JAST

Journal of
American Studies of Turkey
No. 63 (Spring 2025)

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Article Information
Type: Research Article
Submitted: 19.3.2025
Accepted: 4.6.2025
Published: 30.6.2025

Citation: Sonal, Emine and Jeffrey Howlett. "Louis Armstrong and Zora Neale Hurston: On the Re-Calibration of Time in Early Twentieth Century America." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, no. 63, 2025, pp. 49-61.

Louis Armstrong and Zora Neale Hurston: On the Re-Calibration of Time in Early Twentieth Century America

Abstract
This paper explores the re-conception of time in Modernist America's music and literary arts. The representation of time encompasses the organization of rhythmic elements that create motion and counter-motion, allowing the interplay of voices to express complex patterns and themes. Time can be seen as a flexible framework that outlines the possible movements of musical notes or narrative moments. Louis Armstrong established a model for musical phrasing that guided jazz soloists throughout the twentieth century. His solos challenged mechanical clock time by creating melodic conversations in a more fluid temporal shape. This resulted in a personal and unique voice, utilizing irregular measurements of time to achieve an unprecedented degree of expression. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston restructured time in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the use of musical cadences that reflect characters' inner experiences and the rhythms of life. Hurston diverged from canonical rhythm and form, drawing on the speech patterns of southern rural blacks to expand her rhythmic and expressive possibilities. This irregular speech introduced alternative rhythms, allowing Hurston to create new voices on both individual and communal levels. Together, Armstrong and Hurston illustrate how re-calibrating time in their respective arts created innovative and expressive forms, enriching the cultural landscape of early twentieth century America.
Keywords: Louis Armstrong, Zora Neale Hurston, time, rhythm, Dixieland Jazz

Louis Armstrong ve Zora Neale Hurston: Yirminci Yüzyıl Amerikası'nda Zamanın Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

Öz
Bu makale, modern Amerikan edebiyat ve müzik perspektifinde zamanı yeniden değerlendirir. Zaman—temponun ötesinde—hareket ve karşı hareket yaratan ritmik ögelerin birleşimlerini kapsar. Bundan dolayı, seslerin birbirleriyle etkileşimine olanak sağlamış; karmaşık kalıpları ve temaları ifade etmiştir. Zaman, müzik notalarının veya yazılı anlatının hareketlerini ve devingenliğini içeren bir yapıdan oluşur. Louis Armstrong, yirminci yüzyılda caz solistlerine ilham veren müzikal bir geçiş modeli oluşturmuştur. Armstrong'un soloları, süreç içerisinde daha akıcı ve melodik bir söylem yaratarak mekanik zamana meydan okumuştur. Armstrong, dolayısıyla zamanın değişen kıvrımlarını işlevli bir hale getirmiş ve özgün ve benzersiz bir sesi keşfetmiştir. Benzer şekilde, Zora Neale Hurston da *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (*Gözleri Tanrı'yı Gözlüyordu*) isimli romanında yarattığı müzik sayesinde zamanı yeniden oluşturmuş, karakterlerin içsel deneyimlerini ve yaşamın ritimlerini başarılı bir şekilde yansıtmıştır. Hurston, ritmik olan ifade yapılarını farklı açılardan gözlemlemiş; kırsal alanda yaşayan Güneyli siyahların konuşma kalıplarını inceleyerek geleneksel ritim ve biçimden kopmuştur. Bir kurala uymayan bu konuşma tarzı, Hurston'ın hem bireysel hem de toplumsal düzeyde yeni sesler yaratmasını sağlamış ve farklı ritimler ortaya koymuştur. Sonuç olarak, Armstrong ve Hurston, kendi alanlarında zamanı yeniden değerlendirerek modern ve etkileyici formlar yaratmışlardır. Armstrong gibi Hurston da, yirminci yüzyıl Amerika'sının kültürel perspektifine olumlu katkı sunmuştur.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Louis Armstrong, Zora Neale Hurston, zaman, ritim, Dixieland Caz

