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„Choosing "Desperately to Live" with Music – an Investigation of the Functions of Intermedial References to Music in the Fiction of Ralph Ellison"

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1 Introduction

Speaking about his time in New York, Ralph Ellison later wrote, ”In those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live” (*Living with Music* 227). Indeed, music is an almost inescapable feature in the former musician’s storyworlds. It appears in the songs in children’s games, the hymns of church, the singing that fills the streets of his vision of New York and the American South or the jazz record that Invisible Man plays on repeat in his underground hole. It comes as no surprise that Ellison’s writing itself has also repeatedly been compared to different types of music ranging from classical symphonic forms to structures in blues and jazz (Murray qtd. in Callahan, *Introduction IM* xv; Callahan, *Introduction Short Stories* xiv; Callahan, *Introduction Juneteenth* xiv). While such comparisons to music have a tendency to take on the form of praise rather than being based in factual analysis and, as such, have to be taken with a grain of salt (Wolf, *Musicalization of Fiction* 90; Fekadu 57), it is, nevertheless, surprising that research on the role of music in Ellison’s fiction is comparatively rare. Those researchers that touch on this topic relate the content of Ellison’s writing to improvisational techniques in jazz (Radford 62), use his writings to draw cultural comparisons between jazz and the tradition of the church (Pinkerton 186-87) or relate it directly to questions of race (Copenhafer 171-72). What is as of yet missing is an investigation that takes a more encompassing approach by analyzing the music in Ellison’s fiction from the perspective of intermediality and in terms of its functions.

Such an approach can offer important new insights. Firstly, intertextual and intermedial references always exist within a power relation because of different literary traditions and the differing prestige associated with the respective media. Analyzing the way in which Ralph Ellison as an African American writer uses intermedial references to position himself in these two contexts can improve our understanding of these power relations. As Gess points out, investigations of music-literature intermediality can also help to contextualize writing in the sense of offering a new perspective on the history of literature (139) and they can therefore also help to contextualize Ellison’s writing. Secondly, music plays a significant part in the definition and performance of ‘identity’, which is one of the dominant themes of Ellison’s fiction. An analysis of the role music plays for individual and group identity in Ellison’s stories can deepen the understanding of how these identities are performed, negotiated and questioned in the ‘real’ world. This is especially important for communities that have suffered oppression and a belittling of their cultural achievements, such as African Americans. Music can form a significant basis for the development of their identities, both within a larger community or

nation and as individuals. Thirdly, taking a more global approach to intermedial references to music can enlighten our understanding of how references at the discourse level and at the level of the story are connected. Research tends to focus on one of these levels to the exclusion of the other. Sometimes one type of reference is also perceived as of little interest for research. For example, Rajewsky states that individual references on the story level are mainly useful as an indication that system references influencing the discourse could be found in a text (*Intermedialität* 149). By focusing on both aspects, a more encompassing view of how intermediality can influence a piece of literature could be achieved.

This thesis aims to address these matters by analyzing the works of Ralph Ellison under the light of intermediality and by relating it to Wolf's idea of a "musicalization" of literature, in which music plays a part in the "signifying process of the narrative" (*Musicalization* 42, 52). Specifically, this thesis will attempt to answer the question: *Which function do intermedial references to music serve in Ralph Ellison's fiction and how do they contribute to the structure of the narrative discourse and the exploration of individual and group identity?*

It will be argued that music fundamentally influences the structure of Ellison's fiction by relating it to the musical genre of jazz. Additionally, references to music and the performance of music play an important role in the development of Ellison's major topic of identity – both on the level of individual and group identity. Further functions of musical references in fiction for characterization and plot-development will be investigated as well. The main focus will be on Ellison's seminal work *Invisible Man*, supplemented by individual references to a selection of his short stories and his unfinished second novel *Juneteenth/Three Days Before the Shooting*, where musical references serve similar roles. It is hoped that this study will contribute to our understanding of the specific ways Ellison uses intermedial references to music and the functions these references serve on the level of 'story' and 'discourse'.

This paper will proceed with an overview of two models of intermediality in section 2. These models will be presented and, on their basis, a model for analyzing the functions of references to music in literature will be presented in section 3. Since Ellison's background in music and his relation to the literary tradition are of relevance to this analysis, these topics will be the focus of section 4. Ellison's relation to the Harlem Renaissance and to Modernism will be a particular focus since this relation informs how he uses intermedial references. Section 5 will offer a detailed analysis of a specific reference to music in the prologue of *Invisible Man* and how this reference relates to the discourse structure of the novel. Section 6 will focus on the role music plays for identity in Ellison's fiction. This will be divided into three subsections:

how children's music informs the development of individual identity, how church and ritualistic music relates to the performance of group/community identity and how the performance of music is related to expressing individuality and subverting societal expectations and roles. The conclusion in section 7 will offer an overview of the findings as well as questions that merit further research.

2 Models of Intermediality

Before turning to a closer inspection of the study of music in literature, we need to define what exactly is meant by 'intermediality' and 'intermedial references'. In the most general terms, intermediality "refers to the relationships between media" (Rippl 1). The concept of intermediality is closely related to that of intertextuality. There are, however, differing definitions for both terms (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 45; Rippl 6). Some researchers conceptualize intertextuality in its broader meaning as referring to all kinds of semiotic systems and therefore see intermediality as a subcategory of intertextuality (Wolf, *Musicalization* 46). On the other extreme, some researchers view intermediality as the dominant principle. They contend that an understanding of other media is a necessary precondition for the production and reception of any media product and intermediality can therefore be found in all texts (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 48). For the purposes of this project, we will use a narrower definition for both terms, as follows:

Intertextuality refers to the ways a certain text references other texts within the same general medium. Intertextuality would, for example, be a novel referencing one of Shakespeare's plays or one piece of music referencing another piece of music. In each of these cases, the medium of the 'text' in the broader sense – what we might call the semiotic system – stays the same. Intertextuality, according to this definition, also includes references to texts that are from the same medium/system but belong to a different subcategory or genre.

Intermediality, in our definition, means the reference of a certain text to a text from a different medium, i.e., a different semiotic system. That means that (at least) two different media are involved in the meaning-making process (Gess & Honold 5). For our further discussions, we will use the terms 'source medium/source system' to refer to the medium/system that is referenced and the terms 'target medium/target system' to refer to the medium/system in which this reference appears.

The definition above covers a wide range of phenomena such as film and music adaptations of literary works, references in advertising to a specific painting, references to music in literature

etc. A basic distinction can be made between "telling", where the source medium is mentioned or discussed, and "showing", where the source medium is evoked or re-produced in the target medium (Gess 143-44; Schmitz-Emans 134; Wolf, *Showing* 95). Through intermediality, other semiotic systems and media products are referenced, represented and re-contextualized in a specific media product. In this process, both the source and the target work can be encoded with additional meaning ("Zusatzkodierung") (Schulte-Middelich 214) and to fully grasp the meaning, a reader would ideally also be familiar with the source medium and its context (Schmitz-Emans 135). The additional encoding also means that intermediality can serve to re-evaluate a certain work; even a counter-positional stance towards the source material can be taken (E. Martin 148-49). Furthermore, intermedial references can extend beyond references to the content of a certain media product and can also include references to tropes and other typical features of a certain genre or type of medium (Hallet 610-11; Jacobi 313; Wolf, *Musicalization* 46, 56-57). For example, a poem could adapt certain characteristics of a specific musical form, such as the fugue, without referencing any individual piece of music. This form of intermediality belongs to what Rajewsky subsumes under 'reference to a certain system' ("Systemreferenz") as opposed to 'references to an individual text' ("Einzelreferenz") (*Intermedialität* 157). Based on these characteristics, an intermedial analysis of a certain text aims at an understanding of how the different media contribute to the text's meaning (Rippl 2).

Intermediality is a somewhat broad field in which different disciplines are concerned depending on the phenomenon discussed. For example, intermedial studies can investigate literature, film, music, photography, or advertising. It has therefore been deemed useful to consider some generally applicable theories of intermediality before moving on to the specific application of the relation of music and literature. For this purpose, two models of intermediality will be presented: one by Rajewsky and one by Wolf. Both models deal with general features of intermediality that go beyond the relationships between specific types of 'source' and 'target' systems.

2.1 Rajewsky's model of intermediality

According to Rajewsky, three broader categories of intermediality can be distinguished: 'medial transposition' ("Medienwechsel"), 'media combination' ("Medienkombination") and 'intermedial references' ("intermediale Bezugnahmen") (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 51-52; Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 157; Jakobi 315). The first category, '**medial transposition**', includes all cases in which a text is adapted from the source medium into a different target medium (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 51). Probably the most common example of medial

transposition would be a film adaptation of a novel. Obviously, such a transposition cannot mean that the source material is taken over directly. The presentation of the material has to follow the rules and limitations of the new target medium (51). This form of intermediality is not instantly recognizable as intermediality because none of the media-specific characteristics of the source medium have to be present in the target medium (Wolf, *Showing* 96). For instance, none of the medium-specific aspects that make the source material 'novel-like' might be present in the film adaptation of a book. But there can still be instances where features and elements of the source material are approximated in the target medium. In this case, other aspects of intermediality, in addition to the general notion of 'medial transposition', would be relevant that allow for a more precise categorization. For instance, different perceived societal values of the respective source and target medium might influence the way 'medial transposition' is performed.

In the second category, '**media combination**', Rajewsky subsumes any media product that is the result of "combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation" (*Literary Perspective* 52). This combination could take place either at a certain point in the 'text' or throughout the media product. This second category accounts for any type of genuinely mixed media, such as film, opera, theater or comics (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 51; Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 157).

The third category, '**intermedial references**', contains any type of reference to a 'source medium' that appears in a certain media product. This would include, for example, references to film or music in literary works. Rajewsky stresses that these references are "meaning-constitutional" and "contribute to the media product's overall signification" (*Literary Perspective* 52). The central distinction between 'intermedial references' and 'medial transposition' according to Rajewsky's definition is that in a 'transposition' the source text is present throughout the whole new medial product, especially on the level of its content. This is not the case in 'intermedial references', where the source text only appears in a part of the target text and the target text's content can be fundamentally different from the content of the source text. This distinction is debated in literature and writers such as Gess and Lubkoll have argued for classifying both types of references as 'intermedial references' (Gess 142; Lubkoll 78-79). Schmitz-Emans further points out that it is not clear what exactly is transferred between the two media, since for some source media, such as music, content and meaning cannot readily be separated from the medium (142).

Since 'intermedial references' are the most significant category of intermediality for the purpose of this thesis, they will be the focus of the following, more detailed categorization of intermedial phenomena. In Rajewsky's model, the main differentiating factor for the categorization of 'intermedial references' is whether the reference is located on the level of the 'story' or the level of the 'discourse' (*Intermedialität* 80-81, 159-160). References on the level of the story are marked by the explicit reference to the 'source medium' without any changes to the discursive elements of the 'target medium'. In contrast, intermedial references on the discourse level require that certain prescriptive and restrictive rules are adapted from the 'source medium' and transposed to the 'target medium'. A further distinction, as has been mentioned earlier, can be made regarding whether the reference is to a specific media product ('individual reference' or "Einzelreferenz") or to another type of media as a whole ('system reference' or "Systemreferenz") (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 52-53). Rajewsky devotes relatively little attention to the phenomenon of 'individual references', stating that the interest of 'individual references' is mainly that they often accompany 'system references' (*Intermedialität* 149). To what extent this claim can be substantiated with respect to the writings of Ralph Ellison will be explored later in this thesis. For now, we will proceed with the detailed differentiation of 'system references' that Rajewsky derives from her considerations of the 'story' and 'discourse' level.

Rajewsky splits up the domain of 'system references' into two categories, which in turn have their own sub-categories. The first category is 'mentions of the system' ("Systemerwähnungen") and the second category is the so-called 'system contamination' ("Systemkontamination") (*Intermedialität* 157). 'Mentions of the system' are intermedial references made at isolated points and do not necessarily impact the discourse structure of the 'target medium' – although they can do so for isolated sections (158). 'System contamination' goes beyond a partial or isolated reproduction of micro-elements of the 'source medium'. In the case of 'system contamination', the 'source medium' fundamentally influences the discourse structure of the 'target medium' throughout the media product, so that the whole media product is placed in relation to the 'source system' (118).

As mentioned before, Rajewsky proposes further sub-categories for 'mentions of the system'. These can be classified in the following way:

a. 'Explicit mentions of the system' ("explizite Systemerwähnungen")

In this case, the 'source system' is either talked about or reflected on without any modifications to the narrative discourse of the 'target medium' (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 79). This could, for example, mean that two characters in a novel talk about whether they like movies or reflect on the process of moviemaking. 'Explicit mentions of the system' are consequently only relevant to the story and do not influence the discourse elements, i.e., the way it is presented (80). If they appear in high frequency, they might, however, serve as indicators that other intermedial phenomena are present as well (83).

b. 'Mentions of the system by means of transposition' ("Systemerwähnungen *qua* Transposition")

Here, certain elements or structures of the 'source system' are reproduced, evocated, or simulated in the 'target medium' (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 159). This is possible by using microforms that are typical of the 'source system' and adhering to some degree to the rules of the 'source system' (84). This results in the creation of an illusion ("Illusionsbildung") that results in the reader recognizing the media product as resembling the 'source system' (86). This category of 'mentions of the system by means of transposition' is further divided into three different ways in which this illusion can be achieved:

i. 'Evocation of the system' ("evozierende Systemerwähnung")

An 'evocation of the system' happens when a similarity to this system is suggested by speaking about or reflecting on the 'source system' (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 159). The main difference between this and the previously discussed 'explicit mention of the system' is that here the system is evoked in the sense that an illusion is created. This can be exemplified in the following way if we take the 'source system' of movies: If the narrator says that the main character spent most of her evening watching old movies, this is a case of an 'explicit mention of the system' – the 'source system' is mentioned, but none of its specific features are necessarily evoked in the reader. If, on the other hand, the narrator describes the main character as looking like a Hollywood starlet from the 1950s, this would be an 'evocation of the system' (91). In this case, readers would have to refer to their knowledge of the system of movies to understand the meaning of the statement. Hence, it creates an illusion in which the system of movies is evoked.

ii. '(partial) simulation of the system' ("(teil-)simulierende Systemerwähnung")

In the case of a '(partial) simulation of the system', certain elements or structures of the 'source system' are simulated by changes to the narrative discourse at certain isolated points of the 'target system' (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 160). An example could be the imitation of a certain

technique used in movies in a part of a literary text, for example, by trying to replicate a montage technique or simulating something akin to an editing technique through language. Another example would be what is called 'word music', i.e., language in literature that, if read aloud, simulates certain qualities of music – a technique that is used somewhat frequently in modernist writing (96, 97). The main point of this intermedial phenomenon is that the experience of the 'source system' is simulated, so rather than explicit references to the system, which function on the level of the story, changes to the discourse create the illusion that one is experiencing something resembling the 'source system'. A necessary precondition for the '(partial) simulation of the system' is the existence of some similarity between the two systems. This similarity can then be used to create the illusion of the 'source system' being present in the 'target system' (89). Since this type of intermedial reference deals with aspects that are specific to the 'source medium', this is nevertheless called a simulation since a direct translation of these specific aspects into the 'target medium' is not possible (84).

iii. '(partial) reproduction of the system' ("(teil-)reproduzierende Systemerwähnung")

The '(partial) reproduction of the system' does not aim at a reference to media-specific characteristics of the 'source medium'. Instead, these intermedial references focus on aspects of the 'source medium' that – while being typical of the 'source medium' – do not necessitate its particular discourse structure. Instead, they can exist fairly independently from the medium – for example, typical characters or plots (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 103, 104). Another option is that certain aspects of the two media are congruent and can therefore be reproduced in the 'target system' (160).

This concludes Rajewsky's categorization of 'mentions of the system'. The other subcategory of 'system references' is called 'system contamination' ("Systemkontamination"). It is structured similarly to the 'mentions of the system'. As mentioned before, the main difference is that here not only a part of the media product is referencing the 'source system'. Rather, the whole media product is fundamentally modified – or, as the name implies, contaminated – in a way that reflects the 'source system' (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 125-126, 133, 160). Still, the resulting media product is identifiable as a specimen of the 'target medium' because the adapted aspects are being used in a way that still conforms to the rules of the 'target system' (137). Rajewsky distinguishes the following two forms of 'system contamination':

a. 'System contamination by means of transposition' ("Systemkontamination *qua* Transposition")

Here, the rules of the 'source system' are adapted from to the 'target system' and are then followed in the whole media product (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 161). Rajewsky stresses that due to the fundamental differences between the two media, the rules of the 'source system' can only be approximated and used in an 'inauthentic' way (133).

b. 'Partially actualizing system contamination' ("teilaktualisierende Systemkontamination")

In the case of 'partially actualizing system contamination', the rules that are taken over are not highly specific to the 'source system' and can therefore be directly translated into the 'target system' rather than being approximated (Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 143). As with the other form of 'system contamination', these rules are continually observed throughout the media product.

This concludes Rajewsky's model of intermediality. By restricting her model to aspects of intermediality that are independent of any specific 'source' or 'target' system, her model provides a highly useful starting point for investigations in intermedial studies. This general applicability is, however, also a disadvantage of the model. While it is very encompassing, it is less useful when one goes beyond the general categorization of intermedial phenomena and investigates their functions. Stating a problem of research in intertextuality that is also applicable to the study of intermediality, Schulte-Middelich states that defining the functions of intertextual references could help to make the concept more useful for interpreting texts (242). The question of the function of intermediality is missing from Rajewsky's model. Possibly, the reason for this is that the function intermediality serves depends on the context of specific media. Still, this information needs to be supplemented for any intermedial study to arrive at significant results beside the recognition that intermediality exists. Another potential point for debate is the minor importance that Rajewsky ascribes to intermedial references to individual works. As will be shown in this thesis – at least with respect to the writings of Ralph Ellison – references to individual works are not only common but can also serve significant functions for both the story and the discourse in narrative fiction.

