is made privy come his way by constantly connecting himself with those he considers more talented and knowledgeable than himself. When Eric Threadcraft asks Scooter to take a look at a screenplay and see what music track he might come up with, Scooter recognizes it as an opportunity not to be taken lightly. As he maintains his cool upon being asked to participate in a project with the potential to catapult his professional life, Scooter, "took another sip of [his] tall drink" and thought to himself, "Me, too this time.

\(^{128}\) Murray, Seven League Boots, 251.
This is the way it happens when it is happening to you." While Bigger’s reading material is comprised of Communist Party pamphlets that he reads in his upstairs apartment, Scooter “read[s] the script in [his] garage apartment” and begins the meaningful work of developing his own musical style in print. Charged with composing his own score, Scooter must condense all his prior experiences, both musical and otherwise, and create a synthesis of being that musically describes his life. The validation he receives from Eric Threadcraft regarding the resulting impressive composition reinforces Scooter’s determination to excel.

By the end of his journeyman years, Scooter has traversed this country and is in the South of France. Because his personal heroes included men like the Bossman and Louis Armstrong who were “international American force[s],” Scooter aspired to achieve at least a portion of the world they knew. So by the end of Murray’s second section, Scooter tells Jewel that he will not be returning to the United States with her. Rather, he will stay on in Europe for a while and explore the terrain his heroes traversed. Whereas Bigger’s fate is sealed by the end of “Flight” Scooter’s world opens even wider. Filled with excitement over the possibilities that lie ahead, Scooter “sprinted ahead to the damp sand and water’s edge” on a beach in the South of France thinking, “This many miles beyond Chickasabogue Bridge and the canebrakes and the bayou, this many more miles along the way.”

**Philosophical connections**

129 Murray, Seven Leagu e Boots, 197.
130 Murray, Seven Leagu e Boots, 198.
131 Murray, Seven Leagu e Boots, 255.
132 Murray, Seven Leagu e Boots, 258.
Taken as a whole, the organization and thematic structure of Ellison's and Murray's novels stylistically parallel the composition of jazz music. The titles of each novel indicate human agency and the fascination and wonderment of dreaming broadly and traversing vast psychological and, in Murray's case, geographical terrain. As the foundation for jazz music, the blues exudes individuality through the agency of the performer and the songs are endowed with the breadth of human experience. The opening excerpts of each novel compound the intricacies of human endeavor. Invisible Man's textual journey is of the deeply personal variety while Scooter's is comprised of the possibilities that emerge from already having the self-assurance for which Invisible Man strives. Linked textually to the idea of hope in both Ellison's and Murray's novels, education is the metaphoric fulcrum linking the blues and jazz traditions. While many artists needed no formal vocal or instrumental training, legendary jazz musicians of the sort depicted in Ellison and Murray's novels were often trained formally in classical European traditions. In Ellison's novel, non-formal training is augmented by and made more complex with formal educational pursuits. In Murray's novels formal training and its associated documentation (Scooter receives a high school diploma, college degree and has been granted admission into graduate school) is a requirement for young Scooter. The world-class musicians depicted in Ellison's and Murray's novels performed nationally and abroad as informal ambassadors of American culture. In Ellison's and Murray's texts, formal education is necessary for widening the scope of experiences for the protagonists. Invisible Man and Scooter use formal academic training to advance personal goals even as they grapple with or rely on communal knowledge as a guiding element in the creation of identity.
Integration and segregation as guiding elements in the crafting of one's artistry is vital. Professional musicians such as those heralded by Ellison and Murray (Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington respectively) needed an audience in order to receive payment for their efforts. Crossing the color line was mandatory because one needed to cross various boundaries in order to sustain professional vitality. Ellison's and Murray's novels illustrate the necessity of negotiating color line angst in order to broaden individual possibilities. Finally, mobility is an indicator of personal and professional success in that one can advance in either arena only by sufficiently completing tests of proficiency. The musician who has proven his talent by satisfying an audience and so securing future performance dates will be asked to perform in other cities, larger venues, and will likely receive more pay for his efforts. Ellison's and Murray's protagonists use mobility as an exercise of liberation. Invisible Man is psychologically free to pursue mental clarity, despite the Jim Crow laws of his era and he exerts this liberty, in part, by moving geographically from the South to the North. Scooter extends the metaphoric use of mobility by traversing vast geographic terrain, both stateside and overseas. Both authors express in their writing the reality of intellectual and physical freedom despite the reality of any legal and/or social restrictions by playing on the stellar careers of Armstrong and Ellington. Each author remains true to his rearing in the American South and like the world-class musicians to whom they pay homage, each protagonist uses his past in the development of his individual voice. Modeled after the blues and jazz,