Introduction

Time has fascinated philosophers and theorists from ancient times, whether it be conceived of as "an . . . image . . . of eternity, moving according to number" (Zeyl xiii) or "[o]ne of four coordinates in the continuum called 'world'" (Einstein 46). It is perhaps humanity's dearest construct, an intellectual concept that is developed with the intent of forming coordinates along a spectrum of being or perceiving. The concept serves to justify a particular arc of events, real or imagined, within a structure that allows for reflection or analysis. We all live by the fiction of clock time, an abstraction that allows us, among other things, to gather at our conference sessions at the same time. We have machines that measure and verify this abstraction scientifically and mechanically. In all cases, we confidently accept an idea that gives us a sense of control and directional flow by which we order our activities and meditations. Artists, in particular, depend on such structures in which they plot out harmonious and coherent stages within a composition. Musicians use the term "time" to describe the rhythmic divisions within a piece of music, the speed, and progression between the various elements of a performance. Similarly, writers of fiction imagine a narrative time that urges a story forward or lets it sit in retrospection. They organize it into meters and marshal individual articulations into phrases.

This article will attempt not a grand philosophical analysis of time, but merely a modest consideration of the way time is constructed in the arts in modern America. The particular focus here will be on the organization of time within musical and literary compositions during the period of the emergence of mass culture in the United States. It will be argued that artists such as Louis Armstrong and Zora Neale Hurston restructure, re-imagine, and re-calibrate the rhythm of African American arts and, by extension, that of the larger society with all the speed of appropriation, during the 1920s and 1930s. The two artists offer an expression of rhythm that breaks from the dominant culture's regular purposeful pace and metrical standards employed in the work of previous black artists. In the hands of such practitioners, time moves not in a point-to-point measurable gait toward conclusion, but in a spontaneous and experiential arc that makes possible new and speculative destinations.

A linear perspective of time authorizes cliches like "the march of history," implying a steady forward progress. Even within such a static concept, most observers are willing to admit that there is ebb and flow in the pace of events. For example, the advent of mass culture in the early twentieth century may be characterized as a kind of sprint. In this sort of reading, the pace of life has often been said to accelerate in many ways as the mode of life and economic models shift from agricultural to urban and industrial. The *velocity* of the martial gait is not entirely revealing when one considers the restructuring of time that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s in American public life. The march as a *musical genre*, however, is appropriate when we consider the origins of popular music in the early twentieth century. The Sunday bandstand concert provided the basic equipment–physically, in terms of musical instruments, and conceptually in the compositional qualities of the march–for the development of new musical genres.

The prominence of military music has been well established as a source of ragtime music in the late nineteenth century.[1] The regular rhythmic division of musical bars in this genre can easily be

discerned in the music of composers like Scott Joplin. The alternating bass notes and completed chords performed by ragtime maestros with the left hand form a steady framework from which syncopated melody can spring. The accompaniment is characteristically regular and mechanical. It suggests the time measured out by the clock, or by the metronome, the analogous device inflicted upon every music student in order to instill a clock-like sense of musical time. However, for musicians performing ragtime and related popular genres, it is significant that the right hand does not reflect what the left hand is doing. Indeed, the innovative quality of this music is expressed in the melody line, played by the right hand, which involves the strikingly accented notes we recognize as syncopation. In brief, this term refers to the practice of placing emphasis on prominent melodic notes that are delivered "off the beat," that is, between the strokes of the metronome.

From the latter decades of the nineteenth century until roughly the end of the First World War, this quality was indulged, often to comical extremes, by bands of musicians broadly characterized as syncopators. The rhythms in early street forms were perceived as "so ragged" that the style was dubbed Ragtime (Peretti 57). The rapidly commercialized ragtime, which was eagerly appropriated by white audiences and musicians, stands at the top of this hierarchy and, as such, offers a fairly restrained example of the practice.[2] Filtering down through the more folksy grassroots performances by syncopators, who often relied on inexpensive stringed instruments, the expression of this musical quality is much less restrained and results in a busy, exaggerated rhythm that suggests the frantic scampering away from the tyranny of the metronome.[3]

Louis Armstrong: Re-Winding the Dixieland Timepiece

The performance practice of Louis Armstrong, along with the innovators of Dixieland jazz in general, initiates a moderating impulse in the placement of musical emphasis in time, playing the regimented clock time of the accompaniment against the rhythmically freer sallies of melodic phrases. Dixieland injects an element of blues phrasing into the previous style that incorporates different increments of time in the melodic structure. The effect is a less frantic expression of time and produces a sprung rhythmic pattern that endures in jazz improvisation.