Due to these considerations, Rajewsky's model will be supplemented with Wolf's model of intermediality which is more closely connected to the specific context of music-literature relations and expands on the functions intermediality serves in narrative fiction in this context. Wolf's model of intermediality has been revised several times and over the years, the names of some central features of his model have changed. The following section is primarily concerned

with the earlier nominations because the early version of the model was specifically related to the analysis of music-literature relations and the functions he assigns to these relations in his earlier work are of relevance to our analysis.

2.2 Wolf's model of intermediality

Wolf, similarly to Rajewsky, views intermediality as a phenomenon in which "at least two distinct media […] are manifestly or directly involved in the signification of an artefact" or traces of a second medium are apparent in a target medium (*Musicalization* 37). For Wolf (37-39), the distinguishing factors for the categorization of intermediality are as follows:

- "The **media involved**": which types of media are involved in the production of the text or artifact.
- "The **formation of medial 'dominants'**: whether or not one of the media is dominant (for example, with regard to the rules the artifact is based on) and whether the media are dependent or independent of each other.
- "The **quantity of intermedial parts** of a work": whether the whole work is intermedial ("**total intermediality**") or just a part of the work ("**partial intermediality**").
- "The **genesis of intermediality**": whether the author of the source text was involved in the intermedial transformation (for example, by working together with an artist to create illustrations) or not.
- "The **quality of the intermedial involvement**": intermediality can be either overt or covert.

The most relevant of these distinctions when it comes to the analysis of music in literature is between overt and covert intermediality. Overt intermediality occurs whenever "both media are directly present with their typical or conventional signifiers and if consequently each medium remains distinct and is in principle 'quotable' separately" (Wolf, *Musicalization* 40). Wolf later slightly revised this statement, stating that the "components need not always be 'quotable' separately" (Wolf, *Intermediality Revisited* 22), but the general definition remained unchanged. While this simultaneous presence of music and literature is possible in performative literature if, for example, an excerpt of a literary piece is read while music is being performed or if music appears in an audio book, it is essentially impossible in written literature. The closest music can come to being present in a written piece of literature is if sheet music is printed in the text or if a piece of music would automatically play at a certain point in an interactive book (for example online). A truly authentic hybrid-form between literature and music is unachievable with

written language. All other forms in which music can appear in literature are examples of covert or indirect intermediality, which Wolf later also called "intermedial reference" (*Intermediality Revisited* 23). Wolf's definition of this type of intermediality is as follows:

> [T]he participation of (at least) two conventionally distinct media in the signification of an artefact in which, however, only **one** of the media appears directly with its typical or conventional signifiers and hence may be called the dominant medium, while another one (the non-dominant medium) is indirectly present 'within' the first medium. Consequently, this other medium is not present in the form of its characteristic signifiers but, at least minimally, as an idea, as a signified. [...] [I]n all these cases the signifiers of the dominant medium retain their distinct and typical identity, which is different from the signifiers of the non-dominant medium. [...] [T]he two media cannot be separated from each other. (*Musicalization* 41)

This includes practically all references to music in written literature, regardless of whether they fall into Rajewsky's category of 'individual reference' or 'system reference' and regardless of whether they merely mention the system or contaminate the system by a complete or partial adoption of rules from the target system (Rajewsky, *Literary Perspective* 52-53; Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 157). This would allow for an integration of both models with each other with the advantage of Wolf's additional distinctions mentioned above. The combination of both models would be particularly useful in an investigation of legitimization processes, which are always at work when two media interact (Degner & Wolf 8). Wolf states that covert intermediality includes "the musicalization of literature", quotes that evoke songs and song lyrics as well as "ekphrasis" in which a verbalized description of a song is given (*Musicalization* 42-43). A further distinction can be made between "thematization", in which the way of representation in the dominant medium is not changed, and "imitation", where the dominant medium is adapted and "mimetically" presents the referenced medium so that an "iconic similarity" between two media is established (44-45, 57). The concept of "imitation" can basically be equated to Rajewsky's 'system contamination' (*Intermedialität* 157) and will not be discussed further at this point because Rajewsky's model covers this type of intermediality in greater detail. "Thematization" of music occurs whenever the narrator or a character listens to, discusses or interacts with music in any other way. This can be in reference to a specific work of music or to a genre of music. The central aspect is that the "signifiers" of the literary medium "are not iconically related to the non-dominant medium" (Wolf, *Musicalization* 56-57). According to Wolf, references to vocal music by means of quoting the lyrics are "located in between 'thematization' and 'imitation'". This is due to the already mixed nature of vocal music in which text & music are combined (67-69). However, for fiction to actually be considered 'musicalized' in Wolf's definition, "identifiable 'iconic' similarities or analogies to

[…] music or to effects produced by it" should be present in the text and the reader should get the impression "that music is involved in the signifying process of the narrative" (52). A mere reference to music as a background element in a description would therefore not constitute musicalized fiction. For musicalized fiction, the function of the musical reference has to suggest an imaginary presence of the music in the literary work (Wolf, *Showing* 96).

In comparison to Rajewsky, Wolf's model of intermediality is somewhat broader while Rajewsky's goes into more detail in its distinctions of the level of intermediality. Neither of their models are explicitly made for analyzing music, although Wolf focuses on music-literature relationships in the rest of his book. In contrast to Rajewski, Wolf applies his model to investigate what *function* intermedial references to music can serve by analyzing a number of specific literary texts. Since the concrete functions depend largely on the themes of the text and the intentions of the author, not all of these functions are applicable to other texts. Still, some of the more general functions described by Wolf in *Musicalization of Fiction* deserve mention here:

- Music can provide an "enhancement of […] [the] emotional effect" of the narrative (119, 158).
- Particularities of music can serve as a model for structuring the progression of the narrative (121, 176). They can also provide a way to create "aesthetic coherence" or "aesthetic unity" in the narrative (121, 141, 176).
- Music itself is part of everyday life and is therefore also part of the storyworlds created in literature (140-41).
- Music can serve an "experimental function" for moving away from traditional storytelling and in this context also a metareferential and self-reflective function for exploring the "limits of [the] narrative medium" (143, 159, 175).
- Music can serve as a trigger for the thoughts of characters. Related to this is an epiphanic potential of music for characters in the story because music is in contrast to the "everyday world". Because of this, music can be a means for "finding a centre of meaning and identity in one's life" (150, 154, 157).
- The nature of music as an essentially non-referential, non-mimetic art can serve as a reflection of or a model for the human consciousness as it is represented in narrative fiction (150).
- Music – especially if it is presented subjectively through a focalizer – can also serve "the characterization of an individual character" (157).

). Generally, all these functions fit into one of two basic categories of functions: an intratextual function, influencing the meaning on the level of elements of the text, and an extratextual function, which encompasses meaning that goes beyond the text itself, for example, in addressing cultural or "meta-aesthetic" questions (Hallet 612, 613). While Wolf gives some background on the history of music in literature before the 20th century (97-101), his analysis limits itself to a small selection of modernist texts. The reason for this is that the experimental attitude of modernism and a dissatisfaction with traditional ways of storytelling led to heightened interest and a greater appreciation of the essentially a-mimetic medium of music as a model for literature (101-109). Naturally, Wolf's list of functions that references to music can serve is not to be seen as a complete inventory of music-literature relationships. Still, it serves as a good starting point for an investigation of musical references in the works of Ralph Ellison. Taking both Rajewsky's and Wolf's models of intermediality into account, the following section will outline the relationship between music and literature and define different ways in which musical references can appear in narrative fiction.

3 The Relationship between Literature and Music

Much has been said about the relationship between literature and music both by authors and researchers. As has been pointed out by multiple writers, music has been called a "sister art" to poetry (Fekuda 45; Wolf, *Musicalization* 3) and music has been described as a kind of language with a specific logic (Hindrichs 31), even though other writers reject the notion that music qualifies as a type of language because it can be a-referential (Previšić 47). Due to this relation, it comes as no surprise that intermediality between music and literature is found quite frequently. Intermedial relations in which music borrows from literature abound. They range from the tradition of minstrels to the adaption of literary works in operas and symphonic music (especially in the 19th century) and to more modern examples in which literature is adapted and recontextualized in popular music, such as Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights* (Bernhart 391-92).

On the other hand, literature has also borrowed and drawn inspiration from music. A number of writers have either claimed that their works bear resemblance to music or have stated that music should be taken as a model for writing (Fekuda 15; Wolf, *Musicalization* 3). For example, writers during the period of romanticism, such as William Blake and William Wordsworth, pointed towards music as a model for a new style of writing that more closely reflected the sensibilities that poetry was supposed to express. In the early 20th century, some modernist writers, such as Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf, presented arguments for taking

music as a model for a new kind of writing that met the social and artistic challenges of the 20th century (Fekuda 27-28, 83-84; Wolf, *Musicalization* 101-109).

Since the focus of this study is the way music is referenced in the writing of Ralph Ellison, we will deal with *music in literature* and, in particular, the ways in which it can be presented and functionalized in narrative prose writing. This is related to both Rajewksi's and Wolf's models of intermediality together with Wolf's notion of a "musicalized fiction" as it was presented in the previous section. Combining elements from these models with the knowledge of Ellison's use of references to music, we can conclude that references to music in narrative texts essentially take on one of a number of different forms that will be presented here:

- *Certain rules and terminologies of music can be adapted to the narrative style of writing and applied to elements of the narrative discourse.*

This is related to Wolf's concept of "imitation" and Rajewsky's idea of 'system contamination' (Wolf, *Musicalization* 44-45, 57; Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 157). By adapting these rules to fiction, writers often try to find new ways for structuring narrative texts. It has to be said that both writers and critics sometimes use terms from music rather vaguely when they try to apply them to writing. Nevertheless, there are certainly instances in which authors create narrative prose fiction that bears resemblance to music, although instances of poetry that does so are found more frequently (Wolf 3, 22). While it would go beyond the scope of this project to outline in detail the ways in which prose that adapts rules from music works, it is helpful to outline some general concepts of music that could be adapted to the literary form and briefly outline how such an adaptation could be achieved.

One aspect of music that is often seen as central to writing as well is rhythm (Wolf, *Musicalization* 3, 22). While it is fairly simple to identify the rhythm of writing in poetry, the rhythm of prose writing is comparatively subjective and often a trademark of the style of the individual writer. The analysis of rhythm in prose is further complicated by the fact that the rhythm of natural speech is not notated in a written text. Since literature extends beyond the written text and even the written word could be seen as an intermedial transposition of the spoken word (Previšić 39-41), the acoustic dimension of literature is not necessarily present in fiction. As a consequence, it is difficult to clearly conclude that a piece of writing is influenced by the rhythm inherent to a piece of music. More often than not one has to rely on context clues for drawing conclusions about intermediality that references the rhythmic rules of music. Such context clues can come from the notes of authors or from titles or epigraphs of books and

chapters. Drawing conclusions from these clues can sometimes still be difficult especially since writers can use terms from music theory without much attention to their original meaning when they try to describe or justify their style of writing. Whether or not the rhythm of someone's prose bears resemblance to music is consequently difficult to judge.

"Harmony" is another concept in music that is of interest to writers. Again, one could offer different interpretations as to what it would mean to adapt the idea of harmony to prose writing. For instance, a writer can present different voices and viewpoints of the same story, telling it over again from different perspectives and thus arriving at a fuller picture. The problem with using this approach is that it does not quite reflect the meaning of harmony as it is used in music, namely a simultaneous presence of different notes (*Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* "Harmony") or – to use a term more closely related to literature – voices. A 'true' representation of harmony in literature appears to be impossible given the nature of the written word on a page: On paper, only one voice can be present at any moment in time, regardless of the efforts of the author. A closer representation of harmony could be achieved by moving to the medium of the spoken word, which is itself an almost intermedial genre. Even in spoken literature, the different voices would not exist simultaneously while still being meaningful to an audience (Previšić 49). The utmost that the written word can do is to give an appearance of 'harmony'. This would then be an example of Rajewsky's concept of 'system contamination by means of transposition' which is always necessarily inauthentic (*Intermedialität* 133, 161).

Often, the argument can be made that other, less general and encompassing terms from music would be better suited for describing literary attempts at the adaption of musical rules. One example is the term 'counterpoint'. While, strictly speaking, counterpoint refers to a rather strict set of rules that determines how simultaneous voices are to be arranged, it is a feature of counterpoint that "two or more melodic lines" are combined (*Harvard Dictionary of Music* "Counterpoint") and that each of the lines that are performed simultaneously is "of significance in itself" (*Oxford Dictionary of Music* "Counterpoint"). As was discussed above with regard to the terminology of "harmony", a real simultaneity of voices is not achievable in writing. The idea of counterpoint still appears to be more applicable to writing since here the individual voices can also be meaningful when isolated from each other. The whole picture then exists as the combination of the different voices. Novels that use an approach to storytelling that is non-linear and where different plotlines converge together at some point could thus be said to be contrapuntal. An example of a piece of prose writing that partially achieves this is Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*, which is discussed at length by Wolf (*Musicalization* 174-

76). Huxley's solution for dealing with the limitations of the medium is to switch between the different characters and seemingly unrelated storylines in an interwoven tale. Only towards the end of the novel the relation between the individual stories comes together and one perceives the full picture – or to stay within the musical terminology: one is able to hear the music as the contrapuntal stories get interwoven into one complete piece. In the instance of *Point Counter Point*, the clue for the intermedial nature of its structure comes from both the title of the novel and a very explicit statement within the novel about a relation between writing novels and music. One of the novel's characters, the writer Philip Quarles talks about the "musicalization of fiction […] on a large scale, in the construction" of a piece of literature (Huxley 384). If we find such strong suggestions of structural relations between a novel and music, it can be a clue that other musical references are of greater importance in understanding the novel in general and that we could find parallels between the structure of the novel and music. We can conclude from context clues that Huxley uses counterpoint as a structural reference. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that throughout the novel pieces of classical music are referenced in which composing according to the rules of counterpoint is common. It is important to note, however, that applying a musical reference frame to analyzing a piece of prose writing is most likely to be useful when there already are context clues that the author is trying to structure the writing in a way that resembles a musical form.

In the case of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, we are dealing with a piece of writing that is clearly not inspired by the practice of counterpoint: except for the prologue, the story is told chronologically, and it is told from the point of view of a single narrator and focalizer. Instead, we shall turn to another musical term that we can apply to his writing and that is suggested by the specific pieces of music that are mentioned by Ellison. Most of the specific pieces of music Ellison references are jazz and blues songs, the songs of church and children's songs with some rare mentions of classical music. For most of these pieces of music, the rules of counterpoint are of little importance. One common feature of these songs is the use of repetition and variations (or solos) on a theme – whether lyrically in church and children's music or thematically in jazz, blues and classical music. Whether these structural rules of the music can also be found in Ellison's writing is one of the investigations of the thesis. What is to be said here is that rather than trying to stick to a more general framework of analyzing music (on the broad levels of 'rhythm' or 'harmony'), it can be of greater significance to look closely at the 'smaller' genre-specific rules that govern the pieces of music an author is referring to and investigate whether these specific rules are reflected in the structure of the writing.

- *Music (either in general or with a reference to particular pieces of music) can be referenced in the text either to describe a character or to set the scene. It can thus provide additional information about a character and enliven the story and enhance its effect, especially when the music mirrors characters' emotions or what is happening in the plot.*

This is related to the functions Wolf ascribes to music and it belongs to the category of 'explicit mentions of the system' described by Rajewsky (Wolf, *Musicalization* 157-158; Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* 80). This is likely the most frequent way music appears in prose writing. Music is generally a somewhat prominent part of certain storyworlds. One could generalize and take novels from the 19th and early 20th century as typical examples. These novels often feature music and dances as part of the general pastimes of the society they present and as such, the music is rarely commented upon in more detail than is necessary to give an impression of the scene that forms in the reader's mind.

To briefly illustrate this, one could look at the opening chapters of Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* as an example. Wharton's description of Christine Nilsson singing a main part in the opera "Faust" serves as not much more than an atmospheric backdrop as the main characters of the novel are introduced. Their reactions to the music help the reader to get an impression of the personalities of the characters: Newland's understanding of the proper manner of behavior at the opera as well as the subject matter (Wharton 4) is contrasted with his bride-to-be May Welland who "doesn't even guess what it's all about" (6). And the entire New York society's mode of behavior during the performance is thwarted by Countess Olenska's conduct (14-15). The opera and the performance of the singer are mainly commented upon in terms of its meaning to the high society – the press does not talk about the singer's performance but instead focuses on the fact that "an exceptionally brilliant audience" was attending the performance (3). What is commented on is the slight absurdity that the opera – an adaption of a German piece of literature by a French composer – was written in Italian and sung by a Swedish singer to an English-speaking audience (4). This brief fact – which again is linked to a description of Newland's personality, since for him this appears quite natural – can be taken as a slight reference to the intermedial nature of the genre of opera itself.

What this example shows is that references to music in writing do not always necessarily have meaning that would be very relevant in a discussion on intermediality in writing. Sometimes references to music are used 'merely' to form a background against which the personalities of the characters can be defined. Indeed, one could almost assume that the opera Wharton chose

to reference could be replaced with any other opera without much loss to the meaning of the opening chapters. On closer look, however, there is a relevance to choosing an adaptation of the *Faust* story as a reference: Seeing that May Welland does not understand the meaning of the story and the significance of the singer – who is playing Margarete – being approached by Faust (Wharton 5-6) has an effect on Newland's later actions and on the further development of the story. This is of relevance when studying the role of intermedial references: whenever specific pieces of music rather than an unidentifiable piece are mentioned it is potentially relevant to the story. This particularity will also be demonstrated with regard to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in section 5.

