

## ARTICLE

# “Something Apart, Yet an Integral Part”: Duke Ellington’s Harlem and the Nexus of Race and Nation

Daniel Matlin\*

Department of History, King’s College London

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [daniel.matlin@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:daniel.matlin@kcl.ac.uk)

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*Harlem loomed large in the imagination of Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, one of the twentieth century’s most significant composers and an important theorist of the condition of being black and American. This article provides insights into Ellington’s social thought by foregrounding his evocations of Harlem and his efforts to interpolate that neighborhood into the physical, cultural, and imaginative spaces of US national life. In doing so, it also situates Ellington’s ideas in relation to the competing intellectual currents of the Harlem Renaissance movement that had inspired his project of racial vindication. More broadly, the article argues that understanding of the history of African American ideas of race and nation benefits from analysis of discursive place-making and the spatial practices of artistic and intellectual work. Attending to space and place recuperates the complexity and multiplicity of such ideas, which are often concealed by abstracted discussion of concepts such as “integration.”*

Duke Ellington did not much care for the word “jazz.” Over the course of a career as a composer, bandleader, and pianist that stretched from the early 1920s until his death in 1974, among his various objections to the term were that it implied an untrained, uncivilized, or “lowbrow” musicianship, that it captured only a narrow range of a much wider field of “moods” he sought to evoke in his compositions, and, more fancifully, that its origins lay in an expression for flushing a toilet.<sup>1</sup> The words through which he preferred to characterize his music, however, strike a somewhat discordant tone against much of the voluminous scholarship on Ellington.

That scholarship has frequently accentuated Ellington’s “integrationist” philosophy and his rejection of black “separatism”: the “concept of integration” was one he “practiced in every facet of his life”; “integration” was “central” to such Ellington

<sup>1</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0008-2 (31 Oct. 1964), Box 6, Carter Harman Collection of Interviews with Duke Ellington, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (hereinafter Harman Interviews; all transcriptions from these tapes are my own); Tape AC0422-RTC0002-1, n.d. [1964], *ibid.*; Duke Ellington, “My Hunt for Song Titles,” *Rhythm* (UK), Aug. 1933, reprinted in Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York, 1993) (hereinafter *DER*), 87–9, at 88; Howard Taubman, “The ‘Duke’ Invades Carnegie Hall,” *New York Times Magazine*, 17 Jan. 1943, 10.

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compositions as *Such Sweet Thunder* (1957); the “patriotic tone” Ellington struck when introducing *My People* (1963) “should be sufficient to indicate Ellington’s distance from the separatism of the burgeoning Black Power movement.”<sup>2</sup> Rarely do these accounts dwell on the meanings that “integration” held for Ellington, or within American racial discourse more broadly, yet the picture they render struggles to accommodate the intensity of the connections he drew between his music and his blackness. Commenting on Ellington’s descriptions of his work during the 1930s and 1940s—as “essentially Negro music,” “authentic Negro music,” and “unadulterated American Negro music”—an important study contends that from such phrases it might appear “as if he were claiming an impossible racial purity for his music,” and that they convey a “racial pride” that “at times may have run contrary to his integrationist ideals.” Ellington’s “recourse” to such language, the study explains, signals that he was “trapped” by his determination to refute racist assumptions that would credit his music’s sophistication to “white elements” or European influences.<sup>3</sup> Against this impression of self-contradiction, I hope to reveal a more coherent Ellingtonian vision of race and nation.

Far from being unique to the literature on Ellington, the binary logic that pits a seldom-defined “integrationism” against an equally nebulous “separatism” has left its mark on decades of scholarship on African American thinkers, artists, and activists, and in recent years has been the subject of rising critique. As Nikhil Singh has memorably argued, such logic embodies the tendency of US liberal nationalism to elevate, as “integrationist,” that which is seen as upholding the primacy of a unitary American nationhood and its emancipatory potential, and to array against this (or consign to the margins), as “separatist” or “blackist,” expressions of black autonomy and cultural particularity.<sup>4</sup> Recovering the multiplicity and subtlety of the ways in which African Americans have lived and theorized the nexus of race and nation entails the careful work of historicizing “integration” and “separation” as contested, malleable concepts within US racial discourse—work that is only now gathering pace.<sup>5</sup> However, it also demands that we look beyond these terms and the tendency to subsume within them the breadth and intricacy of twentieth-century African American social and political ideas.

Ellington’s understanding of the relationship between black peoplehood and US nationhood is instructive here, as it was relayed not through such familiar terminology, but through distinctive words, sounds, and movements that evoked

<sup>2</sup>Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America* (Chicago, 2010), 403; David Schiff, “The Moor’s Revenge: The Politics of *Such Sweet Thunder*,” in John Howland, ed., *Duke Ellington Studies* (Cambridge, 2017), 177–96, at 182, 187; Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham, NC, 1999), 117. Like many Ellington works from 1939 to 1967, *Such Sweet Thunder* was co-composed with Billy Strayhorn.