Ralph Ellison is an author who recognizes the significance of this era and its musical reconsideration of time. He indulges in a memorable meditation on Louis Armstrong and time in his prologue to *Invisible Man*. Ellison's narrator relates the quality of invisibility to living in

> A slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music. (Ellison 8)

It is significant that Ellison's view is retrospective, harking back to the temporal experiments of the 1920s and 1930s. Tellingly, he does not propose a bebop musician contemporary with his 1952 novel as the exemplary practitioner of the unique time of invisibility; rather, he goes back a generation to cite the innovative figure of Louis Armstrong.[4] By the post-WWII epoch, jazz has emerged as "art" music revered in certain urban enclaves and on college campuses. Ellison's

reflections on time carry readers back to a time when soloists adapted a more humble idiom that quickly became the voice of the emerging mass culture.

Ellison's consideration of musical time seems to derive from his fascination with Henri Bergson's theories on the measurement and experience of time. Bergson distinguishes between clock time, or "common sense time," the abstract measurement of a linear and progressive flow, and "psychological duration," experienced time, or time in the moment (105). These two opposed concepts might be said to equate closely with the musical marriage that had been developing since minstrelsy, the folk syncopators, and ragtime. Clock time is a musical construction that equates with the pulse of the metronome and with the theoretical grid of possible note placement in a composition. The regularity of this structure is represented in the printed notation of musical scores and forms the basis for a range of musical motion. As demonstrated above, this regular and disciplined form of musical time is basic to the accompaniment in syncopated musical styles, whether it appears in the rhythm section of a Dixieland ensemble or the left hand of a Ragtime piano maestro.

Set against this regimented impulse is the melodic element that becomes supple and variable when subjected to the freer temporal mode of syncopation and blues phrasing. This second conception of musical time equates with Bergson's durée. Ellison seems to find a musical metaphor in the experiential quality of spontaneous impressions that equates with the improvisational characteristic of jazz, especially in the hands of a master soloist like Armstrong.

A phrase is a unit of meaning, whether in music or in language. It can be understood as the placing of significance in time. As we consider musical time, the element of shaping a phrase, designating the sonic spaces between the sounded note and the micro-silences that surround it, Louis Armstrong, the main exponent of the practice in the early history of jazz, has often been credited with setting the standard for musical phrasing that reigned for a generation. It can even be argued that, apart from a period in the 1950s and 60s when jazz styles branched into various experimental and artistic avenues, Armstrong's phrasing has been a unifying characteristic throughout the history of jazz music (Jasen and Jones 182). Armstrong's solos convey the rhythms not of regular musical meter but more nearly those of speech. In his recordings of the 1920s, Louis Armstrong emerged as the master of subtly shifting the tiny silences between sounded notes in a way that created the characteristic feel of the jazz soloist. Gary Giddens writes that Armstrong "manifested the rhythmic gait known as 'swing,' transformed a polyphonic folk music into a soloist's art" (273). Wynton Marsalis refers to this rhythmic quality as "bounce."[5] It should be noted that the bending of metronomic measure is not unique to the 1920s, to Armstrong, or jazz music. It is a staple of musical performance practice that no doubt stretches from Bach to Bootsy Collins and beyond. The effect of the allegro accompaniment of 1920s jazz, however, combined with the groove induced by the bouncy melodic statements, bestows an inimitable character to the music of the era that has been utilized by every creator of narrative or historical documentary representing this period. The jazz era possesses a characteristic time signature.

Bounce is created by starting phrases between the regular metronomic strokes and loosening the metrical regularity of melody. Gunther Schuller points out that African folk music arises from an

entirely different system from the traditions of Western classical music, the notation of which depends on a mathematical division of note values. He describes jazz practice as allowing the "democratization of rhythm values" (6). That is, notes may be emphasized that are not usually accented in a particular metrical scheme. Indeed, African musical time, deriving from polyrhythms, is often impossible to notate in sheet music using the mechanical standards of Western music. This flexible rhythmic quality is evident throughout the history of black American music, even down to soul and funk musicians "playing behind the beat."