There are some instances in Ellison's fiction where music appears merely as an element that sets the scene. One example of this is Invisible Man's description of college memories in which he hears a "Christmas carol" and a spiritual while standing "beneath the high-hung moon" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 35). Here the music serves as a background for describing the serenity of his initial time in college. This serenity does not last and after his fall from grace as he is preparing to leave the college, he hears "the sound of an old guitar-blues plucked from an out-of-tune piano drift[ing] toward [him] like a lazy, shimmering wave, like the echoed whistle of a lonely train" (146). Again, this seems mainly to set the mood and underline Invisible Man's forlornness at this point of the story. The air of the campus at night is no longer filled with the harmonies of a group of horns, but with the sounds of a singular "out-of-tune piano". His world has similarly gone out of tune and his intention is to bring things in order as quickly as possible and return to his college life and re-achieve this former harmony.

Later in the novel, in a bar where Invisible Man tries out the disguise of Rinehart, he comments on a song that is playing loudly on the jukebox "lit up like a bad dream of the Fiery Furnace" (486). This too seems only to set the scene and underline the confusing reality of Harlem life, as does the brief mention of a woman on a cart shout-singing "in a full-throated voice of blues singer's timbre" (544) during the confusion of the Harlem riot. Sometimes, the scenic descriptions are longer, as when Invisible Man visits the church at which Rinehart is preaching:

> I looked past their heads into a small crowded room of men and women sitting in folding chairs, to the front where a slender woman in a rusty black robe played passionate boogie-woogie on an upright piano along with a young man wearing a skull cap who struck righteous riffs from an electric guitar which was connected to an amplifier that hung from the ceiling above a gleaming white and gold pulpit. A man in an elegant red cardinal's robe and a high lace collar stood resting against an enormous Bible and now began to lead a hard-driving hymn which the congregation shouted in the unknown tongue. (497)

Once again, this reference does not seem to have any relevance beside beyond setting the scene. Similar uses of "scenic music" can also be found in some of Ellison's short stories, such as the juke box playing "Summertime" in *A Hard Time Keeping Up* (80) and yet another juke box that could help you flee loneliness and "lose yourself in the music" in *A Storm of Blizzard Proportions* (116).

Additionally, short references to music are also used to point out certain aspects of a character's identity. For instance, Dr. Bledsoe's outward appearance of subjection to white guests is supplemented with the information that "his favorite spiritual [is] "Live-a-Humble"" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 106). Although these references to music enliven the narrative, they do not contribute significantly to the meaning of the story beyond that and are of no particular interest to our investigation beyond their mentions here. However, some of the musical elements that on the surface-level appear to be scenic devices take on specific meanings in the context of the narrative and will be discussed in greater detail in sections 5 and 6.

- *Music (either in general or with a reference to particular pieces of music) can be performed, explicitly talked about and reacted to by characters or the implied author of a narrative text. On the level of the story, this can serve as additional characterization or to amplify the themes in a story. It can also have an effect on the plot of a story, especially when music influences the attitudes of characters or has an epiphanic effect on the development of their identity.*

Depending on the context, this can be related to Rajewsky's category of 'evocation of the system' if, for example, someone's actions or mannerisms are compared to an element of music. It can also be categorized as an 'explicit mention of the system' if two characters simply discuss a piece of music (*Intermedialität* 79, 159). The case that one of the characters in a piece of literature might be an active performer of music and hence a producer of the source medium that the text references is not really accounted for in Rajewky's model. The closest description for this would be in the category of '(partial) reproduction of the system' (103, 104) in the sense that a person who produces art is an entity separate from the piece of art itself and therefore the person and the art it produces can both be part of a novel without a change to its discourse. The fact that meta-referentiality of this sort is not a separate part of Rajewsky's model is noteworthy, given the relatively high frequency with which artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers or other producers of media appear as characters in modernism and postmodernism.

Naturally, performances of music can appear as an element of narrative fiction, for example, when characters in novels are musicians themselves. This is quite often the case in 19th and early 20th century novels with female characters performing music – often on piano – in private and at social events. Such scenes can be found in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to name a few. As Fekadu points out, during this time period playing piano was mainly considered a feminine sign of accomplishment that would help women to find a husband (248). As an early 20th century example, Fekadu analyzes the piano-playing main character of Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* who finds pleasure in her means of expressing herself expertly on the piano, which is perceived rather negatively by her social surroundings (250-252). Ellison's fiction, of course, is set in a different time and social environment, so musical performances serve a different role. Still, characters that perform music feature prominently in his writing, particularly at key points in the narrative progression. Their role will be the subject of the section "6.3 Performing Music – Performing Identity" later in this paper.

In other narratives, the characters or the narrator sometimes explicitly comment on music or on its performers or their reactions to the music can be presented. One example of this can be found in James Joyce's short story *The Dead.* First, music is performed at the social gathering (Joyce 193). Then, at the dining table, the guests discuss the proficiency of different opera singers, commenting on how the quality of opera singers had apparently deteriorated from what it was in years past (199-200). Later in the story, after listening to a song that two guests play and sing as the company is leaving (211-13), Gabriel and his wife Gretta both have an epiphanic moment. The song reminds Gretta of a boy with whom she was in love when she was younger, but who died tragically. When Gabriel realizes this and reflects on it, his view on life and his relationship with his wife change dramatically and it is apparent from the open ending of the story that the change is a permanent one (220-25). According to Fekuda, Virginia Woolf ascribes a similar epiphanic effect to music (232-33, 240, 267-68). In this way, how characters interact with and perform music can go far beyond offering a backdrop for a narrative and serving as a way of characterization. Characters' reactions to and interactions with music can significantly determine their feelings and actions and, in the long term, they can influence the course of a narrative's plot. In this context, music is often linked to memory and identity. Hearing a particular piece of music can awaken a (knowingly or unknowingly) suppressed aspect of a character's identity and can impact the progression of the story. Or it can lead to self-reflection and a change in the character's identity, which can impact the plot as well. Both this epiphanic

potential of music and its relation to the performance of identity are present in Ellison's fiction and will be discussed in detail in section 6 of this thesis.

- *Music (either in general or with a reference to particular pieces of music) can be reflected on meta-referentially by the implied author or by characters in the story by commenting on parallels between narration in general and music or the act of writing and music – either implicitly or explicitly*.

That literature can be meta-referential is not a new notion. Meta-referentiality has become such an integral part of different types of media, that Wolf has summarized this as the "metareferential turn" of fiction (Wolf, *Metareferential Turn* 6). Writers can use the implied author or a character within the story to make meta-references about writing or the production processes of other media. These meta-references appear frequently when there is a clear narrator voice and when one of the main characters of a narrative is a writer themselves, both of which are the case in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. As was pointed out before, Rajewsky's model does not necessarily account for metareferences, and they would be categorized as 'explicit mentions of the system' as well (*Intermedialität* 79, 159). It is clear, however, that this type of reference serves a quite different function for the story and discourse than the previous type of reference, which does not point towards system-related similarities between the two media but would fall into the same category of Rajewsky's model.

While meta-references in writing can take on a wide range of forms, we will concern ourselves with meta-references that point toward a relationship between literature and music. One example for this is the afore-mentioned *Point Counter Point*, in which the author-character Philip Quarles develops a plan for a "musicalization of fiction" (Huxley 384). In Huxley's novel, the character goes into some detail as to how such a novel would work, likening the changes of moods within the narrative to different movements in a musical piece and to variations on a theme. He posits the idea of arranging the narrative with different plot lines contrapuntally. Interestingly, on the following page Philip Quarles also suggests putting "a novelist into the novel" because "[h]e justifies aesthetic generalizations" (385). Much of what the character within the novel describes is what Huxley is doing in the novel itself. In other cases, the meta-reference might be more subtle and implied rather than as explicit as in Huxley's novel. Still, as with other aspects of these intermedial references, finding these sections in narrative prose would suggest that at least some intermedial relation between music and literature might inform the piece of writing.

Ellison also implies similarities between acts of speech and performing music in his narrative fiction. For example, in one of Invisible Man's speeches as a student, he talks of himself speaking as "*imitating the trumpet and the trombone's timbre, playing thematic variations like a baritone horn*" and "*words marching like the student band, up the campus and down again, blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs*" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 113). In the later novel *Juneteenth*, Reverend Hickman relates the ritual drumming of African culture to acts of speech, describing "[d]rums that spoke with big voices like big men […] that told glad tidings […] that sent the news of trouble speeding home" (105-106). Since Ellison sees such a connection between the processes behind music and speech, one would not be amiss to search for similarities between music and writing in his fiction. This will be the subject of section 5 on "Ellison and Louis Armstrong".

Drawing on this outline of some ways in which music can appear in literature, we shall discuss in greater detail how Ellison uses music in his narrative fiction. Ellison's use of music is informed by a number of factors, including his own background in music and the cultural context of his writing as informed by the Harlem Renaissance and Western European modernism. Therefore, an overview of these influences and their impact on musical references in Ellison's work is offered in the following section.

4 Ellison's Times: Music and Literature

4.1 Some Notes on Ellison's Biography and his Relation to Music

As a boy and young man growing up in Oklahoma, not much in Ellison's life seemed to prefigure the fact that he would become a successful novelist and winner of the National Book Award (Rampersad 3). Lured by the promise of more freedom and rights than in the South, Ellison's parents had moved to Oklahoma City a few years before his birth. Ellison's father – who had named the boy Ralph Waldo in honor of Ralph Waldo Emerson – died when Ellison was just three years old (6-7). Ralph Ellison was more drawn to music than to literature as a child and young adult (Callahan, *Introduction Stories* ix). Oklahoma City in the 1920s was one of the nation's hubs for jazz music and was visited by jazz legends such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. In turn, the town also brought forth some fine jazz artists. Among the people Ellison knew or grew up with were blues singer Jimmy Rushing and jazz guitarist Charlie Christian (Rampersad 28), who, despite dying at a very young age, was leading figure in the development of Bebop – a development that fundamentally changed jazz in the 1940s (Gioia 144-45). Ellison would later write essays about a number of jazz musicians, including

one honoring Charlie Christian, whom he recalls, as a schoolboy, as building "guitars from cigar boxes" (*The Charlie Christian Story* 267).

Growing up, Ralph Ellison set his mind on mastering the trumpet, spending countless hours practicing (Rampersad 25). In school, Ellison was the student bandmaster of the high school band and he learned that there was a "basic compatibility" of "classical and vernacular styles" (*26*), something that Ellison would later stress and try to find ways to reconcile in his essays. The basic idea behind this can also be traced in much of his fictional work. Indeed, he was introduced to a wide variety of culture – from classical to jazz and blues music to Shakespeare's plays (26). Ellison was aware that there were quite conflicting traditions attached to the different styles he toyed with. In one of his essays on music, he later wrote:

> [There] is a conflict between what the Negro American musician feels in the community around him and the given (or classical) techniques of his instrument. He feels a tension between his desire to master the classical style of playing and his compulsion to express those sounds which form a musical definition of Negro American experience. (Ellison, *The Charlie Christian Story* 271)

As we shall see, this conflict despite a basic compatibility between styles and cultures is apparent not only in music, but also in the literature of Ellison and members of the Harlem Renaissance.

For most of this time of his youth though, Ellison's goal was a career in music rather than literature, although he continued to be an avid reader (Rampersad 29-30). Despite the influences of black jazz musicians, his aspiration was not to join their ranks and become a jazz musician. His plan was to become a composer of classical music, "writing symphonies based on the folk music of his people" (41). Ellison attended Tuskegee Institute where he studied music and eventually became the institute band's student leader, playing trumpet and, at times, conducting (69). At the same time, he was also reading extensively while taking classes and working in the library of the institute (64, 76).

Ellison eventually did not finish his education as a musician and composer. Rather, he turned his attention to becoming a writer. Still, Ellison's early musical education influenced the meticulousness with which he approached writing (Rampersad 205) and the views he had of the conflicting influences on African American musicians are reflected in his writing.

4.2 Ellison, the Harlem Renaissance and Music

Analyzing the way Ellison contextualizes his writing through intermedial and intertextual references and his reasons for doing so requires not only an understanding of his musical background but also of the literary-cultural context of his texts. Ellison can be seen as a descendent of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance is usually said to encompass the time between 1919/1920 and the Great Depression starting in 1929 or the late 1930s at the latest (Mitchell 2, 6; Herringshaw 86, 87; Howes & Slovey 136). While not strictly a part of the Harlem Renaissance, Ralph Ellison can by extension be described within a similar framework. Ellison was not only familiar with the works of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance; he personally knew some of them and they played a role in encouraging his turn away from music and towards writing. While in New York City starting in 1936, Ralph Ellison met the writer Langston Hughes, who introduced Ralph Ellison to socialist and "[l]eftist" ideas and literature and lent Ralph Ellison his old typewriter, encouraging him to write (Rampersad 82, 85, 90). Later, Ellison became friends with Richard Wright, who played a major role in inspiring Ellison to write and helping him to publish some of his early writing – a review for a magazine – and whose friendship inspired and helped Ellison to advance for much of his early career as a reviewer and essayist (Rampersad 99, 212). Like Ellison, Richard Wright was also "committed to modernism" and Rampersad describes both men as being "adoring of Western learned culture" and that they both "admired and yet had [..] grown more and more critical of black culture" (97). This also included the African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance that was already waning from the scene when Ellison and Wright arrived in New York in the late 1930s.

The Harlem Renaissance happened partly as the result of the migration of many African Americans to the Northern United States in the early 20th century and the New York district of Harlem became a center for African American culture, in particular for art and literature (Mitchell 3) as well as music (Warnes 307). The period was marked by a significant increase in the production of African American culture and by a new-found confidence of African Americans in their ability to produce worthwhile art (Howes & Slovey 4-5, 26). Black artists were not unanimously of the same mind when it came to defining how African American culture should be portrayed. Some of them advocated presenting the "whole spectrum of African American people, situations and communities", while others opted for presenting only the "worthy" sides of African American life (Howes & Slovey 36). A number of leading intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, for instance, were skeptical of the newly emerging genre of jazz that was coming into its own as a form of music driven by improvisation and

considered it as uncivilized (W. Martin 347-48). In spite of these differing ideas, it was clear that a central goal of the Harlem Renaissance should be the demonstration that African American artists were capable of producing art that affirmed their humanity and culture. They were to define what their culture and their "contribution to […] civilization" was, which called for a "cultural awakening" (Huggins 59-60). Another goal was one of defining identity – both of the individual and of the community. Without having a "clear sense of the past", they were tasked with delineating the African American "character and personality in the American context" (Huggins 138-39).

The art created during the Harlem Renaissance spanned a wide field in music, painting, sculpture, and literature. Some of it was in the vein of "folklore" and traditionally African American culture, some of it was more closely related to newer strands of culture or to Western European culture (Howes & Slovey 37, 98). Jean Toomer's *Cane*, for instance, is more closely related to modernism because of its experimental structure, while Hurston's fiction is more closely centered in realism and inspired by folklore (Howes & Slovey 45-47; Pfeiffer 56). The poetry of Langston Hughes tries to use "modern forms" while also taking inspiration from musical forms like Jazz and blues (Howes & Slovey 59), but more than anything else, his poetry avoids being "high culture" and rather tries to prove "that the people's language, and voice, and rhythms were legitimate stuff of poetry" (Huggins 227). Hughes assigned great value to jazz and its "spiritual effects" which he considered to be "on par with classical and sacred music" (W. Martin 347-49). Female writers of the Harlem Renaissance have been criticized for resorting to traditional forms rather than using the vernacular, folklore and jazz influences that were almost demanded from modernist influences. But, as Honey points out, a significant number of female poets of the Harlem Renaissance are marked by their modern themes and artistic experimentation which included references to jazz and gospel music and the music's rhythms (159-162).

At the same time as African American artists, musicians and writers were trying to create art that was representative of their culture, the arts of the Western European culture and of white Americans were undergoing a change under the influence of modernism and the connected stylistic experiments. While Huggins claims that "there was no evidence of literary inventiveness in Harlem", he cites Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes as exceptions to that statement (228). Generally, the influence of modernist ideas is not as strongly felt in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance as in the literature of later writers, such as Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright. Nevertheless, interactions between black and white writers and artists were

not uncommon in New York in the 1920s and even though these connections were not without conscious and unconscious racism, they provided opportunities for mutual influence and an exchange of ideas (Pfeiffer 55-56, 60). When the artists of the Harlem Renaissance attempted to follow these ideas, it meant that they had to negotiate multiple cultural worlds in their work. They were turning towards their own cultural roots while also trying to align their works with the tradition of Western European literature and modernism (Mitchell 4). Treading the line between representing their own culture and meeting the artistic standards set by both themselves and the modernist writers was not an easy task to achieve.

This slight dichotomy is also apparent in the works of Ralph Ellison and in his faith in both "the integrity of black folk culture and […] in Western art and learning" (Rampersad 141). Within the literary tradition, Ellison is closely related to modernist writers like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot whose works inspired his early experiments in writing as well as by his friend Richard Wright (Rampersad 99-100, 106-107, 171; Callahan, *Intro*duction *Short Stories* xv-xvii). In his later fiction, Ellison found his own voice and no longer uses as much of the almost imitative style that marks his early writing. Nevertheless, Ellison is writing in two cultural contexts. This is especially apparent in the intertextual and intermedial references he makes in his writing. On the one hand, he adheres to the tradition of Western writers and the modernist movement by referencing other writers such as Dostoevsky in the structure and mood of his underground prologue (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 3-14), Herman Melville in the preacher's sermon about the "blackness of blackness" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 9; Rampersad 195) or Homer through the character of the blind preacher Homer A. Barbee (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 133) among others (Rampersad 206). By doing so, he is trying to place his text within the realm of Western literature and garner a similar respect to that paid to his own literary icons.

