Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat

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Scat begins with a fall, or so we're told. In his second Okeh recording session with his Hot Five on 26 February 1926 in Chicago, Louis Armstrong recorded a lyric by Boyd Atkins called "The Heebie Jeebies Dance." The words are not particularly memorable, a jingle about a dance craze: "I've got the Heebies, I mean the Jeebies, / Talk 'bout a dance the Heebie Jeebies, / You'll see girls and boys, / Faces lit with joys, / If you don't know it / You ought to learn it / Don't feel so blue, / Some one will teach you, / Come on now let's do that prance / Called the Heebie Jeebies dance."[1] Supposedly the practice takes of the tune went smoothly, but a fortuitous fumble as the band was cutting the record transformed the song from one of the first

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1. Boyd Atkins, "Heebie Jeebies" (Chicago, 1926), pp. 3–4. This source can be found in the Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The sheet music was published after Armstrong's single, apparently in response to the record's popularity; it goes so far as to include a transcription of Armstrong's improvisation as a "'Skat' Chorus" (p. 5), in which the piano accompaniment mirrors the melody and rhythm of Armstrong's scatting ("Skeep! Skipe! Skoop! Brip Ber Breep bar la bah"). At the same time, the sheet music signals the inadequacy of its notation, glossing the transcription with the instruction that "Note: for correct interpretation of 'SKAT' CHORUS HEAR OKEH RECORD No. 8300."

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journeyman efforts of a studio band to one of the most influential discs in American popular music. As Armstrong himself tells it:

> I dropped the paper with the lyrics—right in the middle of the tune . . . And I did not want to stop and spoil the record which was moving along so wonderfully . . . So when I dropped the paper, I immediately turned back into the horn and started to Scatting . . . Just as nothing had happened . . . When I finished the record I just knew the recording people would throw it out . . . And to my surprise they all came running out of the controlling booth and said—"Leave That In."[2]

In the liner notes to an Armstrong reissue, producer George Avakian remarks that there are "several versions" of the story. Others present, like trombonist Edward "Kid" Ory, told Avakian that "Louis had the lyrics memorised, but forgot them (or at least pretended to, Ory adds with a grin). Louis says he doesn't remember, but he, too, offers a quiet smile."[3]

As Philippe Baudoin, Gary Giddins, Richard Hadlock, and others have pointed out, it's a rather unlikely anecdote.[4] And although this session is often credited as the "origin" of scat singing in jazz, there are many other earlier practitioners of the mode. Baudoin notes Don Redman, who recorded a scat break of "My Papa Doesn't Two-Time No Time" with Fletcher Henderson five months before "Heebie Jeebies."[5] Will Friedwald, in *Jazz Singing,* points to vaudeville singer Gene Green's half-chorus of imitation-Chinese scat in his 1917 recording of "From Here to Shanghai" and mentions

2. Louis Armstrong, "Jazz on a High Note," *Esquire* 36 (Dec. 1951): 85.

3. George Avakian, "Notes on Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five," *The Louis Armstrong Story, Vol. 1,* Columbia Records, CL 851; quoted in Stephen J. Casmier and Donald H. Matthews, "Why Scatting Is Like Speaking in Tongues: Post-Modern Reflections on Jazz, Pentecostalism, and 'Africosmysticism,'" *Literature and Theology* 13 (June 1999): 174. For other versions of this anecdote, see Hughes Panassié, *Louis Armstrong,* trans. pub. (New York, 1971), pp. 69–70; and Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (1946; New York, 1972), pp. 102–4, hereafter abbreviated *RB.* The discographical information for the recording is Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, "Heebie Jeebies," Okeh 8300, 1926, mx. 9534-A.

4. See Richard Hadlock, *Jazz Masters of the Twenties* (New York, 1965), p. 26; Philippe Baudoin, "Introduction," *Anthology of Scat Singing,* 3 vols., Masters of Jazz, MJCD 801, 1995, p. 19; and Gary Giddins, "Louis Armstrong (the Once and Future King)," *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York, 1998), p. 95, hereafter abbreviated *VJ.*

5. See Baudoin, "Introduction," pp. 17–18. Other predecessors include a Chicago singer named Bo Diddly, as well as Gene Rodemich's June 1924 "Scissor Grinder Joe" and "Some of These Days," recorded by Coon and Sanders in November 1924. See also David Jasen, *Tin Pan Alley: The Composers, the Songs, the Performers, and Their Times* (New York, 1988), p. 6.

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other overlooked figures including Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards, who scatted on a December 1923 record of "Old Fashioned Love," and used to work in a theater accompanying silent movies "with his ukulele as well as with singing, vocal sound effects, and 'eefin' (the word Edwards used before anyone had thought of 'scat')."[6] In the late 1930s, the champion self-promoter and deft revisionary historian Jelly Roll Morton told Alan Lomax of his own role in the mode's origins more than twenty years earlier: "People believe Louis Armstrong originated scat. I must take that credit away from him, because I know better. Tony Jackson and myself were using scat for novelty back in 1906 and 1907 when Louis Armstrong was still in the orphan's home."[7]

I am less interested in the truth or fiction of the anecdote than in its perseverance, its resilience as a touchstone legend of origin. What's fascinating about the story is the seeming need to narrate scat as a fall, as a literal dropping of the words—as an unexpected loss of the lyrics that finally proves enabling. The written words slip to the ground, and an entirely new approach to the singing voice is discovered in the breach, in the exigencies of musical time. It is not exactly that the "song" is separated from the "script," but more that the anecdote relies on an oral/written split to *figure* the way that Armstrong's voice peels gradually away from the reiteration of the chorus, and from linguistic signification altogether. (This happens as a kind of erosion or disarticulation, not a sudden loss: "Say you don't know it, you don't dawduh,/ Daw fee blue, come on we'll teach you . . . ") Of course the anecdote buys into a familiar narrative about "genius" and "spontaneity," the notion that the great man improvises his way out of a tough spot with a dancer's grace—talking to save time, as it were. But there is another quality as well, an apparently necessary coexistence of dispossession and invention, perdition and predication, catastrophe and chance. If "Heebie Jeebies" is an unprecedented occasion for poetic innovation, in which Armstrong's scat somehow moves closer to the qualities of music, it forces the recognition that an *occasion* is etymologically precisely that, Latin for a "falling toward."[8] Here, the lyric sheet drifts down to the floor, and the singer finds resource, happening upon a new sound (itself falling away from the word) in the void of the phonograph horn.

6. Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (New York, 1990), pp. 28, 16.

7. Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll* (1949; New York, 1993), p. 156. Of course, even Morton's chronology is exaggerated, since Armstrong did not in fact enter the Colored Waif's Home for Boys in New Orleans until January 1913.

8. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word *occasion* as meaning a "falling together or juncture of circumstances favourable or suitable to an end or purpose" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "occasion"). Robert Creeley discusses poetics as occasion in this sense in his interview with William V. Spanos, "Talking with Robert Creeley," *Boundary 2* 6 (Spring–Fall 1978): 19.

Though it is seldom noticed, the song itself seems particularly appropriate to the occasion it enables. *Heebie-jeebies* is a phrase that dictionaries of American slang define as "a feeling or anxiety or apprehension," "craziness, foolishness," "errors, irregularities," or even "delirium tremens."[9] The first use of the term given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a 1923 caption by a cartoonist named Billy DeBeck in the *New York American:* "You gimme the heeby jeebys!" A notion particular to the postwar U.S. vernacular, the phrase enjoyed a brief vogue in modernist literature (employed by Dos Passos, O'Neill, Wharton, and Odets, among others) and even provided the title for an African American weekly review in Chicago called *Heebie-Jeebies: A Sign of Intelligence.*[10] In *The Book of Negro Folklore,* Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps define the "heebies" as "the shakes," while Mezz Mezzrow says it refers to the "jitters" (*RB,* p. 333).[11] So the dance starts with a sense of an inherently modern state of bodily unease, anxiety, or trembling, perhaps in the wake of an excess of stimulation (Hughes and Bontemps give this example: "Cheap wine will give you the heebies"), that causes a loss of control, a nervous loss of articulacy that expresses itself as incommodious physical movement.[12] One might wonder whether scat needs to start with such an implication of somatic circuit-crossing, a nerve-driven jostle and hum in the muscles. Interestingly, Mezzrow goes so far as to describe the particular quality of Armstrong's talent as precisely this kind of edgy physical activation, a sensitivity of the nerves that approaches electrification:

> Every day, soon as I woke up about four in the P.M., I would jump up to Louis' apartment and most of the time catch him in the shower. That man really enjoyed his bath and shave. I would sit there watching

9. *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang,* ed. J. E. Lighter, 2 vols. to date (New York, 1994, 1997), s.v. "heebie-jeebies," 2:68.

10. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2d ed., s.v. "heebie-jeebies." I have located only a single issue of *Heebie-Jeebies: A Sign of Intelligence* still extant, in the Beinecke collection at Yale University (listed as vol. 1, no. 36, 1 Aug. 1925). The weekly, housed on Indiana Avenue in Chicago and edited by P. L. Prattis, actually predated Armstrong's recording; judging from the date, it commenced publication at the beginning of 1925. The magazine featured coverage of African American life both in Chicago and elsewhere: political commentary; articles about prominent black figures of the day (Oscar de Priest, Nora Holt Ray, "Battling" Siki); and listings for society dances, sports, sororities, and the events of black Chicago society. (The odd proposition of the title, reading "heebie-jeebies" as a [particularly African American?] "sign of intelligence," is not mentioned in the August 1925 issue.) It is unclear how long the journal was in publication, but at the end of 1926 A. Philip Randolph penned a lengthy rejoinder to an article in *Heebie-Jeebies* concerning the Pullman Porters. See A. Philip Randolph, "Answering Heebie-Jeebies," *The Messenger* 8 (Dec. 1926): 357–60.

11. Anon., "Harlem Jive Talk, Idioms, Folk Expressions," *The Book of Negro Folklore,* ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York, 1958), p. 484.

12. Ibid.

> him handle his razor, sliding it along with such rhythm and grace you could feel each individual hair being cut, and I'd think it was just like the way he fingered the valves on his horn, in fact, just like he did everything. When he slid his fingertips over the buttons, delicate as an embroiderer and still so masculine, the tones took wing as though they sprang from his fingers instead of his lips. The way he shaved put me in mind of the time Louis was blowing and I brushed up against him by accident, and goddamn if I didn't feel his whole body vibrating like one of those electric testing machines in the penny arcade that tell how many volts your frame can stand. [*RB*, p. 212]

Heebie-jeebies also implies a kind of premonition or haunting: the "apprehension" that intuits an invasive presence. This dis-ease itself claims the body. Is it that the infectious music compels the fumbling dance, forcing the jittery hand to lose its grip on the page, or that the body is haunted by, singing for, vibrating to the echo of the words it's dropped?