But beyond the apparently casual nature of his melodic phrasing, the temporal structures in Armstrong's solos absorb rhythms from the aural culture around him. Schuller notes that "African native music and early American jazz both originate in a total vision of life, in which music, unlike the 'art music' of Europe, is not a separate, autonomous social domain." A jazz performance is thus not a separate type of performance from the speech acts of the surrounding environment, as "African music . . . is conditioned by . . . the entire social structure" (4). Patterns of spoken dialogue, laughter, anguished cries, and muted under-the-breath irony are all expressed by Armstrong's horn. In the same way, the instrumental quality of Armstrong's scat singing and the vocal quality of his horn solos demonstrate the African heritage of jazz in the "reciprocal relationship between language and music" (Schuller 5). The rise of Armstrong's post-Dixieland style may demonstrate a retreat from the more frantic syncopations of earlier decades, and his rhythmic innovation, rooted in African folk culture, creates a more vocal musical quality, one that engages more powerfully on an emotional level. Arising from the Dixieland practice of intertwining the voices of trumpet, trombone, and clarinet, Armstrong's style achieves a conversational effect, a responsive attitude that adopts phrasing from other speech performances from within the community as well as from the musical elements surrounding his improvisation. As Robert Palmer expresses, "the melodies found in music suggest words and sentences. By using generally understood correspondences between pitch configurations in speech and in music, musicians can make their instruments talk" (29).

In the 1920s, Armstrong recorded a succession of jazz masterpieces as bandleader and soloist in small ensembles. These recordings have been released in such compilations as Hot Fives and Sevens by the JSP label. A consideration of these recordings can help to illustrate Armstrong's development of phrasing during this period of incipiency. If we look at "Twelfth Street Rag" (Armstrong, *Hot Fives*, 2.8)[6] as a beginning point, indeed, as a retrospective exercise gazing back at the times before the solidification of Dixieland style, the soloist is revealed as a student who has mastered and bettered previous performances of Ragtime-inspired excesses. Armstrong's exposition of the melodic theme retains some of the chaotic energy of the syncopators' style and aggressively accents the offbeats, creating a polyrhythm that cycles back against the regular time of the accompaniment. It is a virtuosic performance that transcends the mere busy-ness of similar performances, but it only anticipates the future fullness of Armstrong's practice in its technical, as opposed to aesthetic, mastery.

When listening to the various exercises with musical time and phrasing established in these recordings, it is tempting to consider Armstrong as assigning roles and characters to particular instrumental solos. If his musical phrasing derives from voices and sounds within the community,

individuals may be represented by unique cadences and phrases. It is inviting for a sensitive listener to hear examples of Bergson's "psychological duration" in the extended moment of intensity evoked in Armstrong's musical phrases. Even while reposing on the inner time of duration, consciousness is aware of an "outer circle of psychic states which it uses as a balance-wheel (Bergson 126). It is possible to discern in musical utterances the unique time experienced by characters and expressed in their particular rhythms of lived time. For example, "Keyhole Blues," (Armstrong, 2.9) while it plays with time in a way as sophisticated as that in "Twelfth Street Rag," "Keyhole" does so by resisting the consistent exposition of melody in an extended musical phrase, using repetition and hesitation to create a stuttering effect. The four notes repeated at irregular intervals seem to resist the progression of the melodic statement. This rhythmic tic may suggest the irregular time experienced by a character who stands uncertainly outside the door listening or peeking in at the keyhole. It is impossible to know how Armstrong responds musically to the titles of traditional tunes or those produced by other composers, however, the phrasing in Armstrong's version of Jellyroll Morton's evocatively titled "Wild Man Blues" (Armstrong, 2.2) also suggests a marginal emotional state. The cadences in Armstrong's initial trumpet solo suggest frequent jitters of complaint and the impatient rush of speech outside conventional utterances. A phrase at the end of this first solo features a brilliant shift in octave that modulates between a breathy threat and a cry of abandon. In "Alligator Crawl" (Armstrong, 2.4), Armstrong's horn also simulates a cry of joy and ends in a swinging fanfare. We can hear these pieces as constituting a catalogue of speech types celebrated in the New Orleans musical dialect. By means of the irregular time of African musical shapes, Armstrong adopts such utterances and elevates them to a form of melodic declaration. Thus, a style of phrasing arises that becomes part of the musical vocabulary inspirational to many future jazz soloists.