133 Aware of some critics, like Irving Howe, who are incapable of realizing that allegedly 'downtrodden people' could and did realize freedom despite legal, physical, social and/or economic disparities or barriers Ellison wrote, “Howe either miss[ed] the irony” expressed by Invisible Man’s physical hibernation “or assume[ed] that I did.” See Ellison, “The World and the Jug” in Shadow ad Act, 109.
Ellison’s and Murray’s novels lend insight into the myriad possibilities made manifest in a stylistic modeling of the complexities of sound.

Murray’s novel answers in the affirmative the question posed by Robert Stepto, “can a questing figure in a narrative occasioned by the pregeneric myth be both an articulate survivor and an articulate kinsman?” Scooter seeks his place in the world as an intelligent college graduate—he has even been accepted into graduate school—steeped in the traditions of his community, who survives in increasingly complex environments. He matures in the *Seven League Boots* into an articulate spokesman and purveyor of cultural knowledge when he assumes the role of teaching Jewel Templeton and readers alike the history of jazz.

Murray’s novel, featuring a protagonist who is literate both academically and culturally, is situated at the literary polar opposite of Wright’s Bigger Thomas. Existing between these two extremes is Ellison’s Invisible Man who seeks to become an articulate spokesman for the self he imagines even within his hole-in-the-ground. The wealth Scooter amasses in Murray’s third novel and throughout his series is not material but cultural and as such cannot be taken away; this is the same wealth in which he has been reared. This textual strategy, too, is opposite of Wright’s. Bigger has nothing, materially or culturally, but Invisible Man has cultural tokens along with the grandfatherly wisdom that haunts him throughout the novel. While Bigger reaches out to no one and so learns nothing in the course of the novel, Invisible Man makes courageous attempts to broaden his psychological and intellectual horizons. Scooter, however, is modeled after legendary jazz musicians who “reached out to embrace themes, the techniques, the idioms of any

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[event] they found appealing and they did so with a minimum of fuss or comment," and so his path to personal fulfillment is smooth, steady, and unmarred by fits and starts.\textsuperscript{135} As an "articulate kinsman" Scooter's characterization lays to rest the inner identity turmoil faced by Invisible Man and the bitter rage of Bigger Thomas.

Wright suggests that Bigger's rage due to his economic conditions prohibits him from realizing his potential and bars his self-assertion. Though he has killed twice, Bigger longs for something else to kill and finds that what needs to be disposed of is internal. "Out of a mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time it was not directed toward people but inward, upon himself."\textsuperscript{136} But Bigger is not suicidal. Rather, he longs to kill the inner force that has driven him to feel a sense of hopelessness and despair and that has led to his view of himself as being less than human, "unequal, and despised."\textsuperscript{137} Years after the publication of Wright's novel, Nikki Giovanni would pen the words that describe what Bigger feels. In her 1968 poem entitled, "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro," Giovanni's speaker asks the poignant question, "Nigger/Can you kill?"\textsuperscript{138} The speaker goes on to query the subject about the types of violence she or he might use to kill the insidious victim, "do you know how to draw blood/can you poison?" (Giovanni, ll. 10-1). As if keyed in to Bigger's thoughts and alluding to Wright's text the speaker asks, "can you piss on a blond head/can you cut it off?" (Giovanni, ll. 19-20). Articulating a truth Bigger's death will reinforce, the

\textsuperscript{135} Levine in O'Meally, \textit{Jazz Cadence}, 443.
\textsuperscript{136} Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 255.
\textsuperscript{137} Wright, \textit{Native Son}, 256.
The agency Bigger asserts through the act of killing and the momentary freedom it grants him is captured in Giovanni's line, "we got to prove we can kill" (Giovanni, l. 24). Bigger's intellectual immaturity coupled with his rejection of communal knowledge has caused him to "kill" the wrong thing. Rather than raping and murdering Bessie (women and cultural heritage), Bigger should have killed the "nigger" in himself and let his potential (intellect and imagination) live. If Bigger could only "make [his] nigger mind/die" as Giovanni's speaker asserts, he might have had the wherewithal to develop and act on some vision of a brighter future (Giovanni, ll. 32-3).  