Scat Semantics

Scat is almost always defined, without further comment, as singing or vocal improvising with "nonsense syllables."[13] There are a number of ways to push at such a definition, but here I will be particularly concerned with the implications of hearing scat as "nonsense." Does scat mobilize (syllabic) fragments of language without regard to meaning? Even in a musical sense, one could argue that scat does carry semantic content, though not necessarily linguistic content: one thinks immediately of the way scat turns so often to musical quotation of melody, sometimes to make a sardonic point through the juxtaposition. Roman Jakobson would call this an *introversive semiosis* in music. Music constitutes meaning because it refers first of all to itself: "instead of aiming at some extrinsic object, music appears to be '*un langage qui se signifie soi-même.*'"[14] There is a recording by Ella Fitzgerald

13. Giddins defines scat as "improvised nonsense syllables" (*VJ*, p. 86). The term is glossed as "singing in nonsense syllables" in anon., "Harlem Jive Talk, Idioms, Folk Expressions," p. 487. Similarly, Friedwald describes scatting as a "wordless performance, generally an improvised one," in *Jazz Singing*, p. xii; and Charles O. Hartman explains it even more confusingly: "Scat singing—the nonverbal vocal imitation of jazz horn playing," in his *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), p. 113. The *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* speaks of "a technique of jazz singing in which onomatopoeic or nonsense syllables are sung to improvised melodies" (J. Bradford Robinson, "Scat Singing," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, ed. Barry Kernfeld, 3 vols., 2d ed. [New York, 2002], 3:515). And *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, ed. Clarence Major (New York, 1994) defines the word as "pure sounds without regard to their meaning" (p. 399).

14. Roman Jakobson, "Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems," *Linguaggi nella società e nella tecnica* (Milan, 1970), p. 12.

of "How High the Moon" live in Berlin in 1960, in which she quotes the melodies of more than a dozen tunes, sometimes with great humor, including "Poinciana," "Deep Purple," "The Peanut Vendor," "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?" "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," "Heat Wave," and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes."[15] But one might equally argue that scat can convey "extrinsic symbolization" (referring to the outside world through either spatio-temporal, kinetic, or affective registers).[16]

For Jean-Jacques Nattiez and other recent theorists of musical semiosis, music means not because it carries specific signifiers but precisely because it doesn't. "Music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative," he argues. It signifies as a "potentiality," engaging a "narrative impulse" in the listener who follows and fills in its syntax. "If the listener, in hearing music, experiences the suasions of what I would like to call the narrative impulse," Nattiez writes, "this is because he or she hears (on the level of strictly musical discourse) recollections, expectations, and resolutions, but does not know what is expected, what is resolved" (*MD*, pp. 128, 126, 128). The limitation of this argument, as scholars such as Susan McClary and Robert Walser have pointed out, is that Nattiez remains concerned almost exclusively with the metadiscursive analysis of music, claiming to operate at what he terms the "neutral level of analytical discourse" (*MD*, p. 156). This ignores the ways that musical signification is inherently bound up with social context; if music offers a discursive system, its utterances only carry content within social "conventions of practice and interpretation" that make musical meanings "contingent but never arbitrary."[17]

With regard to scat singing, in other words, one should be able to speak more specifically not just about syntax but about the contingency of particular rhetorical choices in black musical performance—since a legato phrase of soft-tongued phonemes ("La loo la loo lo") would seem to carry an altogether differently range of significance than a sharp run of fricatives, occlusives, and open vowels ("Shoop be doop").[18] A number of jazz schol-

15. On this recording, see Friedwald, *Jazz Singing*, p. 144. Paul Berliner also comments on quotation in jazz (both in scat singing and in instrumental performance) in his monumental *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 103–5.

16. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, N.Y., 1990), p. 118; hereafter abbreviated *MD*.

17. Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, N.H., 1993), pp. 28, 29. See also Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley, 2000).

18. For an illustration of this point, chosen at random, compare the scat choruses of Betty Carter and Carmen McRae on their stunning recording of "Sometimes I'm Happy," *The Carmen McRae-Betty Carter Duets*, Great American Music Hall Records, CD 2706–2, 1988. When the two singers exchange four-bar passages of scat, their "conversation" takes shape through a variety of phonemic choices and contrasts that gives the counterplay of their improvisations texture and rhetorical shape.

ars, including Paul Berliner, Ingrid Monson, and Brian Hatcher, have attempted to consider signification in instrumental jazz. They note the prevalence of metaphors of narrative or "telling a story" among jazz musicians, which, they argue, indicate that improvisation is syntactically structured in socially determined ways, even if its referentiality is nonspecific.[19] Another way to approach this question is to read Billie Holiday, who in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* memorably describes listening to Louis Armstrong on the victrola in Alice Dean's whorehouse:

> I remember Pops' recording of "West End Blues" and how it used to gas me. It was the first time I ever heard anybody sing without using any words. I didn't know he was singing whatever came into his head when he forgot the lyrics. Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba and the rest of it had plenty of meaning for me—just as much meaning as some of the other words that I didn't always understand. But the meaning used to change, depending on how I felt. Sometimes the record would make me so sad I'd cry up a storm. Other times the same damn record would make me so happy I'd forget about how much hard-earned money the session in the parlor was costing me.[20]

Does such phonetic material, the ground of scat, involve an absence of meaning or, on the contrary, an excess of meaning—even a troubling or transporting excess of meaning, a shifting possibility of a multitude of meanings? The trouble and transport, the heebie-jeebies, would presumably be due to a radical disorientation of reference; the musical syntax remains constant, but is capable of assuming a wide variety of affective significance.

It might be useful to turn to Nathaniel Mackey's epistolary work *Bedouin Hornbook,* in which N. suggests in one of his letters that scat's "apparent mangling of articulate speech testifies to an 'unspeakable' history" of racial violence, lynching in particular.[21] He elaborates this function as a "telling 'inarticulacy'"—an inarticulacy that nonetheless (or thereby) speaks, carries content.[22] For N., this function in scat is linked to a common predilec-

19. See Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz,* esp. pp. 201–5; Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago, 1996), esp. pp. 73–96; and Brian Harker, "'Telling a Story': Louis Armstrong and Coherence in Early Jazz," *Current Musicology* 63 (1999): 46–83.

20. Billie Holiday with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956; New York, 1984), p. 10. There is more to say about this passage. As my colleague Elin Diamond pointed out to me, it seems to link shifts in signification to reception ("the meaning used to change, depending on how I felt"), implying that scat's nonreferential syntax is channeled or recoded by a listener's affective disposition.

21. Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986; Los Angeles, 1997), p. 83; hereafter abbreviated *BH.*

22. N. comments that "inarticulacy spoke" (*BH,* p. 182). Mackey's criticism takes up the notion of a "telling 'inarticulacy'" in a number of instances; see for example Mackey, "Sound and

tion in black musical expression for the edges of the voice: the moan, the falsetto, the shout. All these vocal strategies indicate not just play, much less incoherence or ineptitude, but instead the singer's "willful dismantling of the gag-rule amenities which normally pass for coherence. Refusal worked hand in hand with exposé in such a way that what one heard was a loud critique of available options, a gruff dismissal of available conduits, no matter how 'coherent,' for admissible truths" (*BH*, p. 183). "Deliberately 'false'" vocal production, in other words, in supplementing the sayable, "creatively hallucinates a 'new world,' indicts the more insidious falseness of the world as we know it" (*BH*, p. 62). This is inherently a communicative function, even if it "dismantles" the rules of signification. N. quotes Anthony Heilbut's study *The Gospel Sound:* "'the essence of the gospel style is a wordless moan. Always these sounds render the indescribable, implying, "Words can't begin to tell you, but maybe moaning will"'" (*BH*, p. 63).[23]

In the letter, N. contends that this function may be as present in black instrumental music as in black vocal music. Other critics, from Gunther Schuller to Amiri Baraka, have argued likewise that there is a kind of continuum—what Albert Murray terms a "reciprocal 'voicing'"—between black vocal practice and black instrumental practice in the way they mobilize telling inarticulacy. "The tonal nuances of blues music," Murray argues, "are also a matter of singers playing with their voices as if performing on an instrument, and of instrumentalists using their brasses, woodwinds, strings, keyboards, and percussion as extensions of the human voice."[24] Thinking along such a continuum would mean we'd have to pair, for example, Clark Terry's well-known and jocular "Mumbles," in which the trumpeter sings, slurring choruses of a mumbled scat that seems to linger just beyond comprehensible language, with his more obscure efforts like "Trumpet Mouthpiece Blues," where he disassembles his horn and blows through his mouthpiece to attain a sound that approaches the inflections of speech.[25] In the manuscript that provided the material for his book *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans,* Louis Armstrong recounts an anecdote

Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (New York, 1993), p. 253.

23. Roland Barthes contends somewhat similarly that singing "rustles" a *utopia,* a no-place "of a music of meaning" where "language would be enlarged" and even "*denatured*" but "without meaning being brutally dismissed, dogmatically foreclosed" (Roland Barthes, "The Rustle of Language," *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howard [New York, 1986], p. 77).

24. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York, 1976), pp. 114, 108–14. Gunther Schuller makes a similar argument about music and speech in jazz (in relation to African drum languages) in his *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York, 1968), p. 5.

25. See Clark Terry, "Mumbles," *Oscar Peterson Trio Plus One,* Mercury, 60975, 1964 and "Trumpet Mouthpiece Blues," *Clark Terry Out on a Limb,* Argo, LP 620, 1957.

from his days playing with Joe "King" Oliver's Band in Chicago in the early 1920s that makes a similar point about the interaction of words and music along a continuum of meaning:

> Finally they went into a number called 'Eccentric'—that is the one where Papa Joe took a lot of breaks . . . . At the very last chorus he and [bass player] Bill Johnson would do a sort of Act musically. While Joe Oliver would be talking like a baby [on his trumpet], Bill Johnson would pet the baby in his high voice. The first baby Joe would imitate was supposed to be a white baby. When Joe's horn had cried like the white baby, Bill Johnson would come back with, 'Don't Cry Little Baby.' The last baby was supposed to be a little colored baby, then they would break it up. Joe would yell, 'Baaaah! baaaaaaah!' Then Bill would shout, 'Shut up you lil so and soooooo.' Then the whole house would thunder with laughs and applauses.[26]

It is not to be overlooked that scat singing is engaged at different points along this continuum, thus "telling" to various ends. My purpose here is not to offer a typology of scat, but I'll quickly indicate a few of the elements that would have to be taken into account in order to do so. On the one hand, there is a whole range of scat that approaches what Armstrong's buddy and main supplier Mezz Mezzrow called jive talk—hallucinating a secret language, a language of the inside. Think of the linguistic hipsterism promulgated by musicians such as Cab Calloway, Babs Gonzales, Slim Gaillard, and Leo Watson, or tunes like "In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee" (which Joe Carroll sung with Dizzy Gillespie's band often in the 1940s) written by Milt Orent and Mary Lou Williams, with its pseudotranslations of an amorous fairy-tale exchange of scat. "This jive is a private affair," Mezzrow writes, "a secret inner-circle code cooked up partly to mystify the outsiders, while it brings those in the know closer together because they alone have the key to the puzzle. The hipster's lingo is a private kind of folk-poetry, meant for the ears of the brethren alone" (*RB*, p. 191).[27] Louis Armstrong might be said with little exaggeration to be the origin of this focus in scat singing, given the extraordinary influence of his spoken and sung vernacular in U.S. popular culture throughout the twenties and thirties. In his orchestra recording of "Sweet Sue (Just You)" in 1933, there are two choruses

26. Armstrong, "The Armstrong Story" (c. 1950s), Louis Armstrong House and Archives, Queens College/CUNY. See Armstrong, "The Armstrong Story," *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Brothers (Oxford, 1999), pp. 52–53 and *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (1955; New York, 1986).

