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# Black Aesthetics in Literature and Music and French Existentialism

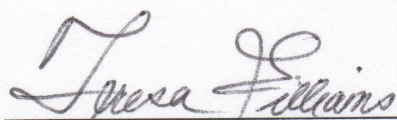
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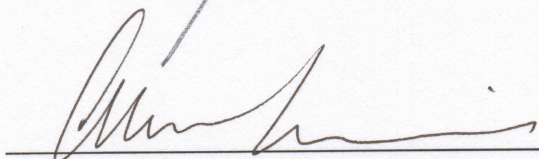
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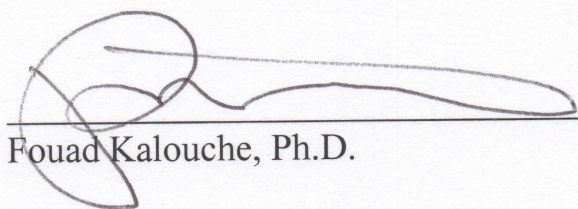
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“To fling my arms wide  
In the face of the sun.  
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening...  
A tall, slim tree...  
Night coming tenderly

Black like me.”

-Langston Hughes “Dream Variations”

“We want some black people on that motherfucking wall of fame, now!!!”

- Buggin’ Out *Do the Right Thing*, 1989

## Introduction

It might be difficult to understand how the two quotes above could possibly be related-- one a poetic verse from one of America’s greatest poets and another, an enraged line from Spike Lee’s 1989 masterpiece *Do the Right Thing*. What I find as link between the two, however, is an expression of black recognition. Lee’s character, Buggin’ Out, feels slighted by the local pizza parlor which has a “Wall of Fame” that celebrates Italians only. The neighborhood in which the pizza place operates has no Italians and is comprised of mostly Blacks and Hispanics. Keenly aware of this slight, Buggin’ Out demands that this pizza parlor recognize the people who patronize the business thereby shedding light on the absence of the proper recognition of black people in a white establishment. Hughes’ expression is less full of rage but is as potent. In the poem, the speaker casts away all bonds of suffering and instead dances passionately. When the



dance is over, the speaker rests under a tree and waits for the night to come which is “Black like [him].” In “Dream Variations,” Hughes engages in a different type of recognition, where he finds brotherhood with the world around him. While both assertions stem from different art forms, they both utilize an aesthetics known as Black Aesthetics.

Although the debates of the aesthetics have faded, an insightful understanding of black literature requires a new and focused examination of this dynamic artistic tradition, from its structure arts to its meanings. Simply put, both texts are expressions that occupy space within works of art, including literature and music, and both are related to and help explain the history of black Americans. A narrative of one’s personal history could serve a similar purpose, yet even these routes of history could be used in the form of the arts. Inasmuch as the arts serve the purpose of expression, black authors, songwriters and musicians who have sought to advance an understanding of black culture, history and life have remained aware of and relied heavily on a distinctively complex and detailed aesthetic that is characterized by aural/oral techniques and styles that have been passed down through generations. This aesthetic, which will be referred to as the “Black Aesthetic,” is a creative force which delves into the roots of black artistry even as it becomes entangled within the traditions of Western literature and music. Such aesthetics, in its generic form, has faced many challenges and has been subjected to multiple studies, particularly since scholars have sought to understand who this aesthetic applies to and how it functions. Publisher Hoyt W. Fuller contends that “The movement will be reviled as ‘racism-in-reverse,’ and its writers labeled ‘racist’ opprobrious terms which are flung lightly at black people now that the piper is being paid for all the long years of rejection and abuse which black people have experienced at the hands of white people- with few voices raised in objection” (Fuller 3-4). While many decry the idea of a racially defined aesthetic, the second part of Fuller’s statement is



crucial in understanding the need for such an aesthetic. As Fuller suggests, the Black Aesthetic is one which reflects upon centuries of alienation and objectification and will at once come to terms with both forms of marginalization as well as overcome it. Fuller explains that Black Aesthetics literature has been ignored by white America because “the glass through which black life is viewed by white Americans is, inescapably (it is a matter of extent), befogged by the hot breath of history” (Fuller 5-6). There is no objective understanding of race for most Americans because there has been a segregation of cultures and peoples for many generations, manifested in a relatively racially biased mindset by white Americans. It is segregation not only found in the Jim Crow South or industrialization of the North, but one found extensively in the fields of Academia, such as the Humanities. In the studies of literature, the segregation is found prevalently in the Western literary canon, which was initially comprised of mostly dead white European males. In the face of such segregation, the Black Aesthetics began to develop a unique style and identity. While the Black Aesthetics have received considerable recognition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is still room for analysis of the Aesthetics.

One of the central objectives of this thesis is to explain the deep history of the Black Aesthetics while simultaneously reexamining its existence. A close analysis of the trajectory of the Black Aesthetics can explain its social, political, and racial history as well as the extent to which it has influenced and helped make vital Western literature. As I will seek to show, the “Black Aesthetic” is not simply a tool with a dictionary of language for the creation of prose and poems, but one steeped “in our racial memory, and the unshakeable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and springing from this, where we are going”(Mayfield 27).



The first part of this thesis will explain the history and development of the Black Aesthetics in America. The core of the study will unveil an examination of four novels by four different 20<sup>th</sup>-century black writers who might not share the exact politics or identity but whose writing shares a similar aesthetic quality. The novels will be examined according to how the Black Aesthetics functions in them. Additionally, this study will examine the musical genre of jazz. It could be very difficult to understand how exactly these forms of music could be valued in the Black Aesthetics but the tools that developed into the aesthetics, from the rhetorical tools of language and rhythm, have a profound impact upon the music. An analysis of the works in the Black Aesthetics components, which will parallel the analyses of works of literature and aesthetics, will offer a better understanding of their respective authors as well as offer possible answers to the larger question.

The importance of the Black Aesthetics cannot be ignored as these works of literature allow for an understanding of race identity and relations in America. I will argue, however, that along with the aesthetics, the French philosophy of Existentialism creates a greater opportunity in understand and appreciating these works. While Existentialism will allow for greater understanding the aesthetics, the aesthetics themselves run congruently with the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir and Albert Camus. In the Introduction of *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, Gordon Marino states his views on how the philosophy “does not dodge the fact that there is something disturbing going on in the basement of our cozy middle-class world” (xi). Marino views the arching philosophy in the sense of freedom from constraints of other established philosophies. Existentialism offers understanding of the world beginning with the individual, and “Everything that it has to say, and everything that it believes can be said of significance...stems from this central, founding idea” (Earnshaw 1). While there are many



philosophers who have contributed their ideas and theories to the philosophy, such as Søren Kierkegaard, the earliest of the philosophers to Germans Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, (the real focus for this thesis will be found in the works of the three well known French Existentialists. While Jena-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus nor Simone De Beauvoir share the exact same philosophy, they do share many central ideas, dealing with the individual, freedom and morality. It is these philosophies that have had a major influence on many black writers—contemporaries and otherwise. In fact, Ralph Ellison was highly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Richard Wright maintained great friendships with Sartre and Beauvoir, having considered them his intellectual soul mates. Interestingly enough, the relationship between Existentialism and Black Aesthetics goes deeper than mere influence and extends to more probing questions concerning individuality and one's relationship to the world. The novels under focus for this thesis invite a detailed examination of this situation. The second part of the thesis, in fact, uncovers the ideas that shape this diverse philosophy as well as the issues that the French Existentialists examine.

In the final section of the thesis, I use French Existentialism to analyze the great works of literature of the Black Aesthetics. Throughout my analysis, I note many themes that are evident in Black Aesthetics and Existentialism. These themes include: alienation, the meaninglessness of existence and Bad Faith, rebellion, and the struggle to affirm life. The third section begins with an examination of four different novels by four by African American authors, and it includes my analysis of each text within an Existential framework. These novels, as stated before, represent the diverse backgrounds and experiences of African American authors who wrote within different contexts while also revealing each writer's efforts at using his/her literary talent as a means of channeling the Black Aesthetic into his/her own form and style. For this part of the



study, I divided the life affirming works of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison and the despair and nihilism evident in the writing of Richard Wright and James Weldon Johnson. While there are noticeable differences among the writers, there is still a consistent theme which runs through these works. With the usage of Existentialism, the analysis delves deeper into the alienation and anguish at work in these novels, while also noting the humanity and will to continue living life in the face of struggle. The thesis also analyzes how music that had been created through the Black Aesthetic utilizes the Existential philosophy, specifically the art forms of jazz. Jazz has been considered an American tradition, but as the music rose to popularity in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, so did its international popularity, including with the French and the Existentialists. In fact, these philosophers found a connection with jazz music and the people that created it. While the Existentialist views allow for a new interpretation and appreciation for these works of literature and music, the philosophy will create a new duct for the answering the questions of what it means to be black. This thesis, then, seeks to go beyond racial identities that would be associated with the Black Aesthetics, imagining new values and meanings for many black authors and performers. At the same time, the study seeks to unveil and reignite the intelligence and power that many of these works have while also underscoring the influence they have wielded over the past century.

## **The Black Aesthetics and its History**

In order to understand Black Aesthetics, there must be an examination of aesthetics history in the West. In Western European tradition, aesthetics is a term which describes theories of beauty and style attributed to a variety of arts. In order to understand and appreciate works of art, one must understand the artistic and aesthetic heritage from which they grew. German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, explains that one cannot



judge art through science because “a science of the beautiful would have to determine scientifically, i.e. by means of proofs, whether a thing was to be considered beautiful or not” (Kant 34). A person cannot distill the essence of an art work from scientific means and practices, but instead within a specified context. For one to understand fully the aesthetics that influence or shape a work of art or one associated with a period, its social evolution must be considered. Throughout history, both artistic value and political ideology have informed both aesthetic and artistic movements, including the most vibrant and engaged ones. In some cases, the aesthetic movement correlates with its own political movement, such as the writers of Negritude or the Marxist writers. To the extent that Europe has had much of the historical and social hold on aesthetics, one of the most interesting aesthetic movements has been the rise and evolution of Black American aesthetics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the beginning of the American slave trade to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the literature, music, dance and art of African descendents have shaped and redefined different aspects of American culture, such as literature, arts, music and common vernacular. The African artistry of storytelling, music, religion, and other cultural practices were applied to the Western tools which defined European art. This synthesis created energized new forms of literature and new genres of music. Where some aesthetic movements deal with either an artistic concept which defines how works are made, such as the surrealist of Europe in the 1920's or with a political cause which attacks or awakens consciousness in people, such as the Communist art works of the 1940's, Black aesthetics deals with both issues. In addition to Black literature and music's ability to tell stories—not simply for amusement but also as a means of serving a didactic purpose for other blacks to persevere in a segregated America—the most important point of these forms of literature and music was their ability to reach multitudes of Black Americans through generations thereby highlighting a unique power to channel into



diverse narratives black people's myriad struggles and situations. During the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the Black Aesthetics that found its roots in slave narratives later developed into the Harlem Renaissance and the transformations of the black identity from the South into the North. With the Second World War, black artists and authors challenged not only the values of white American hierarchy, but also the foundations defined by other black artists. This revolt against the traditional white American history would lead to a more nationalistic version of the Black Aesthetics, which set out to separate itself from the influence of Western European aesthetics. However, after the death of the Civil Rights Movement, black writers began to find freedom in incorporating the aesthetics of older and Western aesthetics to create a unique hybrid of black aesthetics. Important in understanding the Black Aesthetics is not only the artistic developments it is based upon but an aesthetic that deals with the lived experience of black folk. Even with a complex and diverse history, questions still arise about the idea of the Black Aesthetics, such as its real existence, its political function, and its canonization. From its roots within the language and rhetoric that shaped black American identity, beginning with slavery, the Black Aesthetics formed and created complex identities among different men and women. The Black Aesthetics has lent to many different writers', essayists', and novelists' contributions to 20<sup>th</sup> century Western cultural thought.

While the theories of Black Aesthetics developed prominently in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, its roots of development begin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of black newspapers and antislavery publications, editors, journalists and other writers, such as Frederick Douglass, began to voice "the desire to achieve freedom and to define racial self" (Harris 67). With the feeling of white misrepresentation in the media, black writers began to campaign for an approach to writing about race using the voice their own people. Yet, until later developments,



these writers had to work within the “traditional” American English vernacular instead of the traditional folk telling framework that got its roots from the African tradition. Thanks to the sociologist, W. E. B Du Bois and his acclaimed sociological text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, attention to the folk traditions was more apparent during the Harlem Renaissance. During this development, writers such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay began to embrace the folk traditions that Du Bois researched in their prose and poetry. This focus on African American traditions would also influence a class struggle upon many black Americans who rejected the folk heritage. In fact Hughes wrote that “the middle class black artist has been cut off from authentic working-class culture and can only become a great artist by embracing black working-class culture and overcoming the desire to be white” (Harris 68). Such a position was discarded after the Second World War, especially as the notions were changed from separate racial literature to American literature, moving towards more integration. By the 1960’s the idea of a racially identifiable literature returned, with the Black Arts Movement, spearheaded by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. Inasmuch as the movement and the politics of the times were mending together, with the rise of Black Nationalism demanding identifiable black characteristics in literature, poetry and drama, by the end of the century, new black writers began to combine the earlier traditions of folk and black political expression with the Western traditions of literature. These writers “were grounded in the black experience [yet] they felt comfortable borrowing ideas from white culture” (Harris 69). This strain of black aesthetics revealed a distinctive combination of the literature and culture of early black writers while also pushing writers into a different direction, stylistically. While the future of Black Aesthetics remains to be seen, its American historical trajectory is both rich and complex.



To understand how Black Aesthetics evolved into the 20th century, one must examine the history of African roots of the traditions. In his theoretical view of African American literature and criticism, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. analyzes the Yoruba tribe mythology of Esu-Elegbara with its relation later to the African American vernacular, which he terms Signifyin(g)<sup>1</sup>. The most important issue that Gates defines is how even while enduring the Middle Passage, “the African ‘read’ a new environment within a received framework of meaning and belief” (4). In the recount of the mythology, Gates explains how Esu-Elegbara was initially an interpreter to the god from mankind, later revealing himself as a trickster. In tales and poems he is presented tricking people, and the prayers of people that wish to be protected from his deviant ways become magnified. The roots of African American aesthetics are seeded in these legends. Even as Esu represents the complexity and lack of certainty of language, he “is the god of interpretation because he embodies the ambiguity of figurative language”(Gates 21). With a focus on the legends of African mythology, Gates draws the line between Esu and the appearance of the monkey image. Gates notes the comparison of images between Afro-Cuban mythology and the traditional African mythology of Esu, distinctive in appearance and in their duty as interpreters. More importantly, the monkey and Esu are originally two completely separate entities. Gates contends that “Esu stands for the discourse upon the text,” (21) and the Signifyin(g) Monkey as “the rhetorical strategies of which each literary text consists” (21). The most common understanding of the rhetorical speech is “playing the dozens”, defined as “a very elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult each other’s relatives, especially their mothers...” (Gates 68). Gates examines other, less one-dimensional definitions of the term Signifyin(g) as an indirect uses of language. While Gates uncovers many definitions that

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<sup>1</sup> unlike the standard English and linguistic definition of signification



conceive of the rhetorical concepts of Signifyin(g) as pure word play, the terms of Signifyin(g) have a much more distinct definition. To Signify, in the black vernacular tradition, is not to render the definition, but to expand on the many meanings a sign (a word) could have. Theodore O. Mason, Jr. states that Signifyin(g) “aims at the formation of community rather than at the expression of dominance” (665). In short, this rhetorical form interacts among racial and generational lines, while offering a new understanding of language.