On the other hand, Ellison also frequently references music in his writing. This in itself is also typical of modernist writing. However, even though Ostendorf speaks of the contemporary African American jazz as "the true musical idiom of Modernism" (97), jazz does not typically play a big role in the modernist experiments of Joyce, Woolf and Huxley, who model their writing on and reference "baroque and classical music" (Wolf, *Musicalization* 182). Ellison's references to music, by contrast, are much more rooted in the music that was contemporary in his time rather than referring to music of the distant past. The majority of his references are to the music that is present in the everyday life of black communities: the music of children's songs (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 68, 193, 234-235, 241-242, 500), of church (35, 47, 111, 116-117,

234, 339, 390, 452-453, 497) and popular songs (8-14, 486, 581). At times, he also references classical pieces of music, but these references are comparatively rare (134, 232-233).

The fact that Ellison chooses to do this and focuses his musical references on works from the background of African American culture is not to be taken for granted. As a young musician himself, he had chosen a path towards a career in classical music rather than becoming a jazz musician (Rampersad 135). In his writing style itself the traditions of Western modernist writers are much more clearly felt than the background of African American writing and the authors of the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, his references to music do not fall victim to the distinction between "high" and "low" art that is sometimes made (Degner & Wolf 8). Even though jazz and popular music does not possess the prestige of Western classical music and is considered part of "Umgangsmusik", a type of music that does not require attention from the listener (Hindrichs 22-3), Ellison does not present African American music as a curiosity or ascribe less importance to it than to the classical references he makes. Rather, when an orchestra plays Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, Invisible Man keeps hearing the melody of the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" resounding through the piece's theme (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 134). This choice of connecting African American music with classical music and the general choice of primarily referencing African American music throughout the novel has fundamental consequences (von Ammon 535-36). Both different art forms and different sub-genres within those art forms are perceived differently in terms of their value and legitimacy (Degner & Wolf 8, 10-12). By making a connection between the classical music of Europe and the spirituals of Southern African Americans, Ellison ascribes legitimacy to the cultural products of African Americans. And this claim is further supported by the way he uses references to music throughout *Invisible Man*. In fact, music in Ellison's writing is not really an artform that is somewhat separate and distinct from the world in which the story takes place as it sometimes is in modernist literature, and it certainly is not an ideal of human experience and sensibility that is understood and appreciated only by an elite. Instead, music is part of the storyworld; it is lived and breathed by the characters, and it is interwoven with their experience of life rather than offering an escape from it. Music not only has the role of giving additional meaning to the story. It also serves an evocative function, imbuing the storyworld with life. It evokes parts of the experience of the South in the mind of the nameless narrator as well as contrasting the life of African American people in the North with the experiences of white people inhabiting the same environment. And it provides a historicity and cultural background through which identities can be developed and performed.

In this way, his references to music align Ellison more closely with the tradition of African American culture and experience, while his writing is more closely modelled on the Western influences of modernist writers and their views. In doing this, Ellison takes part in two processes of legitimization. On the one hand, he legitimizes his own position as a writer of note – similarly to the earlier writers of the Harlem Renaissance – by aligning his own writing with the tradition of Western European writers. His own work is to be seen as possessing a depth and legitimacy comparable to that of the modernist writers of America and Europe. On the other hand Ellison also takes part in a process of legitimizing African American art and culture. By elevating the modern black art forms of jazz and blues music as well as the religious music of African Americans, Ellison does something similar to what Wolf describes in an article on George Eliot's references to Dutch paintings in *Adam Bede*. George Eliot refers to these paintings to describe and justify her artistic vision: her goal is to capture a truthfulness and realism in her novels that she also identifies in Dutch paintings. Here, Eliot uses an established art form, namely painting and the visual arts, to outline her own artistic vision of what the novel is supposed to be and, in the process, legitimize the comparatively new novel as an art form (Wolf, *Mediale Dominanz* 249-250). Ralph Ellison does something similar but, in his case, the roles are reversed: the novel in the European tradition is the established art form and the music he references is the newer, 'low' art. In treating African American music this way – relating it to the classical music tradition (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 134) or directly relating it to the process of storytelling and writing as we will investigate in the following section (8-14) – Ralph Ellison posits that African American music and, by extension, culture has a similar claim to legitimacy as literature of the European and Western tradition. Interestingly, Neumann calls intermediality "commemorative practice" and points out the transformative potential for intermediality in recording cultural memories (519). This is in line with Ellison's treatment of African American music. One of the roles references to music play in his writing is stressing the value and role of African American culture and art by connecting it to the tradition of the more accepted European and Western cultural products of the 20th and earlier centuries. In doing so, he not only makes a claim for being accepted into the history of cultural creations for his own work. He also makes a claim for a more universal conception of art, in which the art of African Americans is on equal footing with the Western European art that he himself admired.

We shall now investigate in detail the references to music that appear in Ellison's writing. Particular attention will be paid to the way musical references help to expand on Ellison's treatment of identity on the story level by analyzing how characters react to and perform music and how this shapes their identity-forming processes and the ways in which they perform

identity. This will be the focus of section 6 of this thesis. Before that, a closer inspection at one of the more extended references to music in the prologue of *Invisible Man* will be presented, since this reference shapes the novel on the story level but also implicitly offers us information about the discourse structure of Ellison's writing.

5 Louis Armstrong & Ellison: A Closer Look at *Invisible Man*'s Prologue

The most memorable reference to music in *Invisible Man* appears in the prologue of the story. The narrator (the 'invisible man') describes his underground dwelling where he not only immerses himself in light out of fear of being invisible, but also in music:

> Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue" - all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8)

The narrator not only references a very specific piece of music in this prologue. He also makes repeated references to the artist performing the piece – Louis Armstrong – and places Armstrong in relation to himself. Both of them are in a state of invisibility. Both are in their own ways able to make "poetry out of being invisible" – Louis Armstrong through his music, the narrator through the process of writing down his story, which he sets out to do in the prologue. That his writing process is one that can be seen as making "poetry out of being invisible" is an implication that the narrator himself is not aware of. For him, the distinguishing characteristic between Louis Armstrong and himself is that while he has learnt to understand that he is invisible, the singer is – almost blissfully – unaware of his state of invisibility. Still, the narrator keeps drawing parallels between himself and Louis Armstrong, his own situation and the burning question of the song: "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue[?]" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8). In fact, at the end of the prologue, he prefaces the whole narration of his story up to that time as an attempt to answer this question posed in the song: "But what did *I* do to be so blue? Bear with me" (14). In this way, he aligns himself with the singer in the song, the difference being that the narrator sees himself in a position where he can answer the question.

In this way, the song serves as a device that allows Ellison to give an orientation to the narrative that is about to follow.

The choice of song and artist is of further interest. The song was written by Fats Waller with lyrics by Andy Razaf (Copenhafer 137, Sullivan 824). Louis Armstrong's version takes some liberties with the original lyrics, but to this day it remains probably the best-known version of this jazz standard. In the lyrics to the song – which apart from the title are not reproduced in Ralph Ellison's novel – a black narrator laments the difficulties he is having. The song is considered as one of the earlier examples of a popular song that dealt explicitly with race and racism. The original lyrics of this song from a Broadway musical called *Hot Chocolates* (Wintz & Finkelman 1227-1228) were quite different. In the original lyrics, a young black woman laments the fact that she is alone and without a partner. She says that "Gentlemen prefer them light" and because of her darker complexion she herself is considered unattractive and is scorned by people (Collier 241). Louis Armstrong changes the original lyrics significantly by leaving out some verses and sometimes melding different verses into one, as well as changing some of the words in the song. As a result, his version is a more encompassing statement about racism and the difficulties faced by African Americans.

Most likely, a wide array of readers from both African American and white backgrounds would have been familiar with the song and its lyrics. The fact that Louis Armstrong's version is the one referenced in the novel is not particularly surprising. Both a black and a white audience would have been familiar with his music, but not only that – they would also have been familiar with his appearance and his mannerisms while singing a song like "Black and Blue". In fact, Louis Armstrong's way of singing and acting on stage was not without its critics, particularly among the later generation of jazz musicians, who considered Armstrong's mannerisms as playing into the idea of black musicians as entertainers and the tradition of minstrel shows (Borshuk 265). To them, Louis Armstrong was to some extent demeaning himself and saw this as decreasing his credibility as an artist. Ellison himself would feel the need to take Louis Armstrong's side. In his essay "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz" he defended the singer, calling him "an outstanding creative musician" and insisting on differentiating "artistic quality" and "questions of personal conduct" (259).

In contrast to Ellison, the narrator in *Invisible Man* remains somewhat ambivalent in his assessment of Louis Armstrong. As mentioned before, he both aligns himself with and distances himself from the singer. When the narrator claims that Armstrong is "unaware that he is invisible" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8) this could be read as him thinking that the singer was guilty

of a certain naivety when it comes to race relations. However, at the same time, he says that Armstrong has "made poetry out of being invisible" (8), which can be read as an assessment of his music as going well beyond playing into racial stereotypes and possessing a depth that transforms it into high art rather than popular song.

Since the narrator does not comment on or cite the song, a closer look at the lyrics of the song is in order before an analysis of how exactly it is represented and contextualized in the novel. The song has two different sections – a verse-like section A and a bridge-like section B – and is structured in a typical AABA form. The whole form is played twice, once instrumentally with a number of solos and once with Louis Armstrong singing the lyrics (cf. Copenhafer 173-175). The lyrics to Armstrong's version of the song are as follows:

> Cold empty bed, springs hard as lead
> Feel like Old Ned, wish I was dead
> All my life through, I've been so black and blue
> […]
> Even the mouse ran from my house
> They laugh at you, and scorn you too
> What did I do to be so black and blue?
> […]
> I'm white - inside - but that don't help my case
> Cause I can't hide what is in my face
> […]
> How would it end? Ain't got a friend
> My only sin is in my skin
> What did I do to be so black and blue? (Copenhafer 173)

A look at these lyrics reveals some thematic similarities between the song and the novel. Visibility and appearance are stressed and made a main theme. The outward appearance of being black is presented as something that one cannot help but be: "I'm white – inside – but that don't help my case | Cause I can't hide what is in my face […] **What did I do** to be so black and blue?" The narrator in the song finds himself in a situation where he is faulted for something entirely outside of his own control: the way he looks to and is perceived by others. What he is inside is of no relevance for others – it does not "help [his] case" and is no defense against what he is faulted for, namely the "sin" of his dark "skin". The narrator in the song is accused not for something he "did", as the main line of the lyrics puts it, but for what he is. This situation is similar to that of the narrator in Invisible Man, who is rendered invisible "simply because people refuse to see" him; invisible due to "a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom [he] come[s] into contact" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 3). It is not through any action or choice that the narrator is an invisible man. And neither is it through any action or choice that

the narrator in the song became “black and blue”. It is their outward appearance that renders them socially invisible. In this way it can be argued that Ellison uses the intermedial reference to this well-known popular song to help the reader to understand the theme of the story and to help to give the story its general direction and aim: finding out how the narrator came to be in his underground hole and how he came to “be so blue” (14).

However, this is not the only function the intermedial reference to this particular piece of music serves in the context of the novel. In addition to explicitly mentioning the song, the narrator describes his associations and reactions to the piece of music. He wants to play it on five phonographs at the same time and wants to “feel its vibration” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8). In an extended section, he describes how under the influence of a “reefer”, he is able to listen to the music “analytically” and to listen to the individual voices of each “melodic line” and the “unheard sounds”. He describes himself as descending “like Dante, into its depths” (8-9). What he finds there extends way beyond the story communicated in the lyrics. The scenes he sees include a group of slave-owners bidding for a “beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like [the narrator’s] mother” and a preacher talking to a chorus of answering voices about the meaning of “blackness” (9-10). The narrator then speaks to a woman whom he describes as “the old singer of spirituals” and whom he hears in the music. She talks about her dead “master” whom she both hated but also loved because he “gave” her several sons that she loved. “Upstairs” her sons are laughing because the master is dead. The mourning woman explains that the master never gave them the freedom he had promised and that she killed him with poison – out of love, as she claims, because otherwise the “boys” would have “tore [sic] him to pieces with they [sic] homemade knives” (10-11). When the narrator asks her what freedom is, the woman is unable to answer and one of her sons attacks the narrator saying that he made the woman cry. As he escapes, he reemerges from these scenes and images to the sound of Louis Armstrong “innocently asking” the question that makes up the title of the song (11-12).

Beneath the surface of the music, a whole microcosm of (hi)-stories seems to lie - Pinkerton calls it “an evocative spatial arrangement of African American Memory and its vicissitudes” (188). This microcosm of histories speaks about race relations and about individuals within a community of people that are deeply shaped by their past. In a way, the music is telling – albeit beneath the surface – the story that the narrator is setting out to tell: A story that is at once the plight of one highly individualistic human being and the plight of a whole community of people that are trying to come to terms with a history of being taken advantage of by those in a position of power. In a sense, the songs are the stories of people who share the fate of invisibility in a

social sense. Indeed, music reflecting the experience of the narrator appears at various points in the novel. For instance, after the narrator finds out that Bledsoe had no intention of helping him to get back into college, he hears someone on the bus whistling a song that describes a robin being plucked. The narrator identifies with the robin and sees himself as having been plucked of his feathers (193-194). At another time, while unsure of his identity after the electroshock treatment, he sees himself as "Buckeye the Rabbit", a character from a children's song (241-242). In this way, the references to music are used once again for contextualizing the actions and experiences of the narrator. This function is fulfilled at the level of the story, where the narrator arrives at a clearer understanding as to what is happening to him and is able to organize his thoughts which in turn shape his further course of action – or at least his further plans, since he is often unable to carry out his plans. At the same time, these references also serve the similar function of communicating the meaning of certain sections of the story to the reader.

The fact that this specific musical piece influences the actions of the narrator is also directly commented on by the narrator of the story. When he listens to Louis Armstrong and experiences the stories in the "depths" of the song, he realizes that the music is demanding a kind of action which he is incapable of carrying out (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 12). The narrator remains unclear about what kind of action he is referring to. He claims that he is in a state of "hibernation" that precedes "a more overt action" (13). However, he proceeds with:

> And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. [...] you hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians. Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility? But I am an orator, a rabble rouser – Am? I was, and perhaps shall be again. Who knows? All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility. (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 13-14)

The meaning of this can be considered to be twofold. On the one hand, the narrator plays "the invisible music of [his] isolation" by putting on the record player. He can see the music through the images and scenes it creates for him as he described earlier. One could even argue that the music itself is put "down in black and white" in a number of ways. For one, music is usually written down as sheet music on a musical staff in black and white. Then, the images it calls up are somewhat dream- or even movie-like which could also be associated with black and white. And the stories are deeply concerned with race relations and in this sense, invisibility is put down in black and white, in terms of skin color and its relation to the concept of invisibility that the novel deals with.

On the other hand, it can be argued that we learn here that the music actually does move the narrator to action. By writing down the stories evoked by the music he can himself be seen to

put down the music in black and write by bringing it to paper. In this sense, he "play[s] the invisible music of [his] isolation" (Copenhafer 174). But again, the meaning extends beyond this individual instance of putting the music into words. The music moves him to further action, to writing down his own tale of how he became "so blue" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 14). This is the preparatory action demanded by the vision of the music: to add his own (hi-)story to the chorus of voices that appear to him in the song; to become himself a melody that stands "out clearly from all the rest, s[ays] its piece" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 14) and in doing so answers the song's question. Like a jazz musician, the narrator takes center stage and improvises his solo on the theme of invisibility, takes the theme through variations and says his own piece in the process. And only after having done so, he will be able to take a "broader action" and reemerge from his underground "hibernation" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 13) to join the world again. It is of note that the narrator ends his story with the words: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 581). It is in the depth of the music, on the lower frequencies of Louis Armstrong's "Black and Blue" that the narrator finds the microcosm of individual (hi-)stories. And it is there that his own story and that of the reader can also be located: as individual variations on the bigger theme of invisibility. Rampersad states that Ralph Ellison adopts the form of an epic "to improvise on it like a disciplined jazzman" (227). In fact, Ellison is not just improvising on the form of the epic, but he is improvising on the theme of his novel and on his view of African American and American history and identity. As Louis Armstrong used his trumpet to improvise and play variations on the theme of "Black and Blue" before singing the lyrics, Ellison uses his writing to improvise on American identity and in doing so tries to arrive at a broader definition – one that does not ignore the history of African Americans but rather embraces or at least accepts it is part of American identity. Thus, musical references serve the purpose of commenting on parallels between the processes of making music and writing. Through the process of listening to the deeper meaning and history hidden beneath the surface of the music, the writer-character is inspired to write down his story.