Invisible Man functions because there is no "nigger" in him. Moving chaotically through the text, Invisible Man keeps trying new avenues of possibility, and although he never secures for himself the above-ground smoothness of stride he seeks, he continues to press onward and eagerly anticipates the end of his hibernation. Scooter is in constant motion throughout Murray's text. He goes, does, and sees new places and meets new people continuously. He is not caged and in taking advantage of his opportunities he broadens his range of experience as he increases his geographical domain. Taking for granted his innately hostile segregated, impoverished, and politically marginalized community, Scooter is not angry. He simply and eloquently functions with what he has—good teachers, a caring community replete with its own heroes, and a best buddy second to none. Scooter has these so-called basics all his life. Ellison's narrator is not angry. He, too, does the best with what he has and asserts an attitude of affirmation not deprivation.

139 While this sentiment in Giovanni's poem may most accurately speak to the then current reality of deaths during the Viet Nam War, her comment expresses a continuum of thought regarding the alleged massacre of black men.
140 In my understanding "nigger" refers to a negative psychology, void of hope and lacking direction such as that depicted in Wright's characterization of Bigger Thomas.
Even Wright’s contemporary, Gwendolyn Brooks, asserts a disposition of doing rather than simply being (as in being angry) through the voice of her narrator in “kitchenette building.” In this poem, the speaker lives under the same conditions as Wright’s Bigger. The environment is one in which dreams have a hard time being realized and make but a “giddy sound” (Brooks, l. 2). However, despite “yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,” the narrator ponders, ever so briefly, what to do with a dream and defers her thought only to tend to the far more urgent need to urinate now that the bathroom has become vacant. (Brooks, l. 7). Bigger’s rebellious “complaint” and his “groaning” obliterate his view of the possibilities that do exist, despite his conditions. In focusing only on his rage, he is myopic and insults the legacy of everyday African American heroes who succeeded and succeed still, in beating the odds under legal and social conditions far more heinous than his own.

The optimism Scooter exudes is a continuation of lessons learned in his childhood that made him believe not in religion but in himself. Fascinated by Miss Lexine Metcalf’s globe as a child, and by an even larger globe in college, Scooter is thrilled when, as an adult, he is on an airplane “heading into sunrise over the province of Normandy.” Drifting off to sleep as he enters regions he had always dreamed about, Scooter fades from consciousness thinking, “this many miles away from Mobile Bay ... This many miles along the way.”

Significantly, Scooter’s vision of success is realized by focusing on the possibility of escaping the historically brutal racism of the Deep South. From his earliest days, he imagines jumping rail on trains, going to college, and traveling away from the hostility

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142 Murray, Seven League Boots, 277.
143 Murray, Seven League Boots, 277.
inherent in his native environment. His horizons have been broadened exponentially since his earliest days in Gasoline Point, Alabama, and in Murray’s final section, “The Craftsman,” Scooter is faced with the reality of merging his expansive world view with that of his wide-eyed curious admirer, Jewel Templeton. When Jewel admits to Scooter, “I don’t know when I’ve been so happy. Really happy,” he is made fully conscious of their relationship and though he realizes, “I was having a good time too,” he also understands the deeper reality that, “somehow or other I did not think of myself as being happy.”\textsuperscript{144} Though he and Jewel have much in common, Scooter adheres to his community commitments and never loses sight of his intentions with Eunice Townsend. He intends to honor the “schoolboy promises [he] had made as much to [himself] as to the expectations of anybody else, beginning back even in the preschool times of Mama and Miss Tee,” because Eunice, like Gaynelle, represents going home.\textsuperscript{145} Childhood mission complete, for the time being, Scooter returns to the United States and ultimately to the Deep South—with fingers crossed all the while—prepared to embark upon new adventures as a graduate student and as the, hopefully, permanent beaux of his fair lady, Miss Eunice Townsend.\textsuperscript{146}