In light of Gates’ explanation of the use and roots of Signifyin(g), one must ask: how exactly does the use of this specified spoken discourse effect literature and vernacular? The ideas of Signification suggest that language permits different possible readings of texts. Gates notes that Signification could well be used by whites as much as blacks. However, the Signification used by these early white writers was based in racist images and parodies. Parody and humor play a huge role in literary Signification, as many writers would strike against racist doctrines defined by the greater American culture through black publications. Gates also notes how writers, those that parodied books or concepts by another writer, are building upon the African American literary history, reinterpreting the text, from its place in history, from the works connection to literary history and from the original author him or herself. More importantly, using examples from Mikhail Bakhtin, parody serves a purpose in speaking of controversial issues or “successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience” (Gates 111). Gates offers an analysis of and comparison between Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Ellison felt that aspects of his novel, *Invisible Man*, were critical of the ideas in Wright’s *Native Son*. Referencing *Invisible Man* and Wright’s *Native Son*, Gates implies the multiple ways in which Ellison “parod[ies] Wright’s literary structures through repetition and difference” (106). In the



conclusion of his explanation, Gates' regards *Invisible Man* in terms of the revision of the 20<sup>th</sup> century version of old aged "Negro Problem." In the end, in this section of black aesthetics, Gates views the trope of signification as an important historical tool which connects and critiques different writers and works. There are other techniques and rhetorical tools which have contributed to the Black Aesthetics, which developed from what is known as Black English tradition. Yvonne Atkinson describes Black English as "a sophisticated and complex oral language in which voice and visual styling help create meaning" (Atkinson 13). The Black English tradition encompasses Signfyin(g) as well as active reading of "the inflection, tone and non-verbal gestures of Black English"(Atkinson 14). Other tools in the Black English tradition include Call/Response, which involves a "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expression ('responses') from the listener" (Atkinson 22). Tropes such as Signfyin(g) and Call/Response have been essential to building Black English and the Black Aesthetics.

While the previous historical explanation serves to introduce an understanding of Black Aesthetics, Signfyin(g), though essential, is not the sole source of the aesthetics. However, it cannot be denied that the rhetorical discourse of Signification is a thread that bonds the multiple aspects which build the black aesthetics. This is where the definition of black aesthetics becomes much more complex, as the theory behind Black Aesthetics contains different aspects which either define or add to the aesthetics. In their article "The Black Aesthetic in the Black Novel," by Melvin Wade and Margaret Wade discuss how the Black Aesthetics is translated into literature and another aspect of its roots, as a communal tradition. The article begins by showing the difference in art "which emphasizes abstracted forms from the culture, and art which emphasizes abstracted content from the ideological component of the culture" (Wade 392-393).



Communication is the opening key in understanding how black art manifests, which is the communication through black people through language, spoken and printed. Wade adds that even with the roots of Black Aesthetics in literature reside in spoken language and music. When considering the importance of jazz, Wade argues that “Individual identity can only be successfully asserted when he capitalizes upon the cohesive strengthen of his particular group” (395). Black Aesthetics is an aesthetics that exists because of a reliance on tradition and the communication of this tradition through generations. Moreover, Wade clarifies the importance of African traditions, such as Signification and its relation to the aesthetics. The authors also explain the historical and social connection that a black writer makes whenever s/he writes within the Black Aesthetics framework. More specifically, the Wades point out that black expression in a novel could either be a presentation of ideology or value system, using the example of a “novelist seeking to be representative of his people... his novel reflect[ing] the ideological components of Black American culture” (405) and also mentioning those writers whose works express the distinct characteristics of black culture. Whereas the Black Aesthetics transcends the rhetorical tools of Signifyin(g), the main point of the article by the Wades is that Black Aesthetics is a tradition that is “derived from the culture of the Black American . . . these formal elements contain qualities of the distinctive personality of the Black American social group arrived at through the common experience of the group” (405-406).

While the Black Aesthetics can be defined through the nature of black American expression, there is also a political side to the aesthetics. The politics for many black Americans began to turn much more radical, which would be reflected in many writings of the time. This shift would lead to a conflict among many black writers about an important question: should the Black Aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century function as a movement which would separate itself from



Western Literature? Larry Neal, African American theatre scholar, was one of the forerunners of the national Black Arts Movement in the 1960's and 1970's. In a manifesto on the Black Arts Movement, Neal explains how writers that invested themselves in the Black Arts Movement were very much an extension of the Black Nationalist or Black Power Movement. Unlike earlier writers who wrote before this period, the Black Arts Movement would be the arts of and for the Black Community, speaking directly about the needs of the Black Community, personal and social. Neal believed that the writers involved in the Black Arts Movement "[initially] aimed at consolidating the African-American personality [and since has] turned its attention inward to the internal problems of the group [African Americans]" (Neal 75). According to the members of the Black Arts Movement, one major problem that corrupted many established black writers such as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Ellison and Wright, was how they were "copying white culture so long' that they are 'so mixed up from doing so, they think it's theirs'" (Neal 588) as opposed to solidifying their roots in black culture. Whereas that stand taken by many members of the Black Arts Movement was commendable, it is unfair to disqualify the works of these older writers, especially when they appear to follow the traditional Western literary aesthetic. While famed poet and proponent of the Black Arts movement, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka would later recant his ideas of many detractors to many of these earlier writers, what he and other Black Arts writers/activists were demanding a completely new idea of arts that was completely black. This new aesthetics was influenced greatly through the politics of the era along with the changing style of the music that had blossomed in the 60's, such as the soul music of James Brown and the jazz of Ornette Coleman. Another political standpoint of the Black Arts Movement was freedom, as "mastering the techniques of tones and words alike was the key to *creative freedom* which in the case of the American Negro was a long time substitution for



*physical freedom*” (Jarab 591). Even when the Black Arts Movement began to fade away, there are still reverberations in writers by young black writers at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. These writers, however, are not so set in the Black Nationalist ideology; rather, they take their experience with “References to jazz, Shakespeare, modern, modernist, and post-modernist literature” (Jarab 592). While initially the idea of the Black Arts Movement was incredibly controversial, the influence for many writers in theatre and literature should not be ignored. Admitting that there are political roots or uses for black aesthetics is very controversial. While a few earlier black writers were involved in politics, and the addressing race in novels is always considered very controversial, does the black aesthetics need to involve politics or does the Black Aesthetics need to be primarily a nationalistic political cause? While an extreme political side of the Black Arts Movement might seem meaningless to later generations separating the wholly separating the politics from and the Black Aesthetics would be to narrow minded and not reach the full potential of black American literature. The contributions by the Black Arts Movement writers should not be forgotten, but instead added to the complexity of the Black Aesthetics and American literature. It is a moment where the politics of Black America influenced the aesthetics and its rhetorical tools and culture.

At this point the Black Aesthetics can be defined through the combination of the lived black experience and the cultural roots and tools that defined black America, including the use of language. The final question which needs to be addressed in the development of the Black Aesthetics is whether there needs to be a canon for these types of literature. The debate of the usage of a literary canon is based on whether or not a list of “Great Books” should be a static list or whether it should include “a continuing if not contested process influenced by a variety of factors”(Foster 119). With the social changes throughout America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including



the Civil Rights Movements and other political shifts, the great works by women or people of color were no longer ignored, but initially added to smaller literary canons. Traditional canonization included mostly white European males. However, with the changes that occurred during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the visibility of writers that were people of color, campaigns began to include these writers into the canon of supposed "Great Books," now that these writers and poets could finally be analyzed and their influence and contributions would finally be acknowledged. As seen before, there is some danger with a literary canon to beginning with. When considering the politics of the Black Arts Movement, the Westernized literature and the canon were insufficient to black arts, and should be gotten rid of overall. Many of the greatest African American writers before this separation of African and Western literature used much of those novels and as major influences upon their work; such as the parallel between Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. What these writers did with that canon was not simply build off the tradition but, these novelists have reinterpreted the works into their own experience. Not only did these writers follow the Western tradition, but each writer interjected their racial experience that also carried their black American culture into their own works. The canonized books become means for those forced outside the traditions, whether based on gender or race, to either adopt these works for what they are, or reevaluate what they mean for the future writer reading the books.

The Black Aesthetics in American literature imagines a new theory of the art form. The roots begin with the African artistry and reimagining of language in the harsh and painful environment of the new West. Instead of losing the language and the rhetoric devices that shaped the African language before them, the slaves kept aspects of their language and passed it down to generations. While this use of Signification would define the earliest forms of black vernacular,



in a sense of language play, Henry Gates expands this definition into not only “the dozens” but also a form of reinterpretations and commentary on other works. Oral traditions within the black vernacular would then influence other generations and would have a major influence on the written word. The folk traditions would later influence the writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as they began to use these traditions to inform their works. With the change of the political climate in America, the idea of a defined Black Aesthetics or the Black Arts Movement would be the defining movement of many black writers and artist. The movement would lead to a contrast between a legitimate Black Aesthetic and a political movement that was exclusionary and reactionary. Yet, this militant movement would not derail an in-depth research into what defined the Black Aesthetics and future progressions of the aesthetics. Black artists began to incorporate the aesthetics from traditional Western arts and designed them for a different purpose. These newer breeds of black American writers focused on synthesizing the experience forged in slavery and Jim Crows with the prose and poetics of T.S. Eliot or Shakespeare. With its vast and powerful history, the complexities of black aesthetics have influenced, challenged and informed much of the writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American landscape.

### **Existentialism: A Philosophy for the Individual**

The issues most commonly considered in the Black Aesthetics correlate with the philosophy of Existentialism. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is remembered for varied and diverse fields in philosophy, anthropology and sociology from around the world. Scholars from these fields began to ask questions and interpret the individual instead of the questions of the universe. America and Great Britain began to move into the analytical discourse of philosophy with preference to pragmatic and practical uses of philosophy. Continental Europe went into a different philosophical direction, forming philosophies about that were much more humanistic instead of



the focus on scientific matters. Existentialism was one of these major philosophies. Developing throughout Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including German philosopher Martin Heidegger and French psychologist Karl Jaspers Existentialism challenged the notions ethically, morally, and aesthetic philosophy. Because of its vast reaches and interpretations, it is difficult to define Existentialism in a simple sentence. Steven Earnshaw offers a definition to the philosophy stating “Existentialism is a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual’s existence” (1). However, he also notes that the philosophy does not “offer a particularly systematic account of its ideas” (Earnshaw 1). The problems with understanding what Existentialism is and its value system is very obvious; there lacks a general cohesion of ideas between Existentialist writers and philosophers. Yet, as the philosophy emerged it began to shake the foundation of traditional philosophy. It turned away from the notions of older philosophies, such as Empiricism and Rationalism, which, according to certain existential thought “rest on the false premise that mind and world are logically independent of one another, like a spectator and the show before him” (Cooper 15). Yet, at the core of these attacks and challenges to older forms of philosophy is the focus on “close description of everyday life, by drawing out people’s own implicit understanding of themselves and by exposing the incoherence of rival claims” (14 Cooper). Existentialism is a philosophy of the lived life and of practicality. Not only does the philosophy deal with the practical, but it also asserts the importance of one’s authenticity in a chaotic world. Many of the men and women involved in this philosophical movement stretched beyond philosophy and worked in literature. Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone De Beauvoir are the authors whose essays, novels and plays are associated closest with Existentialism. Even though each of these writers might have been put under the umbrella of Existentialism, each had specific and personalized visions of what that philosophy should mean. Albert Camus actually rejected the



label of Existentialism, and aimed in his text not “to reduce or overcome a sense of alienation or separateness from the world”(Cooper 9). While Camus spoke less about alienation, his work was deeply concerned with the absurd, the meaninglessness of human existence with death facing him. Camus would counter this nihilistic notion with the plea for people to “replace these [Christian and religious] values with a philosophical perspective that would give humans a secular meaning....making them, at the moral level, masters in their own house” (MacDonald 149). On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus and De Beauvoir’s close friend, is the ultimate champion of Existentialism. A man that championed the working class, as well as Communism, Sartre addressed multiple philosophical notions and concepts in his novels, plays and essays. One of the most important statements Sartre made through his works comes from his play *No Exit*, which is summarized as “we are not what we intend otherwise, we are what we are and what we have lived to be up to this very minute” (Earnshaw 56). Sartre’s philosophy explored our inauthentic life and our power to be authentic. Simone De Beauvoir followed a few of the notions which were developed through Sartre. She produced her own essays and novels which focused on the women’s situation in the world, whether or not there is room for freedom of any kind. What the French Existential philosopher offer in their respective theories and philosophies are diverse ways of understanding ourselves as individuals and how we interact with the world.

The philosophy of Existentialism developed throughout Europe from the Nineteenth century, not sprouting over night in the three noted French philosophers. While writers such as Shakespeare and Michel De Montaigne and Christian philosopher Augustine have been considered Existentialism’s earliest influences, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is considered the true father of Existentialism. As a Christian thinker, Kierkegaard attempted to reveal the importance of the relationship with god concerned “not [with] the ‘objective truth’



about what one believes, but rather the intensity of one's commitment (the 'subjective truth')" (Guignon 500). Where Kierkegaard's focus and philosophy lay in the "leap of faith", German Friedrich Nietzsche's views were separate from institutions in general. While Nietzsche's philosophy is constantly referred to as Nihilistic, this was an actual problem for him. Fully aware of the death of Christian values and the world of absolutes, Nietzsche was demanding man to overcome the "slave morality" even as he accepted the reality of man's roles as "both creatures and creators" (Guignon 495). Later, another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, became an influential voice of Existentialism in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. His work, *Being and Time* was a highly influential text which focused on existence. To Heidegger, the philosophy beginning with the Ancient Greeks has ignored the importance of human existence. On the contrary, Heidegger feels the human race should live in astonishment "by the very fact of existence" (Earnshaw 59). Heidegger used the term "Dasein" in defining our being and our awareness of it. For all of the differences between the philosophers and the writers, there remain certain notions that could be defined in Existentialism. With the loss of God and the underlying absoluteness of existence, humans are essentially thrown into the world "with no pre-given direction or legitimation. Though we seek some overarching meaning and purpose for our lives, we have to face the fact that there is no 'proper function of humans' or 'plan in God's mind' that tells us the right way to be human" (Guignon 494). This is what is considered the "human condition," the conflict between human desires for certainty and rationality with the tensions of a meaningless world. The importance of the individual in the moment is another highlight in Existential thinking. The notion of dualism, separating a singular being into two distinctive parts, for example the body and the mind, is a detached view of existence. Another notable but often criticized aspects of the philosophy is freedom and authenticity. The Existentialist conception of freedom is based on the



“phenomenological description of our everyday lives. In confronting situations where I must make a choice, I find myself facing an open range of possible courses of action where nothing compels me to choose one course of action over the others” (Guignon 497). Humans are free to make choices and have to take responsibility for their actions. When we refuse to take responsibility and would rather conform to a social value or norm, we face inauthenticity. However, this ideal of authenticity is not based on the romanticized inner self, but on the individual’s becoming conscious of his or her existence. Once one understands one’s place in existence, that is to say the fact that s/he exists, then s/he has the task of creating his/her life along with the meaning s/he creates within the situation in which s/he finds him/herself. Although each philosopher finds a different way to explain his concepts of self fulfillment, the philosophy of Existentialism influences each of their paths.