When we look at the bigger structure of *Invisible Man*, we can come to the conclusion that the jazz song "Black and Blue" not only inspires the narrator on the story level to write, but that jazz also influences Ellison's structuring of his novel on the discourse level. Jazz is an artform that relies heavily on the skills of musicians to take up a theme and improvise on it. Similarly, throughout Invisible Man, the same theme – invisibility and its relation to identity – is picked up again and improvised on. The different episodes that are not always strongly tied together, as Alison points out (335-338), are akin to the solos of musicians in a jazz ensemble. It can be said, therefore, that on the discourse level, music informs Ellison's approach to narrative

structure. At the very least, the prologue's insistence on the relation between the jazz song and the narrator's decision to take up writing as well as the episodic nature of the novel strongly suggest that this is the case. Other scholars have pointed out further connections between *Invisible Man* and jazz. For instance, Porter comments on the fact that Ellison "plays countless variations on familiar literary and cultural themes" by references to the topics of other American writers and historical events and that a broad cast of characters are allowed to present their stories and later practically disappear from the novel (74). Radford sees the character Rinehart as almost being the idea of improvisation itself and draws a connection between Armstrong and Ellison's "skewed sense of time" and how they explore it (40, 59). Sundquist makes a similar point when stating that history in the book resembles "a jazz […] performance" in that it takes on a very subjective form and the same ideas are taken through variations (qtd. in Porter 74). Ostendorf, on the other hand, relates the fact that Ellison switches between or "improvises on" the different frames of folklore, modernism and jazz itself as a model for "American culture" as a whole to the practice of a jazz musician (96).

As this analysis of the prologue of *Invisible Man* and its use of musical references shows, a number of functions for these references can be observed. Indeed, all functions outlined in section 3 already appear in the novel's prologue:

- Rules from music are adapted to literature: The improvisational techniques and variations of jazz serve to structure the narrative of the novel as a whole. It also gives a structure to the "dream-like" sequence in which different scenes and histories serve as variations of the state of being "Black and Blue".
- Music is referenced to describe a character or to set the scene: the old woman in the dream sequence is described as "the old singer of spirituals" (10) and the description of Invisible Man's underground hole includes his radio-phonograph loudly playing a Louis Armstrong song (7-8).
- Music is explicitly talked about and reacted to by the implied author and has an epiphanic effect on the development of his identity: Invisible Man explains in detail his reactions to listening to "Black and Blue" and listening leads to an epiphany in the sense that he realizes that he has to prepare for action by writing down his story.
- Music is reflected on meta-referentially by the implied author by commenting on parallels between the act of writing and music. In this case, this is done implicitly through the fact that music inspires his writing process. It is further reflected by certain

phrases used by Invisible Man, including playing "the invisible music of [his] isolation" and "put[ting] invisibility down in black and white" (13), which were discussed here.

After this analysis of *Invisible Man*'s opening, we will go on to investigate further the functions musical references serve on the level of the story (and to some extent the discourse) in the rest of *Invisible Man* and some of Ellison's other writings. These functions will be presented in the following section in connection with Ellison's dominant theme of identity.

6 The Music of Memory & Identity

Identity, for the purpose of this analysis, is seen as something that can be stable but is generally also subject to change. Identity is "formed according to external actions" (Forbes 476); it is performed rather than possessed. When speaking of 'individual identity', we mean not only the way an individual thinks and acts according to their belief systems. We also mean the way this identity is performed when they interact with others and try to define themselves in contrast to others as self-sufficient individuals. Identity that is the expression of some shared aspect of a group of individuals – for instance, shared belief systems, interests or goals – is what we shall call 'group identity'. For the most part, the term 'group identity' will be used here rather than 'community identity'. The reason for this choice is that the expression 'community identity' implies a more fixed conception of shared belief systems and interests, almost at the expense of 'individual identity', which always is constituted of "a multiplicity of traits", not all of which are shared among any group of people (Haider 246). In our analysis, certain aspects of shared identity are quite momentary; groups based around these shared identities flare up and are dispersed again. To account for this short-termed commonality, we speak of 'group identity', which then includes for both short-term and longer-term collective identities. A strong basis for the formation of identities both on the individual level and the level of groups is a belief system based on memory and experiences. The identities are "internalized" and created at least partly through "constructed" and reconstructed" stories (McAdams & McLean 233). We will now investigate how these identities are represented in Ellison's writing.

Ellison had strong opinions on the way great American literature should be written and spoke of the role of black writers as becoming "the conscience of the United States" (Rampersad 196). His bigger theme is not necessarily African American culture, and it is not the role of racism in American society. His theme is American and individual identity and how a person finds the relationship between these identities and, consequently, a place within society as an American. He was critical of the fact that – in his view – "most Negro writing [was] devoted either to a

violent rejection of American values or to a questioning of them". Rather, protesting the condition of African-Americans in literature should be combined with "setting forth the forms and values under which man must live" and developing an American identity that is applicable regardless of race and social background (Rampersad 201-202). This places Ellison's writing in the context of both modernism and postmodernism. As D'haen remarks, modernity is linked to the emergence of "national narrative[s]", while postmodernism is marked by the re-construction of this identity under inclusion of cultural minority voices (7-9). The theme of an American identity that includes African Americans can be found both in *Invisible Man* and in Ellison's second novel *Juneteenth*, both of which can generally be said to deal with identity and the historical memory of the individual, the community and the nation.

Often in *Invisible Man*, music is strongly linked to memory and identity. Music reminds the narrator of his childhood or life in the South in general and more often than not, it seems to be something that he has stored away somewhere in the back of his mind and is trying to forget. For example, when he is in the office of the Brotherhood and hears a voice singing outside the window, he feels homesick: "A whole series of memories started to well up, but I threw them off. There was no time for memory, for all its images were of times past" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 390). This denial of his past in the South is typical of Invisible Man's actions. For a large part of the story, the narrator is trying to adhere as much as possible to what he thinks would be considered as more acceptable and less backward by the white community. Following his grandfather's advice to "overcome 'em with yeses, […] agree 'em to death and destruction" (16), he tries to act in a way that does not give away his cultural background as an African American from the South. Publicly, he avoids openly acknowledging his origins. For example, when the counterman at a drugstore tells him about "the special" on that day – which happens to be a dish traditionally eaten in the South – the narrator coldly refuses, proud of himself "to have resisted" (178). It is only later in the book when he becomes more disillusioned with his own prospects that he more openly acknowledges his own cultural heritage. This is reflected in his response when he is offered yams in the street. He calls them his "birthmark" and jokingly muses "I yam what I am!" However, he is somewhat sobered by the following thought:

> [N]ow that I no longer felt ashamed of the things I had always loved, I probably could no longer digest very many of them. What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste! But what of those things you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education – but because you actually found them distasteful? The very idea annoyed me. How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that

> would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple. (266-267)

As we shall see in a few examples, music has a similar effect on the nameless narrator as food holds in this particular context – it serves as a reminder of his past and the past he shares with his community. Music is experienced in a way that is hardly ever value-free. Its connotations are rooted in memory and oftentimes it is a memory that the narrator is trying to escape from – one that belongs to a former way of thinking or an identity he is trying to leave behind as he is redefining himself in a new environment. Or it plays a role in the formation of individual or group identity. This is especially the case at points in the narrative where the narrator is unsure about who he actually is. In the following sections, we will discuss how music is related to memory and a sense of identity in connection with two areas – childhood and the church & ritualistic music – before turning to the role performing music plays in the context of identity.

6.1 The Music of Memory & Identity - Childhood

References to childhood in *Invisible Man* are not particularly frequent. However, when they appear, they often do so coupled with references to music and children's songs in particular. One such example is found at the end of Jim Trueblood's story. After having told the story of an incestuous incident and the reaction of the black and white community, Jim Trueblood and Mr. Norton – a patron of the narrator's college – both sit in silence with the narrator watching uncomfortably as life around them goes on as before. Children are playing in the background and a woman is singing a hymn in the yard. To break the uncomfortable silence, Trueblood says: "Lissen [sic] to the young'uns […] Playin' 'London Bridge's Fallin' Down'" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 68). This specific reference to what the children are singing clearly is intentional on the part of the author. It creates a stark contrast with what has just happened in the novel. The narration just detailed a horrible story about incest and violence. Yet, the world around continues seemingly undisturbed. The children, unaware, play on and sing by themselves as before. Their innocence is in direct opposition to what the narrator is experiencing at this moment. Taking the novel's further progression into account, this instance is a loss of innocence for him. It is a major turning point in the novel, after which his prospects and course of life change dramatically. From this point forward, all the goals the narrator was trying to achieve up to this point become unachievable: finishing his college education, becoming Dr. Bledsoe's assistant, becoming a leader to the black community (in the way he has envisioned it). All these goals become unattainable in this moment, even though the narrator is not necessarily aware of

it. All he mentions at this point of the story is that "[s]omething was going on which [he] didn't get" (68).

One could also say that children's song mirrors what is going on in the narrator's life. Just as "London's bridge is falling down", the narrator's life course is irreversibly disconnected from his aspirations. His life course takes a sharp turn, and he will be unable to reach his goals. In a way, it is as if the pathway between his current state and his prospect had been destroyed; much as if a bridge collapsed. Identity-wise, this point in the novel is also the first in a series of steps that lead the character to the realization of his own invisibility. It is of note that from this point on, communication between the narrator and Mr. Norton also breaks down. Even though Mr. Norton had previously seemed very interested in the future of the narrator, going so far as to call him his own "fate" (42), he becomes quite distanced. After he has heard Jim Trueblood's story and after talking to the veteran at the Golden Day this distance is increased (95). The breakdown of communication is also mirrored or prefigured in the children's song. In this way, the innocent children's song is used by Ellison to amplify what is going on both in the story and in the mind of the narrator.

Another instance of a song being used to underline what is happening in the story appears later in the novel. The scene takes place after Invisible Man delivers the seventh and final of his sealed letters – a literary reference to the biblical seventh seal in the book of Revelation (Rampersad 226). These letters given to Invisible Man by the college president Dr. Bledsoe do not – as the main character thought – offer an introduction for him to New York society and a workplace, but instead seal his fate of never being able to return to the college (Ellison *Invisible Man* 190-191). As he is driving back from the interview, he hears a man "whistling a tune between his teeth". After some time he realizes that he himself is humming the same melody and remembers the words to the song that he had heard children sing in his youth:

> O well they picked poor Robin clean
> O well they picked poor Robin clean
> Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
> Lawd they picked all the feathers round from Robin's stump
> Well they picked poor Robin clean. (Ellison *Invisible Man* 193)

Shocked by this memory and its relation to himself, Invisible Man gets off the bus, but the song and its meaning are branded into his memory. He wonders about the meaning of the children's song and why the children delighted in singing about the "Robin" being plucked – "who was Robin and for what had he been hurt and humiliated?" (194). It is clear that Invisible Man is

identifying with the Robin of the song. Half-mockingly he paraphrases the letter exchange between Bledsoe and Mr. Emerson:

> "My dear Mr. Emerson," I said aloud. "The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death and keep him running. [...]" [...] And Emerson would write in reply? Sure: "Dear Bled, have met Robin and shaved tail. Signed, Emerson." (194)

That the song is a somewhat surreal element that mirrors the course of the story is clear. Invisible Man is "picked clean" of his hopes of returning to the college and his agency is reduced. Like Robin, who is tied up and has no ability of deciding for himself what and where he wants to be, Invisible Man is at the whim of those who make decisions for him and his fate is not in his own hands. And all this is happening while he is being "hoped to death" and "kept running". Indeed, society has taught him so strongly to conform to the ideas of others about him that he is uncertain of his own identity. He asks himself: "Who was I anyway?" (194). This is the question of identity that is the novel's centerpiece and that is closely related to the concept of "invisibility".

Invisibility, as Ellison puts forth in the novel, is of course not to be understood as a physical property of the unnamed narrator. Nor is this state of invisibility one that only he occupies. As the novel's ending suggests, the narrator might be speaking not only for himself but for everyone (Ellison *Invisible Man* 581). Nor is invisibility simply a matter of race alone but "extends far beyond the dimension of race" (Callahan, *Introduction IM* xvii). People are invisible not exclusively (although this of course does play a big role) because of the color of their skin but largely because they are seen through a lens of expectations set up by their environment. Invisible Man is visible as a black man, but not as an individual human being with a personality. He is seen only in the sense that he might fit into a preconceived notion, a stereotype.

It is no surprise then that the narrator struggles with the nature of his own identity. As he moves through the stages of his journey, he is repeatedly put into roles rather than being able to find out who he is as an individual and as a member of society. Expectations are repeatedly set up for him:

- His grandfather places upon him the responsibility of agreeing with white men and undermining them with "yeses" (Ellison *Invisible Man* 16).
- As he takes part in the "battle royal" in front of the town's influential white men, he takes on the role of an uncivilized "Sambo" (21-26) and later, during his speech, the

role of an agreeable student that will be a pride to "his people" and that is thankful for the charity of white men (29-32).

- Mr. Norton sees in Invisible Man a way to strengthen his standing as a social benefactor and as a way for him to keep the legacy of his daughter alive. Therefore, he calls Invisible Man his "fate" (41-45) despite the fact that, when they meet again later, Mr. Norton is unable to recognize Invisible Man when they meet again (577-579).
- The younger Mr. Emerson sees Invisible Man as someone who has been wronged by his father and other important men. Hence, he sees Invisible Man also as a chance to eradicate some of the wrongdoing he feels has been caused by Mr. Emerson and somewhat awkwardly tries to help and educate him. In the process, he also puts Invisible Man into a role that the latter is unwilling to take on (186-193).
- When he comes across a union meeting at the paint factory he briefly works at, the union members, without letting him speak, are either immediately suspicious of him and view him as a potential threat because African Americans are hired to keep wages low, or they see him as someone who must be interested in joining the union. Both views are adopted without any actual interest in his person or situation (218-224).
- The doctors at the hospital he wakes up in after his accident only see in him a subject to put a number of medical treatments to the test (231-245). It is not entirely clear how much of what he perceives at the hospital is actually happening because of the surreal nature of this section. Regardless, he does not challenge the role he is expected to fulfil.
- Brother Jack and other white members of the brotherhood see Invisible Man as someone who can serve their interests and help to increase the influence of the brotherhood. His input as an individual or a thinker is not required and his power as an orator is bridled by their doctrines. Ellison does not really offer a reason for their doing so, but eventually, they abandon Harlem and focus their interests elsewhere (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 462-478; Rampersad 245).
- Sybil, the white woman he attempts to seduce to get inside information about the brotherhood, only sees Invisible Man as a way to fulfil her own sexual fantasies (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 517-522).

For almost the entirety of the book, Invisible Man takes on these roles without much questioning. In most cases, he gets into difficulties when he veers away from the course of the roles that are set up for him and tries to have agency over himself. This shows that the society in the novel largely relies on the fact that people meet the expectations that are placed on them. In some instances, the characters go further and over-conform with certain racial expectations. This is

true of Tod Clifton who decides to "plunge outside of history", something that Invisible Man is at first unable to understand – "Why should he choose to […] give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself?" (438). This conformity is not only expected of African Americans, but of every member of society. The difference is that white people have more agency both in determining what these social roles are and in choosing a role for themselves. It is unthinkable that the narrator could set up a role for any of the white members of the Brotherhood. But when they offer a role to Invisible Man, even when he is at first dismissive of it, he himself takes on that role eventually – even if it means cutting off his former ties and adopting a different name (309-310). The easiest way to get through life in the society of the novel is for a black man to take on these roles without much questioning.

But Ellison's investigation of 'social' invisibility is not as bleak as one could make it out to be. Invisibility offers possibilities, it "is sometimes advantageous to be unseen" (3). This is exemplified by the character of Rinehart who uses his invisibility to shift seamlessly between roles and worlds, from gambler to preacher (482-499). He uses his social invisibility to his advantage and when Invisible Man takes on his role by means of a disguise, he is able to do the same. This largely contributes to his realization of his own invisibility, but it also allows him to subvert the expectations of others. And despite the catastrophe of the riots in Harlem, he can use this knowledge to rethink his role in his underground hiding place. While Invisible Man will eventually not embrace the chaos that comes with Rinehart's approach to societal roles, he nevertheless learns from this experience that one's role in society can be malleable and that he has freedom in choosing which path he wants to take once he will reenter society. The message at the end of the novel indicates that one can find a role to play in society without having to give up one's own individuality and that invisibility can be of advantage in this case (580-581).

This, of course, constitutes a simplification of the novel's ideas. The difficulty here lies partly in the fact that the novel's ideas are not always clearly formulated because of how loosely the individual episodes seem to be tied together. Alison comments on the fact that the difficulty Ellison had with finishing the novel and connecting the individual chapters (which often are closed narratives in themselves) can be observed in the short sentences of the transitions between chapters in comparison to the more elaborate style he uses elsewhere (335-338). She also posits that the ending is somewhat forced to give the novel structure rather than following from the progression of the narrative and the character development (341-342). In a sense Ellison is taking his theme of invisibility for a spin and performs variations on the theme, exploring the concept rather than going on to provide a clear message or – to use a different

word – moral of the story. This is also implied by various writers that posit a structural similarity between the novel and jazz (Murray qtd. in Callahan, *Introduction Invisible Man* xv).

As Booth points out, an aspect of invisibility in Ellison's novel is the loss of a sense for one's history out of which much of the "struggle over identity" for African Americans arises (689). This brings us back to the role of music in Invisible Man. Music (and jazz in particular) is part of the "rituals that give order to the chaos of black experience" (Ostendorf 110). As with the microcosm of histories that "Black and Blue" opens up before the eye of Invisible Man in the prologue, it offers a historicity to the individual and collective of African Americans. Being the most prevalent of the cultural achievements of African Americans as well as the one that was most independent of Western European Art at this point, it gives a history to people that were denied a historicity in the American consciousness. And the performance of a jazz musician can be likened to the identity-search of African American people. On soloing and improvisation in Jazz, Ellison wrote that each solo was for the musician "a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition" (*The Charlie Christian Story* 267).