While the previous examples demonstrate the breadth of spoken rhythms that make their way into Armstrong's musical imagination, the essence of Armstrong's style is perhaps achieved in "Potato Head Blues" (Armstrong, 2.5). The groove produced by Armstrong's bouncing rhythm in the initial trumpet solo exemplifies the joyful allegro of 1920s jazz that feels pleasant all along the backbone. Its syncopation converts the martial discipline of the march to a happy loose-limbed strut. Further, Armstrong's musical phrases answer each other in an elegant call-and-response suggestive of the interweaving voices of wind instruments endemic to Dixieland jazz. The clipped phrases suggest a yielding to another soloist but Armstrong incorporates the communal time of Dixieland into the single voice of his horn. It is this type of performance that sets the standard for musical phrasing in the jazz era.

"Melancholy Blues" (Armstrong 2.6) demonstrates a similar use of time in another mood. An adagio tempo is equally evocative of emotional state through its placement of musical emphasis in time. A slower tempo, in fact, allows more negative space within the grid of metronomic time and thus more varied moments for a melodic note to be struck. The low blues of "Melancholy" bends musical time by allowing notes to drag after the expected pulse of the tempo. One need only reference the Bach "Air" from Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D (BWV 1068)[7] to illustrate the malleability of musical time in slow tempos. Bach's famous descending bass line here is written as square eighth notes, but is usually performed by elongating the second, third, sixth and seventh

notes, thus carving into the negative space of sound and allowing these four notes to divide the intervening micro silences in an uneven but elegant pattern. “What Did I Do (To be So Black and Blue)” (Armstrong, 4.4) similarly makes use of a slow tempo to shape a melody in time. The number also demonstrates a vocal quality in Armstrong’s melodic imagination. Unlike many instrumental numbers inherited by jazz performers of Armstrong’s time, “What Did I Do?” is adapted from a Broadway musical written by Fats Waller and Andy Razaf. Armstrong sings the number as well, but only after an extended trumpet solo that runs through both chorus and refrain. Though abstract and brilliantly shaped, this trumpet intro seems to be inspired by the lyrical content of the number. The plaintively repeated and varied four-note figure that opens the trumpet solo seems to be asking “what did I do?” but in a melodic statement different from that which appears in the lyric at the conclusion of every verse.

Yet the dialogue produced in Armstrong’s solo technique is dynamic and new. It contains African American rhythms and style but allows an emotive range not available in other modernist compositions coinciding with the rise of black artists. We can speculate that its effect on the rhythms of American life in other expressions of art in later decades is discernible. For example, the hard-boiled dialogue of Hollywood’s noir films shares the rhythmic energy and call-and-response characteristics of Dixieland jazz, though it is delivered in a driving monotone and lacks the emotive range pioneered by Armstrong and the hot soloists of his generation. The charm of Armstrong’s style is in the warmth and measurement of its speech. It has an emotive dimension that is easily adapted into the larger community’s aural inventory. We can say that, in its most basic terms, Armstrong’s improvisation practice arises from the rhythmic patterns of black speech in the early twentieth century and creates a new sense of musical time that becomes an artistic standard. We can see this as the vernacularization of musical time, a process that can also be reproduced in literary and dramatic composition. Indeed, Amstrong’s adaptation of time spreads its influence throughout the American society. As Giddens states, “[i]n teaching America to swing, he liberated its vernacular voice” (286).

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:
On the Re-Calibration of Time in Early Twentieth Century America

What distinguishes Zora Neale Hurston as a novelist is her multidimensional expertise. Beyond being a novelist and playwright, she was also an anthropologist, folklorist, and artist. Hurston played a significant role in the Harlem Renaissance and the “new Negro” during the 1920s, contributing greatly to the literary and cultural scene of New York City. She was unique among the circle of Harlem artists theorizing on the proper form of expression for young black artists regarding rhythm, tempo and experienced communal time. Whereas contemporaries like Claude McKay and Countee Cullen presented black experience and themes in meters that closely aligned with canonical time, Hurston favored the rhythms of blues music and the people’s speech of the rural South. Langston Hughes likewise experimented with jazz rhythms in his work, but the effect is, appropriately, more “uptown” than the communal time Hurston finds in the rural southern dialect. Her second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, remains a landmark in African American literature, capturing the journey of a young black woman through Hurston’s masterful storytelling, rich vernacular, and vivid character portrayals.