27. On this subject, see also Neil Leonard, "The Jazzman's Verbal Usage," *Black American Literature Forum* 20 (Spring-Summer 1986): 151–60.

of call and response in which Armstrong "translates" phrases scatted by saxophonist Budd Johnson in what Armstrong explains is a secret hipster "viper language."[28] Humor is another crucial element in scat, especially where musical performance approaches novelty and comedy routines, culminating in such masterworks as "Avocado Seed Soup Symphony" (1945) by Slim Gaillard, Leo Watson, and Bam Brown.[29] Even if musicians were playing the game of eloquence and erudition, "they were also mocking the game and the rulemakers, too, and mocking the whole idea of eloquence, the idea that words are anything but hypes and camouflage" (*RB*, p. 195).

Another important point along the continuum of scat is a fascination with what Robert O'Meally has called "mock-foreign language."[30] Mezzrow writes that in 1926 music lovers in Chicago were imitating the slips and phrases of "Heebie Jeebies" so much in everyday conversation that "Louis' recording almost drove the English language out of the Windy City for good" (*RB*, p. 104). But from the very beginnings of scat—performances such as Gene Green's imitation Chinese in the 1917 recording of "From Here to Shanghai"—the form was concerned with the representation of the foreign: alterity projected onto the level of linguistic impenetrability and absurdity. Here one notes an imposition of cultural and racial difference through a play that draws upon the phonetic contours of spoken language. The contortions of tunes like Cab Calloway's "Chinese Rhythm" from the mid-1930s were only a part of an industry of alterity in U.S. popular culture in the middle of the century, one that may not be unrelated in this respect to minstrelsy in the nineteenth century, which similarly drew upon an imposed linguistic deformity (whether in the deliberately inscrutable orthography of dialect literature or in the stereotyped conventions of minstrel show vocal delivery) to imply illiteracy and inarticulacy. Groups including Slim and Slam performed equal-opportunity scat reification, moving from the faux Chinese of their "Chinatown, My Chinatown" (1938) to a pseudo-Yiddish in "Matzoh Balls" (1939), and even a vocalization of African barbarity called "African Jive" (1941).[31]

This mode of performing alterity in scat even becomes, at a number of signal moments, the arena in which disputes over the shape and development of the music are fought out. When Dizzy Gillespie was playing in Cab

28. Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, "Sweet Sue (Just You)," Victor, 24321, 1933.

29. See Slim Gaillard, Leo Watson, and Bam Brown, "Avocado Seed Soup Symphony," AFRS "Jubilee" radio broadcast, Dec. 1945, *Leo Watson: The Original Scat Man*, Indigo, Igo CD 2098, 1999.

30. Robert O'Meally, *The Jazz Singers* (Washington, D.C., 1998), p. 98.

31. See Slim and Slam, "Chinatown, My Chinatown" (19 Jan. 1938, mx. 22319–1), "Matzoh Balls" (4 Oct. 1939, mx. w.26150-A), and "African Jive" (24 July 1941, mx H.368–2), *The Groove Juice Special*, Columbia, CK 64898, 1996.

Calloway's band in the late 1930s, the trumpeter would chip away at the chord changes of Calloway's swing arrangements in his solos, experimenting with a proto-bebop melodic vocabulary. This fascinated some of the members of the band, particularly Milt Hinton and Danny Barker, but drove Cab Calloway crazy. Significantly, he conveyed his resistance to bop with an interesting figure of foreignness: Dizzy's

> interpretation of jazz was originally wild. It was really wild, and it was something that I really had to get used to. I used to call him on it. I'd say, "Man, listen, will you please don't be playing all that Chinese music up there!"[32]

It is a particularly odd objection for a musician who a few years earlier had been insisting in song that "you've got to have Chinese rhythm."[33] Similarly, in 1949, faced with an interviewer fishing for controversy, Louis Armstrong explains his disdain of bebop by criticizing in particular the uncredited way that the younger musicians had appropriated scat, his own "invention" many years earlier. Pops recounts the anecdote about recording "Heebie Jeebies" in 1926 and adds indignantly: "But these bop cats act as though they'd invented scat singing . . . . I think they're trying to sound like Africans, don't you?"[34] In vocal expression in music, scat falls where language rustles with alterity, where the foreign runs in jive and the inside jargon goes in the garb of the outsider. But, as the examples above demonstrate, the performance of difference in scat is by no means innocent; it is the very point at which the music polices the edges of its territory.[35]

32. Quoted in Dizzy Gillespie and Al Fraser, *To Be or Not . . . to Bop* (Garden City, N.Y., 1979), p. 111. Danny Barker also recounts this story in *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It,* ed. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff (New York, 1955), p. 344.

33. Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, "Chinese Rhythm," Brunswick, CP-1104-A, 1934.

34. "Louis Armstrong Assails Bebop as Mere Technique," *The Eve Leader* (Corning, N.Y.), 13 July 1949, n. p., Armstrong clippings file, Institute for Jazz Studies, Rutgers University. One anecdote claims that a different alterity was at the source of scat for Armstrong: his longtime friend Phoebe Jacobs heard him tell Cab Calloway that he got scat "from the Jews 'rockin,' he meant davening"—the stylized sway that accompanies prayer. Jacobs contends that "Louis never talked about this in public, because he feared people would assume he was making fun of Jews praying, which wasn't his intention at all." It is a fascinating connection (particularly given Armstrong's links to Jewish culture in his New Orleans childhood), even if it's more joking backstage banter than a discussion of performance technique, and even if it leaves open the rather complex question of Armstrong's "intention" (quoted in Laurence Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* [New York, 1997], pp. 267–68).

35. Brian Harker has recently advanced the argument that most of these elements of scat singing actually coalesced in early jazz "novelty" and vaudeville *instrumental* performance. He offers a reading of a 1923 book called *The Novelty Cornetist,* by a well-known musician named Louis Panico, who "gives detailed explanations and illustrations of such performance gimmicks as 'the laugh,' 'the sneeze,' 'the horse neigh,' 'the baby cry,' and the 'Chinese effect.'" In this light one might argue that the aesthetic continuum I have outlined is constitutive in the music; the key issue here would seem to be the music's negotiation of a politics of representation. One would have to

Dropping Words

I want to return to the way the occasion of scat in Armstrong evokes a divorce between words and music. I'm wondering about the resonance of such a model in a broader trajectory of black expressive culture—and in the realm of literature in particular. Might one, for instance, read another originary text, W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk,* as precisely a theorization of the possibilities of such a fall, such a separation? The epigraphs to each chapter (one section of a European-language poem, one musical fragment of a spiritual, without the lyrics) formally stage a disjuncture of words and music, which is made most explicit in the book's last chapter, "The Sorrow Songs."[36] *The Souls of Black Folk* predates jazz and Armstrong, but it announces a wider New World African concern with the relation between music and language as figuring cultural transport in diaspora. In that final chapter, as well as in each of his other autobiographical efforts,[37] Du Bois tells a tale about a music "far more ancient than the words" and about his own family's link to that unspeakable history. Du Bois's "grandfather's grandmother," he writes,

> looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus:
>
> Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!
> Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!
> Ben d'nuli, nuli, nuli, nuli, den d'le.
>
> The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.[38]

For Du Bois it is precisely the incomprehension that compels a life-long search for identity and reconnection. As David Levering Lewis puts it, the

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consider a number of examples in this regard: Harker cites "naturalist" tunes like the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's "Livery Stable Blues" (1917) and "Bow Wow Blues" (1921), and Jelly Roll Morton's "Sidewalk Blues" (1926) (Brian Harker, "'Telling a Story': Louis Armstrong and Coherence in Early Jazz," *Current Musicology* 63 [1999]: 48–49). Other sources on the period look elsewhere: trumpeter Rex Stewart describes his own fascination with Johnny Dunn, the "Ragtime King of the Trumpet," who would imitate "a horse whinnying and a rooster crowing" on his horn (Rex Stewart, *Boy Meets Horn,* ed. Claire P. Gordon [Ann Arbor, Mich., 1991], p. 47).

36. Regarding the musical epigraphs, see Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 492–93.

37. See for example W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Concept of Race," *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), *Writings,* ed. Nathan Huggins (New York, 1986), p. 638 and *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York, 1968), p. 62.

38. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* p. 638.

lyric was "the earliest prompting of a very New England and supremely intellectual great-grandson to try to discern a few true notes of a remote, vestigial, and mysterious heritage."[39] The point isn't to find a source for the song, or its proper translation, I would argue; it is instead to recognize the way that the distance to a shared ancestral means of expression and genealogical ground is represented by the distance from those impenetrable phonemes to that music, well understood. "Words and music have lost each other," Du Bois writes, and the listener must seek a message that is "naturally veiled and half articulate."[40] Such may be the condition of scat, and a condition of New World African expression in general.

I am shifting to this broader register in part because "Heebie Jeebies" is not only an origin of scat but might also be considered a story about the inception of what we call "jazz singing"—the "House that Satch Built." Combined with "Muskrat Rag," it was the first big hit of the Hot Fives, selling more than 40,000 copies in a matter of weeks, and it kicked off what many consider the most extraordinary creative period of any musician in this century. Louis did not simply invent a new style called scat, as Gary Giddins has pointed out: "he added scat's moans and riffs to the palette of conventional song interpretation, employing them to underscore emotion and rhythm and meaning" (*VJ*, p. 86). Scat is sometimes a kind of instrumental technique in the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, but more often it arises (or tumbles) out of Armstrong's singing voice; in classic cuts like "Lazy River," "All of Me," and "Stardust," scat originates in the way Armstrong fills the breaks between the lines of the lyric, accompanying himself with hornlike comments, and then allows the words of the song to bleed over into the commentary, mingling call and response in a voice that is not one voice, in a voice that seems haunted by another voice or voices, 'liquefying the words,' as Zora Neale Hurston would put it.[41] Armstrong's vocal doubling, the peeling away from the lyrics through sung accompaniment, is rightfully termed an *obbligato* because it would seem indispensable in this aesthetic.[42] As Mackey has argued more broadly, there is in jazz singing an

39. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York, 1993), p. 15. Lewis notes that the lyric still defies the attempts of linguists to find sources or translations. He notes one possible source in a Senegambian song of captivity; see p. 585 n. 7.

40. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Writings*, p. 541.

41. See Zora Neale Hurston, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals" (1934), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York, 1995), p. 872. The musical examples include Armstrong, "Lazy River," Okeh, 41541, 1931, mx. W 405058–4; "Stardust," Okeh, 41530, 1931, mx. W 405061–1; and "All of Me," Okeh, 41552, 1932, mx. W 405133-A.

42. On the meaning of *obbligato* in jazz, see Michael Jarrett, *Sound Tracks: A Musical ABC* (Philadelphia, 1998), p. 258.

obligatory splitting of sound, a "wooing of another voice, an alternate voice," that is nothing if not compelling, in all the senses of the word.[43]

One might take up this compulsion in terms of the other sense of *scat*—a sense that we'd sometimes prefer to forget, but which may in fact be appropriate to Armstrong's aesthetic, at least. I'm thinking of the Greek derivation of the term, which connects it to words like *scatology*. The narrator at the opening of Wesley Brown's novel *Tragic Magic* espouses just this sense of *scat*, finding a link between black vernacular practice, jazz singing, and an excremental science:

> Scatology is a branch of science dealing with the diagnosis of dung and other excremental matters of state. Talking shit is a renegade form of scatology developed by people who were fed up with do-do dialogues and created a kind of vocal doodling that suggested other possibilities within the human voice beyond the same old shit.[44]

In the second half of his life, Armstrong was famously evangelical about the healing effects of a series of herbal laxatives that he tried to combine with various diets and regimens: Abelina water from Texas, then Pluto Water, and then Swiss Kriss, developed by the nutritionist guru Gayelord Hauser after World War II.[45] Armstrong sent out hundreds of copies of a diet, "Lose Weight the Satchmo Way," that he had concocted with his wife Lucille and was also known to send out a Christmas card with a photo of himself sitting on the toilet, grinning, his pants down, busy above the "Satchmo-Slogan": "Leave It All Behind Ya."[46]

This obsession seems to have originated with Armstrong's mother Mayann. Living in extreme poverty in New Orleans in the first decade of the last century, she developed an arsenal of homeopathic stratagems to keep her children healthy. In his autobiography, Armstrong writes: "'A slight physic once or twice a week,' she used to say, 'will throw off many symptoms and germs that congregate from nowheres in your stomach. We can't afford no doctor for fifty cents or a dollar.'"[47] The version of this anecdote in Arm-

43. See Mackey, "Cante Moro," in *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School*, ed. Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling (Albuquerque, 1994), p. 78.

44. Wesley Brown, *Tragic Magic* (1978; New York, 1995), p. 5.

45. See Gayelord Hauser, *Diet Does It* (New York, 1944) and *New Guide to Intelligent Reducing: How to Reduce and Stay Reduced for Life* (New York, 1955).

46. Armstrong, "Lose Weight the Satchmo Way," in *The Louis Armstrong Companion: Eight Decades of Commentary*, ed. Joshua Berrett (New York, 1999), pp. 99–102. The Christmas card is reproduced in Giddins, *Satchmo* (New York, 1988), p. 189; hereafter abbreviated *S*.

47. Armstong, *Satchmo*, p. 20.

strong's manuscript for the book is more blunt and bolder in proposing a connection between bowel movements, trumpet playing, and sexuality:

> She said—"Son—Always keep your bowels open, and nothing can harm you . . . . I always remember what my mother said where ever or when ever somebody would die with gas or indigestion . . . And still uses the phrase—"They didn't shit enough" . . . . it all derives—from negligence of the bowels . . . . I am about to be fifty nine years old . . . . And if I have to say it myself, I am blowing better and twice as strong as I was when I was in my twenties . . . Well I won't mention my sex sessions these days, because I hate to be called a braggadosha . . . . Wow . . . Did that come outa Mee.[48]

In the final aside, in a characteristic self-disparaging move, an impressive example of Armstrong's vocabulary (verbal "blowing" inspired by his sexual prowess) garners the same surprised appreciation as a good shit: "Did that come outa Mee." In this complex metaphorical mix, the Armstrong scat aesthetic is equally a strategy of catharsis and physical (erotic) regulation. This is not at all the scatology of Luther ("spiritual enlightenment on a privy"),[49] nor that of Freud (where character traits of "orderliness, parsimony, and obstinacy" are the results of the sublimation of infantile anal eroticism).[50] Nor, I think, is it the transgression and carnivalesque inversion of hierarchy, the "world turned upside down," envisioned in Rabelais. It is something more akin to James Joyce's identification of creativity with excretion—or, as he calls it, "chamber music."[51] Armstrong too flirts with such a metaphorology, writing—and even singing at times—of the "music of Swiss Kriss." He commented in one letter to Joe Glaser that he was enclosing copies of the diet "that you can give to your fat friends.. Especially those fat band buyers . . . They will gladly buy all of your bands.. Because, after hearing so much music that they will make from the music of Swiss Kriss—it will be a pleasure to them to hear a real live band, for a change" (figs. 1 and 2).[52] The "Comments" to Armstrong's diet "Lose Weight the Satchmo Way" close with wordplay that equates aural attentiveness with open bowels: "P.S. When the Swiss Kriss Company gives me a radio show, my slogan will be—'Hello Everybody, this is Satchmo speaking for Swiss Kriss. Are you loosening???????'"[53]

48. Armstrong, "The Satchmo Story," *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words,* pp. 114–15.

49. Martin Pops, "The Metamorphosis of Shit," *Salmagundi* 56 (Spring 1982): 30.

50. Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism" (1908), in *Character and Culture,* ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1963), p. 29.

51. Quoted in Pops, "The Metamorphosis of Shit," p. 36. The anecdote concerning this title is recounted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (1959; New York, 1983), p. 154.

52. Armstrong, letter to Joe Glaser, 8 Sept. 1955, Music Division, Library of Congress.

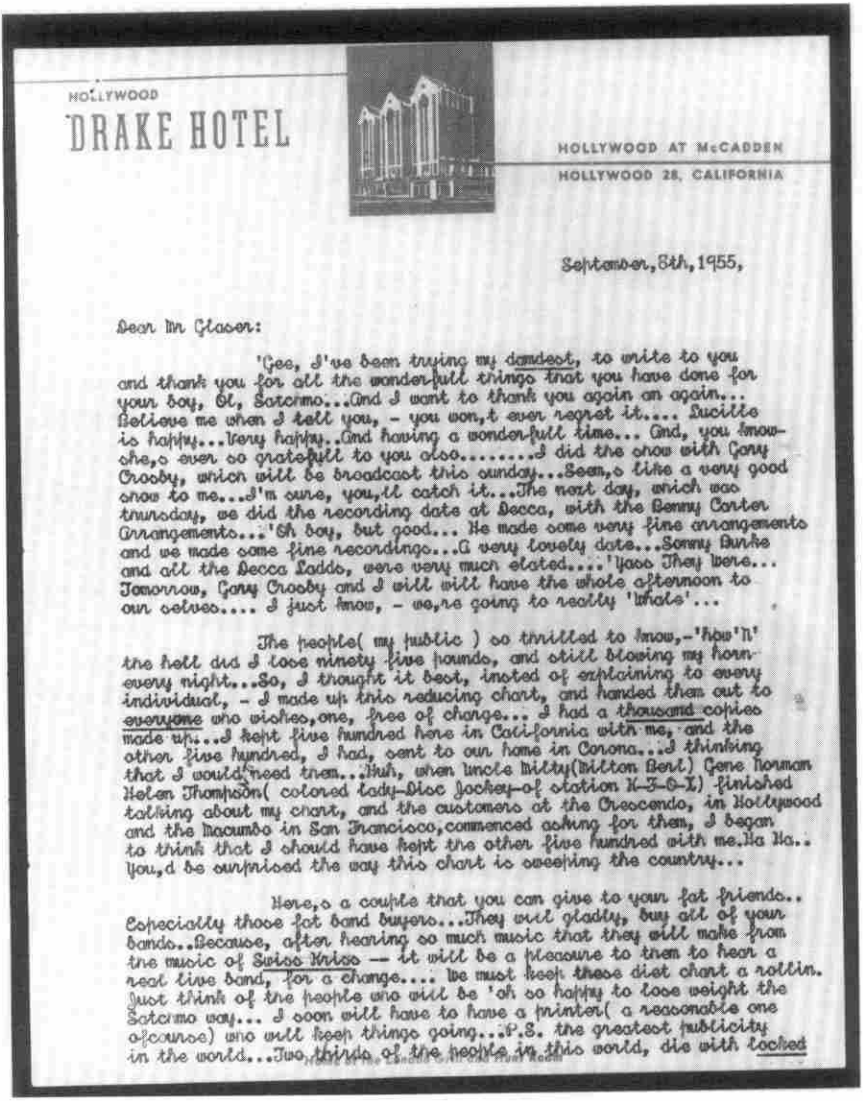
53. Armstrong, "Lose Weight the Satchmo Way," p. 102.

In a poignant and rambling autobiographical narrative he wrote during a hospital stay near the end of his life, titled "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, LA., the Year of 1907" (1969–1970), Armstrong gives the most extensive elaboration of this metaphor:

> My wife Lucille started me to taking Swiss Kriss. I came home one night as she was reading a book written by Dr. Gaylord Hauser, who introduced Swiss Kriss. Then when we were on our way to bed, she reached and open up her box of Swiss Kriss, took a teaspoonful, put it on her tongue dry, rinsed it down with water, settled into bed for the night, and went right off to sleep.
>
> Now I dugged her for a couple of nights. So the next day I went out and bought a box for myself. She took a teaspoonful. But with all the heavy food that I eat—I must take a little more than Lucille takes. So I took a tablespoonful of Swiss Kriss, rinsed it down off my tongue the same as Ceily (Lucille) did. It's so easy to take' I forgot that I had even taken it. It's nothing but Herbs. It said Herbal Laxative on the box anyway. I figured what she had takened had to be better than the mild Laxative that I've been taking which was pretty good but not strong enough for all of those Ham Hocks and Beans, Mustard Greens and Rice I had for Supper. It only made me sput like a Motor Boat. So I slept real peaceful with Swiss Kriss, *well say'* about five or six hours, which was fine. Then I awaken to a little rumble in my stomach, which was a warning—let's walk to the John. Hmm, I paid it no mind, and went back to Sleep, that is for a few minutes then a little Larger rumbling saying—"Swiss Kriss time, don't walk—Trot." And don't Stumble please. I was lucky enough though—I made it to the Throne in time. And All of a Sudden, music came—Riffs—Arpeggios—Biff notes—etc. Sounded just like ("Applause") Sousa's Band playing "Stars and Stripes Forever," returning to the Channel of the Song—Three Times. Wonderful.[54]

One shouldn't lose too easily the fact that this is a metaphor and not a homology. But if the figure describes the effects of the laxative, it also reflects on the status of music in Armstrong's aesthetics. A music where the action of words and music falling away from each other might best be described as a *release,* a sought-out condition of flow. An ethics of discard ("Leave It All Behind Ya") that also provides the foundation for a poetics. This should

54. Armstrong, "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, LA., the Year of 1907" (1969–1970), Louis Armstrong Archives, Queens College/CUNY; see Armstrong, "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, LA., the Year of 1907," *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words,* pp. 35–36.