<sup>3</sup>Lock, *Blutopia*, 125, 258 n. 36.

<sup>4</sup>Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 46, 40. See also Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896–1935* (Gainesville, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Especially significant is Daniel Geary’s current project, *Integration: An Intellectual History*, which reconstructs US discourses of integration in relation to (among others) African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx Americans. See also Ernest Allen Jr, “Notes on the Concept of Integration,” *Black Scholar* 42/1 (2012), 2–15; Yomna Saber, “Lorraine Hansberry: Defining the Line between Integration and Assimilation,” *Women’s Studies* 39/5 (2010), 451–69.

particular notions of space and place.<sup>6</sup> Spatial constructs and practices, I argue, offer historians vital entry points through which to access the nuance and variety of African American ideas of race and nation. Ernest Allen Jr has attributed the “ambiguity and confusion” engendered by the “integration vs. separation frame” to the way these terms “reduce complex social relations to the language of spatial metaphor.”<sup>7</sup> To the contrary, I see the persistent use of these terms as expressive (sometimes unwittingly so) of the inherently spatial nature of social relations and social thought, in all their complexity. Mindful of Katherine McKittrick’s warning against the “terribly seductive” notion “that space and place are merely *containers* for human complexities and social relations,” I suggest that we need to attend more closely to the spatial imaginaries through which the conjuncture of race and nation has been envisioned and communicated. As an array of recent works, including in the field of “black geographies,” has detailed, black diasporic life was born of spatial rupture, has been constrained and fortified by place-making, and is generative of vivid mappings and geographical yearnings. “Black matters,” McKittrick insists, “are spatial matters.”<sup>8</sup> I wish to argue that by comprehending spatial practices, including physical and discursive place-making, we restore the vivid particularity that is often concealed behind potentially homogenizing abstractions such as “integrationism.”<sup>9</sup>

Ellington’s vision of race and nation was embodied in his music, but was perhaps articulated most succinctly in response to a journalist who, in 1941, asked him to explain the “dissonance” within his compositions. “That’s the Negro’s way of life,” Ellington replied. “Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part.”<sup>10</sup> This spatial schema was both Ellington’s

<sup>6</sup>“Space” denotes physical (or metaphorical) dimensions and relationality—“that which allows movement”—while “place” denotes some particular space that is invested with meaning or value (for example through naming). The two terms “require each other for definition.” See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977), 6.

<sup>7</sup>Allen, “Notes on the Concept of Integration,” 9, 2.

<sup>8</sup>Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, 2006), xi, emphasis added, xii; Jake Hodder, “Toward a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence, and the Promise of Africa,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106/6 (2016), 1360–77; Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria F. Robinson, *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* (Oakland, 2018); George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia, 2011); Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds., *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto, 2007); Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, eds., “We Shall Independent Be”: *African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States* (Boulder, 2008); James Tyner, *The Geography of Malcolm X: Black Radicalism and the Remaking of American Space* (New York, 2006); <https://blackgeographies.org>. Earlier works anticipating aspects of this scholarship include Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, 1991); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002). See also Daniel S. Allemann, Anton Jäger, and Valentina Mann, “Introduction: Approaching Space in Intellectual History,” *Global Intellectual History* 3/2 (2018), 127–36.

<sup>9</sup>Space and place are also fundamental to music’s production and reception. See especially Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley, 2005); Andrew S. Berish, *Lonesome Roads and Streets of Dreams: Place, Mobility, and Race in Jazz of the 1930s and ’40s* (Chicago, 2012). Berish’s fine chapter on the Ellington Orchestra focuses on its musical evocations of the South and, through a 1946 performance of “Air-Conditioned Jungle,” a generalized black urban experience. See *ibid.*, 119–66.

<sup>10</sup>John Pittman, “The Duke Will Stay on Top!”, unidentified clipping (probably from San Francisco’s *People’s World*), n.d. [Aug./Sept. 1941], reprinted in *DER*, 148–51, at 150. Singh briefly invokes

metaphorical expression of the relationship of blackness to Americanness and, more literally, his idealization of a (possible) American social geography and the place of black people within it.

The unmistakable centrality of Harlem within Ellington's musical imagination and public discourse over successive decades can only be understood as rooted in his valuing of black *apartness*—a valuing that scholars have largely understated or trivialized, owing to its supposed incompatibility with Ellington's "integrationism." Yet black people were also, for Ellington, "an integral part" of America. In this article, I bring to light the techniques of discursive place-making and broader spatial practices through which Ellington undertook an ongoing performance of Harlem that became the principal means of explicating his social vision of simultaneous *partness* and *apartness*. In doing so, I highlight ways in which that vision intersects with, and remains distinct from, a number of major currents in African American thought, from the competing tendencies within the interwar Harlem (or New Negro) Renaissance to the traditionalist African American cultural criticism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The first section of what follows establishes key aspects of the historical and intellectual context within which Ellington's understanding of race and nation took shape, and foregrounds his musical and rhetorical glorification of Harlem as a black place. This glorification was a precondition for the type of cultural pluralist politics of recognition and inclusion that I call *incorporation*. If Harlem had long been legally incorporated into New York City, Ellington sought a more meaningful incorporation of the neighborhood, and "the Negro," into the physical, cultural, and imaginative spaces of the city and US nation, while nonetheless sustaining Harlem's *apartness*. The second section reconstructs the spatial practices—which I call *interpolation*—through which Ellington sought to convey and enact this vision. If the word "incorporation" carries a necessary reminder of the power of market- and US-national appropriation of black culture, I intend "interpolation" to convey a countervailing sense of the agency and creativity that have been manifest in black projects of claiming, and transforming, "America."<sup>11</sup>