Though usually distancing himself from Existentialisms, Albert Camus’s works have influenced and been influenced by many of the concepts found in that philosophy. His upbringing and education were radically different from those of his contemporaries. Born in Algeria on November 7, 1913, Camus would endure his personal loss of his father from a very young age, along with the troubles of the First and Second World Wars, and the Algerian War for Independence. His family life was spent in the poverty stricken area of Belcourt, in Algeria. While attending the University of Algeria, he was struck with tuberculosis, which crippled him. However, he began writing and began more philosophical studies. What initially began as interest, the study of philosophy became one of his passions in life, and was also fueled by his political development during this time. As fascism was on the rise in Italy, Camus demanded that people should not give in to “Mussolini’s revivalism... [rather he] invited his audience to recall yet another aspect of [Mediterranean] glorious past: that of *al-Andalus*, in which the different



ethnic and religious groups from Spain and the Arab-Muslim Mediterranean had been united” (Poel 16). Later, Camus would become a member of the French Communist Party, while also becoming a Résistance member during the Nazi occupation of France and a journalist for newspapers, such as *Combat* which he was also the editor-in-chief. The war had influenced Camus’s novels and philosophical works. When he considers why one fights, Camus explains that is “because we cling to life so much that we find the strength to sacrifice it for a future we ourselves will no longer be part” (Poel 19). The spirit of revolt runs through many of Camus’s writings—not simply the political revolt but a social and a near metaphysical revolt. In his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus uses the Greek myth to introduce the concept of the Absurd, “a recognition that the universe is without intrinsic meaning and hence all human endeavor is ultimately...pointless” (Earnshaw 95). Furthermore, humans represent “beings adrift between past and future and unable to rely on either to give meaning to the present” (Carroll 57). What Camus speaks of is man’s constant search for meaning and complete clarity in the world which does not give him either. The opening section of the essay questions whether life is worth living because of this lack of meaning. Camus argues against suicide suggesting that we should become aware of all limitations and rebel against them. What this rebellion requires is not completely clear. Once a person is conscious of the Absurd and the burden of death to follow life, it is important to live that life as passionately as possible in the face of the Absurd, by “clinging to the truth that he [the Absurd Man] must accept his burden and live without appeal”(Earnshaw 101). The earliest ideas which Camus formed were that of the Absurd and the man in revolt. This act of rebellion is a part of human nature, according to Camus, and involves a man’s reacting to the imposing world while affirming his meaning in it. A final motif evident in some of Camus’ work, and more so in the other Existentialist works, is that of authenticity. Novels



such as *The Stranger*, *the Plague* and *The Fall* deal directly with the Absurd as well as with issues of authenticity. Camus' view of authenticity is as ambiguous as his view of revolt. In his play of the famous Roman ruler *Caligula*, Camus resists the "choice between the inauthentic ethic of honor...and the abyss of the nihilistic jungle that swallows up Caligula" (Golomb 188). Paring with the extreme of living life too passionately and at one's own will, Camus' authenticity requires one to be fully aware of one's world to live the life one is given without imposing on others. Camus' individual philosophy began to evolve further from the original output, which began to strain many of his friendships, notably with Jean-Paul Sartre, over intellectual and political matters. Unfortunately, Camus's works and philosophy were silenced after his death in an automobile crash on January 4, 1960.

Often overlooked in Existential anthologies, Simone De Beauvoir is one of the most interesting of the philosophers, not simply for her intellect, but also because of her distinct feminist interpretations. The irony of her intelligence was that she did not consider herself a philosopher, evidenced by her having stated: "I'm not a philosopher in the sense that I'm not the creator of a system, I'm still a philosopher in the sense that I've studied a lot of philosophy" (Fullbrook 3). Born in Paris on January 8, 1908, the major influences on her intellectual development came from her parents. Her mother, Françoise de Beauvoir instilled an "educational grounding and moral instruction, from infancy through to late adolescence, [that] should be based on the diluted, but highly conventional version of the Roman Catholic theology which was deemed appropriate for females of her class"(Fullbrook 9) whereas her father's, Georges Bertrand de Beauvoir, influences were "of extreme religious skepticism, with attendant ethical values, and right-wing political principles, coupled with an aristocratic sense of aesthetic values"(Fullbrook 9). At the age of 5, Beauvoir was enrolled in a private Catholic girls' school.



As she matured, she would reject the Catholic doctrine as well as her Catholic education, admitting her loss of faith at the age of 14. Her time at the Catholic school developed her preference for reason over doctrine and after she graduated, she began formal studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne in the late 1920s. She passed her philosophy national exams with the second highest marks, while also receiving her degrees in Latin and French Literature from the Institut Sainte-Marie and her degree in mathematics from Institut Catholique. During her time in college, she became close friends with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. A long lasting relationship grew between de Beauvoir and Sartre, professional and personal. At the beginning of World War II, Beauvoir began writing her first novel, *She Came to Stay*. However, the impact of the Nazi regime would stifle much of her early literary career. She continued to write and work during this time, publishing articles for the magazine, *Le Temps Modernes*. This period would also be the beginning of her best known work, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. More of a sociological text than philosophical, Beauvoir examines “the notion of woman as, Other” (Reynolds 140). This book is derived from de Beauvoir’s larger consideration of “the nature and range of women’s experience over history, their status in different cultures, myths and stories that classify their role in society, [and] the forms of oppression that subjugate their existence” (MacDonald 274). While the text deals with the historical definitions of being a “woman,” *The Second Sex* challenges “the assumption that there is some essence that constitutes being a woman” (Reynolds 140). The mystery and otherness of the female is correlated to the norm, i.e. the male. De Beauvoir even asks the important question, which constitutes the discourse of much of the text: what does it mean to be a woman? *The Second Sex* examines woman oppression, otherness and authenticity in order to understand the idealization of women. Another one of her famous books is *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Where *The Second Sex* handles the



“Other,” *The Ethics* conversely deals with the individual as a subject and an object in the world. In this regard, personal freedom, or transcendence, can only exist with equal freedom and transcendence of other people. The idea of happiness, especially a materialistic perspective of happiness, is not as important as the idea of freedom. To make a choice and to be authentic as well as shaping and changing one’s situation is the definitive goal of life. Beauvoir is by far the most overlooked of the existential philosophers, but her insight is incredibly important to the philosophical world. Beauvoir remains influential in feminist and philosophical circles.

Jean-Paul Sartre is possibly the most recognizable philosopher when discussing Existentialism. His ideas and concepts ranged from phenomenology, politics, ontology and ethics, using existentialism as much of his foundation. Born in Paris on June 21, 1905, Sartre was raised in a bourgeois French family, by his mother and grandparents, after his naval officer father died a year after his birth. His grandfather, Charles Schweitzer, was “an autocrat, the sole being in charge of their large household, issuing edicts and decrees like an Old Testament patriarch” (MacDonald 295). However, Charles treated young Sartre as an adult, whereas his mother was treated more as a child. Throughout his youth, Sartre was placed in multiple primary schools, notably Lycée Henri IV. In 1922, Sartre entered Ecole Normale Supérieure. During that time, Sartre spent studied psychology and pathology, though he was not enrolled in those courses. It was here Sartre began his friendship with de Beauvoir and began his studies in philosophy. He initially failed his final national exams, but passed first on his second attempt with his friend Beauvoir second. After graduation, Sartre began teaching in Le Havre, and began his sketches for his first novel *Nausea*. His philosophical studies began to turn to the works of Edmund Husserl and Heidegger, two influential philosophers. In 1936, his first philosophical work *The Transcendence of the Ego* was published. This began his long repertoire of philosophical and



fictional works that would last until his death in 1980. Yet, one of the major influences on Sartre would be the Second World War. His works were considerably apolitical before the Occupation of France by the Nazis. He was drafted into the French Army, which he spent in the meteorological corps, until his capture by the Nazis in 1940. The time spent in the war camps influenced Sartre's attitude on "a stark contrast between oppressor and oppressed" (Priest 8) and his sympathy for the Soviet Union. Marxism inspired much of Sartre political outlook, as a way to overcoming such oppression in the West. In 1943, Sartre published his most important work and the foundation for much of his philosophy, *Being and Nothingness*. The book focuses on phenomenology and ontology, "as the imposition of the ontological constraints of 'existentialism' on phenomenological 'essentialism'" (Priest 13). Sartre details how the individual comes into awareness and how it reacts and acts in the world with other conscious individuals and the importance of consciousness, because "It is through consciousness that we are aware of everything, and this continuous flow of consciousness...is beyond our control"(Earnshaw 76). The concepts and arguments raised in *Being and Nothingness* would be developed throughout his literary and philosophical career, defining many key elements to existentialism, particularly freedom, mortality, responsibility, anguish and bad faith. Sartre's existentialism suggests "we do not come into the world with a predefined self" (Reynolds 54) but our existence is the continuous progress of defining ourselves, or "Existence precedes essence." This means that the older philosophical mindsets of human nature were not relevant, but the individual's choices create their nature. One is not led by their "essences" but by the choices they make in their existence. If one retreats from making these choices, "fleeing this anguished apprehension of our responsibility" (Reynolds 72) we are living lives of what Sartre called 'bad faith.' Denying our freedom and attaching our identities with materials and status is another way



one can live in bad faith. The problem with living in such a way is that this denies what it means to be human. Sartre's focus in his latter works, such as *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* stresses the importance of choice within certain situations. His focus also shifted towards the necessity of people to create a political project to gain true Existential freedom. The influences of Sartre were not only on a philosophical level, as he critiqued literature. Regarding literature, Sartre penned the essay *What is Literature?* The essay asks this question, as well as "Why does one write? For Whom?" (Sartre 276), which he feels has not been asked by his contemporaries. The essay also explains why a writer should commit so much to his work, for Sartre states that "The 'committed' writer knows that words are action (Sartre 281). A writer committed to their text is engaged in a personal and political practice. The committed writer must be aware of this power in one's words instead of mindlessly following "prevailing ideology and ruling interest" (Priest 14). This was in exact line with the ideas of Sartre, the prevailing importance of individual freedom and the act of engaging in this freedom. The ideas and works of Jean-Paul Sartre have made a tremendous impact on Western philosophy and literature.

While Existentialism is difficult to fully define, each of these noted French philosophers have added their personal ideas to the philosophy. Most importantly, the individual viewpoints of each writer has progressed the philosophy. Camus' world was a realization of the Absurd and man's constant fight against this. At once the Absurd man is aware of his futile battle against the absurdity, but will continue to rebel on the most human of level. Beauvoir philosophical view pertained to the interaction between people, and the effects of oppression on humanity, especially from a female perspective. Beauvoir attempted to overcome the otherness that had rendered women as objects. By doing so, Beauvoir searched for the most honest manner of assuring authenticity in people against the background of social positioning influencing her



contemporary Sartre. Sartre would define the Existential philosophy and theories on different practices and institutions. In his text on phenomenology, *Being and Nothingness* Sartre tries to explain that “the self (being) is a ‘relation’ which has no grounding and is not its own origin, rather than an which has, or is, ‘substance’, as when man is considered as God’s creation or as having an essential human nature” (Earnshaw 81). While offering this ontological view of existence, Sartre would later scrutinize politics and other philosophical forms, where political engagement is integral to individual freedom. Even with the considerable difference between the philosophers, their ideas have shaped much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s landscape with its roots on the individual and its reflections on the world around.

The first two books that shall be analyzed first are Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*. These two books encompass Black Aesthetics through its storytelling capabilities, utilization of black American traditions, specifically the music of jazz and finally, its preference to the lived experience for black people. At the same time, these novels also reference the Existential works of Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir. Both novels deal with the constant struggle with existence and the search for authenticity and recognition in the world. Yet, the characters in these novels are not consumed by these situations. Rather, through the power of will and determination, the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Violet of *Jazz*, are able to overcome these situations.

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### **The *Invisible Man* and the Search for the True Identity**

Widely acknowledged as a masterpiece in American literature, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) is a document on race and identity before the Civil Rights movement that reshaped the nation. Drawing on multiple influences, from American poetry and European literature to



Jazz and the African American church, Ellison depicts the odyssey of a young, nameless African American narrator who attempts to find his identity in a world faced with political, social and racial turmoil and contradictions. Through this journey, the narrator grapples with images of black America, triumphant and demeaning. Haunted by the words of his grandfather to “Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em [white America] with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (Ellison 16) the narrator battles with depictions black America for the rest of the novel. By the end of the novel however, the narrator does not become a full person with a true identity; rather he remains the “Invisible Man,” not a ghost or a specter but invisible because of his lack of recognition from the world, which the narrator expresses as “That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of the *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look though their physical eyes upon reality” (Ellison 3). One of the key elements to the novel is America’s racial history and identity, yet the novel does not portray a simple history of an American following the Civil War and Reconstruction. The novel examines racial blindness. Ellison’s “Invisible Man” is faced with a racial blindness that has grown out of “[a] dominant culture’s privilege to see or not to see” (Cheng 121) people of color. Even as the narrator faces the blindness of society, he becomes overcome with his burden in the world to define his recognition. Nonetheless, with these obstacles and challenges, the narrator still searches for his authenticity. The narrator explores possible ways to gain identity in a segregated society, finding that there is no absolute way to live life. With this recognition by the narrator, Ellison creates an Existential question in the novel. *Invisible Man* echoes many of the concepts that Albert Camus focused on in his philosophical essays, specifically in the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus



examines the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus to explain how an individual should live through the absurdity of our world, a world without God or meaning. To Camus, the greatest philosophical issue of our times is “this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd” (Camus 444), whether the absurd justifies suicide. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* addresses these issues, such as the search for meaning and authenticity through an absurd world. However, the book also shares positions found in the works of Sartre and de Beauvoir. Sartre’s concept of the individual’s existence and its development play an important role in the novel as the narrator attempts to fulfill his identity. But, it is Sartre’s “bad faith” that is most present in the novel, as the narrator gives up his own freedom, responsibility and individuality in order to satisfy the ideas of others. The book also uses influences of Simone de Beauvoir, such as the importance of the individual’s interactions with the world around them, exercising one’s freedom with others. Ellison’s narrator suffers from intense racial pain and suffering, denying his humanity, only to reach his full potential and possibilities. *Invisible Man* is a passionate work of fiction, but it also deals with intensely intellectual struggles of race and identity within an Existential framework and through which the narrator affirms *his* identity.