HOLLYWOOD
DRAKE HOTEL

HOLLYWOOD AT McCADDEN
HOLLYWOOD 28, CALIFORNIA

September, 8th, 1955,

Dear Mr Glaser:

'Gee, I've been trying my dandest, to write to you and thank you for all the wonderfull things that you have done for your boy, Ol, Satchmo...And I want to thank you again an again... Believe me when I tell you, - you won,t ever regret it.... Lucille is happy...very happy..And having a wonderfull time... And, you know-she,s ever so gratefull to you also.....I did the show with Gary Crosby, which will be broadcast this sunday...Seem,s like a very good show to me...I'm sure, you,ll catch it...The next day, which was thursday, we did the recording date at Decca, with the Benny Carter Arrangements...'Oh boy, but good... He made some very fine arrangements and we made some fine recordings...A very lovely date...Sonny Burke and all the Decca Ladds, were very much elated....'Yass They were... Tomorrow, Gary Crosby and I will will have the whole afternoon to our selves.... I just know, - we,re going to really 'whale'...

The people(my public) so thrilled to know,-'how'n' the hell did I lose ninety five pounds, and still blowing my horn every night...So, I thought it best, instead of explaining to every individual, - I made up this reducing chart, and handed them out to everyone who wishes,one, free of charge... I had a thousand copies made up...I kept five hundred here in California with me, and the other five hundred, I had, sent to our home in Corona...I thinking that I would need them...Huh, when Uncle Milty(Milton Berl) Gene Norman Helen Thompson(colored lady-Disc Jockey-of station K-J-O-I) finished talking about my chart, and the customers at the Crescendo, in Hollywood and the Macumba in San Francisco,commenced asking for them, I began to think that I should have kept the other five hundred with me.Ha Ha.. You,d be surprised the way this chart is sweeping the country...

Here,s a couple that you can give to your fat friends.. Especially those fat band buyers...They will gladly, buy all of your bands..Because, after hearing so much music that they will make from the music of Swiss Knise — it will be a pleasure to them to hear a real live band, for a change.... We must keep these diet chart a rollin. Just think of the people who will be 'oh so happy to lose weight the Satchmo way... I soon will have to have a printer(a reasonable one ofcourse) who will keep things going...P.S. the greatest publicity in the world...Two thirds of the people in this world, die with tooked

FIGURES 1 and 2. Louis Armstrong, letter to Joe Glaser, 8 Sept. 1955, Music Division, Library of Congress.

Mr Glaser.

HOLLYWOOD

DRAKE HOTEL

HOLLYWOOD AT McCADDEN
HOLLYWOOD 28, CALIFORNIA

Bowels – or suffer with gas – and don,t know anything at all to do for them selves....Right?...Thats why I explained everything thoroughly ... Imp..Didthat come outa me?..... I can see you laughing,now... Gin,tcha glad' that you don,t have to use it?...So do your boy a favor and pass it around, willya?....Doctor Schifft, got his, oos, Dr Gottlieb.. P.S. if you should get a little crowded with requests for my charts just let me know and I will mail to you, all you ask for....

Incase that you don,t[ve]it, – I had to have 'eight suits altered, since I have been playing at the Crescendo...I had to throw away, all of my jock straps – underwear – pajamas, etc, and replenish them all with size 'thirty twos,...Wow... I find, it,s so easy to live by this chart... The new Clarinet man arrived last night(thursday) ..He spent the night-out at the club with us.... You sure did send a good man this time... Yes-Edmon Hall is one of the very best,there is, on the Clarinet... A man whom I've always admired as a great musician, from the very first time I heard him, until, this very day...I personaly,think that he will lift the band up a hundred percent...

So Dad, the old glimmers(my eyes) seem to be getting a little tired.. This dam Smog, has,nt helped them-any...Two or three days this week everybody,s been complaining about the Smog... One night at the Club– I had to play the whole night with my dark glasses on....They,re much better now...Then to—I had a busy day...So again – thanks for your wonder-ful kindness...I do hope that Moms(your dear mother)is having fun with the kids...Give my regards to the staff...Tell them, not to be bashfull...If they need to lose a little here an there, just step right up and let Doctor Satchmo–'lay one of these fine charts,on them... Nightie Night and –God Bless Ya....

Swiss Kriscly,

Louis Armstrong

make us hear that excursion in "Lazy River," where Pops explodes the lyrics with a glorious run of sixteenth-notes (ending with a spoken aside, commenting on his own invention: "If I ain't riffin' this evening I hope something"), in a slightly different way. Novelist Ralph Ellison supposedly told Albert Murray, "Man, sometimes ole Louie shows his ass instead of his genius."[55] I'd put it rather differently, though. Sometimes it seemed that Armstrong thought his genius *was* his ass.[56]

Writing Scat

It is a commonplace for critics to write somewhat unthinkingly that Armstrong's trumpet playing is "like" his singing—as Hugues Panassié gushes, Louis "blows his horn exactly as he sings—and vice versa."[57] With the increasing availability of Armstrong's multifaceted written work, they also tend to claim that his writing is "like" his music. I have been drawing on the wealth of Armstrong's writing in part precisely to raise the question of the relationship between the forms of his creative expression. On what basis, if any, can one make these kinds of analogical claims?

Gary Giddins has rightfully termed Armstrong "by far the most expansive musician-writer jazz has ever known" (*S*, p. 14). His correspondence alone is voluminous. Dan Morgenstern has wondered in print at Armstrong's remarkable precocity on the page, as well as on record:

> How, then, did this "uneducated" and "deprived" man come to be a writer, and a real one, with a clear and distinctive voice of his own? We know that Armstrong already owned a typewriter and knew how to use it when he first arrived in Chicago to join King Oliver's band—the climactic event in *Satchmo.* The earliest surviving typed letter by Armstrong I've seen is dated Sept. 1, 1922, and it contains complaints that three previous letters (one to the recipient, two to other friends) have gone unanswered.[58]

Armstrong wrote copiously and variously: not just letters, telegrams, and postcards to friends and acquaintances and fans, but also a number of articles and book reviews, two book-length autobiographies, as well as a number of unpublished and ephemeral documents found in his home in

55. Quoted in Murray, "Jazz Lips," *The New Republic*, 22 Nov. 1999, p. 34.

56. In a more serious mood, he told another interviewer: "Got to get all those impurities out every day. That's my success. I mean, I don't try to be more than anybody, no better than anybody. I just want to stay among them, make that gig" (Armstrong, *Louis Armstrong—A Self-portrait* [New York, 1971], p. 52).

57. Panassié, *Louis Armstrong*, pp. 53–54.

58. Dan Morgenstern, introduction to Armstrong, *Satchmo*, p. ix.

Queens, which included a wealth of other autobiographical material, transcribed jokes, isolated prose narratives, recipes, pornography, and song lyrics. He carried a typewriter, a dictionary, and a thesaurus with him on the road and would often sit backstage in his bathrobe and hammer out two-fingered letters while surrounded by family, bandmates, friends, and admirers. A number of newspapers and jazz magazines published articles by Armstrong, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, and a number of them gave special attention to what Morgenstern terms Armstrong's "stylistic and linguistic idiosyncrasies"—in some cases going so far as to reproduce facsimiles of his original letters and handwritten manuscripts.[59]

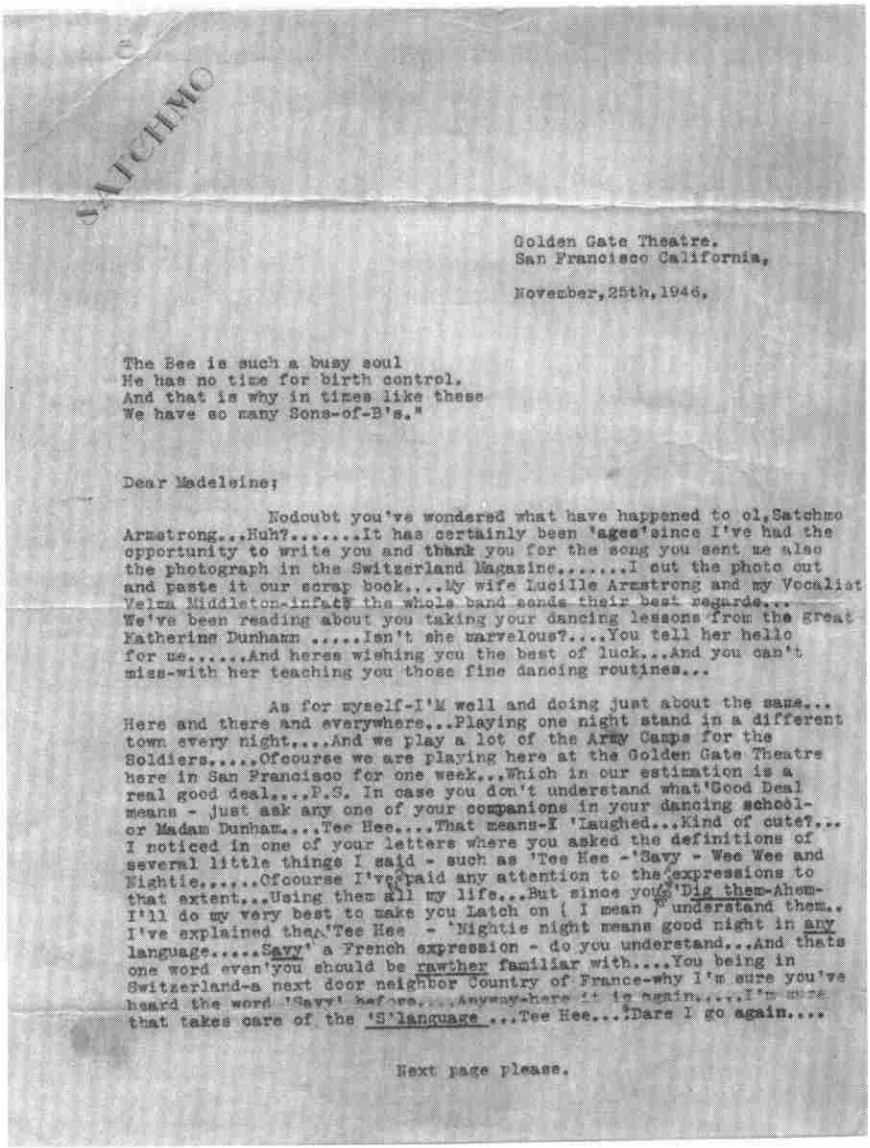
Thomas Brothers, who has recently edited an invaluable collection of Armstrong's writings, notes a certain consistency of usage in Pops's "orthographic style": "For punctuation, Armstrong uses all of the standard symbols, but with only a few of them (period, question mark, exclamation mark, semicolon, and colon) does he limit himself to conventional practice." As Brothers points out, ellipses, dash, parentheses, comma, apostrophe, and double apostrophe are "all used inventively."[60] The parameters of this practice are apparent in a letter Armstrong wrote to Madeleine Berard in November 1946 (fig. 3).[61] The first thing that sticks out is the epigraph, which Armstrong often cobbled into his letters. Often they were quick, lascivious *double entendres.* Another letter opens: "Said one strawberry to another- / If we hadn't been in the same bed-together / We wouldn't bee in this jam . . . / Tee Hee."[62] What is the status of this intruding stanza that would seem to depart from the conventions of the epistolary genre? The strangeness of the syntax is striking, as well as the reliance on ellipses (of varying lengths) as the main mode of sentence stop. (Giddins has offered the smart suggestion that this use of ellipses is itself a kind of convention, however; now somewhat archaic, it hearkens back to "the old Walter Win-