\textbf{(Un) Masking Possibilities}

Murray and Ellison have created novels that identify, articulate, and extend the blues as a philosophy and aesthetic device that opposes Wright’s \textit{Native Son} on a most fundamental level. Both Murray’s and Ellison’s novels suggest that to know oneself, one

\textsuperscript{144} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 290.
\textsuperscript{145} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 297.
\textsuperscript{146} In conversations with Murray, he tells me that the fourth novel in this series opens with Scooter and Eunice married and with Scooter enrolled in a graduate program in NYC.
must delve deep into the origins of his being and nurture a sense of group consciousness even as one develops individually. Whereas Wright’s novel offers a simplistic and flattened view of the urban poor and black life in general, Murray’s and Ellison’s novels reveal the complexity life, the richness of cultural connections and the value of group consciousness despite economic considerations. According to Murray’s text, if one is like Scooter and reared in the blues, one finds that he is the progenitor of a heroic legacy. Forged from those who have survived and thrived by employing varied means including religion, song, dance, stubbornness, rigid self-determination, and a host of actions designed and enacted to thwart feelings of inadequacy, Scooter was born between the proverbial ‘rock and a hard place,’ yet nurtured by his community and so is part of it even though he forges an identity of his own. As the narrator explains in Murray’s novel,

you play the blues the way you play the blues because that is the way people among whom you grew up conditioned you to hear and play the blues—without ... denying either your individuality or even personal idiosyncrasy ... such is the nature of the source of idiomatic authenticity.\textsuperscript{147}

This idea recognizes differences in style, of presentation, or personality and yet simultaneously maintains a commonality based on personal or communal knowledge in transforming the particular angst one may face. So while Murray’s aesthetic take on depicting the blues in print may differ from Ellison’s, the two methods form a unified ideology and are variations on the same tradition. As Ellison states, “those who know their native culture and love it unchauvenistically are never lost when they encounter the

\textsuperscript{147} Murray, \textit{Seven League Boots}, 310.
unfamiliar."^{148} Scooter is guided by and adheres to his culture because he loves it dearly. Similarly, the old woman who sings spiritual’s in Ellison’s Prologue tells the narrator that freedom does not lie in hate, “Naw, son,” she says, “it’s in loving.”^{149}

Bigger’s outright rejection of the blues and its concomitant link with self-affirmation as an effective way to combat the despair with which he is faced is where Murray and Ellison might argue Wright’s novel falls short. As Ellison asserts, “the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom” and could, even should have provided Bigger with a foundation strong enough to transform his anger into practical form.^{150} As Murray explains, “the most fundamental as well as the most obvious shortcoming of Bigger Thomas … is that he is an exaggerated oversimplification of both the complexity as well as the potential of Negro life in the United States.”^{151}

Wright’s novel ends with the protagonist’s impending death that is, after all, a logical and long awaited outcome for the intellectual and emotional death that has existed all along. Ellison’s novel ends on a hopeful, if uncertain note and this is precisely Ellison’s point. Life is uncertain and while Invisible Man is eager to embark upon above-ground experiences and test his new sense of self, there is no promise of a problem-free environment, clarity or not. Beginning with a Kafka quote that suggests uncertainty (“the castle hill was hidden” and there was not even a “glimmer of light/to show that a castle was there”), The Seven League Boots ends on an equally uncertain but hopeful note as Scooter waits with fingers crossed, waiting for whatever comes next.^{152} Like the blues, Ellison’s and Murray’s novels illuminate life’s fascinating complexities and

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^{150} Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 255.
^{151} Murray, *Hero and the Blues*, 94-5.
^{152} See opening epigraph in *The Seven League Boots*. 