While this is true for the musician, other forms of music play comparable role for the expression of identity for a listener. This brings us directly back to the "Robin-Song" in *Invisible Man*. Individual identity is linked to memory and childhood and this is exemplified both in this case and in other sections of the book. It comes as no surprise that while working for the Writers' Project in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ellison took an interest in recording the songs and games of children in Harlem and "tracing the language back to its Southern roots" (Rampersad 116). The results of this can be seen in his representation of children's songs both in *Invisible Man* and his other fiction. By reminding Invisible Man of his earlier life, these songs pose questions about his identity. This happens partly because of his identification with the characters as with "Robin". But given the lack of a formal, written history of African Americans, they also offer a form of history and ritual that is a basis for the formation of culture and community as well as individual identity. This becomes more apparent in the hospital scene after Invisible Man's accident. In this somewhat surreal scene, Invisible Man is oblivious of his identity, being unable even to remember his own name (Ellison *Invisible Man* 239-241). It is not surprising that this surreal section of Invisible Man is one of the densest when it comes to references to music. Rampersad directly relates the role of jazz and blues to the surreal sections of Ralph Ellison's writing because of the music's challenges of conventions and its "determined refusal of an orderly separation of the comic and the tragic", claiming that the two forms

"combine to orchestrate the sometimes surreal nature of much of what makes up modern African-American urban consciousness" (197). As Invisible Man lies in the constringent medical apparatus in the sick room, various impressions and memories come to him. The sound of one of the medical machines sounds to him like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (Ellison *Invisible Man* 238, 239). He hears (and sees) a military band play a "Sunday air" and is unable to identify where the sound comes from (234). In three other scenes, he remembers his childhood with each memory being connected to a song:

First, when he looks at the doctor, he recalls the first time he saw "black men in stripes and chains" (escapees from a chain gang) being chased by hounds and his grandmother on the same day singing "with twinkling eyes":

> Godamighty made a monkey
> Godamighty made a whale
> And Godamighty made a 'gator
> With hickeys all over his tail ... (234)

The contrast between these two memories – the song's affirmation of equality among living beings regardless of species or, by extension, skin color on the one side and the mistreatment of black people on the other – was certainly a part of the collective consciousness of African Americans. The children's song features lyrics that are connected to faith and at the same time implicitly stress the shared humanity of different races. This reading of the lyrics is strongly suggested by the context in which the song appears. It is cited in connection to black men being chased down by dogs as they try to escape forced labor. The affirmation of humanity in the lyrics in this context is necessary for coping with the knowledge that these things happen: The reality of racism that African Americans faced at the hands of white people not only denied them some basic rights but was also capable of making them doubt their own humanity. The need in the Harlem Renaissance of proving the validity of African American culture and humanity only arose out of the treatment of African Americans by white Americans. "Left to their own devices, blacks would never have questioned their innate humanity" (Rampersad 41). In the novel, Invisible Man recollects the scene and the song as he watches the doctor who is attending him. In connection with the memory, he addresses some questions to the doctor in his mind: "[D]id you ever wade in a brook before breakfast? Ever chew on sugar cane?" (Ellison *Invisible Man* 234). In trying to define his own identity, Invisible Man finds commonalities between his humanity and that of the white doctor. The children's song in his memory and the questions he addresses to the doctor affirm that at least part of their identity is shared.

The second memory has a similar function, but in this case, Invisible Man addresses himself – again only in thought – to the white nurse. This memory is connected to music as well: when white girls were flirting with their male companions in the park, the black boys would hide in the bushes and sing as loudly as they dared:

> Did you ever see Miss Margaret boil water?
> Man, she hisses a wonderful stream,
> Seventeen miles and a quarter,
> Man, and you can't see her pot for the stream ... (234-235)

Here, the song's meaning is more 'vulgar', relating to the bodily functions. Still, it stresses the common humanity of the involved parties: the white girl is not some aloof being but shares the same traits of humanity that the black boys did.

The third musical memory appears slightly later in the hospital. When Invisible Man is unable to remember his own or his mother's name, the doctor tries a different approach and asks "WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?" (239-241). This leads Invisible Man to a 'self-discovery' as he states:

> Somehow I was Buckeye the Rabbit ... or had been, when as children we danced and sang barefoot in the dusty streets:
>
> Buckeye the Rabbit
> Shake it, shake it
> Buckeye the Rabbit
> Break it, break it ...
>
> Yes, I could not bring myself to admit it, it was too ridiculous - and somehow too dangerous. It was annoying that he had hit upon an old identity and I shook my head, seeing him purse his lips and eye me sharply. (241-242)

He is then asked to identify another character, Br'er Rabbit, who in the children's song seems to be a name for the same character as Buckeye. He feels as if he were just playing a game with himself but nevertheless seems genuinely unaware of who he is – he only rediscovers his name later on when the doctor calls him by it when he is released (246). Unable to escape the hospital for the moment, he muses that the two problems are related and that he will be free when he discovers who he is (243).

In this case, the song is related to a piece of African and African American folklore. In it, Br'er Rabbit is something of a trickster who is able to outsmart other, more powerful animals (*Britannica Online* "Brer Rabbit"). Similar characters from children's stories and folklore also appear in conversations at other points in the novel, for example when Invisible Man encounters a man in the street who calls himself Peter Wheatstraw – the name of an African American

blues singer (173-177). To Ellison, African American folklore was of particular importance when it came to defining identity. Being denied a history, African Americans had to rely on the forces of religion, folklore and music – in particular the blues – to form a history and out of this history an identity and a philosophy of life (Rampersad 120; Ellison, *Richard Wright's Blues* 129, Warnes 308). Invisible Man accepts folklore as a basis for his identity. Even though he finds it "annoying" that the doctor has "hit upon an old identity", he himself is "giddy with the delight of self-discovery" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 241-242). In his own progression of myth-making, seeing himself as an artful trickster is also related to his grandfather's final words in which the man described himself as a "traitor" and an underminer of racial expectations (18). Forging these two characters – his grandfather and the folkloric Br'er Rabbit – into his own identity, Invisible Man's treatment of white men also changes from this point on. While they are still able to assign roles to him, he takes them on with a more ironic attitude. Much of the deference in his interactions before the accident – for instance, towards Mr. Norton, Mr. Kimbro or the union members at the plant – is gone after his hospital stay. This new aspect of his identity already becomes clear in his changed behavior during the interaction with the doctor upon leaving the hospital (245-249). While white men from this stage on are still able to influence his course of life, they are no longer able to shackle his mind and direct the currents of his thoughts. With his acceptance of the folkloric trickster as part of his identity, something fundamental has changed. And this change is brought about at least in part by his memory of a piece of music from his childhood.

Not all instances of children's songs contribute to the identity formation process in this way. After Invisible Man has the eye-opening experience of slipping in and out of roles in the guise of Rinehart – which destroys his last connection to the doctrine of the brotherhood – he visits his mentor Hambro for a final time. As the men sit down to talk, Hambro's child is heard singing two songs from the other room: "Humpty Dumpty" and "Hickory Dickory Dock" (500). The later of these songs seems to be mostly atmospheric information that Ellison provides. The former song can be interpreted to have additional meaning. For one, it awakens "humiliating memories" in Invisible Man, who had once forgotten the song's lyrics in a church Easter program (500). In this case, it cannot really be argued that the song or the memory contributes meaningfully to Invisible Man's identity formation, which has already taken a different direction. Rather, the song once again seems to mirror what is going on in the story: like the character Humpty Dumpty in the well-known song, Invisible Man has suffered a "great fall" or a significant change in more than one sense. Firstly, his position and influence in the brotherhood has declined greatly with much of the structure he helped build gone and the

brotherhood having lost interest in the Harlem district. In this sense, his fall is a fall from grace within the brotherhood and the community. Secondly, he had a fall in the sense that his world view and his concept of identity had been shattered because of his slipping into the role of Rinehart with the associated contrasting identities. Rinehart shows him the potentials of invisibility and after this realization, Invisible Man cannot be the same anymore. In this way, the song again seems to have symbolic meaning – Invisible Man in this moment is likened to Humpty Dumpty and the reference to the song stresses how drastic the change he has undergone is.

Since *Invisible Man* is not primarily about childhood but rather about identity, it is noteworthy that most of its references to childhood are linked to music. Childhood itself as a theme takes a more central role in some of Ellison's short stories and in his unfinished second novel, parts of which were published under the names *Juneteenth* and *Three Days Before the Shooting*. Even though these narratives are not the central concern of this paper, they deserve mention for the role children's songs play in them. For the children in these stories, music is playful and participatory. It is repurposed for their needs, adapted according to their moods and the meaning of music is changed and interpreted in creative ways. Lyrics are mockingly changed and the clear distinction that their parents draw between secular and religious music is challenged by the children's reinterpretations and combinations. This is especially true for a series of short stories featuring the characters Buster and Riley – "Mister Toussan", "Afternoon", "That I had the Wings" and "A Coupla Scalped Indians". Despite their different themes, each of the stories contains at least one instance in which the boys either hear a song and talk about its meaning or sing a song themselves. That the music has additional meaning beyond its melody and lyrics is clear to the boys. This becomes especially apparent in "A Coupla Scalped Indians". Trying to get to a carnival, they hear the sound of horns in the distance and talk about what the players are "signifying" (Ellison, *A Coupla Scalped Indians* 56, 57) – a term used in African American culture to describe a way in which meaning is subverted and the "apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance" (Gates 183). Interpreting the solos played by the musicians, the boys assign meaning to it that remains unknown to white listeners. One of the boys remarks that if the white men knew "what that fool is signifying on that horn they'd run him clear on out the world" (Ellison, *A Coupla Scalped Indians* 57). The boys are aware of the meaning carried in the music they hear, and they are aware of its function in the identity-defining process. Through playing, a musician can create and subvert meanings without the knowledge of white listeners – in this sense, he possesses a power that he may not possess in everyday life.

To summarize the main points of this section, memories of childhood in Ellison's fiction are often related to music and children's songs in particular. Ellison uses these references to music partly to mirror the developments of the story and the character, especially at points in the plot that mark a major change. More importantly, however, Ellison references music in the context of identity-forming processes. The songs of children in particular serve as a partial substitute for the cultural history that African Americans are denied and hence cannot access in their identity-forming processes. By providing stories, characters and other folkloric elements to identify with, they help in the process of forming an individual and a shared identity. For Invisible Man, these processes are, therefore, often linked to memories of music and songs from his own childhood.

6.2 The Music of Memory and Identity – The Church & Ritualistic Music

African American culture during the time of Ellison's writing was heavily influenced by the imagery and music of religion. While Ellison himself stated that he was not particularly religious, he admitted that religion played an important role in African American life and tradition (Saunders 51). His fiction reflects that: Invisible Man's vision of black life in the novel's prologue features a scene of a sermon (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 9-10) and one of the two main characters of his unfinished second novel *Juneteenth*/*Three Days Before the Shooting* is the preacher Reverend Hickman. The church provided not only a basis for faith and religious practice, but religious music was also present in the everyday life of African Americans. This fact is reflected in Ellison's other fiction as well. In his short story *Mister Toussan* the boys Buster and Riley hear Riley's mother singing a hymn while working on a sewing machine. The song silences the boys for a while and influences the course of their conversation (Ellison, *Mister Toussan* 20). In another short story called *That I Had the Wings* the same two boys are reprimanded by their aunt Kate for changing the words of a hymn and "takin' the Lawd's name in vain" (Ellison, *That I Had the Wings* 38-40).

In Invisible Man, religious music plays a similar identity-shaping role as children's songs. But rather than on the level of individual identity, the identity-forming process here takes place at the intersection between the individual and the group. In this context, it is noteworthy that the main character of *Invisible Man* is usually not an active participant in the black community that surrounds him. His interests are in becoming a leader of the people and getting ahead rather than on being a member of the African American community. He is unsentimental about his relationship with other African Americans, including that with Mary Rambo, who takes a motherly interest in him and helps him when he is at one of his lowest points, or with Tod

Clifton, his friend in the Brotherhood. This changes for short periods of time in the novel when he achieves a sense of group or community identity. Usually, this experience of group identity is connected to both religious music and sermon-like speeches.

The first of these scenes occurs slightly after Invisible Man has fallen from favor because of visiting Jim Trueblood and the Golden Day with Mr. Norton. As he returns to the college and awaits his punishment from Dr. Bledsoe, he is told to attend chapel. He hears music and the sermon of a visiting preacher that used to travel with Dr. Bledsoe and the college's founder in earlier years. The student body and guests of honor first listen to an organist playing an impressive piece (Ellison *Invisible Man* 115) which eventually gives way to a "thin brown girl" who sings without accompaniment:

> She began softly, as though singing to herself of emotions of utmost privacy, a sound not addressed to the gathering, but which they overheard almost against her will. Gradually she increased its volume, until at times the voice seemed to become a disembodied force that sought to enter her, to violate her, shaking her, rocking her rhythmically, as though it had become the source of her being, rather than the fluid web of her own creation.
>
> I saw the guests on the platform turn to look behind them, to see the thin brown girl in white choir robe standing high against the organ pipes, herself become before our eyes a pipe of contained, controlled and sublimated anguish, a thin plain face transformed by music. I could not understand the words, but only the mood, sorrowful, vague and ethereal, of the singing. It throbbed with nostalgia, regret and repentance, and I sat with a lump in my throat as she sank slowly down; not a sitting but a controlled collapsing, as though she were balancing, sustaining the simmering bubble of her final tone by some delicate rhythm of her heart's blood, or by some mystic concentration of her being, focused upon the sound through the contained liquid of her large uplifted eyes. (116-117)

Invisible Man's reaction is a stronger identification with the college and its community. He feels a sense of dread because he might have to leave and lose the connection to the college and its history. The singing itself is also a performance of identity. As Invisible Man observes, the performance of the girl does not seem to be addressed to anyone outside of herself. Through singing, the girl is perceived as being apart from her environments and can define herself. At the same time, she is also able to impart a sense of group identity to the listeners who feel a connection to the college. Still, the voice seems to be an expression of something even outside of the girl herself that is almost forcing her to sing. It is not clear what exact song the girl is singing, but it appears to be a hymn. By singing the hymn, the girl is involved in a process of mythmaking in which both she and the audience take part. This is possible because music offers "a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective" and "articulates *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and

social ideologies are understood" (Frith 110, 111). Because of this relation between music and the experience of group identity, Invisible Man feels a particular strong sense of being a part of his community in the context of this performance.

In the novel, this musical performance is placed at the start of a ceremony. The Ceremony commences with another hymn that is sung by everyone present in the chapel while Invisible Man is still lost in the thoughts evoked by the girl's singing (Ellison *Invisible Man* 117). This is followed by a speech of the visiting Reverend Homer A. Barbee who tells the story of the college's founder. At a central part of this similarly mythmaking and group-identity-forming narration – interestingly, Invisible Man likens the preacher's mannerisms to an orchestra conductor (127) – the founder collapses in exhaustion during a speech. The crisis is miraculously overcome when Dr. Bledsoe starts to sing and leads the faltering audience into "a song of hope". They continue to sing "against the tottering of their giant" until the founder revives (125, 126). In his description, the preacher assigns specific meanings to their songs:

> […] long black songs of blood and bones:
> "Meaning HOPE!
> "Of hardship and pain:
> "Meaning FAITH!
> "Of humbleness and absurdity:
> "Meaning ENDURANCE!
> "Of ceaseless struggle in darkness, meaning:
> "TRIUMPH ... (125, 126)

For the crowd that is singing these songs, this is once again a process of creating a group identity. In the words of W. Martin, these songs "grant religious meaning to hardship" (350). In the description the positively connotated meanings assigned to the songs are related to qualities deemed desirable in a group of people that has gone through suffering. The strict content of the songs is less positive: the songs deal with "blood", "hardship", "pain", "absurdity" and a "ceaseless struggle in darkness". These songs are the chronicle of a people without history. They contain both a text and a subtext. They speak of oppression and advise a code of conduct that should lead people out of oppression: hope, faith and endurance lead to the eventual triumph. Whether this is the right way out of oppression is not answered; has the dream of the founder been fulfilled or is the college only a minor dent in the greater struggle? In either case, the people in the narration partake in their performance of a shared identity. Invisible Man and the students listening to Reverend Barbee are carried along as well when Dr. Bledsoe takes the stage again after Barbee's speech:

> I closed my eyes as I heard the deep moaning sound that issued from him, and the rising crescendo of the student body joining in. This time it was a music sincerely felt, not rendered for the guests, but for themselves; a song of hope and exaltation. […] I could not look at Dr. Bledsoe now, because old Barbee had made me both feel my guilt and accept it. For although I had not intended it, any act that endangered the continuity of the dream was an act of treason. (134)

That the students now appear to sing the song for themselves rather than anyone else shows their acceptance of the identity it reflects. Identity is not necessarily something that someone possesses; both individual and group identity are performative. By participating in the singing for themselves, the students define their group identity as the ideological offspring of the founder and as followers of his dream. For Invisible Man, who rightfully fears that he will be expelled and therefore ostracized from this group, this performance of group identity is painful. The novel gives no indication that he partakes in the singing. Since his previous actions could have damaged the college, he realizes that he might be considered a traitor by the group. Hence, although he realizes that this is an important process of identity-finding for the students, it is logical that he is now unable to participate in this process. When the orchestra starts playing a piece of classical music that reminds Invisible Man of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" – the favorite spiritual of his mother and grandfather – he is unable to stay any longer and leaves mid-ceremony (134).