Such an approach holds that concepts and practices of space and place allow us to recuperate social visions at their most graphic, embodied, noisy, and concrete, restoring the specificity that abstractions such as "integration" can easily drown out. "Integration" has, indeed, proved a slippery term, often used in ways that elide distinct aims or ideals that have not always been held in combination, ranging from statutory desegregation of locales and institutions to cultural assimilation and

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Ellington's "dissonance" as an "ironic twist" on US pretensions to global democratic leadership; see Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 55–6.

<sup>11</sup>Both concepts are distinct from Louis Althusser's "interpellation," the "hailing" that enlists individuals as "subjects" of state ideology. While Ellington's pursuit of incorporation arguably performs the state's work on the broad level of affirming American nationhood, a strict application of Althusser's concept might conceal the forceful challenge to hegemonic (white-supremacist, assimilationist) Americanism that inheres within Ellington's vision of incorporation. The interruptive or insertional (spatial) connotations of "interpolation" further signal that counterhegemonic force. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York, 2001), 85–126, esp. 117–18.

“biological amalgamation.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the semantic appeal of “integration” through much of the twentieth century and beyond surely rests on its insinuation of the common spatial factor underlying most, if not all, of its varied objects: the aim of greater *inclusion* (however plastic this concept, in turn, may have been) within the US national domain, which distinguishes all such ideas from the emigrationisms and secessionisms that have disavowed the possibility of black flourishing within the US national context.<sup>13</sup> As thinly as the term “integration” itself specifies the character of Ellington’s thought, then, his vision of incorporation undoubtedly forms a strand within a variegated intellectual history of integrationism, so defined—and one that resists any opposition between inclusion and apartness.

Ellington’s social vision and spatial practice of the 1930s and early 1940s have had divergent afterlives, as perhaps befits a thinker whose aesthetics and politics leaned across familiar ideological demarcations. His vision of incorporation during those years possessed a proletarian hue that complemented the Popular Front’s promotion of a more expansive, egalitarian American patriotism. As will be seen, however, incorporation later proved adaptable to less progressive iterations of US nationalism, ranging from Ellington’s own increasingly strident American exceptionalism during the early Cold War period to the manner of his veneration by the figureheads of a black “neoconservatism” that gained prominence toward the end of the twentieth century. By contrast, an array of African American cultural expressions in recent decades have revealed a more radical potential within Ellington’s spatial practice of interpolation, when the latter is enlisted to operate beyond incorporation’s limits, and limitations, as a US-nationalist politics of inclusion.<sup>14</sup>

### “From the life of Harlem”

Harlem’s extraordinary, sustained prominence within Ellington’s music and his wider discourse and self-fashioning sprang from something deeper than the “vogue” for the neighborhood, as a nightlife destination and trope of racial exoticism, that took hold among segments of white America during the 1920s—as commercially savvy as Ellington and his manager, Irving Mills, undoubtedly were.<sup>15</sup> Though he exaggerated when he claimed in 1933 that “every one of my song titles is taken from, and naturally primarily from, the life of Harlem,” his abundant use of Harlem imagery is inescapable.<sup>16</sup> Reeling off titles such as “Harlem Speaks,” “Harlem Flat Blues,” “Drop Me Off at Harlem,” “Echoes of Harlem,” “Uptown Downbeat,” and “I’m Slappin’ Seventh Avenue,” Ellington’s first biographer,

<sup>12</sup>On this point see Allen, “Notes on the Concept of Integration,” quotation at 9.

<sup>13</sup>On “inclusion” see *ibid.*, 2. On emigrationism and secessionism respectively see Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton, 2014); Christian Davenport, *How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa* (New York, 2014).

<sup>14</sup>Of relevance here is Barbara Foley’s critique of US discourses of cultural pluralism, as ultimately reproducing “the inevitably class-collaborationist character of nationalism.” See Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana, 2003), 160–61.

<sup>15</sup>Lock, *Blutopia*, 104; Harvey G. Cohen, “The Marketing of Duke Ellington: Setting the Strategy for an African American Maestro,” *Journal of African American History* 89/4 (2004), 291–315.

<sup>16</sup>Ellington, “My Hunt for Song Titles,” 88.