In the early twentieth century, the rise of African American racial consciousness paralleled the emergence of jazz, blues, spirituals, and visual arts. During this time, a new generation of African American writers produced groundbreaking works in poetry, novels, drama, and essays, marking a significant era of cultural and intellectual growth. The Harlem Renaissance became a vital space for these artists, writers, and musicians to express their identities and experiences, setting fire to a transformative shift in American culture.

In 1937, while conducting folklore research in Haiti, Zora Neale Hurston wrote the manuscript for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks. For many critics, the book became widely read and controversial, largely due to Hurston's bold use of African American vernacular by capturing the speech patterns and dialects of Black communities. This technique was radical for its time, as many Black intellectuals viewed rural folk culture as ignorant or embarrassing. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that Hurston's contributions as both an author and anthropologist were fully recognized and appreciated after her death.

The novel places a significant emphasis on Black folks' life in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-Black town to be incorporated in the United States, highlighting the community's culture and dynamics. At the heart of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Janie Crawford, a sixteen-year-old girl who dreams of love and wonders if marriage will bring it. She waits for love to blossom, like a pear tree in spring. The pear tree symbolizes Janie's ideal of a harmonious relationship, one that is both emotionally fulfilling and sexually liberating. To sum up, over the course of twenty-four years and three marriages, Janie endures pain and humiliation, while also experiencing resilience, love, and personal growth.

The exposition, written in standard English, has a poetic, almost biblical tone, setting a reflective and philosophical mood. Here, a formal and elongated rhythm is employed, evoking a canonical era, which perhaps operates as Bergsonian common sense time. In contrast, when Janie begins telling her story to Pheoby, the dialogue between the two women and the speech of the townspeople is delivered in African American vernacular. This contrast between the narrative voice and the dialogue is striking. While the narrator speaks in broad, philosophical terms, the characters' conversations are grounded in their personal experiences, expressed in the non-standard, vernacular of their community. The rhythm of this speech may suggest the melody of a musical piece, the time of emotional duration that springs from the canonical accompaniment. It is interesting to see that the narrative voice speaks in general and philosophical terms, while the dialogues remain personal and specific based on the characters' experience. This distinct narrative voice can be seen in the following quotation: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men" (Hurston 1). The voice heard here is a historical one, delivered in a slow tempo with weight and gravity, providing a past against which contemporary rhythms can be contrasted. Furthermore, Hurston's capture of vernacular enabled her to incorporate blues musical techniques in her novel in relation to African American experiences in early twentieth century America. It is clear that Hurston creates the music by depicting the characters' vernacular. As an anthropologist,

Hurston travelled to the South to study the local dialects of the black community. She recorded the unique phrasing that derived from a shared African culture. As a consequence, she managed to insert the vernacular on the page by improvising the musical speech form similar to the rhythm of a blues song.[8]

The novel charts Janie's journey of self-discovery, particularly through her evolving use of language. At the outset, Janie is silent, her voice overshadowed by others. Her grandmother, Nanny, forces her into a marriage with Logan Killicks, prioritizing material security over emotional connection. As a former slave, Nanny values protection and stability above love. In her marriage to Logan, Janie is treated as a worker, laboring in the fields alongside the mule. Unable to endure this life, she elopes with Joe Starks, a wealthy man who becomes the mayor of Eatonville, the first self-governing Black community in the United States. Yet Joe, too, controls her voice and public appearance, dictating what she should wear and forbidding her from speaking publicly. For example, he forces Janie to wear a head rag, seeing her beauty and voice as threats to his authority. To summarize, Joe's voice doesn't represent the liberating sound of blues but repeats the rhythm of oppression. In Eatonville, his "big voice" is an imitation of the hegemonic power structure.