While the novel resonates with a French Existentialist framework, the roots of the novel are found within the Black aesthetic. Ellison stated that the influences and models for this book were Ernest Hemmingway, Mark Twain, William Faulkner and Fyodor Dostoevsky, but Ralph Reckley notes that “he owes just as much, if not more, to his Black experience” (Reckley 389). The Black Aesthetics is an interaction between the lived black experiences with the culture that began in American slavery. These experiences range from Black oral tradition and tropes as well as rituals and culture. Jazz plays an integral part in Ellison’s life, not simply his fiction. The



novel opens with the narrator's reflections on a piece by the jazz legend Louise Armstrong. The music strikes him intensely as he muses "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible" (Ellison 8). The music has given some sense of identity in the world which lacks it. Ellison was initially a student of music at the Tuskegee Institute, but was still dedicated to music in his essays and novel. Most importantly, American music, such as jazz, blues and spirituals, those musical mediums that were intersections of African folk expressions and early American folk songs, were as profound as classical music, stating "Bessie Smith singing a good blues may deal with experience as profoundly as Eliot, with the eloquence of the Eliotic poetry being expressed in her voice and phrasing" (Anderson 85). While jazz is important to the story the black church service is present in the novel, specifically in the section of his college years. The black church represents a place of expression where "for black preachers, narrative was also a vehicle for expressing ideas...to engage listeners' imagination" (Saunders 39). While the images of the Black Churches play an important role in the novel, it is also criticized for its hypocrisies and blindness to reality. The book also portrays black ideologies that were becoming prevalent during 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Black Nationalism and Communism. The character Ras the Exhorter is a parody of the separatist ideologies of Marcus Garvey, which takes its roots in the traditions of Signification, the indirect reference to people or objects. With these ideas and characters throughout the book, Ellison's novel is not simply Black but reaches into the America's literature and history. It is debated whether Ellison as an author with a purpose, specifically a racial and political purpose. Gregg Crane notes that while some critics of Ellison feel he lacks "the confrontational zeal appropriate to a minority writer in a racist society" Ellison's fiction excels in the "artistic and democratic vision of justice combining...ethics and law, high and vernacular culture" (Crane 104). Crane continues "In *Invisible Man*, the novel's



unnamed narrator finds a [...] freed [...] realization that certainty is an illusion. If he rejects a vision of 'the world [as] nailed down'...his world can 'become one of infinite possibilities' a surprising and ironic outcome for a black man living in a racist society" (Crane 105). This is where the novel is equally American but also Black American novel. Yet, while his story takes the form of *Odyssey*, the fact that the narrator suffers the most because of his race creates a dual consciousness. This leads to another level of black Aesthetics influencing *Invisible Man* as the novel follows "the tradition of the slave narrative-that of Frederick Douglass...Many of the narrator's dilemmas have their origins in what W.E.B. Du Bois called the double consciousness that plague all African Americans" (Reckley 389). The novel truly intersects the folk traditions of black American culture with the aesthetics of modern American fiction.

The novel is not simply an American odyssey, but one affected by American racism. These cultural and social factors create a distinctly American and Black American work of fiction, but also reach into the philosophies of Camus, de Beauvoir and Sartre. *Invisible Man* deals with the challenge of finding an identity and authenticity in a racist society, through the lived experience of the narrator. However, this viewpoint ignores another problem within the novel; not only the effects of racism, but how the racism strips meaning from a person. Albert Camus's concept of the Absurd is an example of this meaninglessness. From his youth to the book's conclusion, the narrator faces a life without meaning or identity. Camus's Absurd is defined as "the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of the daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" (Camus 6). When people become conscious of their repetitive and mechanical nature, our growing estrangement from the world, along with the inevitability of death, a sense of alienation from the world begins, which is a part of the Absurd.



In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus addresses the Absurd and its relationship to suicide. By committing suicide, Camus states, one admits “that [life] that ‘is not worth the trouble’ ” (Camus 5) a recognition of the difficulties of living in the Absurd. The Absurd in the *Invisible Man* is as intense as Camus’s, where society and the individual are both rendered meaningless. In the novel, when the narrator takes his first official job at the Liberty Paints plant, his job is mixing black paint together until they are white. After failing at the job, the narrator is forced to work with Lucius Brockway, the plants engineer, who states that “We make the best white paint in the world...Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through!!.. ‘If It’s Optic White, it’s the Right White” (Ellison 217). While the work itself is absurd and bizarre, it is the implication of the work, the dissolution of black paint and the preference of the white paint that are absurd. The implications of the scene appear to be the meaninglessness of black people in America and society as a whole. The only way a black person can be accepted is to be diluted by whiteness. Dilution, then, creates alienation from the black flesh and his humanity. The narrator is not only thrown into the world, to use a term by Heidegger and Sartre, but he is thrown into a racist environment which strips meaning from the individual purely because of his race. Through this realization of this absurdity, some of the other characters attempt to function in the absurdity. While being reprimanded by his college President, Dr Bledsoe explains how black people are to act in white society “Why the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie” (Ellison 139) because “You’re nobody, son. You don’t exist-can’t you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think-except men like me” (Ellison 143). These quotes express the absurd’s power as “the only bond uniting them [man and the absurd] If I wish to limit myself to facts, I know what man wants, I know what the world



offers. I have no need to dig deeper” (Camus 30). But these ideas, rather than affirming the narrator, limit him from the Absurd. The narrator would want nothing more than to be a human being, without ties to his race or other standards, but the reality will not let him. The narrator then takes up a fight to overcome this Absurdity while other characters in the novel give in to it. While the Absurd appears as a horrifying reality, existence is neither futile nor bleak, in both Camus and Ellison’s cases. For Camus, there are three specific things that will allow man to not be burdened by the Absurd, which is living life in revolt, passionately and acknowledgement of one’s freedom. The Absurd, in Camus, is not to be avoided and denied, but to be understood. By forfeiting this acknowledgement, Camus explains that we enter “Philosophical Suicide.” To revolt against the Absurd will life its meaning created by the individual. The freedom of thought and action allow individuals to live life passionately and to continue to strive in the face of the Absurd. By the end of *Invisible Man*, the narrator reaches the similar conclusion of his existence. He understands that the only way he can be the person he wants to be is through his own means. He is fully aware of his freedom as a person to live the life he wants to live. Near the end of the novel, facing a possible attack by Ras the Destroyer, the narrator makes this reflection:

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I looked at Ras on his horse and their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that brought me here running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. I stood there, knowing that by dying...I would perhaps move them one fraction of a bloody step closer to a definition of who they were and of what I was and had been. ... And I knew



that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others... (Ellison 559).

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The narrator realizes the Absurd of the world, but also realizes his place in it. He no longer accepts the victimhood of the Absurd. More importantly, he no longer sees his insignificance in the world. Instead of accepting the definition expressed by other people, he will accept his own definitions. His identity is his and cannot be defined through the ideas of others. Accepting the Absurd has allowed him to overcome the forces which attempt to repress and keep him invisible. In the Epilogue, the narrator reflects, "I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit...My world has become one of infinite possibilities"(Ellison 576). The narrator's life is worth living because it is his life, with no constraints and oppression from others. Ellison and Camus reach a similar intellectual plane with their works and their meaning of life.

While *Invisible Man* reaches into Camus's Absurd, Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "Bad Faith" also has an influence on the novel. While the Black Aesthetics considers the importance of race and authenticity, the aesthetics can also handle the opposite view of race and identity. The definition of "Bad Faith" is considerably dense, but Sartre's explains this as "the nihilation of a possibility which another human reality projects as its possibility" (Sartre 137). Sartre's existentialism begins as the human comes into consciousness. The conscious individual is capable of making choices and decisions, but also negating these abilities of choice. To live a life of "Bad Faith" an individual is in self-deception. Practicing "Bad Faith" "is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth" (Sartre 139). The worse type of "Bad Faith" is a type of, what Sartre calls "Play Acting," an individual accepting a stereotype or an identity, such



as a waiter or a soldier, in order to not make their own decision. The narrator of the *Invisible Man* faces a similar situation of “Bad Faith” but his is on the ideological perspective. While his odyssey in the novel is based upon realizing his identity, the narrator accepts the ideas and images of others for him, from his grandfather’s deathbed to the ideals of his university. The narrator spends much of his time in confusion, attempting to assert himself through the ideas of others. The most poignant example of his acceptance of beliefs is his period spent in the Brotherhood. Being forced out of the Liberty Paints Plant, the narrator becomes a mouthpiece for a leftwing organization called the Brotherhood in the Harlem area of New York City. Giving his first invigorating speech, he announces to the audience “I feel suddenly that I have become *more human*...I feel strong, I feel able to get things done!” (Ellison 346). The actions and the ideas of the Brotherhood have given the narrator a purpose and a sense of reason but as the novel progresses, the narrator becomes disillusioned as rebellious members begin to go missing when they speak against the leadership. The ideology of the Brotherhood, the promise of “a better world for all people” (Ellison 304), had deceived the narrator. The ideas of the Brotherhood seemed promising and would improve his constituents in Harlem, but actual showed no real support for the ailing community. As the narrator had the opportunity to make a choice and defy the Brotherhood, he preferred to stay to the rules of the organization. This is the worst aspect of living in “Bad Faith”, as it takes away man’s ability to make definite and meaningful choices. Brother Jack, a Brotherhood member who was involved with the narrator explains: “We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them” (Ellison 473). The narrator had allowed the ideas of the Brotherhood to not only deceive him, but to turn him into a pawn for sadistic ends. By following the orders of the organization without question, the narrator lives in “Bad Faith.” In



this sense, “Bad Faith” is the annihilation of real projects that could fulfill people and allow for an authentic life. “Bad Faith” is not only present within the narrator, but in many of the characters that choose an ideology instead of making a real decision, such as the followers of the firebrand radical Ras the Destroyer. To be human is to make a choice no matter the situation, even in the most difficult of moments. The narrator realizes such “Bad Faith” in other characters and accepts that his own life cannot be lead by this. *Invisible Man* delves deeply into “Bad Faith” and its effects through morals created by others. The novel illuminates the destructive nature of blindly following established ideologies, revealing the importance of one’s stripping away “Bad Faith” for individual recognition and authenticity.

Black Aesthetics lends itself to the novel through its lived experience. One’s experiencing life is not an individual task as much as it is a social task. *Invisible Man* deals with the individual Existential situation, but Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy plays an important role in the novel. If the narrator’s invisibility is based on the blindness of others and since his visibility can only come from recognition, the start of this recognition begins with him. Beauvoir writes, “To exist is to *make oneself* a lack of being; it is to *cast oneself* into the world” (Beauvoir 42). Beauvoir states that the progression of humanity begins with internal activity in the face of the world. By not engaging in this action, a person “manifests a fundamental fear in the face of existence, in the face of the risks and tensions which it implies” (Beauvoir 42). Beauvoir then equates morals with the human “necessity for a freedom which guarantees everybody’s freedom” (Earnshaw 161). Where Sartre’s early writings consider the other people not fully important, Beauvoir’s Existentialism depends on other people: “To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations” (Beauvoir 71). *Invisible Man* takes her statement further, as the narrator states, “Responsibility rest upon



recognition and recognition is a form of agreement” (Ellison 14). The narrator states that recognition can only happen when other people are willing to recognize. Beauvoir, on the other hand, makes human existence a declaration. Where life lacks resolve and meaning, and nihilism of the individual begins to grow, Beauvoir reminds the reader “it is up to him [the nihilist] to justify the world and to make himself validly” (Beauvoir 57). While the struggle of authenticity in *Invisible Man* begins with facing Camus’s Absurd, the narrator does not exist in detachment from people; rather he is in continuous interaction with other people. However, this is where the narrator runs into a problem. While his first quote assures the importance of recognition, society will not offer him this. Reflecting on a scene where he bumps into a white man and nearly attacks and beats him, the narrator notes “He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. But didn’t *he* control that dream world-which, alas, is only too real!-and didn’t *he* rule me out of it?”(Ellison 14)The narrator is aware of the lack of recognition in the world, but he does not allow it to cripple him. Beauvoir explains “There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world...having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their head” (Beauvoir 37). By the end of the novel, the narrator is willing to take this chance and assert himself into the world. The ideologies that have blinded so many that, the narrator will not allow limiting him. Rather, because of the limitless freedom of the narrator, he is capable of realizing all of his possibilities. Through this assertion of his existence, the narrator will no longer be an invisible Man to the world.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is an arduous odyssey through the racial turmoil in America. But, the novel does not give in to political ideology or racial concepts in an effort to define the narrator’s journey; instead, it decries living life through stereotypes. More specifically, within the framework of Existentialism, the novel examines alternatives to one’s asserting



authenticity in one's environment. Through Camus, the narrator is thrown into the world of absurdities and meaninglessness, which would cripple weaker men. For much of the novel, it does so, as the narrator gives up his ability to choose and create himself and his values to other people and ideas, living a life of "Bad Faith". But, the narrator takes a different route when he realizes that he and no one else is capable of the possibilities in his life. The narrator begins this process of reshaping his world by disconnecting himself from ideologies and instead living his life and affirming himself as a human being with meaning. As he grows from this, he will be capable to gain recognition with others, through living his own life. The book does not call for racial separation or even racial identity, but is asking for an authentic human identity. The narrator, the Invisible Man, is free, as is every individual to make him visible with no appeals to another. The narrator recognizes this and ends the novel with "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison 581). It is a line which speaks to our individuality and the connection with others we hold.

### ***Jazz and the Other: Morrison's Jazz and the struggle for female affirmation***

Of the many gifted writers of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black, white or otherwise, few had more influence or impact than Toni Morrison. From her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to her latest work, *A Mercy*, in 2008, Morrison's novels transcend politics, history, culture and race, while engaging readers. Her novels manage to incorporate "the communal bonding and artistry evident" (Atkinson 12) of the black American oral tradition while at the same time builds upon the Western literary giants, such as Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner. Her novels not only



address concerns of politics and aesthetics, but most importantly thrive on American folklore and history, not only addressing the lived black experience but also the lived human experience. Her 1992 novel, *Jazz* tells an intricate and layered story of the failing marriage between Joe Trace and his wife Violet. Joe falls in love with the much younger Dorcas, but later kills her out of anger and jealousy. This is not the end of the story, as Violet disfigures the corpse during the funeral. In the face of the chaos that follows, the narrator digs deeply into the life stories of Violet, Joe and Dorcas in order to understand who these people are. Through the narrative, this identity is slowly revealed, but by the end of the novel, many existential questions remain. The radical and influential work of philosopher Simone de Beauvoir has many connections to the questions posed in *Jazz*. Beauvoir's work uncovers the structure which limits women and places them within specified roles. But, in Morrison's novel, these women break these barriers. For example, Violet attempts to cut off the face of Dorcas during the funeral, causing a commotion at the event and sends ripples in her Harlem community. Though rejected by the community, the real question of why she attempts to steal the face of her husband's lover is never asked. It could be the fact of pure jealousy but the reality is far deeper. Beauvoir's philosophy on feminism and existentialism provides possible interpretations and answers for some of these questions as to why Violet found this action to be her solution to her problems. As Beauvoir depicts and explores how women have been placed in society in the roles of caretaker, mother, or object, she offers a psychoanalytical understanding of how these practices and definitions create the idea of "woman". Beauvoir does not deny the biological side of women; rather she examines the societal influences which define women. Morrison's novel deals with women that in their own way challenge the ideals of women in society, internalizing "economic oppression and racial violence....made visible in the interiority of lives lived within the dynamic allure of a restless



city”(Grewal 123). Beauvoir challenged the constructs of society, while also declare true freedom for women. Morrison and Beauvoir reach a very similar , and both find ways to prevail over the situation, but with different outcomes. For Beauvoir, the solution for women is found in active refusal to the societal constructs, while Morrison finds the solution in active understanding of the self. The writers not only allow for a feminist critique but a human critique. In Morrison’s *Jazz*, the oppressive ideas of society cause the main female characters to lash out and demand their existence to be recognized.