59. Ibid., p. x. Some examples of writings published with careful attention to Armstrong's stylistic idiosyncracies include: Armstrong, "Special Jive," *Harlem Tattler,* 2 July 1940, p. 7; "Special Jive," *Harlem Tattler,* 19 July 1940, pp. 7, 19; "Louis and Letters," *Metronome* (Apr. 1945): 48; "Chicago, Chicago, That Toddlin' Town: How King and Ol' Satch Dug It in the Twenties," *Esquire's Jazz Book* (New York, 1947), pp. 40–43; "Europe—With Kicks," *Holiday* (June 1950): 11–13, 14, 16, 18, 20; "Ulceratedly Yours; Louis Armstrong," *Down Beat,* 14 July 1950, pp. 1, 19; and "Jazz on a High Note," pp. 85, 209–12. See the bibliography of Armstrong writings in *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words,* pp. 221–24.

60. Brothers, "'Swing a Lot of Type Writing': An Introduction to Louis Armstrong," in *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words,* p. xiii; hereafter abbreviated "S."

61. See Armstrong, letter to Madeleine Berard, 25 Nov. 1946, Louis Armstrong Archives, Letters-3, 1/6, Queens College. This letter is partially reprinted (with a number of unaccountable omissions and errors of transcription) in *The Louis Armstrong Companion,* pp. 128–29.

62. Armstrong, letter to Mrs. Frances Church, 10 Mar. 1946, Institute for Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.



SATCHMO

Golden Gate Theatre.
San Francisco California,

November,25th,1946.

The Bee is such a busy soul
He has no time for birth control.
And that is why in times like these
We have so many Sons-of-B's."

Dear Madeleine;

Nodoubt you've wondered what have happened to ol,Satchmo Armstrong...Huh?.....It has certainly been 'ages'since I've had the opportunity to write you and thank you for the song you sent me also the photograph in the Switzerland Magazine.....I cut the photo out and paste it our scrap book....My wife Lucille Armstrong and my Vocaliat Velma Middleton-infact the whole band sends their best regards... We've been reading about you taking your dancing lessons from the great Katherine Dunhamn .....Isn't she marvelous?....You tell her hello for me.....And heres wishing you the best of luck...And you can't miss-with her teaching you those fine dancing routines...

As for myself-I'M well and doing just about the same... Here and there and everywhere...Playing one night stand in a different town every night....And we play a lot of the Army Camps for the Soldiers.....Ofcourse we are playing here at the Golden Gate Theatre here in San Francisco for one week...Which in our estimation is a real good deal....P.S. In case you don't understand what'Good Deal means - just ask any one of your companions in your dancing schoöl-or Madam Dunham....Tee Hee....That means-I 'Laughed...Kind of cute?... I noticed in one of your letters where you asked the definitions of several little things I said - such as 'Tee Hee -'Savy - Wee Wee and Nightie.....Ofcourse I've paid any attention to the expressions to that extent...Using them all my life...But since you 'Dig them-Ahem-I'll do my very best to make you Latch on (I mean understand them.. I've explained the 'Tee Hee - 'Nightie night means good night in any language.....Savy' a French expression - do you understand...And thats one word even'you should be rawther familiar with....You being in Switzerland-a next door neighbor Country of France-why I'm sure you've heard the word 'Savy' before....Anyway-here it is again.....I'm sure that takes care of the 'S'language ...Tee Hee...Dare I go again....

Next page please.

FIGURE 3. Louis Armstrong, letter to Madeleine Berard, 25 Nov. 1946, Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College, City University of New York.

chell style" of journalism—evoking a sense of pace and interconnection meant to connote the informality—and inside scoops?—of a gossip column [*S*, p. 23].) The punctuation of the manuscripts is equally bizarre; Armstrong certainly uses apostrophes, but occasionally a comma will intrude in its place ("ol, Satchmo"). Pops underlines compulsively, and the use of single, double, and even triple apostrophes is not uncommon, sometimes just at the beginning of a word or phrase, sometimes just at the end.

One also notes a kind of multiplicity of register that structurally one might suggest functions like his sung obbligati to his own vocals in tunes like "Lazy River." The language peels away from itself, questioning, mocking its own pretensions, feigning incomprehension ("Huh?"), continually qualifying and breaking up its own assertions ("But since you didn't 'Dig them—ahem—I'll do my very best to make you Latch on (I mean) understand them"). This effect is also produced through an odd predilection for using postscripts in the middle of a text, even in the middle of a paragraph, often for definitional purposes ("P.S. In case you don't understand what 'Good Deal means—just ask any one of your companions in your dancing school—or Madame Dunham"; in another manuscript, Armstrong writes "I kept saying to myself as I was getting dressed, putting on my old 'Roast Beef'—P.S. that was what we called an old ragged Tuxedo").[63] The letter often makes recourse to an oral orthography—representing speech patterns and accent through the ways the words are written down on the page. But this technique doesn't always pertain to the representation of hipster language or the black vernacular in particular. (Here, for instance, he affects a pseudo-British aristocratic *rather*: "*Savy*' a French expression—do you understand . . . And thats one word even'you should be rawther familiar with . . . . You being in Switzerland—a next door neighbor Country of France.") And Armstrong relishes in a complex verbal play ("that takes care of the 'S'language . . . Tee Hee . . . . "Dare I go again . . . . "), which almost constitutes an immanent theory of his literary practice itself. "Slang" is both inside and outside conventional "language," marked off by an ambiguous set of apostrophes that also serves to indicate a neologism ("slanguage"). The two apostrophes before the last sentence have a similar multiple effect, appearing to note a citation of a commonplace phrase ("there I go again") as well as to draw attention to the way it is "played"—the initial consonant articulated at a slant, hardened so as to give it too another meaning ("dare I go again")

One of Armstrong's handwritten letters begins to theorize more explic-

63. Armstrong, "The Armstrong Story"; see Armstrong, "The Armstrong Story," *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words*, p. 49.

itly his sense of typing practice, when he tells Joe Glaser that it is a pity that his typewriter is broken because he had wanted "so badly to swing a lot of Type Writing, 'Gappings' on ya.'" The missive opens (fig. 4):

> Dear Mr. Glaser"
>
> Am sorry that I have to write this letter with a pen, but, on arriving at the air port in Las Vegas yesterday, My typewriter fell from on top of all, that luggage that was on the truck, And the "Jolt"Sprung' everything. TCH TCH, isn't it A Drag? And I wanted so badly to swing a lot of Type Writing, "Gappings" on ya" Of course, they're fixing it up for me. So, I Guess, that's all that matters.[64]

Brothers points out that "gappings" is slang for "salary" ("S," p. xii), and, later in the letter, Armstrong uses it this way himself in given instructions regarding his mistress (with whom he'd recently had a child): "Now here are the Bills as follows. I want you to see that Sweets + Baby' get one hundred per week—or you can send her, a month's gappings, now + pay her monthly" ("L," p. 160). But it also may be a reference to the intervallic (keyboard) creativity of typewriting technology.[65] Pops wants in this sense not only to enter a certain economy of exchange but also to appropriate a rational technology of the interval ("gappings"—in the sense that the typewriter structures and spatializes an access to language) from a particular, paradigmatically black aesthetic ("swing"). A few years later, Amiri Baraka would snarl that "*a typewriter is corny,*" wishing for a romantic immediacy of expression that would bypass its technological interface.[66] But Armstrong, a bit like the poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, seems to revel in appropriating the technology of rationalization, finding the obligatory edges and gaps of the medium.[67]

Brothers usefully resists any impulse to read the complexity of Arm-

64. Armstrong, letter to Glaser, 2 Aug. 1955, *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words,* p. 158; hereafter abbreviated "L."

65. Consider Friedrich A. Kittler's comment that "as a doubled spatialization of writing—first on the keyboard, then on the white paper—[the typewriter] imparts to texts an optimal optical appearance" (Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz [Stanford, Calif., 1999], p. 228).

66. Baraka writes: "I'd have magnetically recorded . . . & translated into word—or perhaps even the final xpressed thought/feeling wd not be merely word or sheet, but *itself,* the xpression, three dimensional—able to be touched, or tasted or felt, or entered, or heard or carried like a speaking singing constantly communicating charm. *A typewriter is corny!!*" (LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], "Technology and Ethos," *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* [New York, 1971], p. 156).

67. See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island, N.Y., 1999); Stewart Brown, "Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite," *Kyk-Over-Al* 40 (Dec. 1989): 84–93; and Brathwaite, "Newstead to Neustadt," *World Literature Today* 68 (Autumn 1994): 656–58.

strong on the page as either illiteracy or "irony" ("S," p. xiv). But then he suggests rather simplistically that the excessive graphicity of Armstrong's "gappings" are an "attempt to add Armstrong's *voice* to his words":

> The interpretation that seems to hold consistently is that Armstrong is interested in depicting an oral rendition of his prose; he offers not just written prose but his version of how to hear it. He is especially attentive to emphasis and pace. Given who he was as a musician, this interest is not surprising, for he was a great master of melodic nuance and rhythm. ["S," pp. xiv–xv][68]

Brothers acquiesces to an easy literalism; for him, apostrophe and capitalization are employed not to convey "distance" or "irony" but "more simply, as a way to convey emphasis," and "the varied lengths of his ellipses, from standard three (sometimes two are used) to as many as fifteen, imply varied durations of pause" ("S," pp. xiv, xv). Certainly, Armstrong plays on the page with conventions of representing orality, but can that play be reduced to a functional attempt to "depict" his own voice in a legible set of marks?