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contradictions and so unmask the human possibility destroyed by Wright’s artistic endeavor. Like the blues, however, neither Ellison’s nor Murray’s novels offer any definitive answers for the troubles faced by their narrators because knowing the uncertainty of life, each author knew improvisation would be a requirement. In unmasking possibilities for societal change, Murray and Ellison’s novels suggest the power of individual fortitude (steel rugged determination) in the midst of the bizarre and always uncertain experiences we face. In transforming the world and making it a better place, we must begin with transforming our individual psyches. As each novel demonstrates, we can always exert intellectual power and imagine possibility no matter how caged-in we may allegedly be. “Within these free spaces, networks of relationships are built, cultural rituals are developed, shared meanings are facilitated, and strategies are rehearsed, thus making social movements possible. This is a potentially transformative experience for individuals as well as society.”

In opposition to Wright’s fixed narrative of pathology, Murray’s and Ellison’s novels are like jazz scores; sketches of ideas meant to inspire creativity, improvisation and encourage change.

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AFTERWORD

For all its power to transform, the blues is not a violent or protesting music. It does not have to be because its strength lies in affirming the best of the individual. Used as a guide for literary analysis, the blues offers compelling insights into African American culture and the far-reaching influence of its people. Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* depicts a community rich in its own resources, actively engaged in the business of living not lamenting their alleged limitations. While blue feelings may comprise an inescapable reality, characters such as Luzana Cholly, Stagolee Dupas, Gator Gus, Little Buddy Marshall, Deljean McCray, Miss Lexine Metcalf and others offer reasons to eagerly anticipate another day and so counter the ill effects of both personal angst and even the mundane bitter realities of racism and its associated maladies. Similarly, an investigation into the various literary, musical, and aesthetic (visual arts) influences that contribute to the creation of *Train Whistle Guitar* and the other novels in Murray’s series reveal complexities that promise to keep scholars employed indefinitely. A blues-based analysis of texts maintains and emphasizes the text’s inextricable link to history and honors the musical genre by identifying the multiplicity of aspects that contribute to artistic development while also offering a synthesis to the field of study. Artists are always looking for ways to improve their craft and will draw upon myriad sources, some seemingly related to their particular field, others not, as they search for inspiration and creative liberation. Literary critics can achieve similar liberation by openly acknowledging (i.e. documenting in print) the existence and wide-ranging influence of the blues and the variety inherent in the ways in which human agency is revealed as
diverse communities work to overcome blue feelings in culturally and historically significant ways. More than the ongoing violent aggressions between rivaling groups of people, human survival and subsistence should be viewed as a matter of daily conquering the minutia of life.

It is the power of the blues to adopt, appropriate and transform. In its ability to "adopt," the blues as critical theory grants an entry point to a text and reveals familiar and accessible narrative formulations within the text (the railroad, the reality or impact of migration/travel, geographic locations/regions, names of artists/bands and the titles of their songs, use of language and vernacular expression). This literary manifestation of acculturation identifies the ways in which the protagonist of a text makes himself a part of both his local environment and the wider realm of adventure and opportunity that engages a multiplicity of experience in the process of asserting his individuality. In "appropriating" a text, the blues as critical theory links common features shared between texts and reveals the cultural (literary, visual, musical, intellectual, gender, and any other) influences on the text. By revealing intertextuality, critics place texts in the realm of literary discourse by acknowledging the multiplicity of textual influences of various texts upon each other in the ongoing effort to make sense of the world.¹ It is through the process of "transformation," however, that the cultural proclivity towards a blues ontology is determined. This endeavor involves the critic in an in-depth study of the ways in which a particular text exhibits a coherent synthesis. Given the variety of situations (what has he adopted?) with which a protagonist is faced and the various influences