Morrison’s novel spans many literary traditions but does have firm roots in the Black English oral traditions, which would influence the concepts of black aesthetics. Yvonne Atkinson explains the importance of the Black English tradition because “In African American culture, language is aesthetic... [and] a sophisticated and complex oral language in which voice and visual styling help create meaning...” (13). Atkinson continues with this aesthetic argument by considering certain characteristics in the Black English vernacular, such as Call/Response and Witness/Testify, which exist through “the lens of language” (Atkinson 21). Call/Response is an act of a speaker saying a phrase to the listener and the listener answering back to them, while Witness/Testify takes place when one person witnesses the world around them and then tells the tales they have seen. Atkinson notes the importance of both of rhetorical devices as “systems that call for the participants to reaffirm, their cultural roots, community, and themselves” (Atkinson 22). Atkinson identifies the use of Call/Response along with Witness/Testify in Morrison’s *Jazz*: “The narrator of *Jazz* is participating in the act of Call/Response because she is a reminder, a Call to remember; all those tales...who have sat on front porches, on stoops, at windows, and Witnessed the world pass by” (Atkinson 24). The language of *Jazz* is not straightforward, but incorporates characters personal histories, providing “an extended melodic



reverie on the makings of desire, on the indirect paths of its thwarted rhythms in historic time” (Grewal 120). *Jazz* takes place during the 1920s in Harlem, as the Northern Migration was at its peak following the First World War. During this time, the rise of the black middle class created a new class of black artist and writers, influencing and informing the literary movement known as the “Harlem Renaissance.” Morrison’s focus, however, is not the men and women of the black middle class or intelligentsia, but the black migrants that inhabited the working class. While the subject matter is closer to the folk, as opposed to the middle class, Morrison finds much freedom through this, being able to “like the music[...] find the groove of its own theme” (Grewal 129). While the novel finds its roots in black oral tradition, the substance is more focused on the female perspective. As the narrator tells the story of Violet, it reminds the reader of “the consciousness of black women’s struggle to survive the violence of disenfranchisement reverberating across generations, across the North-South and rural-urban divide” (Grewal 123). What Morrison offers in *Jazz* is a complex understanding of a scorned woman. It is too simple to view Violet’s violence as insanity or pure jealousy. When Violet asks “What’s the world for if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” (Morrison 208) we as readers are given a different perspective of Violet’s desires and passions. Morrison does not allow for simple nor understated writings of her characters, but offers dense and historically rich men and women. As a writer, Morrison’s utilization of the Call/ Response and Witness/Testify aesthetic demands the reader to become engaged with the story. It is Morrison’s mastery of both the Black English oral tradition and the Western literature tradition as well as her reinterpretation of women’s roles in society that creates such a compelling novel as *Jazz*.

While Morrison is capable of delving deep into her culture and history, her novel still deals with the lived Black experience. Violet’s question, “what’s the world for if you can’t make



it up the way you want it?" (Morrison 208) represents such frustration with the lived experience. It is a frustration unlike the one of Camus's Absurd but one of the denials to living the life one would want to live. In Violet's case, a life where her love of Joe was reflected by him and his love reflected by her. It is a question that must be asked by the end of the novel by Violet in order but the question that has resonated through much of the novel. Simone de Beauvoir explored this question in 1952 with her text *The Second Sex*. Violet later states the largest problem her life at that point that she "Forgot it [life] was mine. My Life. I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else" (Morrison 208). This quote's asks what type of person Violet had attempted to be throughout her life. Beauvoir offers a few examples of what women are destined to be in their lives. Historically, Beauvoir states that "men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers...to keep woman in a state of dependence" (139). Women have in some form or another been made into not only the Other, a being subjugated by a dominant subject, but an Other that is made dependent on the male. Beauvoir explains the problems within the institution, such as marriage for women, where women are "taken for granted [for her] fidelity to the strict regimen she assumes, not taking into account that she has temptations to vanquish" and men are "profoundly ignorant of her dreams, her fancies, her nostalgic yearnings..." (Beauvoir 473). Women are trained into this submission at a young age, in Beauvoir's exploration. Beauvoir states "Everyone possesses a unique past. Everyone also...holds images of themselves generated by the people they know and by the social categories to which they find themselves assigned"(Fullbrook 62). She explains that when a woman is younger "Her youth is consumed in waiting...she is awaiting Man...The girl, since childhood...has looked to the male for fulfillment and escape" (Beauvoir 328). The institution of marriage takes away a woman's strength and her emotions, sterilizing her into a "good wife"



instead of a human being. Violet might not have seemed the woman that would fall into such restraints, having done intense fieldwork with in the South before relocating with her husband Joe Trace to New York. Yet, her life was plagued with struggles, such as the abandonment of her father and the suicide of her mother. Finding a man and leaving the South could possibly replace much of that hurt, but there are negative effects. The narrator states how "... twenty years doing hair in the City had softened her arms and melted the shield that once covered her palms and fingers" (Morrison 92). What is interesting about this passage is how the "shield that once covered her palms and fingers" does not hide her femininity, but actually gives her a human quality. However, her marriage to Joe Trace, though initially a happy one with possibilities and a future, has dwindled into loneliness. Beauvoir quotes psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel about how "marriage gives rise to fantastic comedies and play-acting between the partners" (Beauvoir 447) which explains much of the relationship between Joe and Violet, one being the provider and the other being the loving wife, respectively. Violet's expectations of happiness and stability have fallen apart after the affair between Joe and Dorcas. Joe was a choice that *she* made: "She had chosen Joe and refused to go back home once she'd seen him taking shape in early light" (Morrison 23) giving her control that women are less likely to receive in a relationship. However, Violet's reflection on their relationship proves very complex. Violet comes to a momentary conclusion about Joe "He was trying to catch a girl he was yet to see, but his heart knew all about... Which means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he" (Morrison 97). It seems that Violet loses complete control of the marriage and by that extension herself, becoming submerged in the fantasy of marriage and her role in it. Neither Violet nor Joe is able to fulfill what they are really looking for in love and life, however they have settled for each other. Unfortunately, a male has more sovereignty in his life, allowing



someone like Joe to go search for what he has been missing, which is found at least on a sexual level through Dorcas. For the most part, a male does not find the female as essential, whereas a female in society can only be whole through marriage. Marriage is an institution that limits women, but “transcend[s] [to males] toward the totality of the universe and the infinity of the future” (Beauvoir 448). Joe’s life does not exactly rely on Violet, as society has trained him to just need a woman in his life. In the situation that she was facing with Joe, Violet could have cheated on him after discovering his affair, but this alternative would not have led to a real solution. As Beauvoir suggests “Her decision to deceive her husband is often borne of resentment. [Alfred] Alder maintains that woman’s infidelity is always a mode of revenge...It may be that the flouted husband retains primary importance in the wife’s eyes” (Beauvoir 548). Violet instead tries to actually love again, herself, Joe and even Dorcas. Morrison does not allow Joe to exist on his own, but makes it clear that the love he will share with Violet does not only make him human, but makes both of them human.

Violet’s journey begins with her understanding why Joe would want to cheat on her as well as what she has been lacking as a human. Violet’s self love and validation is intricate, initially beginning with the scene where she attempts to cut the face off of Dorcas’s corpse. What makes this grotesque action so important is attempting to understand what this action served for Violet. She would be known as “Violent” in the Harlem community, seen as an unstable and irrational rebellious woman. But the real question is could this be an act of rebellion, an only act of rebellion for a woman in the situation of marriage and infidelity? The act of infidelity does not provide actual rebellion, but more or less provides an outlet for disappointments. Beauvoir notes that a rebellious attitude of the wife is threatening under the surface of a marriage, as the wife becomes disenchanted with the stature of her husband. The married woman is faced with being



shaped by her husband, being a model wife and mother. As Violet is without children, out of her own choice, she is faced with being shaped as the woman that Joe would want her to be for him. In this situation, "she opposes him with covert tenacity...she retains her own peculiar view of things" (Beauvoir 465-466). Not only is she shaped by Joe, but by the traditions and rites that women have gone through. Yet, whatever strength has remained from Violets years toiling in the South have allowed her to resist any possible shaping by Joe. Her rebellion and independence is already planted from the time they fell in love. Another route for revolt is explored by Beauvoir when she considers physical action in revolt such as tears or outbursts of violence. In this aspect, Violet's action reflects an action that though "a gesture. Yet above all she is engaged in expressing" (Beauvoir 609). The community would see her action as an expression of anger. But cutting off Dorcas face at the funeral is a part of Violet's larger question of who was this young girl that stole her husband. She needed to see the face of the young woman that stole her husband. Yet Violet finds that there is nothing spectacular about his young woman, who lost both her parents at a young age and truly only looking for attention from older men. Violet's understanding of the young woman lost and as confused as she was, does not help her fully come to terms with her question. If understanding the situation will fail a woman, what options does she have? Beauvoir finds option within liberation. To be a fully liberated woman, Beauvoir states "she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her project she concretely affirms her status as subject" (680). Violet does not exactly take this defiant route, but takes the spirit of Beauvoir's liberation. For Violet, it seems to be the realization that the tiny and human insecurities that would have barricaded her from reaching her potential as a subject are the only things that can fulfill her. The morals and norms that have stripped dignity from women are things Violet has not time for. Instead, she reinvigorates her marriage to Joe with honesty and



being direct to him as a person where “there is no stud’s eye, no chippie glance to undo them. They are inward toward the other...” (Morrison 228).

Morrison’s *Jazz* faces the issues of female oppression with honesty and passion. Violet is misconstrued as a vengeful and angered woman through much of the novel, but in reality her journey was for a search of authenticity and love. With Beauvoir’s existential and feminist analysis of Western society, we are capable of understand why Violet would take such an action and why the community would view her as so. The novel is steeped in the history of each of the protagonists, including Joe Trace and Dorcas. But, it was not until Violet asked the question “what’s the world for if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” (Morrison 208) that an existential question becomes pressing. For Violet to make life what she wants it to be, in Morrison’s novel, takes the courage to face problems that would have otherwise been crippling. While facing these problems, Violet becomes active in asserting her life to Joe and her community, in effect liberating herself from the traditional ties that have caused her pain as a woman. *Jazz* offers an affirmation of life through the task of uncovering the problems and constructs that oppress women.

The final two books that shall be analyzed in the thesis are Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. These books have a different utilization of the Black Aesthetics. Johnson’s novel, which is the earliest of books studied for this thesis, utilizes the techniques of black American traditions, such as the slave narratives, Wright stood the furthest away from any traditional sense of the Black Aesthetics. Nonetheless, these books examine similar problems found in Existentialism and few unexplored



areas, such as rebellion and impact of the human recognition. Unlike the previous books, the characters of Wright's and Johnson's novel are incapable of overcoming their situations.

### ***Native Son: Richard Wright's Denial of Freedom***

Opening with a screeching alarm clock, Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a poor young Black man living in Chicago's inner city. Already a troubled youth, Bigger's life becomes thrown into turmoil after the accidental killing of a young white woman in his care. In Wright's prose, we find an examination of the psychological and social effects of racism and poverty on Black America. Even as Bigger is placed in jail and given the death penalty, Wright's real issue was not only the fate of Bigger or the African American community, but America's racial consciousness. While Bigger is painted as a monster during his trial, Wright questions the validity of this viewpoint. Is he truly a devious murder or is there something much deeper that could uncover this enigma? The novel delves into Bigger's psychology as a young Black male, with no possibilities or hope in his part of the city. Though bleak, the novel raises important questions of Bigger as an individual and the entirety of the African American community. If Bigger is truly a monster and a threat to the safety of people, what circumstances have brought him into this? Is this truly his own creation or are there factors that have made him this way? As the novel explores these problems, Simone de Beauvoir's articulation of existentialism would raise much light on these questions. Beauvoir notes how being put under intense oppression, such as the oppression faced by women or slaves, causes people to reject their freedom and submit to "the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths created" (Beauvoir 37) by other people, specifically white males. Bigger's identity was very rarely his own, and he felt much of the limits of white society, with Bigger's line "I *could* fly if I



had the chance" (Wright 17) as an expression of his lack of freedom. When Bigger works for his white and wealthy employers, spending a night on the town with their daughter and her communist boyfriend, a sense of shame overcomes him through the whole experience. But, to the reader this shame is quite bizarre. Nonetheless, the sense of shame is very much related to the years of oppression that have transformed Bigger. The novel and Beauvoir's philosophy can provide an understanding into how oppression decimates an individual and what actions are offered to these people. As the novel progresses, Bigger takes his job as a chauffeur for a rich family. On the first day of the job, he accidentally murders his employer's daughter in panic. Yet, after the act, Bigger feels heroic in relation to and even rebellious against the oppressive white society. Here, Albert Camus' *The Rebel*, an essay on rebellion and revolution, can assist in defining whether the actions of Bigger are truly rebellious. The act of revolt is important to Camus and his Existential philosophy, but what exactly defines this revolt is the problem. Could Bigger's murder really be an act of revolt, by Camus's definition, or is this act simply violent? While many of the ideas of existentialism function well with Wright's novel, Wright would not fully agree with many of the ideas his French contemporaries were developing. Though Wright was attracted the ideas of the Existentialist, he was still left with problems that he was unable to resolve from the philosophy. This failure and disillusionment with the philosophy is present within Wright's works including *Native Son*. While the novel relates too many of the themes of Existentialism, such as rebellion and alienation, Wright is unable to find a life affirming value for his protagonist Bigger Thomas.