A later instance of music and group-identity-finding happens during the leadup to Invisible Man's first speech for the brotherhood. As he approaches the podium together with other speakers, the crowd is clapping in time and singing "John Brown's Body", making Invisible Man wonder how they can make that "old song sound new" (339). This song, which has partially religious lyrics and imagery, was related to the abolitionist movement of the 19th century. The song and the surrounding atmosphere again inspire a sense of group identity in Invisible Man. He then goes on to state in his speech that he feels as if he has become "more human" and that he has found his "true family" and his "true country" (346). Given Ellison's overarching topic of the American identity, this phrasing is particularly relevant. Like other types of identity, national identity is "constantly defined and redefined in individual and collective performances" (Pfister 9). His initial impression of the brotherhood and its interest in African American and social problems lets Invisible Man see his place as an American citizen for the first time. That this happens in the context of music – an old song that is made to seem new – is not uncommon in Ellison's fiction nor is it something entirely new in modernist writing. Fekuda points out that in Virginia Woolf's novels, as in *Between The Acts* and *The Waves*, music is at times used to create epiphanic moments that lead to a stronger sense of community

and enables emotionally distanced characters to find together again (232-233, 240, 267-268). While Fekuda points out that Woolf's relation to music goes beyond this and that music becomes an alternative way of structuring narratives for her (237-239), Ellison's use of musical references in his other narratives sometimes makes use of this epiphanic potential of music as well.

One such situation can be found in his short story "In a Strange Country", inspired by Ellison's time as a merchant marine in the Second World War (Rampersad 170-171). In the story, Mr. Parker, a black soldier stationed in Wales, gets beaten up by white American soldiers. A Welsh man helps him and invites him to a place where a Welsh choir is singing. Initially skeptical, he decides to go there and is deeply impressed by the choir's performance. Mr. Catti, the man who invited him, hints at a similarity between African Americans and the Welsh people, saying that "like ourselves, your people love music" (Ellison, *In a Strange Country* 110). When Mr. Parker hears the choir singing emotionally about Wales and battles of the Welsh, he wonders why he cannot remember any American song "that's of love of the soil or of country" (112). The choir then starts to sing National Anthems, starting with the Welsh, then "God Save the Queen". Still, Mr. Parker is taken aback when they start singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" while looking at him, wondering if they are mocking him:

> And suddenly he recognized the melody and felt that his knees would give way. It was as though he had been pushed into the horrible foreboding country of dreams and they were enticing him into some wild and degrading act […] It was all unreal, yet it seemed to have happened before. Only now the melody seemed charged with some vast new meaning which that part of him that wanted to sing could not fit with the old familiar words. And beyond the music he kept hearing the soldiers' voices, yelling as they had when the light struck his eye. He saw the singers still staring, and as though to betray him he heard his own voice singing out like a suddenly amplified radio:
>
> '... Gave proof through the night
>
> That our flag was still there ...'
>
> It was like the voice of another, over whom he had no control. His eye throbbed. A wave of guilt shook him, followed by a burst of relief. For the first time in your whole life, he thought with dreamlike wonder, the words are not ironic. (114-115)

The feeling here is similar to that of Invisible Man's feelings in his speech. In the context of the performance of group and national identity, a known piece of music derives new meaning that makes the characters identify with their country. Music with this function can be seen as an extension of the role that Said ascribes to "Western classical music" which constitutes an "elaboration" of "Western civil society", giving society "rhetorical, social, and inflectional identity" (70, 71). This role can be seen in the sections of *Invisible Man* and *In a Strange*

Country. The music elaborates on what it means to be "American" or a member of the Brotherhood. It does so not necessarily through the meaning of the words themselves, but through the relation between the performance of identity and the social setting in which the performance takes place. Herein lies a significant difference to the classical music referenced by Said: in the hymns and national music the distinction between the performer and the audience breaks down. The audience members become active because the music itself is participatory. In the context of the national and communal music that they perform, their shared identity is expressed. Music, as Fekuda points out in her elaboration on Said's writings, plays a constitutive role in the maintenance of social and ideological structures (240, 241). This, of course, includes the maintenance of a sense of national identity. Ellison makes this apparent in the above-mentioned short story: Impressed by the harmonies the choir members produce, Mr. Parker asks about the background of the singers. He is surprised to hear that they come from different social backgrounds: one of the men is a "leading mine owner", another is a "miner", yet another a "union official". His companion, Mr. Catti, explains this by saying: "When we sing, we are Welshmen" (Ellison, *In a Strange Country* 112). In performing their national identity, they are putting aside a part of their individual identity for the sake of the group. For Mr. Parker, who does the same when he sings the American national anthem, this is an epiphanic, albeit more painful process. His American identity and experience include having been beaten by fellow American soldiers and, most likely, other humiliations in his home country. He is overwhelmed by the strong emotions he feels as he sings, being pushed into this acceptance of a part of his identity almost against his own will. Having felt the acceptance of his humanity by the Welsh people, he is made aware that he is still American. He has to come to terms with the fact that, although he identifies as an American, most people in his country would see him as the "other" and not as a significant part of their own national identity.

Invisible Man in the section above is more positive in his outlook: in the performance of group identity, he claims to have found his "true family" and his "true country" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 346). Although he gets disillusioned with the Brotherhood later in the novel, he retains a sense of American identity, which makes it necessary for him to leave the underground and rejoin the world to take on whatever "socially responsible role" he will have to play (581). This does not mean that the individual identity and the culturally and historically determined shared identity of African Americans is lost in this process by being suppressed. America is a "quilt work" of different "communities that share a history of conflict and injustice and contribute their voices to its culture without losing their distinctive paths on that common journey" (Booth

685). Different identities of the individual are likewise integrated even though they can at times be in conflict with each other.

This is reflected at a later instance in *Invisible Man* where a song is connected to the formation of group identity. The scene takes place during the funeral march for Tod Clifton before Invisible Man is supposed to make a speech in front of the mourners:

> Then somewhere in the procession an old, plaintive, masculine voice arose in a song, wavering, stumbling in the silence at first alone, until in the band a euphonium horn fumbled for the key and took up the air, one catching and rising above the other and the other pursuing […] And for a few bars the pure sweet tone of the horn and the old man's husky baritone sang a duet in the hot heavy silence. "There's Many a Thousand Gone". [...] It was a song from the past, the past of the campus and the still earlier past of home. And now some of the older ones in the mass were joining in. [...] [I] saw a slender black man with his face turned toward the sun, singing through the upturned bells of the horn. [...] I felt a wonder at the singing mass. It was as though the song had been there all the time and he knew it and aroused it; and I knew that I had known it too and had failed to release it out of a vague, nameless shame or fear. But he had known and aroused it. Even white brothers and sisters were joining in [...] And yet all were touched; the song had aroused us all. It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though he'd changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name. (452-453)

The song evokes a strong feeling of group identity among the listeners. They are not moved by the meaning of the words but by the performance of this song in which they are taking part. The song itself was used in the civil war era by slaves and freed slaves with the lyrics specifying things that they will no longer have to endure when they are free (Lauter 2871). The line "there's many a thousand gone" relates Tod Clifton's death at the hands of a policeman to the fate of many African Americans before him. He is 'canonized' as part of a bigger history of injustice so that his death has some meaning. The group identity here is that of mourners that are dedicated to preventing similar deaths from happening in the future. The identity forming process includes both black and white people who join in the procession and the singing. Invisible Man is more of an observer in this case; his plan is initially to make use of Tod Clifton's death as a political tool and re-strengthen the interests of the Brotherhood. As he sees the people in this way and since he has become more disillusioned with the Brotherhood and is still unable to fathom Clifton's decision to "plunge outside of history" (438), he changes the course of his words. He focuses his speech on the person of Tod Clifton and on his name, solidifying his memory but refusing to give it political meaning and especially refusing to directly link it to the interests of the Brotherhood. He moves the speech away from the collective and focuses on the individual. It is telling that as he walks away, he sees "not a crowd but the

set faces of individual men and women" (459) in his last glance at the mourners. Because of his choice to refuse to reaffirm the group identity at this point, something inside Invisible Man also changes and this could be considered his epiphanic moment. From this point forward – and even more so after the following debate with the leaders of the Brotherhood who are indignant at his failure to mobilize the crowd in their interests – he acts out of individualistic interests without feeling a sense of group identity. The theme of American identity is only taken up again in the Epilogue of the story. This plays into the debate of whether it follows from the novel that Invisible Man will emerge from the underground and rejoin society as Ellison vehemently stressed in later interviews (Alison 341). After all, it seems correct that Ellison's "true crusade was toward individualism, not group identity" (Rampersad 190). The next section will therefore investigate in what ways individual identity finds its expression in the context of performances of music in *Invisible Man*.

6.3 Performing Music – Performing Identity

For Ellison, the performance of music was intricately linked to all aspects of identity that we have talked about. In an essay, he speaks about a jazz musician for whom "each solo flight, or improvisation, represents [...] a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition" (*The Charlie Christian Story* 267). In this single quote, we see him referencing both individual and group identity. Given these views and Ellison's background as a musician, it is not surprising that some of his characters actively perform music. One character that deserves mention here is Reverend Hickman who appears in Ellison's unfinished second novel *Juneteenth*. Reverend Hickman is a former jazz musician and gambler who turned toward religion by becoming a preacher. His old identity still creeps into his life, when in moments of excitement he begins to play a jazz tune in church instead of one of the hymns by mistake (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 144). In *Invisible Man*, music that is performed rather than remembered is usually performed by minor characters or by a group of people that sometimes joins in with the performance of a solitary character as in the chapel and funeral procession scenes described in the last section. While the group performances were eventually an expression of group identity, the individual performances in *Invisible Man* are usually an expression of individual identity.

One such performance occurs shortly after Invisible Man's arrival in Harlem. On the street, he meets a man who is singing a blues "in a clear ringing voice". The words of the song appear nonsensical:

> She's got feet like a monkey

Legs like a frog - Lawd, Lawd!
But when she starts to loving me
I holler Whoooo, God-dog!
Cause I loves my baabay,
Better than I do myself […]
She's got feet like a monkeeee
Legs
Legs, Legs like a maaad
Bulldog … (173, 176-177)

The conversation with the man who calls himself Peter Wheatstraw is no less elusive to the reader and Invisible Man alike. The man's talk is filled with references to folklore, children's rhymes and is made up of a quick onslaught of words. The man's appearance – pushing a cart with discarded blueprints of building projects and "Charlie Chaplin pants" – make him appear as a comical character (174-175). Still, it is he who confronts Invisible Man about denying his southern heritage and not being able to play along with his word games. As the man disappears again while singing, Invisible Man is left wondering about the meaning of the words to the song. Invisible Man'S detachment from his own cultural roots becomes even more apparent as he notes, "God damn […], they're a hell of a people! And I didn't know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over me" (177). Invisible Man views himself as apart from his people, as being able to leave his roots behind and enter the white society he just arrived in. It is not apparent to him, but at this point he has already lost his individual and group identities by trying to detach himself from his memories and his cultural background.

The character of Peter Wheatstraw is an entirely different matter when it comes to individual identity. He proudly performs his identity without any fear of social repercussions which would be unthinkable for Invisible Man at this point of the narrative. His identity is performed both through his playful and confident handling of folkloric elements and through his performance of a blues song. According to Rampersad, Ellison saw the blues as something of a philosophy of live (189). In an essay written some years before the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison notes:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (*Richard Wright's Blues* 129)

Whichever way Peter Wheatstraw might appear to Invisible Man, through his doubtlessly "near-comic" approach to memory and his cultural heritage, he is much better-equipped to face the world than Invisible Man is at this stage. Wheatstraw has no doubt about his identity and

proudly performs it in public in front of anyone willing to listen to his song and his 'spieling'. Looking at the lyrics to his song, one can see the tragic and the comic being present at the same time. Invisible Man reasons that there is no woman that would fit the description. He is stumped by the "contradictory words" and the fact that anyone could love someone "as repulsive as the song described" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 177). Since this explicit reasoning about the song's lyrics very strongly suggests that there is in fact a metaphorical meaning, one could posit that the "she" Peter Wheatstraw is talking about is his identity as an African American man from the south – the very thing that Invisible Man is trying to deny and is incapable of loving. While Peter Wheatstraw is able to confront this identity and live comfortably, Invisible Man is incapable even of pretending to play along with Wheatstraw's performance:

> Suddenly I was embarrassed and angry. […] I was exasperated. […] I tried to think of some saying about bears to reply, but remembered only Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear … who were both long forgotten and now brought a wave of homesickness. […] He had me grinning despite myself. I liked his words though I didn't know the answer. I'd known the stuff from childhood, but had forgotten it; had learned it back in school (174-176)

Having tried hard to live in a way that was accepted by white people, Invisible Man has lost his connection to this part of his identity and is therefore incapable of taking part in this performance that is defiantly affirming of both individuality in dealing with life's challenges and a sense of one's cultural heritage.

Defiance in the performance of identity also plays a part in Invisible Man's final meeting with Tod Clifton. When Invisible Man meets Clifton selling a "Sambo doll" in the street, Clifton is making a semi-musical performance: he is rhythmically "spieling" an advertisement for the doll while making it dance with an invisible string (431-433, 446). The shocking part about this performance for Invisible Man and the Brotherhood is that Clifton is openly playing with stereotypes or, in the words of Brother Jack, is "a traitorous merchant of vile instruments of anti-Negro, anti-minority racist bigotry" (466-467). This is shocking because he had been a promising leader in the Brotherhood and is no doubt aware of the meaning of his actions and of the fact that this is considered degrading by the Brotherhood to the point of making him a traitor. Not just the figure itself with its "grinning […] black mask-like face" is perceived as degrading; its movements appear particularly offensive. Invisible Man describes its motions as "loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous […] throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received

a perverse pleasure from its motions" (431). The 'lyrics' to Tod Clifton's performance are equivocal:

> Shake it up! Shake it up!
> He's Sambo, the dancing doll, ladies and gentlemen.
> Shake him, stretch him by the neck and set him down,
> - He'll do the rest. […]
> He'll make you laugh, he'll make you sigh, si-igh.
> He'll make you want to dance, and dance […]
> He'll keep you entertained. He'll make you weep sweet-
> Tears from laughing.
> Shake him, shake him, you cannot break him […]
> What makes him happy, what makes him dance,
> This Sambo, this jambo, this high-stepping joy boy?
> He's more than a toy, ladies and gentlemen, he's Sambo, the dancing doll, the twentieth-century miracle. […]
> [Y]ou don't have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed, he'll kill your depression
> And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile […]
> You simply take him and shake him ... and he does the rest." (431-433)

To most of the onlookers this is simply a comical performance, but to Invisible Man, it is more although even he does not seem aware of the full implications. It is an open choice to ignore history and choose not to partake in the social restructuring that Invisible Man – at this point in time – thinks the Brotherhood is working towards. Clifton does not get a chance to explain his choice in the novel; he is fatally shot by a policeman just minutes after this scene takes place. But on a closer look at the performance, Clifton's defiance is more drastic than even Invisible Man realizes. Tod Clifton is not only defying the teachings of the Brotherhood in this public performance; he is also undermining their interests in a more fundamental way. That Clifton also performs a second, subversive act with his spieling and the dancing doll is shown by the fact that when his eyes meet Invisible Man, he gives him "a contemptuous smile" (433).

There are several indications that Clifton is equating the doll to Invisible Man and other African American members of the Brotherhood – including his former self. The Sambo doll is made to dance on an invisible string, indicating that it is controlled from elsewhere although it appears to be dancing of its own volition. To the outside, it looks as if the doll comes alive because its neck is being stretched and this is also the 'instruction' Clifton gives to his audience for making the doll dance. This can be interpreted as what the Brotherhood is doing: by metaphorically stretching Invisible Man's head and giving him a sense of power and authority, they are able to make him dance and perform for them. All the while, he is unaware that he is being controlled because the string that actually governs his movements is invisible. Likewise, it is only later that Invisible Man discovers that he was not "hired to think" (469) and that he himself is

invisible to Brother Jack and the others (475). The lines, "Shake him, shake him, you cannot break him" also indicate that the ones controlling the dancing are not concerned with the feelings or the personality of their doll. Their goal is to be entertained, to have the doll dance according to their will and to have it act according to their interests. This is reflected in the actions of the Brotherhood and their reactions to anything that threatens their plans as well. The fact that the doll is a "twentieth-century miracle" shows that this way of exploitation in which the African American is unaware that he is being exploited is a more modern phenomenon and that the political value of the willing cooperation of African Americans is just being recognized. In contrast, the "vile" dolls that Invisible Man sees had been around for longer, which also hints at their ambiguous meaning. The statement that the doll will "kill your […] dispossession" is a very explicit reference to the agenda of the Brotherhood and to Invisible Man himself. His first speeches in the street and in front of a congregated Harlem crowd had been on the topic of dispossession and as district leader for the Brotherhood he had united the leading members of the community by addressing the same problem (275-280, 340-346, 379). If this was not indication enough that the Sambo doll stands (at least metaphorically) for Invisible Man, Ellison stresses the relation by letting Invisible Man describe how he "saw a short pot-bellied man look down, then up at me with amazement and explode with laughter, pointing from me to the doll" (433).

While this bystander notices the similarity, Invisible Man himself fails to see the connection between himself and the doll. For him, it is a symbol for things past, for everything the Brotherhood is fighting against. He feels betrayed by seeing his former 'Brother' sell this symbol and disgustedly spits on the doll (433). He is unable to understand Clifton's motives for "giv[ing] up his voice and leav[ing] the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself" (438). While Clifton plunges "outside of history", Invisible Man thinks of himself as taking part in history-making instead of being too "transitory" for being considered in the "historical documents" (439). Still, the whole experience is eye-opening to Invisible Man. As he moves through the crowd, he seems to notice for the first time not the crowd that will be shaped by historical actions, but individuals that "were […] outside of historical time" and who "didn't believe in Brotherhood" (440). Moving through Harlem with newly opened eyes he notices the individuals that unlike him have no interest in shaping history. He notices the "sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues" and wonders whether this was "the only true history of the times, […] a song with turgid, inadequate words" (443). This relates back to African Americans being a people denied a historical record but goes beyond that: most people are not part of the big currents of history and their actions and thoughts die with their memory.