¹ Texts can have influence even on people who have not read the book in question. When people read book reviews, critical essays, attend book club meetings, or watch television shows (Oprah’s book club comes first to mind) and have general conversations about books it gives a work name recognition which, in turn, increases the influence of a particular work even if all the people who discuss the book have not read the text.
which have helped develop his character (what has he appropriated?), how does he achieve a particular goal? In other words, what tools, mechanisms, devices or skills are important to the protagonist, how does he employ those tools, and to what end? An investigation of these types of questions acknowledges the protagonist as an agent in his future rather than a mere victim of circumstance. “But for some curious reason, nothing at all is ever made of the possibility that the legacy left by the enslaved ancestors of blues-oriented contemporary U.S. Negroes includes a disposition to confront the most uncompromising circumstances and make the most of what little there is to go on, regardless of the odds.” Murray’s 1976 comment addressed a glaring hole in the realm of cultural analysis and suggests that work is still needed in literary criticism in general and the blues as a cultural mechanism in particular. An acknowledgement and study of blues-based literature advances the understanding of how the blues legacy has endured in the United States, the range of its influence, and its ability to transform the hegemony that continues to threaten intellectual, artistic and professional livelihood. Slaying modern dragons of institutionalized racism, theoretical hegemony in literary critical discourse, and professional annihilation will require the same types of weapons used to battle the specter-filled forests, thorn-laden briar patches, and Grand Dragons of lore. Employing the blues as a method or guide for literary theory relinquishes the author, critic, and reader from any “victim” status because the blues does not merely beg, borrow, and plead but transforms the inevitability of one’s circumstances or conditions into an attitude of affirmation that empowers the practitioner. In this way, simplistic definitions (such as

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2 This use of theory can work for analyzing the text through the lens of the protagonist, as I will do with Murray’s and Ellison’s texts in chapter three, but can also be used to analyze the artistic inclinations of the author.

"victim") are neutralized as every conscious thought and/or action a protagonist makes is an indication of his self-assertion which is ultimately a testimony to human agency (no victims allowed!). Conditions might be brutal, circumstances might be unfair and yet African Americans, humans in general, have triumphed, have known heroes, have created legends and will continue to do so despite the threat of nuclear war, the rapid spread of AIDS, and abject poverty. Human nature has proven that we will always make a way out of no way; or at least, some of us will. The blues offers one approach to gaining insight into the methods of survival that have sustained a people for generations and its counterpart exists in cultures worldwide. As the good-time music of juke joints and sophisticated urban nightclubs (and many venues in between), the blues celebrates the human triumph over despair in culturally and historically meaningful ways. Houston Baker notes, "The black speaking subject who attempts to invert the negative ontology that whites promote as a 'natural' entry in American discourse becomes a heroic figure" because s/he creates an identity for her/himself and in so doing, engages a powerful self-assertion. 4 Heroic models need to be identified and explored for their usefulness in serving as guides as scholars and artists navigate the stormy waters of theoretical and cultural change. Rather than engaging the ways in which racism manifests itself and has shaped the development of ideas and fictions, scholars should devote time to discerning the ways in which communities have survived, transformed and evolved into present conditions as a result of determination and personal fortitude and how these qualities indicate political, economic, and intellectual realities and lend insight into geopolitical futures. The literature that employs blues methods in its creation and the discourse that

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uses the blues as a method of analysis promises to grant both the author and his critic liberation from negative ontology.

Murray’s series is a story of “suite” success. Scooter’s maturation through situations that compound the complexity of his experience in each novel serves to broaden his realm of learning. He begins the series as a novice in every way but by the end of Murray’s third novel, Scooter has developed into a self-assured young man who is capable and confident about forging his own path even as he maintains vital links to the community of his rearing. In reference to the creation of musical suites Schuller states that their development indicates “real compositions, strongly influenced by classical forms and techniques, though at the same time thoroughly grounded in certain jazz traditions… and sound concepts. These pieces were far removed from the world of ‘arrangements’ and dance numbers and pop tunes. They were…of unusually high quality.”5 Similarly, Murray’s series is strongly influenced by literary classics such as Thomas Mallory’s Le Morte D’Arthur, various folk tales and fairy tales, yet is ‘thoroughly grounded’ in the blues and so maintains a vital link with the cultural history of African Americans. Far removed from the world of “arrangements and dance numbers and pop tunes,” when taken as a whole, Murray’s series indicates a “real composition” in the sense that it advances a central theme comprised of individual parts themselves intricately conceived.