Barry Ulanov, wrote that the neighborhood was a long-standing “obsession with Duke.”<sup>17</sup> Graham Lock, John Howland, and Kimberley Hannon Teal have addressed Harlem’s importance as a symbolic resource within Ellington’s project of vindicating African American life and history, and the impact of the neighborhood’s musical and entertainment cultures on his artistic imagination.<sup>18</sup>

Building on such insights, I wish to demonstrate that Ellington’s renderings of Harlem as a place, together with the spatial practices by which he carried Harlem to strategically and symbolically significant locations, institutions, and media, comprise an ongoing performance of his theorization of the race–nation nexus. Indeed, Ellington was one among a litany of twentieth-century black artists and intellectuals—Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Gil Scott Heron, Faith Ringgold, to name only a few—who articulated the realities and possibilities of being black and American through evocations of Harlem.<sup>19</sup> For decades after its emergence in the 1920s as the world’s largest, most cosmopolitan black urban community, this variously styled “Black Metropolis” and “Mecca of the New Negro,” more than any other place, carried the weight of symbolizing the prospects of black existence in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

The journalist to whom Ellington spoke of African Americans in 1941 as “something apart, yet an integral part,” was John Pittman, an African American communist. Pittman enthusiastically likened Ellington’s statement to the concept of a “nation within a nation” underlying the Comintern’s 1928 assertion of African Americans’ right to self-determination in the southern “Black Belt.”<sup>21</sup> This right of territorial sovereignty was not one Ellington espoused, and while he participated energetically in the cultural currents of the Popular Front, at no time was Ellington a communist.<sup>22</sup> The phrase “nation within a nation,” though, has a longer, more varied history in black political thought. Martin Delany had used it in advocating black emigration in the 1850s, comparing African Americans to “the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria”—subordinated peoples he regarded as living amid wholly separate nationalities.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, Booker T. Washington in 1899

<sup>17</sup>Barry Ulanov, “The Ellington Programme,” in Ken Williamson, ed., *This Is Jazz* (London, 1960), 141–2. See also Barry Ulanov, *Duke Ellington* (New York, 1946).

<sup>18</sup>Lock, *Blutopia*, 77–118; John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor, 2009); Kimberley Hannon Teal, “Beyond the Cotton Club: The Persistence of Duke Ellington’s Jungle Style,” *Jazz Perspectives* 6/1–2 (2012), 123–49.

<sup>19</sup>This longer history of ideas of Harlem is the subject of my current book project.

<sup>20</sup>Andrew M. Fearnley and Daniel Matlin, eds., *Race Capital? Harlem as Setting and Symbol* (New York, 2018).

<sup>21</sup>Pittman, “Duke Will Stay on Top,” 150; “Guide to the John Pittman Papers,” Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, at [http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingsaids/html/tamwag/tam\\_188](http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingsaids/html/tamwag/tam_188). The thesis of the “Black Belt nation” was quietly discarded after 1935 but regained support among some African American communists in the late 1940s. See Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (London, 1998), 90.

<sup>22</sup>On Ellington’s Popular Front participation and sensibility see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996), 309–19; Kevin Gaines, “Duke Ellington, *Black, Brown and Beige*, and the Cultural Politics of Race,” in Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago, 2000), 585–602.

<sup>23</sup>Martin Robison Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (New York, 1968; first published 1852), 209.

described African Americans as “almost a nation within a nation” in arguing for continued black residence in the South. Washington appealed to a vision of rights-bearing black US citizens, while voicing no objection to emerging Jim Crow segregation.<sup>24</sup> Decades later, in 1966, the demand for “black self-government” in black-majority cities by the radical intellectuals Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs was, in part, a revision of the communist “Black Belt” thesis.<sup>25</sup>

Ellington’s conception differs from each of these positions. Like Washington, he envisioned a dual national belonging that entailed a sustained, autonomous black peoplehood alongside faith in the promise of equal black participation in US national life. However, if Washington’s “nation within a nation” expressed acquiescence to segregation, Ellington’s needs to be understood in the context of a broader rethinking of US nationhood during the early decades of the twentieth century. As George Hutchinson has shown, black intellectuals of the interwar Harlem Renaissance, as well as liberal and radical white thinkers, worked “to expand the notion of ‘the people’ who compose the American national community.” Against white supremacy and cultural Anglo-Saxonism—and the scant recognition of African Americans within the pluralist vistas of John Dewey, Horace Kallen, and Randolph Bourne—the likes of Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, and J. A. Rogers promoted black cultural expression as central to their own pluralist articulations of Americanism.<sup>26</sup> Yet African American cultural pluralism was itself a contested terrain. The literary figures on whom Hutchinson focuses mostly advocated cultivation of black arts and letters as a step toward interracial understanding, and thence a deeply blended US national culture forged through reciprocal assimilation—and, in some cases, interracial “amalgamation.”<sup>27</sup> Ellington’s vision of incorporation, I argue, entailed a markedly “harder” cultural pluralism that infused his characterization of “authentic Negro music” and his celebration of Harlem as an intensely, autonomously, and permanently black place.<sup>28</sup>

“Nation within a nation” usefully captures the depth of Ellington’s commitment to an enduring black peoplehood and culture while simultaneously registering his American patriotism, which was evident throughout his career and became especially voluble during World War II and the early Cold War. The phrase highlights the vividly spatial manner in which Ellington imagined the relationship between “Negro” and “American” peoples, a relationship he repeatedly described through his evocations of Harlem and inscribed through the movements of his band. Yet if “within” might suggest neat containment, a more ambiguous juxtaposition is signified by the rhetorical equivalence of “nation” and “nation”—an ambiguity

<sup>24</sup>Booker T. Washington, “The Case of the Negro,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 1899, at [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1899/11/the-case-of-the-negro/476934](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1899/11/the-case-of-the-negro/476934).