*Native Son* is a novel which addresses "Black Aesthetics" from a different angle, dealing primarily with politics and substance, rather than stylistic developments. The novel does not take advantage of older forms of African American culture, such as oral tradition, spirituals,



folklore or jazz. Wright maintained a desire for “the reader to feel that there was nothing between him and Bigger” (HBWB 459). Wright states that in writing a novel, the author “regard[s] his imagination as a kind of self-generating cement which glued his facts together, and his emotions as a kind of dark and obscure designer of those facts”(HBWB Wright 433). In an article entitled “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” Wright gives his autobiographical accounts of black men that he would transform into Bigger. Wright explains how each living version of Bigger Thomas and the horrors faced by other blacks in the segregated South contributed to the first drafts of *Native Son*. Wright admits, however, that the book has a reach outside of the African American community: “The feeling of looking at things with painful and unwarrantable nakedness was an experience, I learned, that transcended national and racial boundaries” (HBWB Wright 443). This does not detract from the importance of racial oppression in the novel; rather, it expands its views to the more general problems of oppression. Wright had been developing his work within what Robert E. Washington deemed the “Naturalistic Protest School.” Washington details these writers as “the product of a small but energetic group of socially marginal black American writers” (127) influenced by radical left-wing doctrines, such as Communism flourishing during the Great Depression. But, what made this school specifically different was its adaptation and mutation of Marxist literary theory in black American’s experience. Wright developed these two identities in his works, creating characters within an economical and racial divide. In *Native Son* Wright addresses the sense of alienation one feels in their society, because of the restrictions that not only stop them but define them. Yet this oppression was extremely damaging to Bigger as it “hinder[ed] and stifle[d] in the victim those qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor” (HBWB Wright 453). Bigger’s life has been submerged in the void of Jim Crow,



disenfranchisement and lynching, which develops from racial separation. Wright understands why Bigger would rebel against this system, yet views it pessimistically. Wright notes that while other African Americans tried to find meaning and freedom through religion, labor or pseudo-leadership, other blacks became estranged from “the folk culture of [their] race” (HBWB Wright 439) and their reaction against the dominant white society. Bigger is attempting to define himself in an oppressive world that has separated him from his culture. This novel influenced and informed some of the ideology behind the Black Arts Movement. Though the novel did not partake in specific “Black Aesthetics,” it is highly political, and ties with one of the ideas behind the Black Arts Movement, “to confront the contradictions arising out of the black man’s experience in the racist West” (Knight 1). However, the Black Arts Movement was much more radical, wanting to decimate the older Western tradition in literature for a distinctly black one. Wright would have found this foolish, being destructive and separatist instead of finding true substance in life. Yet, Bigger is still faced with the complex and yet damaging racism that has constructed his psychology for most of his life.

While Wright disassociated himself with much of black America, his novel utilizes the importance of the lived black experience. One of the important aspects of *Native Son* is Bigger’s psychology of that which either prohibits him from making choices or what causes his regression and anger. Before examining the analysis of Bigger, Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of the subjugation of women connects with the same problems found in *Native Son*. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir gives the historical, psychoanalytical, biological, and mythological development behind the idea of the female. Through biology, Beauvoir notes how the female has been rendered as passive while the male is the active and dominant creature. She also notes how



philosophers, such as Aristotle and Hegel, tend to separate women as a weaker species that are “a mere accident-but a very happy accident” (Beauvoir 142). Yet, Beauvoir writes that “Man gives significance to the sexes and their relations through sexual activity, just as he gives sense and value to all the functions that he exercises”(Beauvoir 7). Beauvoir realizes that sexual identity is constructed by males, based on how they see the function of women, as reproductive caretakers. In that same way, race would be a construct by white or Europeans, based on how they view people of color. For a person such as Bigger, he recognizes this racial divide and feels inferior and inhuman. Beauvoir sees this process occur in women when the lacking of what their counterparts own creates barriers leading to a regression of the “romantic heroines of fiction, with self-admiration and self-pity” (Beauvoir 296). Beauvoir states out the problem that: “The sphere to which she belongs is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated, by the male universe” (Beauvoir 297). She compares this situation with that of African Americans, even using Wright’s novel, “what Bigger Thomas, in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, feels with bitterness at the dawn of his life is this definitive inferiority...which is written in the color of his skin: he sees airplanes flying by and he knows that because he is black the sky is forbidden to him” (Beauvoir 297-298). The world for the white male is given a freedom and open future, where women and people of color, are relegated to a fantasy world. This oppression of woman and people of color is understood through the white male’s natural transcendence, the ability to go beyond a current state. Where males can will and make choices, and take a female and “mold her to his desire” (Beauvoir 139), women have very limited choices. By the end of the first chapter “The Data of Biology” Beauvoir asks “Why is the woman the *Other*?” (Beauvoir 37). This question is equally important in understanding *Native Son* and could be asked why is Bigger the *Other* or why is the



black American the *Other*? This novel delves into what it means to be the Other in society, and to be molded to another's desires.

*Native Son* asks the difficult question of being made into the *Other*, but the answers are far off. This issue is relevant to a Black Aesthetics view which deals with the lived experience of black Americans. However, it does explain how being the *Other* has made Bigger resentful. Max, Bigger's lawyer for his murder trial asks states, states to Bigger "And I know that almost every white face you've met in your life had it in for you, even when that face didn't know it. Every white man considers it his duty to make a black man keep his distance" (Wright 346). This observation unveils the inherent racism born in America, extending to a racism that oppresses and also destroys hope for millions. The racism of America has created barriers between races in Bigger's mind between him and white America. Mary Dalton, the daughter of the family he chauffeurs, violates this barrier, leaving Bigger confused and damaged. She asks him to take her and her boyfriend to the local black restaurant. When Bigger saw his friends and girl friend, the situation made Bigger very shameful. While racism has created a barrier around white people, Mary attempted to break those barriers. On her part, however, she never realizes Bigger as human, but as a "Negro." Bigger states that white people, "choke you off the face of the earth...They don't even let you feel what you want to feel" (Wright 353). Bigger is saying that being black in America, you couldn't even be human or have real freedom. The significance and meaning given to black Americans is disturbing and painful. Unlike women's regressions into romanticism, Bigger does not find escape from the inferiority, especially from institutions, such as the church. Bigger is completely eliminated from the world and cannot find freedom. With this information Max declares in his testimony "to see a mode of *life* in our midst, a mode of life stunted and distorted, but possessing its own laws and claims, an existence of men growing out



of its own soil prepared by the collective but blind will of a hundred million people....recognize human life draped in a form and guise alien to ours” (Wright 388). Max pleads to understand Bigger’s problems from a human perspective. People in the city are demanding Bigger’s death, but Max understands the real problem at hand. While Bigger tries to function in a racist society, he is suffocated by his racism as well as America’s racism which makes him less human. He cannot recognize other people that he has not grown up around as human, including Mary. Yet, because of his alienation from white society, he perceives the black community as being forced to conform to White standards. Real choices for Bigger are impossible and his freedom is stifled as Max states, “This is a case of a man’s mistaking a whole race of men as part of the natural structure of the universe and of his acting accordingly” (Wright 396). Unfortunately for Bigger, the “natural structure” for him leads only to violence. These factors of repressed anger within a racist’s society have warped Bigger and crippled him as well.

Given Bigger’s life and psychology, his position is very limiting. However, Beauvoir notes that while the African Americans and women share a similar oppression and domination, “the Negroes submit with a feeling of revolt” (Beauvoir 298). This sentiment is relevant to how Bigger felt following the murder of Mary Dalton. In the second section of the novel, “Flight,” Wright gives a glimpse into Bigger’s new mentality after the murder, “The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it...formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself” (Wright 105). In the vein of Camus’s *The Stranger*, the murder of another person forces the protagonist to reflect upon himself. Bigger’s act of murder has given him a sense of being, allowing him to make his existence truly known in the world. However, the questions of whether Bigger is truly a rebel is brought up. In order to answer this, Albert Camus’s essay *The*



*Rebel* will explain rebellion and its significance. Camus explains that rebellion is a combination of “the categorical rejection of an intrusion that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right which, in the rebel’s mind, is more precisely the impression that he ‘has the right to...’ ” (Camus 13). An act of rebellion reviles those that oppress a rebel while also affirming in himself his value and own ethics. However, rebellion is not always limited to the individual, because if a rebel were to give his/her life for these values, “he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good...he considers these rights more important than himself” (Camus 15-16). This is a complex issues as Bigger felt an intrusion from Mary in the novel. It was not only her intrusion, but an intrusion that extended from a sense of white America’s unlimited freedom. When Bigger speaks to Max about Mary’s intrusion into his world however, Wright states “his murder of her was more than ample justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel” (Wright 114). While rebellion is a declaration of an individual against oppression, Camus warns of the destructive power of resentment in rebellion and how it separates the individual from their society. Unfortunately, this is where Bigger’s rebellion appears to fall apart, because very little is actually affirmed by this murder. His murder does not affirm his power over white culture or any other beliefs he has. One thing that is apparent is that the fear that has consumed him has faded for a moment, which elated him, something he would wish for all black people. However, there is something truly insidious about Bigger’s feelings following the murder. He seems to feel that his own personal beliefs should be held by all black Americans: “Dimly, he felt that there should be one direction in which he and all other black people could go whole-heartedly; that there should be a way in which gnawing hunger and restless aspiration could be fused” (Wright 115). Bigger imagines a leader similar to Adolph Hitler or Mussolini for black people in America, most likely himself. While he wants to



overcome the racist society, Bigger's rebellion seemed to be sparked by fear instead of true affirmation. Camus warns of this possibility, as a revolution becomes detached from its humanity and instead becomes tyrannical. Wright does not see Bigger's actions as true rebellion but as nihilism. In reality, his actions reflect a person trapped in their determined situation, with choices of both tyranny and destruction, or on an immediate turn, one of prison and death.

The existential philosophy functions well with Wright's novel as Wright had separated from black cultural traditions of storytelling and black identity in America. Wright was able to find meaning and some possibilities when he encountered the philosophy early in his life later starting close friendships with Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir in the 40s and 50s who would influence his novels *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. For as close he was to these philosophers, this does not mean that Wright found complete solace with the Existentialist as Nina Kressner Cobb argues. Following the Second World War, Wright found France to be refuge from the bigotry and racism of America. Not only was France an alternative to America, but the answer to the country's problems, looking at "French humanism to counterbalance the increasing materialism and to end the anomie inherent in industrialization" (Cobb 365). Wright was able to find a country that complemented his outsider status, and France offered him possible "answers to personal quests within a more universal framework, as if to overcome his sense of isolation" (Cobb 365). Yet, less than a year as an expatriate in France, Wright became cynical of the prospects of change, as ideologies began to take hold in the France. But, this was the period that Wright met Sartre and the two became intellectual acquaintances. The duo and many of their contemporaries began working on political projects to combat racism, capitalism and inequalities in France. This relationship was "based more on the commonality of their political objectives and professional advantages of their association" (Cobb 367) than on philosophical relationships.



But as Sartre's politics turned to communism, Wright began to turn away from the philosopher. Wright began to decry Sartre's existentialism; questioning Sartre's claim of existence precedes essences. Wright focused upon psychological determinism that counteracted the Sartre's existentialism. Yet, Wright was influenced by the existential ideas that existed before the French philosopher, such as those found in Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Heidegger. If Wright was truly influenced by the philosophy of existentialism, it was the forbearers that had truly reached his intellect, not the post-war grouping. Wright rejected traditions and authority for "hampering man's mastery of his environment" (Cobb 373) but he himself could not conceive of the roots of his rebellion, but he was "troubled by the answer that his freedom derived from alienation" (Cobb 374). Wright developed much of his own existential questioning from his own experiences and rejections of his own culture and not from the philosophy of existentialism. His split from the other existentialists was based more on politics than their philosophies.

As Wright resists the Black Aesthetics, he also rejects Existentialism's move towards creating meaning for one's life. He does touch open the issues of the Other and revolt found in the works of Beauvoir and Camus, but is unable to find any positive outcome for their philosophies. One theme that he explicitly shares with the Existentialist is Camus's idea of revolt and how the rebellious can lead to tyranny. Wright's focus, however, might not be a specifically individual process of overcoming the racism of the world. Bigger's character is highly different than the narrator of *Invisible Man* and could not possibly imagine a world where his choices make a difference. Wright, on the other hand seems to focus on alerting America to the ugliness and dehumanization of American racism. Bigger is unable to overcome such racism and Wright is too disillusioned to find a solution.

### **Living in Bad Faith in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man***

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An American Renaissance man, James Weldon Johnson was one of the earliest and influential African American writers, journalists, poets, critics, lawyers and songwriters to reach into the greater experience of blacks in America. His sole novella, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* tells the story of painful racial confusion at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The unnamed narrator details his youth and adolescence, unaware that he is actually black, though his skin is light enough to be considered white. When he discovers this truth, the narrator tries to navigate and assimilate the world of black and white. Though once considering himself beautiful and worthy, the narrator began to look at his self in distain, examining how his black features on his face have spoiled his beauty. Fully conscious of his race and the weight it carries, the narrator attempts to come to terms with this realization, and overcome “the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each colored man” (Johnson 13). The narrator admits that every African American develops a “dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race” (Johnson 14). Throughout his odyssey, the narrator experiences an America of wonder, joy, pain and suffering. He is hurt and unsettled intensely by the racism and bigotry which plagues blacks throughout the nation, yet he remains a “privileged spectator” (Johnson 124) to a culture that is vibrant as it is oppressed. While the novella is built around the turn of the century African American experience, the narrator deals with a great number of existential issues. Though the existentialists who have been the focus of this project, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus, were born at beginning of the century and where unaware of the world Johnson existed in, their concepts still are relevant to *The Autobiography...* specifically the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre. The idea of alienation plays an important aspect in the novella. Sartre views alienation as a loss of “the sense [...] that man is ‘essential’ to the constitution of the world” (Cooper 32). In one sense, alienation is a positive aspect of living, as



Steven Earnshaw states “The refusal to conform to society’s received values is [a] common [...] thread that runs throughout Existentialism”(5). However, the alienation in *The Autobiography...* is not a rejection of conformity, but a painful separation the narrator feels from his race. Though aware of the alienation towards white society, the narrator still does not feel connected with black America. The folk music and traditions of many blacks are very unfamiliar to him, which causes a mixture of great fascination and bitter pain. While the human condition of alienation overshadows the narrator, Sartre’s phenomenological ontology, his construction of existence, plays an important part in the novella. Because of his consciousness of being black, the narrator begins to reevaluate himself. In some cases, the narrator hides his race and identity, predicting the possible reactions he would receive from people and from the gaze and judgments of another placing him as a black object. Sartre explains these encounters with the self in the world, as a process which “puts [the self] in the position of passing judgment on [itself] as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other” (Sartre 189). Not only does the narrator realize himself as an object, but this objectification comes with racial implications. As the narrator becomes conscious of his race, he attempts to combine the two racial boundaries. His existential odyssey leaves him lost and more frustrated than his start, ending with a choice between racial sameness and racial diversity and honesty. Nonetheless, the existential phenomenology of Sartre is compatible with Johnson’s novella.