A literalist approach loses a sense of the peculiar status of Armstrong's writing, the diverse scenes and situations in which he wrote, and it would seem to abandon the issue of Armstrong's connection to his audience and correspondents as well. But I am not even convinced that it suffices as an explanation of the formal elements of Pops' work on the page. The problem is that although the reader has a wealth of indices—an overflow of graphic marks and pointers that accompany the utterance—one has no access to a code, no means to decipher the shifting levels of those effects through interpretation. Brothers reproduces Armstrong's letter to Glaser in type, simply using italics every time Armstrong underlines (neglecting, in other words, the fact that in Armstrong's manuscripts, while some words are underlined once, others are triple- and even quadruple-underscored). The complexity of the writing is much better served with a facsimile (fig. 5):

> Something else Black Benny said to me, came true→He said (to me) "DIPPER"' As long as you live, no matter where you may be→always have a White Man (WHO LIKE YOU) and Can + will Put his Hand on your shoulder and say—"This is "My" Nigger" and, Can't Nobody Harm' Ya." ["L," p. 159][69]

68. See also "S," p. xiv; Brothers is right to depart from Kenney in reading all unconventional punctuation as indication of "irony," a "'distance from the meanings of words'" ("S," p. xiv).

69. Armstrong tells the same story elsewhere (not always attributing the advice to Black Benny) in ways that might help explain some of what seems to be an odd racial subservience in the letter to Glaser. In one interview in the late 1960s, he recalls that a group of black musicians playing one-nighters in Mississippi had been chased after a show and beaten with chains and knives by a group

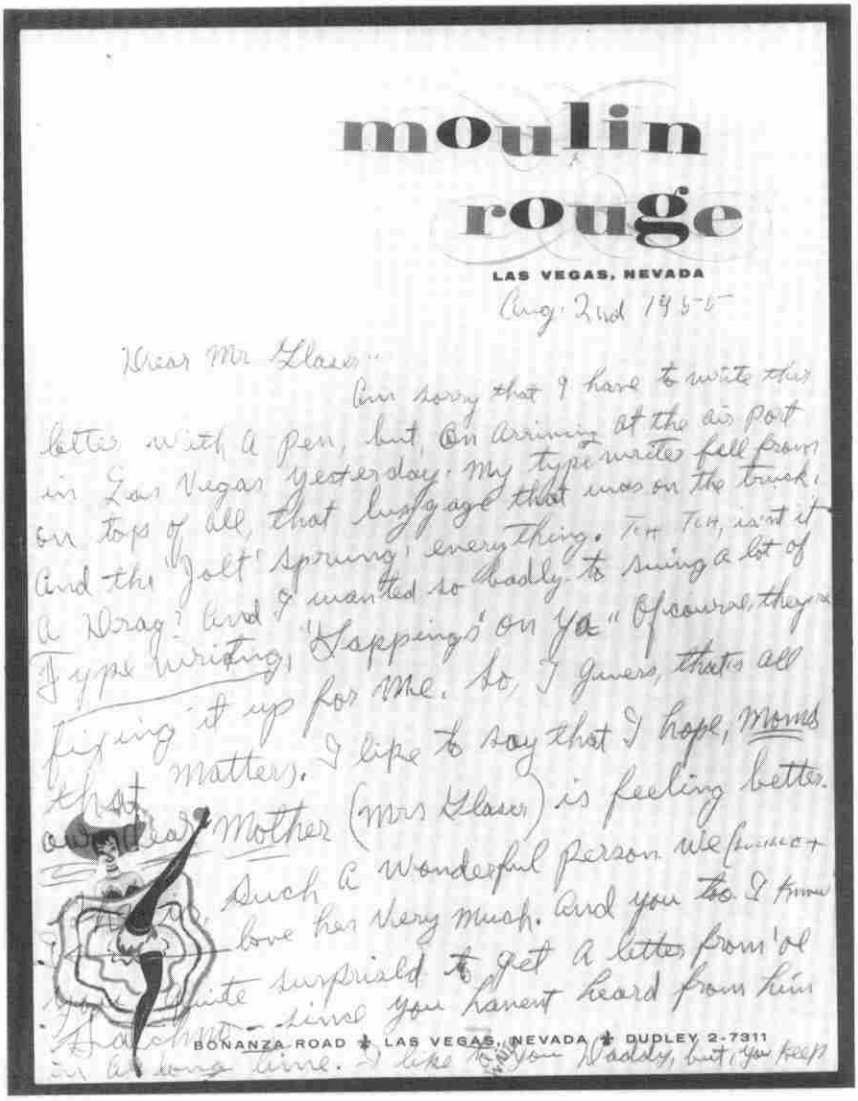


FIGURE 4. Louis Armstrong, letter to Joe Glaser, 2 Aug. 1955, Music Division, Library of Congress.

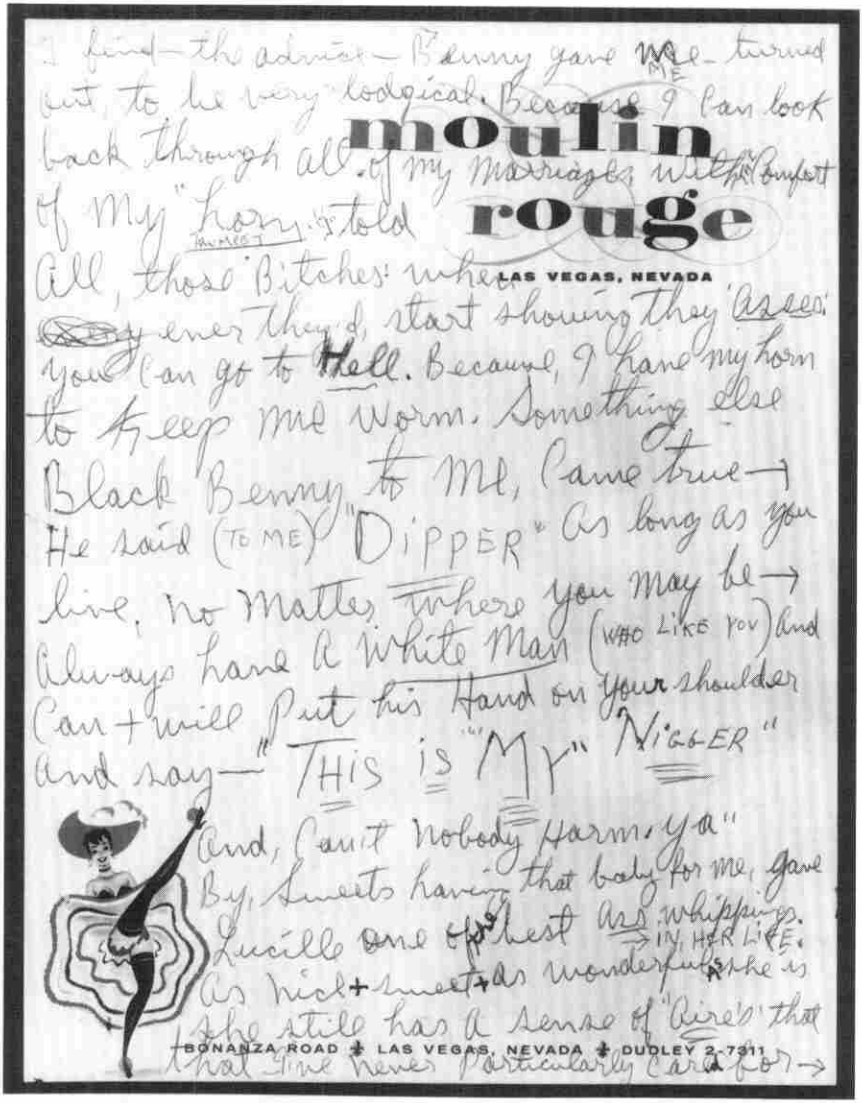


FIGURE 5. Louis Armstrong, letter to Joe Glaser, 2 Aug. 1955, Music Division, Library of Congress.

The passage is hard enough. Armstrong is recounting an anecdote about Black Benny, a gangster in New Orleans, who supposedly told him that it was all-important in life to have a white patron or protector. Glaser, of course, is Armstrong's manager. How is he supposed to receive this passage? Or the ending of the letter, where after coursing through fourteen handwritten pages of disclaimers, confessionals, and monetary and logistical demands, the text closes obsequiously:

> I—Just, Love, Your, Checks, in, My POCKETS—"OH" They look so pretty, until, I hate like hell to cash them. Honest to God, I usually keep them as long as I possibly Can. But Suddenly, some Situation raise its "UGLY HEAD." And "bye 'bye Joe Glaser's' signature. "HM . . . It has been such a real Pleasure writing to you, Boss. Hope, I didn't bore you. ["L," p. 163]

Do the apostrophes and underlining, the various manipulations of capitalization and punctuation, aid the reader in comprehending the valence of these words? How would one quantify or measure such an interpretative effect, as Brothers seems to want to do? How does one read (how does one hear Armstrong's "voice" in) a word surrounded by two quote marks on one side, and three on the other? Is a word underlined four times and surrounded by one single quote and one double quote being given more or less emphasis than a word underlined two times and framed by four apostrophes? Armstrong sometimes went back over his typed letters, correcting spelling and adding words inadvertently left out—but he often also threw in a number of handwritten apostrophes, still adhering to his strange, offkilter practice. Particularly in the handwritten letters, the exuberance of Armstrong's graphicity makes one wonder whether it should be considered—as Jed Rasula has suggested with regard to the diacritical markings in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry manuscripts—as a "visual supplement rather than aural cue."[70] The graphic accompaniment in the manuscripts

of white men who hours earlier had been in the club dancing. Armstrong is disgusted by this practice of "nigger knocking" ("No reason—except they was so goddamn miserable they had to mess everybody else up, ya dig? *Peckerwoods!* Oh, this world's mothered some mean sons!"). But he contends that the militancy of the younger generation of African American men was simply not an available response in the context of such ever-present racial violence in earlier years: "If you didn't have a white captain to back you in the old days—to put his hand on your shoulder—you was just a damn sad nigger. If a Negro had the proper white man to reach the law and say, 'What the hell you mean locking up MY nigger?' then—quite naturally—the law would walk him free. Get in that jail *without* your white boss, and yonder comes the chain gang! Oh, danger was dancing all around you back then" (quoted in Larry L. King, "Everybody's Louie," *Harper's* 235 [Nov. 1967]: 67). The perspective here is less obsequious than pragmatic. (He segues directly from this story to explain the utility of his relationship with his manager Joe Glaser.)

70. Jed Rasula, "Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding," in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York, 1998), p. 242.

doesn't clarify the writing, in other words. Instead, it actually makes them more daunting, giving too much indexical information, pointing in too many directions at once, invading the spaces between words with a thicket of punctuation that threatens to become impenetrable. The letter does not simply express irony, certainly; but neither does it simply transcribe Armstrong's "voice," unless *voice* is taken as another word for such deictic overabundance. It may do all these things and more—and that *excess* of signification may be precisely the effect of Armstrong's writing.