<sup>25</sup>Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs, “The City Is the Black Man’s Land” (1966), in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit, 2011), 162–70, at 164; Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 192.

<sup>26</sup>George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), esp. 13, 84–93.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, *ibid.*, 79, 145, 154–5, 291, 293.

<sup>28</sup>“Harder” variants of cultural pluralism (later of multiculturalism) more strongly emphasize the autonomy of particular cultures within the national domain, while “softer” variants (sometimes named “cosmopolitan” rather than “cultural pluralist”) attach relatively greater value to interaction, hybridity, and, in some cases, national belonging. See Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 289; Tania Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* (New York, 2008), 11.

that echoes Ellington's situating of black Americans as both "part" and "apart," and summons the recurrent if unstable presence of Africa and its diaspora in Ellington's imaginary.<sup>29</sup> A distinct place for black people at the heart of the city that epitomized American modernity, Harlem located, and grounded, his vision of African Americans as "something apart, yet an integral part."

At the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois had famously described an agonized, destructive African American "double-consciousness": "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>30</sup> Ellington, though incensed by white supremacy, heard the "dissonance" of African American subjectivity as something less tortured and internally conflicted. He contributed to a vocabulary that would resound, later in the century, in the black-and-American patriotism of the writers Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, two Ellington admirers who would also explore what Ellison called the "internality" of black American life through depictions of Harlem.<sup>31</sup>

In the early stages of his musical career, however, Ellington had been strongly associated with another place that loomed large in the geography of African American life. For several years after arriving in New York in 1923, the musicians who formed the nucleus of what would soon be the ensemble most closely associated with Harlem were known as the Washingtonians. Early in 1924, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, their pianist, became leader of the small band, which included saxophonist Otto Hardwick, trumpeter Arthur Whetsol, and drummer Sonny Greer. Born in 1899 into the lower fringes of Washington, DC's race-proud black elite, Ellington had witnessed the erosion of the capital's status as the "undisputed center of American Negro civilization."<sup>32</sup> Federal employment of African Americans plummeted during Woodrow Wilson's presidency, and segregation hardened.<sup>33</sup> Harlem, meanwhile, latterly an affluent white neighborhood, rapidly emerged in the 1920s as the new fulcrum and symbol of African American professional, political, intellectual, and cultural life.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Harlem was the crucible of New York's vigorous "stride" piano style, which was imbuing jazz with a new air of urbane virtuosity. Following their idols Willie "the Lion" Smith and James P. Johnson from nightclubs to tenement parties, the Washingtonians reveled in the neighborhood's fertile musical culture.<sup>35</sup> Ellington would tell Carter Harman,

<sup>29</sup>See Carl Woideck, "Authentic Synthetic Hybrid: Ellington's Concepts of Africa and Its Music," in Howland, *Duke Ellington Studies*, 224–64.

<sup>30</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (London, 1905; first published 1903), 3.

<sup>31</sup>Ralph Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline" (1967), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, 1995), 730–58, at 734; Ellison, "Harlem's America," *New Leader*, 26 Sept. 1966, 22–35; Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (New York, 1970).

<sup>32</sup>Historian Constance Green quoted in Mark Tucker, "The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington," in Samuel A. Floyd Jr, ed., *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays* (Knoxville, 1993), 111–27, at 112.

<sup>33</sup>William B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880–1920* (Bloomington, 1990), 64–5.

<sup>34</sup>Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

<sup>35</sup>Duke Ellington, "Jazz as I Have Seen It," part IV, *Swing*, June 1940, 11, Duke Ellington Clippings File 1933–1940, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark.



a journalist who amassed twenty hours of recorded conversations with Ellington in 1956 and 1964, that Harlem had possessed “a musical language of its own” that seemed “totally independent.”<sup>36</sup>