Johnson’s novella is placed in a complex situation regarding Black Aesthetics. Johnson himself was a civil servant as well as an artist at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This coincides with the migration of blacks from the South to the North, changing the black class structure and creating varied ideas and lifestyle. The fight against racism remained an important aspect of black life, most importantly in the works of the black intelligentsia, which included



Johnson and peers such as W. E. B. DuBois. However, each class felt differently on how to deal with the problem. Johnson favored “the aesthetic dimensions of black American literature” (Washington 39) compared to the much more narrow viewpoint shared by the strictly political aspects of black America. Johnson was more concerned with the language that constituted black America, from traditions of the church to black poetry. However, there are social and political aspects to Johnson’s novella, as it deals with the larger crisis of “a privileged black narrator tenuously connected to his or her blackness that needs to escape the problematic meanings of that identity” (Smith 378). Though the novella tackles this issue at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the book relies on many traditions and narratives that have developed in America after the Civil War. The slave narrative, an autobiography of an ex-slave, plays an important role in the novella. The racial divide found in comparing freedom/slavery and North/ South influences the narrators perception of American and the rest of his travels. The narrator travels to the South, not only going to college but to understand his heritage’s roots and gaining insight into a culture the narrator does not understand. This is also where Johnson gives his novella a historical perspective of black American life. In one passage, the narrator breaks down traditions in black culture into a science. Describing a trip to a black church service, the narrator explains the art of the hymn, “Generally, the parts taken up by the congregation are sung in a three-part harmony, the women singing the soprano and a transposed tenor, the men with high voices singing the melody, and those with low voices, a thundering bass...It stirs the heart like a trumpet call” (Johnson 107). The passage gives a dense interpretation of a traditional black church’s tradition of gospel, expressing the art behind the singing, while showing the power and effect that the singing has over an individual. While Johnson navigates many of the traditions that have come to define black America, including the bliss of ragtime and the horrors of lynching, the most



important aspect of the novella is the narrator's "double consciousness." While the story of a black man passing as white, or the "tragic mulatto" is nothing new in American fiction, Johnson's story examines how black Americans remain a mystery to their white counterparts. For the narrator, the world of fellow black people was alien to him his whole life, while the white one has shut him out. Johnson's narrator attempts to understand his own culture, but unable to, decides to live the rest of his life as a white man. If an essential aspect to the Black Aesthetic is the lived black experience, the narrator finds his experience within the boundaries of this "double consciousness." While the novella offers a deep document of black America at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what the narrator defines as the racial "double consciousness," a phrase first noted by W.E.B. DuBois, as an identity of an American who remains a mystery to his country. DuBois's "double consciousness" tackles the experience of black America in its racism, where black Americans struggle to be recognized as America and as human, but face the impossibility because of segregation and racism. The narrator has an interesting standpoint within this "double consciousness" as he is only truly affected by it when he admits to being black which by doing so admits to living a meaningless existence, at least in the eyes of white America. While the black aesthetics were being defined for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Autobiography*... captures multiple techniques and ideas, from the folk cultures and traditions of black America to important that would shape it.

Even as the Black Aesthetics play an integral role in the *Autobiography*... the immediate obstacle the narrator is faced with is his alienation from both black and white society. The revelation and shock of his racial identity at a young age "gave me a sword-thrust that day in school which was years in healing" (Johnson 12). The narrator is at a loss in the situation; because his skin was not dark enough, he would never relate to the other black children, but his



realization disturbs his link with the white children. What the passage indicates is what Sartre would consider a loss of essence. This essence, which began as whiteness for the narrator, is distinct and fixed, and the alternative essence of blackness is distinct. However, the constructs of blackness were also portrayed in a negative light. David E Cooper, notes the destructive power of holding to identities, "The 'sincere' man takes it that deep-down, he has a nature or character which determines in advance how he should be" (96). In the realization that he is black, the narrator is faced with a problem of giving up his notions of himself and now taking on the "essence" of a black American, growing "constantly more and more afraid of laying myself open to some injury to my feelings of my pride" (Johnson 14). What the narrator finds as he becomes older is the "double consciousness," where he "looked out through other eyes, [his] thoughts were colored, [his] words dictated, [his] actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased I force..." (Johnson 13). It was a fact that his world is dictated by others, and he only knows himself through white society. Sartre deals with a similar issue of identity in his work, *Being and Nothingness* and the books begin their problems with the human gaze. Sartre explains the power of the Look, the human gaze upon another person, noting that "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other... I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me" (Sartre 189). With the appearance of the Other, in the case of *The Autobiography*... white America, the narrator recognizes himself as an Object, who is given definitions and qualities by the Other. The narrator faces changes when he realizes that he is black and attempting to understand whether he must or must not accept the lifestyles of other blacks. As the narrator enters his adult years, he attempts to truly understand his own people in America by traveling to the South. What he discovers is that the experience of black America is comprised of struggle



and disfranchisement, with the existence of blacks and their place in America being turned into the “Negro question.” Though the narrator attempts to overcome his alienation, the process becomes too difficult for him to cope with, “I understood that it was not discouragement, or fear, or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race...it was shame, unbearable shame” (Johnson 113). This shame has grown out of his failure as a member of his own race and his inability to face the world honestly. Sartre states that “[Shame] is the *recognition* of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging” (Sartre 199). The narrator of *The Autobiography*...feels a sense of shame because of what his black skin entails, but the narrator feels an equal shame at his lack of embracing the black community but also refuting the white community. To go even more in-depth, Sartre states how shame is a confession of the being that is undergoing shame. This is the direct shame that the narrator feels, “Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals” (Johnson 113). In embracing himself as black, the narrator will be embracing not only the aspects of culture, but the violence inherited to each generation following slavery. The narrator is not only alienated because of his lack of convergence with his race; it is also the shame of how his race is treated.

One theme of the Black Aesthetics that is found in the lived experience of the narrator deals with the obstacles in their life—in the case of *The Autobiography*. . .—the sense of alienation and shame they feel. Through Sartre’s philosophy and theory on human existence and recognition, the narrator’s alienation in *The Autobiography*... becomes clearer, in relation to both human and racial identity. However, there are other philosophical ideas Sartre developed that also relate to Johnson’s story, ideas of anguish and Bad Faith. If the Black Aesthetics is dedicated to the recognition of the black America experience, the experience can be easily



hidden from the world. Sartre's anguish is an important concept in existentialism and finds its way into the novella. Angst is man's realization "that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also as lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escape the feeling of total and deep responsibility" (Sartre 347). Sartre compares this angst to that of commanders leading large militaries into battle, knowing that each member will be under their command and responsibility. The narrator of *The Autobiography...* experiences the same anguish not only in his feeling alienated, but also as his larger burden. In the novella, the narrator becomes a well known piano player, traveling all over the world. But while in Europe, the narrator decides that he should use his musical talents to uplift blacks in America. The narrator's task is somewhat as a leader who is attempting to bring black people out of suffering. Yet, after witnessing more brutality in the South, ending with a lynching, the narrator came to a crossroads of his possible next actions. This connects with Sartre's anguish in another manner, as the narrator finds it impossible to truly be a leader or take up the burden of so many people, leaving with the debate of "to forsake one's race to better one's condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one's country for the same purpose" (Johnson 113). The narrator feels responsibility for uplifting the black people from the suffering in the south, a task too arduous for one individual. With such a force in front of him, the narrator decides "that I would change my name...and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead" (Johnson 113). In one sense, he is living without the labels and stereotypes that would be placed upon him because of his race. But the reality is that the narrator has chosen whiteness and the safety there in, instead of his true racial identity. Addison Gayle Jr. sums up the instance best: "After spending time in both worlds, the protagonist finds his identity in the white world. In doing so, he fails as artist and as man; for



although he realizes the richness of his African heritage, he cannot allow himself to think of his culture as unique and distinct- he can accept it only as submerged entity within a larger cultural sphere”(412). More than rejecting his cultural heritage, the narrator lives in Bad Faith. Sartre’s defines Bad Faith as “hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth” (Sartre 139) from oneself. Bad Faith is that essential falsehood that is presented to the self and then to the world. The narrator commits this Bad Faith by living the rest of his life as a white person, instead of being honest and accepting the black culture into his life. While denying his race, he is also denying his responsibilities that he shares with his race. While he feels the limitations of his race, instead of finding a way to overcome it, he defers to a white counterpart.

An early example of the Black Aesthetics, Johnson’s *The Autobiography*... presents a Black experience and identity which is so shrouded in suffering that living a fulfilling life is impossible. Through Sartre’s existential phenomenology, one gains a deeper understanding of the narrator in Johnson’s novella. The narrator experiences painful and yet exhilarating moments through his odyssey, in order to come to terms with his racial identity. From the moment his feelings of alienation from people and himself set in, the narrator begins asking deep questions about who he is. Unfortunately, the reality for millions of blacks is one full of degradation and humiliation that is far too insufferable. Unable to cope with the shame of racism and his sense of anguish, the narrator chooses to remain white in the eyes of the world in order to feel some sense of meaning and comfort. Johnson’s novella is not only tragic for the character, but also for the state of America at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Black music and the Existentialist**

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Finally, I wish to analyze the music of jazz and its connection with Black Aesthetics and French Existentialism. In the earlier parts of the thesis, I present jazz as having played an integral role as a tradition and cultural artifact for the writers like Ellison and Morrison. Yet, the music was also influential to the Existentialists, who were not only fond of the music, but found that jazz was a form of music that could overcome the suffering and anguish of the world. As this thesis examines the Black Aesthetics and its link with Existentialism, it will also be fitting to examine how this aesthetics works in Black music. The history of Black American music is long and complex. Not only is the history complex, but the function of the music has been a popular debate. The roots of the music and culture were forged in the suffering of African slavery where “Almost every material aspect of African culture took a new less obvious form or was wiped out altogether” (Baraka 15-16). What remained according to Amiri Baraka, were the African religions and the arts, specifically the arts of music and dance. Through the generations of slavery however, the African religious and work songs would be dramatically transformed through the pressures from American Protestantism. What would form for the second generation of African slaves were the Work Song, which were “stripped of any purely African ritual and some cultural reference found for it in the New World” (Baraka 19). Baraka notes the importance of language to the Work Song, which combined the remains of African language, but developed out of the African “foreigner trying to speak a new and unfamiliar language” (22). Because of the changes and transformations of slavery, “African speech, African customs, and African music all changed by the American experience, [turned] into a native American form” (Baraka 24). This form of musical expression would be considered to be barbaric, yet Baraka notes that these critics of Africanized American music were ignoring the different scales, rhythms, melodies and techniques found in the music. While Western critics ignored these different



techniques and styles in African American music, what many of these critics ignore is the importance of the African song lyric, communication through the music, the mastery of improvisation, and most importantly, the music's function among the African American community. Through generations and mutations, African American music has become an important staple of American life.

It is important to understand the roots that would develop and define black American music in order to ask the other question. A major conflict in understanding the history of Black American music is whether it should be narrowly defined as a entirely Black American product or as a part of a sharing between the racial divide. In Baraka's opening analysis, one can understand how the African music and cultural expressions were filtered through Western aesthetics and traditions, creating a specifically Black American music and aesthetic. However, Jimmy Stewart sees that historically for music, there has been "two distinct aesthetic traditions" (82). Stewart recognizes that "it has been this cultural tradition or aesthetics that has determined the values in the music in each case and that has determined everything in the terms of the respective musics, e.g., the way the musical instruments were utilized, and the over-all philosophy of music" (82). Stewarts addresses the critical response that has been developed to understand black American music, such as R &B and jazz, which was inherited from the Western tradition of music as "the judgments of whites that are being foisted on Black people"(Stewart 83) that ignores the culture of people of color. Stewart would rather acknowledge Black American music beyond a static condition of "art," one that focuses less on a product and more on the creation process. This process of creation is a part of the overall development in the Black Aesthetic. This act of creation, Stewart explains, is "why black people in the West never had to wait for a phonograph record or a book to accomplish the transmission



of our cultural values” (84). The art and artifacts that remained from the black slaves and their immediate generations were not the ends but the means to the bigger end, the process of the story instead of the pure story. Stewart finishes his essay on Black Aesthetics of music with the continual clash between Western and African musical aesthetics and where the music fits into community. Stewart argues “that none of the instruments we used were invited by us, meant that we had to impose on borrowed instruments an aesthetic convention” (86), which signifies an innate Black Aesthetic for black artists and musicians. The techniques Baraka describes are a few examples of these Aesthetics, and Stewart goes another step farther, “For examples, the collective improvisation that Ornette Coleman introduced into our music in the sixties was employed in the [King] Oliver and [Louise] Armstrong period, all the way back to our early churches, back to form in Africa” (87). Stewart notes that by the 1960s there was a rejection of Western aesthetics in African American music, for example in jazz. The piano, for example “the most ‘white’ instrument” had become irrelevant because “the music of the sixties was a force of our aesthetics, which obliged us to discard the piano” (Stewart 91). The change in musical instruments and their utilization was also met with changes in community. The progress of the music, jazz in particular, was influenced by “a deeper development that meant they [musicians] were examining their aesthetics in its relationship to the economic and political factors that determined its being” (Stewart 91). These artists were revolting against norms that had been marginalizing them as well as segregating them. Older forms of music and musical traditions had fallen to the wayside according to Stewart. The political and social reforms reevaluated the position of the artist. The changes in politics not only changed the responsibility of the artist, but also challenged the function and growth of music as competition replaced apprenticeship which became the route for musical creation. This sense of competition would foster musicians to



improve and recreate their styles. Stewart gives the example of John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins saxophone “battle” in the 1960s. These jazz artists battling for musical supremacy create new paths for musical innovation. Real innovation is not based purely on technology in the black Aesthetics, but is rather a part of a revolt against the older functions and techniques of Western aesthetics. These facts would effect, influence and change the direction of black American music.

In the analysis of Black American music, Baraka and Stewart offer the historical roots, criticism and interpretation of Western aesthetics by slaves in America. The music is not a simple artifact of a time or culture, but expressions and continual artistry, where the product is found through the creation. One musical forms that represent the Black Aesthetics and essential to 20th century American culture is jazz. While the Black American musical cannon is vast with different genres, such as soul or rock and roll, it is these two styles that fully express the similar aesthetic qualities discussed in Baraka and Stewart. Jazz’s lineage begins in the Deep South that cultivated slavery, where the songs, melodies and performance of the field workers influenced the performance of jazz musicians. The Work songs began to evolve and change into “Negro Spirituals” and finding their place in the blues and jazz. Where Jimmy Stewart offers the historical aspect of the genre, J.A. Rogers views jazz as “a joyous revolt from convention, custom, authority, boredom even sorrow-from everything that would confine the soul of man and hinder its riding free on the air”(111). The other form of early African American music, the blues, represents the oppressive state of life, one lacking humanity or freedom. Jazz is the opposite and is in reality a release from these oppressive conditions of life. In Roger’s analysis in the essay “Jazz at Home”, the genre serves a very important social function, that of expressing joy throughout American periods of sorrow and frustration. Jazz’s historical heights were found



in “when minds were reacting from the horrors and strain of war [World War Two]. Humanity welcomes it because in its fresh joyousness men found a temporary forgetfulness, infinitely less harmful than drugs or alcohol”(Rogers 117). Jazz’s aesthetics are not only found in its musical virtuosity, originality and spontaneity, but in its ability to transcend its musical form and express humanity. Amiri Baraka goes as far to say that “The jazz player could come from any part of that socio-culture spectrum, but if he were to play a really moving kind of jazz, he had to reflect almost all of the musical spectrum...And thus, jazz could not help but reflect the entire black society”(140).

Black American music has transformed the musical and cultural landscape in America and abroad. The roots of the music are found deeply in the days of slavery and the years of Reconstruction that followed. The African spirituals, folk songs and work songs would transfer from the voices of slaves into the instruments from Europe. The first transformation of the music is evident in 19<sup>th</sup>-century blues and jazz. While blues expresses the anguish and oppression of many black Americans, jazz became the explosive element that would reinvigorate the community as well as a source of expressing the human will of overcoming the anguish of existence. Most importantly, the innovations made in jazz would transcend the music scene and function for a communal purpose. As jazz would lose its popularity, rap music would influence and take much of the function that jazz had laid out a century before. Both styles of music would challenge as well as influence the structures and forms of Western music and culture.