Train Whistle Guitar introduces Murray’s theme of heroism being central to African American culture.6 Scooter is a child and experiences myriad situations and overcomes them as would a child. In The Spyglass Tree, Scooter is older and faced with a

6 Albert Murray, Train Whistle Guitar (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974).
broader realm of experience. As he negotiates his college experiences with increasing self-assurance Scooter’s heroism is reinforced because he intellectually deciphers right from wrong based on the quality and quantity of his learning (academically and cultural) to that point. In *The Seven League Boots*, Scooter has graduated to another level of academic and psychological maturity and his role as a hero is compounded again as he engages even more complex experiences, this time with the grace and apparent ease of one whose knowledge base is secure. In advancing a central theme over the course of three novels with a sole protagonist, Murray demonstrates intellectual muscle and artistic control, arranging motifs and situations in the same manner as a musician devoted to developing an extended work. Emphasizing the significance of the blues and jazz music in each novel, Murray maintains a link with the cultural history of African Americans while demonstrating the delicate junctures of artistic influence that exist in the creation of, in this case, works of literature. Different from a single novel or single musical score, the development of a series is akin to the creation of musical suites because of the intellectual tenacity involved in adhering to a central theme while creatively arranging motifs and situations in such a way as not simply to repeat but rather to improvise on what has been stated earlier. Improvisation is a process of evolution and is a guiding tenet of the blues and jazz music and in the literature that adheres to its constructs. Improvisation must be viewed not as random creative meandering but rather as a historically based technique rooted always in commitment by way of training, skill and talent.

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Readers of Murray's series will notice profound silences in his fiction, indicating areas that are rich for scholarly exploration. These omissions are, at times, so obvious as to seem intentional. Lynching, one of the most heinous atrocities levied against members of the colored community, is all but absent in Murray's series. Educational opportunities are depicted as being readily available for those who work hard and stay focused on the tasks at hand. In fact Jim Crow, as a system designed to limit and/or obliterate opportunities, social movement and economic advancement for people of color, seems to have had little impact on Scooter and members of his thriving segregated community. I think these silences or, more accurately, understatements (Murray does address each issue to some degree) are intentional. Murray's career was launched with the publication, in 1970, of *The Omni Americas: Black Americans and American Culture*. This work, as is indicated on its title page, was written to provide "Some alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy." In the *Omni Americas*, Murray engages the history and ramifications of the tenuous black white relationship in the United States. In his nonfiction Murray asserts a strong counterstatement to the 'folklore of black inferiority'; however, in his fiction, Murray does not engage the debate. Rather, in his fiction, Murray focuses acutely on the most positive aspects of black culture in order to illuminate that which he heralds in his nonfiction. If the folklore of white supremacy is at one pole of the racial divide, Murray's counterstatement is decidedly at the other. Murray's silences suggest, at least, a strong-willed self assertion that is unrelenting in its championing of black culture.

By positioning himself at one end of the racial divide, Murray creates in his fiction a fairy tale like series. Murray's fiction, like bodies of fiction that have historically
denied colored peoples the dignity of human agency, creates a hero whose right to power should be unquestioned. Murray is exacting in his writing and creates a world in which Scooter experiences none of the pitfalls that deter ordinary humans which is in direct contrast to depictions of blacks as victims, depraved, and dehumanized—popular views that Murray’s fiction is designed to counter. Knowing full well that life is a low-down dirty shame, Murray saw no usefulness in retelling this often-told story in his novels. My study allows Murray his silences and understatements in order to ascertain the benefits that can be realized by championing the very best of individual endeavors. Undoubtedly Scooter’s experiences can be discerned in light of various setbacks that Murray chooses to de-emphasize. However, focus on the most positive aspects of Scooter’s character reveals acute points of cultural contention. In a manner similar to that described by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres in their book, The Miner’s Canary, my study illuminates larger issues that plague our vast cultural terrain by narrowing in on the particulars of Scooter’s experiences. The questions that arise through exploring the silences in Murray’s work allow space for Murray’s work to be engaged critically in significant ways that can only illuminate the fields of blues and jazz studies.
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VITA

Jacquelynne Jones Modeste

Jacquelynne Jones Modeste was born in Waterloo, Iowa, on April 29, 1968. She graduated from Dwight Morrow high school in Englewood, New Jersey, in 1986. Jacquelynne Jones Modeste received her B.A. in English Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1990; and an M.A. in American Studies from Columbia University in New York City, New York, in 1994.

In September 1995, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a Commonwealth Fellow in the American Studies program. Jacquelynne Jones Modeste defended her dissertation in November 2004 and is currently working at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, as the Executive Assistant to the President. Jacquelynne Modeste is married to Lorenzo and they have two young boys.