In the mid-1920s, Ellington’s band established themselves as innovative practitioners of the bluesy, propulsive “hot” jazz that commanded great popularity uptown and downtown. In December 1927 they began a residency at the uptown Cotton Club that would run through to February 1931 and propel Ellington, and his association with Harlem, to international renown.<sup>37</sup> Lavish, pricey, mob-owned, and operating an almost exclusively whites-only admissions policy, this was the archetypal nightlife destination of the 1920s “Negro vogue.” Black dancers, including the club’s notoriously light-skinned and minimally clad “chorus girls,” offered up primitivist fantasias amid antebellum plantation décor, accompanied by Ellington’s (now ten-piece) ensemble.<sup>38</sup> Through song titles such as “Jungle Nights in Harlem,” Ellington and his manager, Irving Mills, rhetorically linked the music to these stage performances and permitted patrons to hear the growling, plunger-muted sounds brought forth by trumpeters Bubber Miley and Cootie Williams as animalistic cries from the African (or urban American) jungle.<sup>39</sup> For all its constraints, Ellington not only used the Cotton Club as a springboard to fame but developed his compositional style in the process. While his “jungle” marketing would be short-lived, it licensed Ellington to experiment with the eerie, dissonant harmonies and “speaking” brass sonorities that would long characterize his orchestral palette.<sup>40</sup>

Still, Ellington’s ambitions exceeded the cabaret scene. Having left the Cotton Club, Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra toured the US and Europe, appeared in Hollywood films, and from the mid-1930s were one of the most critically exalted and commercially successful bands of the “swing era,” as jazz-inflected (to varying degrees) dance music became the leading American musical entertainment of the later Depression years.<sup>41</sup> Ellington’s first published article, appearing in the British magazine *Rhythm* in 1931, had addressed his grand ambitions as a composer and frustration with the generic constraints (“only thirty-two bars,” and “a strict tempo”) of popular dance music. Proud of the “part my race is playing in the artistic life of the world,” he elaborated:

To-day we are an important and intrinsic part of the population of the great United States of America. In Harlem we have what is practically our own city; we have our own newspapers and social services, and although not segregated, we have almost achieved our own civilisation. The history of my people is one of great achievements over fearful odds; it is a history of a people hindered, handicapped and often sorely oppressed, and what is being done by

<sup>36</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0008-2 (11 Aug. 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews. The most candid of Ellington’s longer autobiographical accounts, these interviews warrant rapid digitization. Ellington’s memoir, *Music Is My Mistress*, is notable for its “refusal to say anything negative”; see Lock, *Blutopia*, 87.

<sup>37</sup>On this period see Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Oxford, 1991), 79–258.

<sup>38</sup>Jim Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (London, 1985; first published 1977), 30, 36–7, 73.

<sup>39</sup>For contemporaneous studio recordings see Duke Ellington and His Cotton Club Orchestra, *Jungle Nights in Harlem (1927–1932)*, Bluebird 2400-2-RB (CD, 1991).

<sup>40</sup>Martin Williams, “Views and Reviews,” *Evergreen Review* 5/17 (1961), 108–9, Box 1, Duke Ellington Files, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark.

<sup>41</sup>Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 93–199.

Countee Cullen and others in literature is overdue in our music.

I am therefore now engaged on a rhapsody unhampered by any musical form in which I intend to portray the experiences of the coloured races in America in the syncopated idiom. This composition will consist of four or five movements, and I am putting all I have learned into it in the hope that I shall have achieved something really worth while in the literature of music, and that an authentic record of my race *written by a member of it* shall be placed on record.<sup>42</sup>

In departing the Cotton Club, embracing wider geographic and artistic horizons, and embarking on a project of racial vindication, Ellington might well have left behind the imagery of Harlem, which by now was so bound up with the primitivism the club traded in. Instead, his article illustrates how central Harlem was to Ellington's visualization and expression of the ideals that would animate the new phase of his career. The early 1930s have often been identified as the moment the Harlem Renaissance died, as the hope, and patronage, that had fueled this profusion of black arts and letters during the preceding decade dissipated amid the Depression and an increasingly class-oriented politics.<sup>43</sup> Yet Ellington's article exhibits a key Renaissance trait (invoked through "Countee Cullen and others") that would remain fundamental to his work for at least another two decades: the use of Harlem itself as an emblem of black yearnings, strivings, and accomplishments.<sup>44</sup> Glorifying Harlem was crucial to Ellington's pursuit of incorporation—his vision of an honored place for black peoplehood within the collective life and consciousness of the American nation. Doing so, however, would require an increasingly fraught effort amid proliferating images of Harlem that belied the black neighborhood's early promise.

Though divergent representations of Harlem constituted an important intra-Renaissance battleground, Ellington's tribute to "practically our own city"—where a distinctive black "civilisation" was arising as an "important and intrinsic part" of US society—broadly echoes the cultural-pluralist optimism of prominent 1920s Renaissance figures. Alain Locke had heralded Harlem as an emergent "race capital" engendered by a "tide" of southern and Caribbean migration, and as the domain of a "New Negro" intent on "group expression and self-determination," who "lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Ellington's

<sup>42</sup>Duke Ellington, "The Duke Steps Out," *Rhythm*, March 1931, reprinted in *DER*, 46–50, at 48, 47, 49–50, emphasis in original. Scholars have speculated about how far Ellington's published writings were stylistically altered by editors, and the degree of authorial assistance he may have received from writer friends including Helen Oakley Dance and Patricia Willard. See especially Mark Tucker's editorial remarks in *DER*, xviii, 46. Yet all major studies engage his published writings as, in general, illustrative of his beliefs. On Ellington's commitment to authorship see Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Literary Ellington," *Representations* 77/1 (2002), 1–29. Passages I quote from Ellington's published writings are broadly consistent with sentiments he expressed in interviews.