Indeed, the only thing element of this scene that continues to shape future people and their identities might be the songs that were recorded and, in their historicity, contain – like Louis Armstrong's "Black and Blue" in Invisible Man's vision of the prologue – the history and identity of a community.

To return to the performance of Clifton: What exactly is his motivation? Since Clifton dies immediately afterwards and Invisible Man is no omniscient narrator, the novel does not offer an explanation. Nadel describes approaches to explaining Clifton's behavior as ranging from him going "nuts" to him being a "victim of his own conscience and/or the white manipulators" and eventually goes on to suggest reading him as a "Christ figure" (64-68). While there are significant allusions that imply a relation between Clifton and Christ, it only appears to explain his death, but none of the facts leading up to it. Instead, we can focus on some points that are definitive: Clifton's intelligence and his recognition of Invisible Man together with his earlier assessment that a man sometimes "*has* to plunge outside history" (377) and the fact that he does not join Ras' party all indicate that his actions are the result of a conscious choice. So is his performance and his musical spieling. Clifton is performing his identity in a way similar to Peter Wheatstraw: Drawing on folklore and racial stereotypes, he moves freely between different meanings and subverts them effortlessly – something of which Invisible Man is still incapable. What to Invisible Man looks like a step back is in fact a sign of a better understanding of race and social relations on Clifton's part. With his acquired knowledge, he decides – in contrast to Invisible Man's later plans of upturning the Brotherhood from the inside – to comically subvert the Brotherhood's aims outside its confines and outside of history. In a similar way to how Invisible Man in the Prologue is "fight[ing] with Monopolated Light and Power" by stealing their electricity and making it appear as if it was lost somewhere in Harlem to get revenge for being invisible for so long (5-7), Clifton gets revenge by disappearing before the eyes of the Brotherhood in the middle of Harlem as they are similarly unable to see him because they do not notice the individual. As if out of mockery, he celebrates his invisibility by selling his "vile instruments", the Sambo dolls. And, in the process, he signifies for anyone enlightened enough to recognize it the true nature of the Brotherhood's involvement in Harlem: making the people dance to the tune of the Brotherhood's interests. In his public spieling and acting, Clifton is ritually performing his enlightened individual identity. Whether his death is then accidental or sacrificial is up to interpretation. Fact is that the somewhat enlightened Invisible Man have suffered the same fate at the end of chapter 25 might if he had not escaped into his underground hole.

Interestingly, Invisible Man usually does not participate in musical performances – irrespective of whether they express group or individual identity. When the students at the chapel, the congregation of the Brotherhood or the people at the funeral sing, there is no mention of him joining in and singing along. The utmost he does is catching himself humming a tune when he remembers the Robin song (193). This can to some extent be explained by the fact that he is disconnected from both his individual identity and the group identity of the African American community. His non-participation can be seen as his attempt to dissociate himself from other African Americans as he thinks of himself as superior to them. Another reason appears to be that he sees singing itself as an aspect of the African American identity that he is trying to overcome. A common prejudice or expectation of white Americans was that African Americans "were all entertainers and natural singers" – a notion Invisible Man resents (314). The novel deals with this idea in multiple instances. For example, Jim Trueblood, the man who shocks Mr. Norton with his story, performed at the college on special occasions:

> He was also a good tenor singer and sometimes when special white guests visited the school he was brought up along with the members of a country quartet to sing what the officials called "their primitive spirituals" when we assembled in the chapel on Sunday evenings. We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet. (47)

The students are embarrassed by the crudeness of the voice, but they have to accept this as part of the performance of African American identity that is expected by the visitors to the college. The students themselves are also subjected to partaking in similar performances:

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

The performance is ritualistic; it is something that is necessary in their interactions as they have to accept the demands of the more powerful white people. This is partially also why the Sambo doll is so offensive: It is eternally subjugated to perform and degrade itself for the amusement of whoever controls it. While being forced to sing spirituals is comparatively less degrading, it is nevertheless a result of an uneven power relation that shows itself in the setting up and fulfillment of expectations. Invisible Man, despite being a yes-sayer according to his own account due to his grandfather's advice, seems unwilling to partake in these performances and anything that is reminiscent of them, including the singing at Clifton's funeral. That these

expectations are recognized by both African Americans and white Americans becomes clear at Invisible Man's first encounter with the white members of the Brotherhood. At the party, a man begins to ask Invisible Man to sing a "spiritual" or "one of those real good ole Negro work songs". The following exchange occurs:

> "The brother *does not sing*!" Brother Jack roared staccato.
> "Nonsense, *all* colored people sing."
> "This is an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism!" Jack said.
> "Nonsense, I like their singing," the broad man said doggedly. [...]
> "Why don't you let him say whether he can sing or not ...? Come on, Brother, git hot! *Go Down, Moses*," he bellowed in a ragged baritone, putting down his cigar and snapping his fingers. "*Way down in Egypt's land. Tell dat ole Pharaoh to let ma colored folks sing!* I'm for the right of the colored brother to sing!" (312)

The man is then escorted out. Given that the Brotherhood sees itself as advanced, this situation is threatening to the status of the others in attendance. They are aware of the social order and that, in their forward-thinking society, it is a taboo to ask a black man to sing and thus make him put on the role of an entertainer. In contrast, it is perfectly acceptable for them to sing "folk songs" as they did moments earlier (311) since this is a part of their own identity that they take pride in. Seeing that the situation is tense, Invisible Man saves the face of the attendees by reacting with inordinately overacted laughter in which the others join after some initial disconcertment. The whole situation is "sobering" to Invisible Man, who finds himself shaking hands with some of them "as though [he] had told them something which they'd wished very much to hear, had rendered them an important service which [he] couldn't understand" (313-314). One of the women tells him that she "would never ask our colored brothers to sing" despite loving to hear them because asking them "would be a very backward thing" (314). Invisible Man is somewhat perplexed by the situation, wondering if there was a way for him to be asked to sing.

The scene shows very clearly the performative quality of identity. On the one side, there is the African American refusing to sing because of the implicit expectation of white Americans that he would be a singing entertainer. On the other side, there is the white American resisting asking the black man to sing, even though she likes African American songs. Both are forced to act against their will since they are performing an identity that defines itself in contrast to the societal expectations. In doing so, they lose agency – the choice not to sing is a statement of identity but also brings about a loss of a part of the identity Invisible Man is suppressing. In this scene in particular, it also shows the power relations that are at work. Invisible Man does not possess the choice to sing, even if he wanted to because of the restraints both of his own identity

and the group identity of the Brotherhood. Accepting the man's request and singing a spiritual would be breaking the code of what the Brotherhood stands for in a similar manner as Clifton's performance in the street.

When it was stated before that Invisible Man does not perform music, this did not mean that he does not *use* music to perform identity. When Invisible Man comes to a realization of his individual identity, music plays an important role. This brings us back to the Louis Armstrong song "Black and Blue" that plays such a central part in the prologue. Invisible Man is performing identity in a sense here as he states, "I play the invisible music of my isolation" (13). His act of performing is not by singing, but by putting on Louis Armstrong's record. If he could, he would play it on five phonographs at the same time so he can feel the music's vibration (7-8). At the same time, he has fully come to terms with his individual identity. He no longer shrinks back at memory, the cultural heritage of African Americans or his role as an American. Instead, he accepts all as building blocks of who he is. Instead of drowning out the painful memories the music brings up as he did before or refusing to join in the crowd of singers (390, 453), he is ready to add his own historical voice. It is his own variation on the age-old song of what it means to be black in America and its lyrics are not "all the same old slave-borne words" with added emotion that makes it feel new (453) or the "turgid, inadequate words" of a blues song blaring from a shop entrance in Harlem (443). Nor is his instrument the rich baritone of Louis Armstrong's voice or the imposing sound of his trumpet. It is the sound of a typewriter slightly echoing through the brightly lit underground hole of a man determined to rejoin society in spite of himself. His voice is that of Peter Wheatstraw, Tod Clifton and Rinehart, the voice of those plunging outside of history, but not less individual and not less American for it. It is the voice of invisibility, not the voice of white or black and blue. And on the "lower frequencies" (581), it is the voice of everyone struggling to find a place in society and coming to terms with one's history and present, with one's social role and identity.

7 Conclusion and Outlook

As described at the beginning, the goal of this analysis was to determine which functions intermedial references serve in the fiction of Ralph Ellison and how they contribute to the structure of the narrative discourse and the exploration of the topics of individual and group identity. Four main functions of musical references in Ellison's fiction were defined.

Firstly, Ellison uses music – in particular jazz – by adapting some of its rules to structure his narrative discourse. This can be especially observed in the many 'variations' Ellison 'plays' on his topic of individual and group identity and on the concept of invisibility.

Secondly, references to music serve the function of enlivening the story by providing additional characterization and by mirroring developments of the characters and the plot.

Thirdly, characters in Ellison's novel both consume and perform music or interact with music in other ways. Music can, among other things, serve as a trigger for epiphanic experiences that shape the characters and plot on the story level. The way characters perform and interact with music is part of their formation and performance of identity as well and, therefore, strongly related to Ellison's central theme of identity. Of particular importance in Ellison's context are children's songs which are connected to a person's history and individual identity-forming processes. By providing a memory to African Americans, who had largely been denied a written history, these songs and the connected folkloric elements provide reference characters that can serve as the basis for identity-formation. Ritualistic music and the music of church serve a similar purpose in the context of group identity. By providing a shared reference frame through which to see the world and a moral framework, they contribute to the formation of shared values and interests and the development of a group identity. The fact that this music – in contrast to, for instance, Western classical music – is participatory with respect to its performance further strengthens its potential for group identity performance. Lastly, the performance of music – especially in the context of jazz, blues and folklore – contributes to the expression of individual identity and offers a way to regain agency and pride in one's identity as well as a way to subvert expectations. This was shown with reference to the characters of Peter Wheatstraw and Tod Clifton.

Lastly, Ellison uses references to music to meta-referentially reflect on parallels between narration in general and music as well as between the acts of writing and making music. This is done in a more implicit way by relating acts of speech to acts of music-making. More explicitly, Ellison lets music serve as the trigger for his character to become a writer. By becoming a writer, the non-musical main character figuratively adds his own story to the multitude of (hi-)stories that he finds hidden in the songs of African American culture. Children's songs and religious music serve a role as a shared inventory of stories, of folklore, of characters and of moral lessons in African American culture. Therefore, for a writer that attempts to capture this aspect of African American – and that also means American – identity, writing almost by default has a relation to music. Additionally, the influence of modernism

further supports the need for relating music – and jazz in particular – to writing. It is no surprise that Ellison related reading Eliot's *The Waste Land* to jazz and Louis Armstrong (Callahan, *Introduction Short Stories* xv; Rampersad 76-77). As Ostendorf states, "for him, all American culture […] is "jazz-shaped". […] [J]azz […] is the true musical idiom of Modernism" (97). In *Invisible Man*, Ellison implies as much in his references to Louis Armstrong as a chronicler of African American experience in the prologue and the inspiration to write that the main character draws from it.

For this analysis, the focus was limited to intermedial references that relate to music. Music is, however, not the only medium that significantly shapes Ellison's fiction. If we view music as the primary reference medium of *Invisible Man,* film appears be the reference medium of choice in Ellison's unfinished second novel, as Yukins argues convincingly (333). The most complete part of Ellison's second novel was published under the title *Juneteenth*, while a longer fragmented part (including *Juneteenth*) was published as *Three Days Before the Shooting*. As has been mentioned earlier, one of the main characters of this second novel is the jazz-musician-turned-preacher Reverend Hickman. The other major role is taken by Senator Adam "Bliss" Sunraider who as a young boy of unclear parentage and unknown "race" had been raised by Reverend Hickman before turning his back on the African American community to become first a filmmaker and later a politician. While this thesis focused strongly on *Invisible Man*, a closer look at the role of music in Ellison's unfinished second novel might offer additional insights. In the later novel, identity and the performance of identity is again a major theme: Senator Sunraider severs all ties to his former identity in order to progress in life. A comparative study of Reverend Hickman and Senator Sunraider and their use of their respective media – music/speeches and film – could therefore merit further research. Additionally, the connection between music and the church is significantly stronger in *Juneteenth*/*Three Days Before the Shooting* than in *Invisible Man*, to the point where their relation makes Sunraider wonder, "What was jazz and what religion back there?" (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 100).

One could also expand on the connection between music and speeches or sermons. Speaking is brought into relation with acts of music-making as we have observed before. For example, in one of Invisible Man's speeches as a student, he talks of his speaking as "imitating the trumpet and the trombone's timbre, playing thematic variations like a baritone horn" and "words marching like the student band, up the campus and down again, blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 113). On the other hand, Reverend Hickman tells the young "Bliss" Sunraider that what is keeping Bliss "from being a great preacher" is his

inability to sing (Ellison, *Juneteenth* 55). Such a study could deepen the understanding of Ellison's views on American identity and remedy one of this thesis' limitations, namely its strong focus on *Invisible Man* as opposed to Ellison's other writings.

Another aspect that deserves a closer investigation is the role of different legitimization processes that accompany the interaction of two medial products. Wolf's categorization of "medial 'dominants'" (Musicalization 37-39) could serve as a starting point of such an analysis, although it would have to be supplemented with other models for media combinations. In the study at hand, this aspect was only investigated with regard to Ellison's dichotomous heritage as a writer with both African American and Western European culture as a reference frame. A closer look at these processes in relation to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance could give significant further insights into the position Ellison holds in relation to these writers.

This thesis provides a model for the different functions intermedial references can serve in fiction in general and the specific functions they serve in Ellison's writing. Additionally, it offers an in-depth inventory of musical references that appear throughout *Invisible Man* and what specific roles they serve in the context of the theme of identity. Music, as has been argued, not merely provides a backdrop for the narrative. For the author, it can significantly influence the writing on both the level of the story and the discourse. And music can serve an important role when it comes to the definition and performance of both individual and group identity. As part of the larger relation between the individual and their environment, music can be used to define, negotiate and challenge what it means to be an individual, a member of a local community and a member of a nation, both in the world of the story and in our own everyday lives.

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9 Appendix

9.1 Abstract (English)

While Ralph Ellison's writing has repeatedly been described in terms of similarities to music – in particular the genre of jazz – the interplay between references to music, Ellison's discourse structure and his dominant theme of identity has not been explored in detail. This thesis aims at filling this gap in research. By an analysis of references to music in Ellison's major novel *Invisible Man* in the context of Rajewsky's and Wolf's models of intermediality, this paper sets out to determine the functions these references serve on the level of the discourse and the story. Particular attention is also paid to the roles music plays in the formation and performance of identity in Ellison's work. The analysis shows that he primarily references specific pieces of music and implies that the improvisational nature of jazz serves as a structural basis for his writing, thereby locating his work in the tradition of modernist literary experiments. Furthermore, the majority of Ellison's references to music originate in African-American culture, which contextualizes his writing as an extension of the legitimization processes related to African-American culture initiated by the Harlem Renaissance. The analysis also indicates a strong link between children's music, religious music, jazz and blues and the formation and performance of individual and group identities. The reason is that this music provides a cultural memory for African Americans in the early 1900s who were denied a written history as a basis for their identity. These results contribute to a more encompassing understanding of the functions of intermedial relations between music and literature in Ellison's writing – both on the level of the discourse and the story. Additionally, they offer insights into how marginalized communities and individuals utilize music to define, negotiate and perform their identities.

9.2 Abstract (Deutsch)

Obwohl Ralph Ellisons Werke in der Vergangenheit wiederholt mit Musik – speziell mit Jazz – verglichen wurden, gibt es noch keine detaillierte Studien zum Zusammenspiel zwischen Musik, den Diskursstrukturen in Ellisons Werken und seinem Hauptthema: Identität. Die vorliegende Arbeit verfolgt das Ziel, diese Forschungslücke zu beseitigen. Es soll bestimmt werden, welche Funktionen Referenzen zur Musik auf der Ebene des Diskurses und der Handlung in Ellisons Roman *Invisible Man* erfüllen. Als analytischer Rahmen dienen dabei Rajewskys und Wolfs Modelle der Intermedialität, mithilfe deren diese Referenzen analysiert werden. Ein besonderer Fokus ist dabei auch die Rolle, die Musik in der Herausbildung und Performativität von Identitäten spielt. Die Analyse zeigt, dass sich Ellison primär auf spezifische musikalische Werke bezieht und andeutet, dass das improvisatorische Wesen des Jazz eine Inspiration für die Struktur seines Romans liefert. Damit lässt sich sein Werk in der Tradition früherer modernistischer Literaturexperimente verorten. Des Weiteren stammen die meisten Referenzen zu Musik aus dem Afro-Amerikanischen Kontext, wodurch sich Ellison als Nachfahre der von der Harlem Renaissance initiierten Legitimation der Afro-Amerikanischen Kultur einordnen lässt. Die Analyse lässt auch auf einen starken Zusammenhang zwischen Kinderliedern, religiöser Musik, Jazz und Blues einerseits und der Herausbildung und Performativität von individuellen und Gruppen-Identitäten andererseits schließen. Der Grund

hierfür ist, dass diese Musik ein kulturelles Gedächtnis für Afro-Amerikaner im frühen 20. Jahrhundert liefert, denen eine verschriftlichte Geschichte als Grundlage für die Identitätsausbildung verwehrt blieb. Diese Ergebnisse tragen zu einem umfassenderen Verständnis der Funktionen von intermedialen Bezügen zur Musik in Ellisons Werken bei – sowohl auf der Ebene des Diskurses als auch auf der Ebene der Handlung. Außerdem vertiefen sie das Verständnis dafür, wie marginalisierte Gruppen und Einzelpersonen Musik nutzen, um ihre Identitäten zu definieren, auszuhandeln und auszuleben.