However, Janie's relationship with her third husband, Tea Cake, marks a turning point. With Tea Cake, Janie's voice is no longer suppressed, and she experiences open and free conversation. Language becomes a source of empowerment, allowing her to express herself fully. By the novel's end, when Janie returns to Eatonville, she has achieved self-realization, having found love, fulfillment, and her own voice. Janie recounts her story to Pheoby, breaking free from societal expectations and completing her journey toward independence as a woman who has, in her own words, "been to the horizon" (182), used as a metaphor for future possibilities.

Time also plays a significant role in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the novel's nonlinear structure frequently interwoven with flashbacks reflects this. The story is framed by a third-person omniscient narrator who uses standard English. In the opening paragraph, this narrator introduces a distinctive and virtuous voice. In contrast, when Janie begins recounting her life to Pheoby, their conversations, along with those of the townspeople, are delivered in African American vernacular. This contrast between the narrator's general, philosophical language and dialogue which are experience-based is striking.

Hurston's capture of vernacular enabled her to incorporate blues musical techniques in her novel in relation to African American experiences in early twentieth century America. Conveying the essence of the blues requires a mastery of "timing, . . . subtle variations in vocal timbre, [and the ability] to hear and execute . . . very precise gradations in pitch (Palmer 19). It is clear that Hurston creates the music by depicting the characters' vernacular. As an anthropologist, Hurston travelled to the South and collected games, chants, 'spells' and studied the local dialects of the black community that contribute to the rhythms of literary time in her developing literary style. In this novel she successfully managed to insert the local dialect on the page and improved the speech form in time to the rhythm of a blues song. Therefore, the characters' vernacular is very musical. Zimmerman states that "Hurston believed that music and literature grew from the art of

sound, and she used sound as a narrative structure to frame *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Her understanding of music evolved from her dedication to sound studies; her use of the rhythm and rhyme of blues music allowed her to capture the vernacular of the South" (3).

Much like Armstrong's jazz solos, Hurston's dialogue captures the individuality of her characters and their genuine, unfiltered responses to life. The speech patterns of her characters, such as Janie, Tea Cake, and the porch talkers, are imbued with a musicality that mirrors the rhythms found in jazz and blues. Their conversations are tinged with pauses, overlaps, and interruptions, lending a natural flow to the dialogue. For instance, in Chapter 1, when Janie recounts her life story to Pheoby, the structure of her speech mimics that of a blues song, with its emotional depth and variations reflecting the sorrows and triumphs of her life. The repeated structure, reminiscent of blues, represents Janie's emotional journey through her struggles and moments of joy as can be seen below:

> Naw, 'tain't nothin' lak you might think. So 'tain't no use in me
> telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go
> 'long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain't no different
> from a coon hide. Looka heah, Pheoby, is Sam waitin' on you for his supper? (Hurston 7)

Tea Cake, Janie's third husband, deepens the connection between Hurston's novel and musical traditions. As a blues musician who plays both the guitar and piano, Tea Cake embodies the improvisational spirit of the blues. His first appearance at Janie's door, where he mimics the tuning of a guitar, captures his playful, spontaneous nature: "Tea Cake stood there mimicking the tuning of a guitar . . . Finally she smiled and he sung middle C, put his guitar under his arm and walked back to where she was" (Hurston 96). Through his music, Tea Cake entertains his community and brings people together, inviting Janie to participate: "Evenin', folks. Thought y'all might lak uh lil music this evenin', so Ah brought long mah box" (96). Tea Cake's connection to the blues mirrors Janie's journey. Just as Tea Cake embodies the spirit of the blues, Janie, after enduring the hardships of her first two marriages, emerges as a "blues woman" finding calm, vibrant energy, and emotional resilience in her relationship with Tea Cake, much like the healing power of blues music. In short, it is the music that allows Tea Cake to interact with Janie and introduce his true personality in terms of his charm and sincerity to Janie.

The musicality of Hurston's vernacular corresponds with the rhythms of blues and jazz, overlapping perfectly with the way a jazz musician improvises, repeating and playing with musical phrases to express emotions. Hurston's decision to write her novel in black vernacular was a deliberate political choice, much like Armstrong's improvisations within jazz and blues. In an era when standardized English was regarded as superior, Hurston preserved the authenticity of African American voices. Similarly, Armstrong's jazz solos kept alive the traditions of spirituals and slave songs, forms of cultural expression that had long been devalued by dominant white society.