<sup>43</sup>David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1981), 282–307; Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 435–6.

<sup>44</sup>On this trait see James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (New York, 1990), 19–32.

<sup>45</sup>Alain Locke, "Harlem," *Survey Graphic* 6/6 (1925), 629–30; Locke, "Enter the New Negro," *ibid.*, 631–4, at 634.

description of Harlem as “not segregated”—truthful only on the narrowest definition—chimes with Locke’s and James Weldon Johnson’s accounts of black Harlem’s formation and institutional life as primarily self-willed, self-enacted achievements.<sup>46</sup>

This mode of racial vindication became ever more precarious during the 1930s and 1940s, as segregation’s force and consequences in Harlem burst violently into view. Following Harlem’s uprising of March 1935, when rumors concerning (frequently real) police brutality set off attacks on white-owned businesses, Locke himself conceded that Harlem was in reality a “Ghetto” and “an over-expensive, disease- and crime-ridden slum.”<sup>47</sup> Ellington’s vision of black autonomy within “practically our own city” was undercut by the neighborhood’s future congressman, Adam Clayton Powell Jr, whose newspaper column offered Ellington’s own career as evidence of “musical sharecropping” in Harlem: “the Duke” was “owned body and soul by Massa Irving Mills,” who was “rumored” to have “pocketed \$90,000 in 1934 alone.”<sup>48</sup>

Ellington’s Harlem imagery, and the vision of incorporation that rested on it, would be substantially at odds with a crescendo of bleak, naturalistic portrayals spurred by Harlem’s uprisings of 1935 and 1943. In novels such as Carl Offord’s *White Face* (1943) and Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), the New York Photo League’s “Harlem Document” project (1936–9), and official and journalistic reports on the uprisings, Harlem spelled acute alienation, deprivation, and social distress.<sup>49</sup> The neighborhood was coming to symbolize the northern, urban variants of segregation—the iconic American “ghetto,” a term connoting isolation and stigma rather than the dignified apartness (and respected partness) that incorporation entailed.<sup>50</sup> As will be seen, in the early 1940s Ellington privately penned his own anguished response to Harlem’s oppression. Yet publicly he continued, mostly, to evoke the neighborhood as the epitome of black communal flourishing rather than indict white supremacy by amplifying Harlem’s distress.

Buoyant, hard-swinging pieces like Ellington’s “Drop Me Off at Harlem” (1933) and his collaborator Billy Strayhorn’s “Take the ‘A’ Train” (1941) reprised the image of Harlem as a site of expectant arrival—the “Mecca of the New Negro”—that had run through much Harlem Renaissance discourse.<sup>51</sup> “‘A’ Train,” with lyrics inspired by directions Ellington had given Strayhorn to his apartment in Harlem’s most prestigious enclave, Sugar Hill, would feature as the band’s theme song for the remainder of Ellington’s career.<sup>52</sup> In countless renditions at the top

<sup>46</sup>Locke, “Harlem,” 629–30; James Weldon Johnson, “The Making of Harlem,” *Survey Graphic* 6/6 (1925), 635–9. Regarding segregation see Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890–1930* (New York, 1966).

<sup>47</sup>Alain Locke, “Harlem: Dark Weather-Vane,” *Survey Graphic* 25/8 (1936), 457–62, 493–5, at 462, 457.

<sup>48</sup>A. Clayton Powell Jr, “Soapbox,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), 21 Nov. 1936, 16. For a nuanced account of the Ellington–Mills financial relationship see Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 49–53.

<sup>49</sup>De Jongh, *Vicious Modernism*, 80, 82–5, 89–92; Paula J. Massood, *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in 20th-Century Photography and Film* (New Brunswick, 2013), 95–7; *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia’s Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935* (New York, 1969).

<sup>50</sup>James Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto: Winter 1948,” *Commentary* 5 (Feb. 1948), 165–70.

<sup>51</sup>*Survey Graphic* 6/6 (1925), front cover.