One of America’s oldest forms of popular music, jazz has stood the test of centuries, evolving and mutating with the ever changing American landscape of class and race. With its roots in slavery, jazz developed into “a marvel of paradox: too fundamentally human, at least as



modern humanity goes, to be typically racial, to international to be characteristically national, too much abroad in the world to have a special home” (Rogers 110). In the 1940s, the genre’s popularity spread throughout the world, especially in Europe. While jazz’s reach is far, its musical energy exerts “a release of all the suppressed emotions at once...It is hilarity expressing itself through pandemonium; musical fireworks” (Rogers 111). The genre and its many genius artists developed the music as an ultimate expression of humanity in a racist and oppressive world. Charlie Parker, one of jazz music’s earliest innovators, became bored with the confines of older music and broke the mold: “Parker discovered that by running higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing these with appropriately related chord changes; he could play what he had been hearing” (Rout 151). The traditions forged by older and more established jazz musicians became something of an absurdity to Parker. Not only has he as an artist reevaluated how the music can be played, Parker has also asserting himself as an artist and an individual with few peers through his playing. As the music grew in popularity, its reaches left the American shores, influence millions abroad including the philosophers of French Existentialism, specifically Sartre and Beauvoir. Jazz became popular during the occupation of the French in the Second World War, but its music represented the passion that the suffering men and women were searching for. The politics of Sartre and Beauvoir would be opened to the greater problems and discrimination faced by blacks in America. The music was relatable for many of these philosophers and philosophies, from Sartre’s existential freedom to Beauvoir’s individualistic liberation found in the music. Therefore, the philosophical and theoretical views of jazz have crossed many lines and barriers, meeting with ideas and philosophies of the French existentialist. Before understanding where the radical freedom of Sartre meets solos of Parker, it would be wise to understand the critiques of jazz from the view of Black Aesthetics. Ortiz M. Walton gives a



historical explanation of African music, explaining that “The art of improvisation first found [its] expression in Africa...Spontaneity in turn means to express feelings as they occur, hence improvisation becomes instrumental toward the attainment of spontaneity”(161). This spontaneity and raw passion found in African forms would mobilize into the white hymns of the New World, which would later affect the black church. It was in the church where the black slaves were allowed “release [of] emotions that slavery would naturally tend to curtail” (Baraka 48). The rhythms and aesthetics of African music were relocated into Western instruments, black Americans that grew out of the last decades of slavery created a new form of expression. Jazz developed parallel with the blues, both style of music provided a different function. For Amiri Baraka, the blues is one form of “a negro experience” (94), an experience of deep pain, where jazz is the opposite experience, one that evokes joy within humanity, even through the experience of slavery. Where one form indicates suffering and oppression, the other represents passion, humanity and the individual existing through the oppression. One of the reasons this form of music garnered such popularity was not only because of its “explosive attempt to cast off the blues and be happy...in the midst of sordidness and sorrow” (Rogers 111) but also due to its break from traditional, classical, Western music, where “classical techniques...[are] subjected to the emotional and philosophical attitudes of Afro-American music-that these techniques be *used* not canonized”(Baraka 230).The expression and passions exerted by jazz music became very popular in Europe during the 1940s, as European children became disillusioned with “a society whose strength lies in its ability to destroy itself and the rest of the world”(Baraka 232). At this crossroads of culture and race, these young, predominately white European found a great connection with African American jazz.

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Jazz offered a new adaptation's Black Aesthetics and created different sets of artists. The artistic evaluation of Existentialism, the artist is "to be free and creative in each stroke...But to be an artist he must rise above his situation, transform it into something new, beyond what anyone else or he himself has done" (Ames 525). Sartre and Beauvoir were two Existentialist philosophers who saw this value in art, in literature and in music. For Beauvoir, jazz presented a personal and political education and development through the musical form. Jazz as a musical genre was a part of the Other for Beauvoir, an entity outside of her immediate knowledge of either herself or the world. Beauvoir's interest in jazz grew into an interest in America, particularly since the music allowed her to freely reexamine herself and the rest of the world. As she began to evaluate jazz, her views began to turn to the political aspects and functions of the music. It was through jazz that Beauvoir understood much of the oppression and racism in America, which she compared to the oppression faced by women in *The Second Sex*. The emotional release that Beauvoir found in jazz allowed for her to truly become involved with herself. Beauvoir also viewed jazz as a part of the greater social revolution, resulting in her better understanding of what takes place, spiritually, emotionally, mentally and psychically among the oppressed as they seek to become liberated and live authentically.

The major contribution that jazz makes to the Black Aesthetics is an individualized release by the musicians through the instruments. Sartre had a slightly different viewpoint of jazz music, less politically and more so philosophically. Initially, Sartre rejected music as a powerful art form, Sartre would later formulate three qualities that music holds, "1. Music expresses emotions and evokes it. 2. Music expresses the emotions of an age. 3. Music might express the rage of the oppressed and its hope for the future" (Robinson 452). With his earliest discovery of jazz, Sartre felt a connection to a foreign but vibrant music that was equally sexual and



emotional. The music would be referenced in Sartre's *Nausea* through Sophie Tucker's interpretation of *Some of These Days*. C. W. Nettelbeck notes Sartre's use of the popular jazz standard in relation to the "ability of the music to escape the temporal contingencies of existence and hence to serve as a haven against nausea" (173). Jazz was not only bursts of expression under oppression, but it was radical freedom of an individual in full view of society. Nettelbeck relates jazz's freedom to the writings of Sartre's suggesting that "What goes on in jazz-that is as a culture 'other' full of emotional connotations-...*deliberately appropriated as an agent of transformation*, taking the form, ultimately, or writing that seeks to inflect and subvert ideologies and socio-political realities" (175). Sartre's radical freedom could easily be expressed in his literature, but it was also in the music of jazz that he saw the manifestation of such freedom. The jazz musicians would allow neither the racism nor the traditions of the West to silence them and their message. Instead, many jazz artists were capable of taking the traditions along with their musical talent to create their own meaning through the art form, resulting oftentimes in an artist's covering a traditional song while adding his/her own melodies and riffing over the original song's structure. The spirited and passionate playing of the jazz artist does not succumb to the racism of institutions and social placement. On the contrary, Sartre viewed jazz as "the confidence in the human capacity to change direction and meaning" (Nettelbeck 175).

What the proponents of Black Aesthetics find in jazz is an expression of the affirmation of life in the face of suffering. The Existential philosophers found an outlet and an intellectual comrade through the jazz music that had been developing in the 1940s. Sartre and Beauvoir adapted a genre of music that allowed them to analysis themselves and then filter this into the larger narrative of the world. However, each philosopher adapted to the music differently and



through different purposes. For Sartre, the music served more of a novel purpose, much more as a release of emotional and mental tensions. Yet, Sartre was capable of finding freedom that could overcome the sense of Nausea one faces in one's life. Jazz would not only allow for freedom to take place in human life, but could allow for full rebirth of the individual. Beauvoir, however, adopted the music as a political tool. Jazz allowed her to view America from a different viewpoint, which was used to understand the oppressed individuals that perform the music. As she grew to understand the oppression of segregation in America, she created a connection between this oppression and the overall oppression of women. The music would provide "a programme for action, or at least the basis for developing such a programme" (Nettlebeck 180). Sartre's philosophical use of the music opened unlimited possibilities for people, while Beauvoir found the music to be the perfect political tool. However, as the decades wore on, the duo began to turn their focus away from the music and into pure political meanings. Nonetheless, the philosophers were capable of "projecting unexpected meanings and possibilities of jazz culture back onto the rest of the world" (Nettlebeck 180).

## Conclusion

The Black Aesthetics, which has been demonstrated through *Invisible Man*, *Jazz*, *Native Son* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and music of jazz, encompass many of the themes at work in the French variation of the Existentialism. The aesthetics of black Americans has been an amalgamation of their lived experience and the cultural heritage that has been central to black expression and vitality. One of the most influential aspects of the Black Aesthetics is the traditions found in Western Literature, including works by Shakespeare, Eliot and Hemingway. Others have argued the Black Aesthetics to be a simplified "secret language invented by black



people to confound the whites” (Mayfield 24) or existing as “racial chauvinism, separatist bias, [or] Black fantasy” (Gayle 39). Throughout this study, I have argued for a new observation of the Black Aesthetics as a combination of the lived black experience, manifested in the black tropes of storytelling, language and communication, such as Signify(g) and Call/Response, that have found their way into Western literature as well as Western music. As rhetoric tools, these aspects of the Black Aesthetics have greatly challenged and changed much of the art of storytelling and the usage of prose and poetry.

While these techniques and tropes have filtered in American language and rearranged it, one of the most significant contributions of the Black Aesthetics has been the importance of the lived, black experience. What this study illuminates, ultimately, is the notion that while each experience differs, *Invisible Man*, *Jazz*, *Native Son* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* reveal a sustained dedication to an ongoing recording of black experiences. In fact, these literary and musical expressions of Black America are integral to the writer and his community because they affirm the lived experience and history of generations of Black Americans, while also recognize the talent and craft found in Black literature. This revelation of the Black Aesthetics uncovers many of the same themes evident in the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone De Beauvoir. The French Existentialists, along with the influences of Heidegger and Nietzsche, helped shape during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical themes of individuality, meaning, value and ethics. These themes are important to the new views of the Black Aesthetics and a focus on the lived experience. The male and female characters of the Black Aesthetics novels that centralize this thesis oftentimes must confront and find ways to overcome a world marked by indifference and meaninglessness. Their struggles against and



efforts at overcoming such indifference manifest as a “free and courageous determination to go on living creatively despite everything” (Golomb 177).

As previously mentioned, there are specific links between the Existentialist philosophy and the philosophy of the Black Aesthetics along with a new affirmation of life as well as despair towards life as a black American. Existentialism allows for a sense of clarity and a possibility of meaning in an indifferent world. This affirmation is evident in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, in which a young black man navigates the world attempting to find meaning in his life. The narrator of Ellison’s novel faces many ideologies and values that have been created to define him and other black people. As the narrator attempts to travel and overcome these beliefs systems, he becomes aware of the absurdity of the world and the meaninglessness that characterizes the thoughts and ideas of the people he encounters. When the novel reaches its conclusion, the narrator becomes “A man without a distinctive identity . . . [being] all things to all men... [thereby] await[ing] the coming millennium, when race will have become irrelevant” (Gayle 415). The narrator refuses the embarrassment or the blind allegiance presented as options to him. Instead, he forces himself to begin his life anew with the goal of affirming his existence. In reality, he is not waiting to affirm his existence at a future time renders the issue irrelevant. The truth is that by his own choices he becomes the man he needs to be, without regard for the ideals or beliefs of others. This life affirmation is also a central theme in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, as Violet comes to terms with her husband’s affair. One could ask exactly what a scorned woman should do in a situation like the one Violet experiences, whether stay with her husband or leave him, but Morrison presents a story of personal meaning and affirmation. Morrison distils this story through the twisting histories of Violet, her husband, Joe Trace and the young lover, Dorcas. Morrison’s *Jazz* connects with many complex ideas that Simone de Beauvoir



investigated, especially the relationships and connection between a male driven society and the idea of woman as Other. Beauvoir reveals the solution of this Existential problem pertaining to women by proposing women's liberation of themselves from the values and codes of society thereby disassociating themselves from the ideas which have oppressed and derided women and claimed their liberation. Violet, in *Jazz*, is capable of overcoming the pain she has felt by not disassociating from the values would have stripped her, but instead looking for the humanity within Joe and Dorcas. This projection and ongoing effort at disassociation allows Violet to come to terms with the situation, and, more importantly, instills a true sense of brotherhood between men and women.

As Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* demonstrated the life affirming aspects that are found in Existentialism, the latter two novels demonstrate the failures and disparaging aspects of the philosophy. Richard Wright's *Native Son* tells the tragedy of Bigger Thomas. The racism of America, which could not cripple the narrator of *Invisible Man* functions as a disturbed and pained psychology for the protagonist. Unable to every view himself as a human but only as his race, Bigger wanders through life committing petty crimes and being a delinquent. For a brief moment, Bigger finds meaning in his life through the accidental murder of his white employer's daughter, even considering himself to be a rebel. His capture and trial reveal that he is a man who has been consumed in the racism of America and has never been able to possible define his identity and his humanity. Wright's novel does not offer a real answer to the situation of blacks in America will be found through the alienation and racial hatred that has defined them for generations. The philosophies of Sartre and Beauvoir were interesting to Wright as a writer, but this novel views life with fewer possibilities. Robert E Washington states that Wright's "pessimistic outlook about the fate of black individuality reflected his feelings of



rootlessness, his sense of dislocation and despair” (Washington 230). This pessimistic and negative outlook on black individuality in America is also found in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Johnson’s mulatto narrator attempts to assimilate into his black community, while also uplifting his people. However, after his odyssey in America, the narrator is unable to accept his black heritage and humanity. He decides instead to live with life as a white man, in order to avoid the harsh reality of black life, living in Bad Faith. The novels written by Wright and Johnson do not offer the same life affirmation found in the Black Aesthetics of Morrison and Ellison.

Finally, there exists an intellectual and philosophical link between American jazz and Existentialism. The genre of music represents the combination between the African traditions of spiritual and religious practices with the musical instruments and traditions of the European culture. The proponents of the Black Aesthetics find a sense of release and a revolt against the oppression of the racism in America. Sartre and Beauvoir find a kinship with the music and their philosophies of radical freedom and political changes. Beauvoir discovered a music that complemented the Otherness she uncovered through her research of the oppression of women. Sartre found a connection with his radical freedom and jazz’s ability to expressing the ability of overcoming the anguish of humanity, while also providing human possibilities to live life passionately.

The Black Aesthetics has been defined as the lived black experience in America through the decades of racism and segregation along with the lingual traditions that were found in African American heritage. This tradition, originally manifested in oral communication within the slave community, transcended into the world of literature and later adopted Western



literature, creating a new literary and artistic aesthetics. This tradition is not only present in novels and in music, but also drama, poetry and short stories. It is important to view the Black Aesthetics beyond a call for racial revolution and dissimulation from America and the Western world. The aesthetics should also be viewed beyond the adaptation of a Western literary and musical aesthetics by the African American oral tradition. The works that shape this thesis, along with other texts that lend themselves to a Black Aesthetics identity, deal with issues deeper than problems of race and instead focus on the problem of humanity. It is this problem that gives these novels their Existential identity. The novels and music uncover a philosophical desire for authenticity and a definition of humanity in the black community without the restraints of society. While there are other issues pertaining to the Black Aesthetics which can be explored, such psychological attitude of Black Americans because of racism and its manifestation in the Black Aesthetics. At the same time, the Black Aesthetics can be studied beyond novel into the different artistic and literary realms. This thesis explored the issue of individuality and its function in the black community. The analysis in this thesis will allow for future research and analysis for the shifts and changes in the Black Aesthetics. By using the insight, ideas, and interpretations of the three French Existentialists whose work is central to this thesis and the themes of Black Aesthetics, I have begun to reinterpret what the aesthetics means within a literary context while also proposing the future direction of the Black Aesthetics.

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