In both cases, Hurston and Armstrong symbolized the freedom to break away from conventional rules, to experiment, and to create something uniquely personal. Both artists celebrated the

beauty of African American culture and the value of forms of expression that had been historically marginalized. While blues and jazz conveyed the stories and struggles of Black communities through music, Hurston used the vernacular of African American people to tell those stories in literature. Just as Armstrong's solos captured the individuality of each performance, Hurston's dialogue conveyed the spontaneous and unfiltered responses of her characters to the world around them.

Both Hurston's literary style and the musical traditions of jazz and blues share a deep connection to African American culture, relying on rhythm, spontaneity, and individuality. In both jazz and *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* there is an underlying theme of freedom to express oneself authentically, and to break away from societal norms. Janie's quest for personal freedom and her journey to find her voice mirror Armstrong's musical journey, as both forms of expression transcend racial and social boundaries.

Conclusion

Hurston's use of vernacular in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Armstrong's improvisation in jazz and blues share important similarities, particularly in their celebration of individual voice and rhythm. Both Hurston and Armstrong, through their respective art forms, embody the richness of African American culture and emphasize personal expression. Just as Armstrong crafts melody and rhythm through improvisation, Hurston's characters speak in a vernacular that flows naturally, with shifts in tone and rhythm reflective of their spontaneous emotions and experiences.

In conclusion, Armstrong's soloing demonstrated a mastery of improvisation, reshaping melodies in spontaneous and creative ways. He claims the inheritance of a hegemonic common-sense time, or clock time, and upon this ground expresses the more fluid and flexible time of personal emotional duration. This mirrors how Hurston weaves language and folklore into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, using vibrant, unpredictable dialogue and storytelling patterns that feel fluid and organic. Ultimately, Hurston and Armstrong converge in their shared use of rhythm, phrasing, improvisation, and individuality. Both artists capture the vibrancy and diversity of African American life, celebrating its rhythms and unique voices. Through their respective art forms, they offer a form of resistance to dominant cultural narratives by emphasizing the power of individual expression. Hurston's use of dialect and Armstrong's improvisation embody the rhythm of Black life, highlighting the importance of personal voice within a broader cultural framework and offering liberation through art. Though Hurston's medium was literature and Armstrong's was music, both celebrated Black cultural identity and reshaped their art forms by focusing on personal style and innovation. Both brought the rhythms of the black vernacular to the mainstream of modern American culture and helped to shape subsequent expressions of American life and character. In doing so, these artists changed the way Americans experienced time during the transformative period of the early twentieth century.

Notes

[1] See, for example, David Wondrich's discussion of Ragtime in *Stomp and Swerve: American Music Gets Hot 1843-1924*. Wondrich cites musicologist Edward Berlin who delineates the stages of development from the march to the cakewalk to the rag (Wondrich 61).

[2] The popularity of Ragtime does not result entirely from the anonymous note poachers of Tin Pan Alley. See David Gilbert's discussion of the efforts of musicians like James Reese Europe to introduce African American musical styles to the Manhattan musical stage in *The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace*, especially pages 163-73.

[3] Paul Oliver catalogues a number of performers and recordings in his work *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*. His chapter "Under the Chicken Tree: Songs from the Ragtime Era" traces rag-inspired performances during this period.

[4] Michael Germana has devoted a chapter to Ellison's critique of time in the Bebop era in his study *Ralph Ellison in Context*.

[5] Quoted in Ken Burns's documentary series *Jazz* on PBS.

[6] The recording referenced is a four CD set. The first number refers to the CD number and the second to the track number on that CD.

[7] The recording referenced here is from the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, which uses bowed basses to realize this rhythmic pattern. Other recordings may even make use of pizzicato technique which shortens the decay of the struck note and expands the temporal range in which the musical emphasis may be voiced.

[8] Here again Schuller's comments on the reciprocal relationship between music and language are applicable, as are Palmer's observations of the verbal priority of the blues.

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