It is thus not sufficient to proclaim that "Armstrong wrote by ear," as Albert Murray does in a review of the Brothers collection, before launching into what is—for one of the great defenders of Armstrong's music—an astoundingly prissy defense of literary standards. Murray excoriates the "illiterate imprecision" of Armstrong's letters and manuscripts, calling them "embarrassingly corny." He adds cruelly (this about an autodidact who had never regularly attended school): "there is very little evidence in any of his published writings that he ever grasped, say, a junior high school-level of competence in the fundamentals of grammar, syntax, and meaning."[71] One might counter with Gary Giddins that "most of his writing was not intended for public scrutiny during his lifetime" and at least make an effort to come to terms with the formal peculiarity of a personal letter or private narrative (*S*, p. 14). But I wonder if one cannot make a more complex argument about the workings of all of Armstrong's writing (even the manuscripts prepared for publication), specifically in their relation to music.

Giddins's protestation is inadequate, in the end, if only because Armstrong (who not only wrote but also made hundreds of reel-to-reel tapes of recitations and performances and backstage bull sessions and then painstakingly decorated the tape boxes with elaborate collages and drawings) is so clearly a *self-archivist*, obsessed with recording technology of every sort. How does one theorize such a long-standing, deliberate practice of archivization, which aims at posterity even if the recordings are not immediately destined for public consumption? (One imagines that the very intimacy of this archiving practice would be all-important for a public figure who was so extensively commercially recorded and disseminated.) Just in terms of the formalism of the manuscripts, why would Armstong's use of ellipses, for instance, somehow be necessarily less complex than Emily Dickinson's dashes or Amiri Baraka's open-ended parentheses? Is it possible to read Armstrong's expression in writing, respecting its ambiguity and experimentation and not reducing it *either* to an inanity (a lack of instruction) *or* to a simple functionalism (the representation of orality)?

71. Murray, "Jazz Lips," pp. 32, 33, 32.

Scat Aesthetics

I will close by suggesting one way of theorizing what Duke Ellington would call a parallel between the forms of Armstrong's performance.[72] Gary Giddins's work on Armstrong has stressed the impossibility of "separating the exalted musician from Armstrong the impish stage wag" and warned of the perils of "underestimating the absurdist humor that informs [Armstrong's] genius" (*VJ*, p. 87). Giddins turns our attention not just to Armstrong's musical creativity but also to his physical presence, specifically his repertoire of wry and insinuating gesture in performances on film. In the early short *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932), a die-hard fan who's been conked unconscious by his wife (she is furious that he sits around listening to jazz records all day) dreams he is the "King of Jazzmania," sitting on his throne, treated to a command performance by Louis Armstrong. Draped in a ludicrous leopard skin, carrying a handkerchief, and standing up to his ankles in soap bubbles, Armstrong plays and sings "(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal You" and "Shine," with his orchestra behind him in attire that seems designed to connote an oddly regal primitivism. Describing the physicality of Armstrong's performance in films such as *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* and in concert footage (including a remarkable 1933 date in Denmark where he performs "Dinah"), Giddins writes that Armstrong's

> mugging is so much a part of his vocal performances that it is impossible for anyone who has seen him to listen to his records without imagining his facial contortions. Even when he delivered himself of a ballad, he had an array of expressions—half smiles, a trembling of the lips, a widening of the eyes, a scrunching of the nose—that fit the notes and underscored the lyric. Mugging was a kind of body English done with the face; it was a way of acting out the music. [*S*, p. 111]

Giddins contends that Armstrong in *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* "transcends the racist trappings by his indifference to every sling and arrow. The director/writer is trying to tell the audience one thing. Armstrong is telling it something entirely different—he's doing it not only with the magnificence of his music, but with his physical muscularity, his carriage, his boding sexuality . . . [and] the look in his eye" (*S*, p. 36).[73] Or as Giddins puts it earlier,

72. See Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Literary Ellington," *Representations*, no. 77 (Winter 2002): 10–11.

73. I have elided part of this quote because Giddins misreads one of the Armstrong manuscripts, arguing that Louis writes of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson as "'comedian + danger in my race'" and then extrapolating on the importance of a "threatening" physicality in Armstrong's aesthetic (*S*, p. 36). In fact, as Thomas Brothers points out, it is much more likely that the portrait

"Genius is the transfiguring agent" (*S*, 26). The reading turns in part on the common assumption that Armstrong "becomes a different man" when he starts playing the trumpet, when he stops mugging and gets down to business.[74] The implication is that his trumpet playing somehow "trumps" his problematic vocal clowning and even that Armstrong's instrumental performance reasserts a sexual prowess and "masculinity" that is somehow undermined or threatened by his singing.

But is it possible to read this scene in terms of "transcendence"? Does one really forget or forgive the leopard skin, the handkerchief, the bugged eyes, the grin, the gaping "satchel mouth," the soap bubbles, the lyrics ("I take troubles all with a smile . . . that's why they call me Shine") as soon as Pops picks up the horn? Or is Armstrong's "absurdist humor" ultimately a tricky willingness to inhabit all these trappings and more? He is the grotesque jester who preens and gapes, disturbing in his willingness to echo the melodramatic performance styles of minstrelsy. He is also the self-assured modernist, who negotiates the trumpet parts with brilliant technique and injects self-reflexive commentary into his vocal performance as well. (In one spoken aside during "You Rascal You," he tosses a line that slyly equates sexual contest with an access to recording technology: "You gave my wife a bottle of Coca Cola so you could play on her Victrola.") Moreover, Armstrong's mugging might not be simply "a way of acting out the music." What's striking about his movement is that he's acting out so much *more* than what's in the music: facial contortions, chest convulsions, head nods, even mouth movements, shadow pronunciations, that don't correspond to any discernible development in the production of sound. This is not at all "body English" or direct address; instead, one sees a spectral presence that seems to jerk and twitch and bulge in the somatic excess of that body. That excess outlines other possibilities, not taken, not voiced. There is no transcendence here; all these elements (at the very least), all these implications *coexist* in the performance, which is driven throughout by what Giddins more usefully terms Armstrong's "beguiling knowledge of the anomalous" (*S*, p. 37). The effect forces the viewer to confront a swinging incommensurability—an untamable, prancing set of contradictory indices that seem to be saying all too much at once.

This deictic complexity is not unique to Armstrong; indeed, it is a key component in black traditions of musical performance. In one section of Mackey's *Dbjot Baghostus's Run*, N. describes going to see a Betty Carter

of Bojangles refers to him as a "comedian + dancer" (Brothers, "Appendix," in *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words*, p. 193).

74. Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago, 1996), p. 211.

concert. He's struck by the visual component of the performance, the "facial teasing" the singer applies to her songs, "the discrepant play of her precise, near parsimonious delivery against the facial extravagance it's accompanied by."[75] Carter dances around the song, past the song, her body seeming to produce—to "ventriloquize," N. writes—"a 'voice' one synaesthetically 'saw,' a 'voice' which was not the voice one in fact heard" (*DJR*, p. 155). N.'s friend Lambert suggests that this confusion, the "furtiveness of source" of Carter's voice, actually is geared to give a "utopian foretaste of sourcelessness": the appearance of pure sound beyond the particular subject, beyond the particular vocal instrument. But that "foretaste," he adds, is continually "haunted" by "historical debris," particularly a "history of would-be sources which [are] really subversions, a history it propose[s] an 'unsourced' exit from" (*DJR*, p. 156). Sources that would presume to explain, to delimit, the genesis of that voice. The most obvious example, for Lambert, is minstrelsy, the "historical debris" of distorting stereotypes of the black body in performance. So Carter's facial extravagance "revels in distortion to show that it's wise to distortion, immune to presumed equivalence" (*DJR*, p. 156). (Of course, one would have to consider a whole range of "historical debris" beyond minstrelsy: gender and sexuality, for example. In one interview, Carter talks about this disjuncture in terms that make it clear that gender stereotypes were equally formidable barriers, saying that her physical beauty was "a handicap and also an asset because if an audience looks at a figure first and then you get them quiet enough to listen to the singing, then you have really done something. In the Apollo I would be about eight bars into my tune before anyone realized I was singing. Redd Foxx used to say to me that it was a whole year before he realized I could sing.")[76] It's important to note the terms with which N. describes Carter's furtive voice, its "elusiveness of source which created an illusion of sourcelessness." "It was eerie," he writes (*DBR*, p. 155). That is, it gives him the heebie jeebies.

Scat aesthetics distend an expressive medium through the proliferation of index. This is a structural effect and thus one that can be applied as readily to a linguistic medium as to one like music, which signifies as expressive potentiality, articulating a syntax where in Billie Holiday's phrase the "meaning used to change." Scat works the "accompaniments of the utterance" in a given medium: in song, the vocal play that liquefies words; in performance, the excessive, oblique physicality of mugging; in writing, the

75. Mackey, *Dbjot Baghostus's Run* (Los Angeles, 1993), p. 154; hereafter abbreviated *DJR*. This book is the second volume in his series entitled *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, of which *Bedouin Hornbook* is the first.

76. Quoted in Linda Prince, "Betty Carter: Bebopper Breathes Fire," *Down Beat*, 3 May 1979, p. 13.

overgrowth of punctuation, self-interruptions, asides, that exceed the purposes of emphasis, intonation, and citation.[77] Inarticulacy is telling because the proliferation of index points at—structurally suggests—an expressive syntax that is unavailable but inferred through its "accompaniments." Scat aesthetics thus involve an augmentation of expressive potential rather than an evacuation or a reduction of signification. Words drop away from music so that "the unheard sounds [come] through."[78] The syntax of scat points at something outside the sayable, something seen where it collapses.

77. The phrase "accompaniments of the utterance" is taken from J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962; Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 76. I thank Fred Moten for directing me to this source. If scat mobilizes the index in particular, one would have to discuss scat as "improvisation" by taking into account the way that the index is temporally contingent; since a deictic gesture is registered in time, the index has what Rosalind Krauss calls "an existential connection to meaning, with the result that it can only take place on the spot" (Rosalind Krauss, "'Michel, Bataille, et Moi,'" *October*, no. 68 [Spring 1994]: 13). In writing, however, indexicality carries a temporal connotation but is not temporally contingent. The "on the spot" indicator can be added *after the fact*—thus Armstrong's predilection for inserting handwritten apostrophes and underlining to his letters in revising them.

78. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947; New York, 1989), p. 7. One can approach a reading of the famous reference to Armstrong in the prologue to *Invisible Man* only by taking up issues of indexicality. The unnamed narrator says that he plans to have not just one, but *five* phonographs in his basement "hole," playing Armstrong's version of "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue" "all at the same time" (p. 6). This desire both calls for a certain intensification of listening ("when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body") and parallels the room's excessive illumination (it is wired with 1,369 lightbulbs), thus extending a playful critique of the optical figures of Enlightenment metaphysics. But the call for amplification may be less about simply increasing the sonic volume and more about stressing a simultaneity and potential multiplicity of signification in the music—the "slightly different sense of time" it articulates, in which the listener can "slip into the breaks and look around" (p. 7).