<sup>52</sup>Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 178.

of a program, featuring vocalists such as Betty Roché, “A’ Train” implicitly cast the ensuing Ellington Orchestra performance—in a dance hall, concert hall, or radio broadcast; in New York, Biloxi, or Damascus—as a sonic journey to Ellington’s Harlem.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, while the titles of his thousands of compositions invoke myriad places, people, moods, and moments, Ellington’s most extensive, luminous programmatic descriptions almost invariably concern Harlem.<sup>54</sup> The romance and exuberance with which he persisted in conjuring the neighborhood are evident in his remarks about “Harlem Air-Shaft” (1940), an acclaimed instrumental piece that, while geared to a three-minute, 78-rpm record side and danceable tempo, exhibits the adventurousness he was simultaneously applying to longer, concert-oriented compositions. A *New Yorker* profile in 1944 quoted Ellington’s description:

You get the full essence of Harlem in an air shaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one great big loudspeaker. You see your neighbors’ laundry. You hear the janitor’s dogs. The man upstairs’ aerial falls down and breaks your window. You smell coffee. A wonderful thing, that smell. An air shaft has got every contrast ... I tried to put all that in “Harlem Air Shaft.”<sup>55</sup>

Glorifying Harlem meant, for Ellington, reveling in the neighborhood’s variety, richness, and clamor as a panoramic setting of black urban modernity. In this sense, incorporation resisted both primitivism and the emerging “ghetto” discourse. No less importantly, as will be seen, it refused any narrow recourse to the politics of respectability that deemed images of working-class tenement life inimical to the pursuit of black rights.

Ellington’s verbal portrait of an often merry and sensuous—if rambunctious, sometimes fractious—tenement life, and the evident fondness with which he sketched it, certainly accord with the high-spirited tone of “Harlem Air-Shaft” itself. The piece fairly bounces through successive brass and reed riffs, finding room for bright, declarative trumpet interjections by Cootie Williams and graceful, swooping solo work by clarinetist Barney Bigard before a final chorus combines the strains in raucous polyphony. All this sounds a world away from the anxiety and threat pervading the naturalist black urban literature of the 1940s. In Ann Petry’s

<sup>53</sup>For these examples see Ken Vail, ed., *Duke’s Diary: Part One: The Life of Duke Ellington 1927–1950* (Lanham, 2002), 326; Vail, ed., *Duke’s Diary, Part Two: The Life of Duke Ellington 1950–1974* (Lanham, 2002), 117, 225.

<sup>54</sup>Among Ellington’s extended, concert-hall-oriented compositions of the decade from 1943 onward, only *A Tone Parallel to Harlem* (1951) is “as explicitly programmatic” as *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943); see Lock, *Blutopia*, 114. The Harlem imagery of both works is discussed below. Edward Green argues convincingly that song titles and programmatic statements, even when created after their respective compositions, illuminate Ellington’s artistic imagination. See Edward Green, “‘Harlem Air-Shaft’: A True Programmatic Composition?” *Journal of Jazz Studies* 7/1 (2011), 28–46.

<sup>55</sup>Richard O. Boyer, “The Hot Bach—2,” *New Yorker*, 1 July 1944, reprinted in *DER*, 225–36, at 235.

*The Street*, the ominous “wind sighing in the airshaft” breaches the apartment walls within which Lutie Johnson tries to shield her young son from Harlem’s menacing presences.<sup>56</sup> Even in 1925, at the zenith of hopes for Harlem, Rudolph Fisher had employed an air-shaft—a vertical “sewer of sounds and smells”—to signify the noxious effects of Harlem’s segregation and overcrowding.<sup>57</sup>

Ellington thus cleaved to the Harlem-centered strategy of cultural vindication devised at the height of the Renaissance by Locke, Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson, even years after Locke had abandoned it. Yet for all his celebrated elegance and decorum, and elite upbringing, “the Duke” never restricted himself to the bourgeois respectability politics of “uplift” that had shaped the racial vindicationism of prominent New Negroes such as Locke, Du Bois, Fauset, and Cullen.<sup>58</sup> While Ellington admired Cullen’s poetic accomplishments, Cullen, a master of sonnet form, had in 1928 dismissed Langston Hughes’s jazz-inspired poems, and warned black artists away from spaces of black life that compromised bourgeois respectability: “Every phase of Negro life should not be the white man’s concern. The parlor should be large enough for his entertainment and instruction.”<sup>59</sup> What Cullen would make of Ellington plunging his interracial audience amid the sounds and smells of a Harlem tenement’s air-shaft can readily be inferred. Yet for Ellington, a sympathetic rendering of working-class black urban life was indispensable to black America’s incorporation.

Harlem also remained vital to Ellington as both a realization and a spatial metaphor of black autonomy. Though his 1931 article had expressed pride in “my race” as “an important and intrinsic part” of the “great” United States, Ellington’s emphasis had been on *apartness*—the separate place (“practically our own city”) and parallel institutions (“our own newspapers and social services”) through which “we have almost achieved our own civilisation.”<sup>60</sup> Harlem’s *telos*, here, recalls Horace Kallen’s (albeit Eurocentric) hard pluralist ideal of an American democracy in which each “ethnic” group would “attain the cultural perfection that is *proper to its kind*.”<sup>61</sup> This pronounced cultural separatism, tinged with essentialism, emerges too in Ellington’s characterizations of his music, which have been bracketed as deviations from his “integrationist” philosophy: “Naturally my own race is closest to my heart; and it is in the musical idiom of that race that I can find my most natural expression”; “The only way to play Negro music is to be a Negro.”<sup>62</sup> A significant, but neglected, implication of such statements is that just as Ellington envisioned Harlem as a self-willed black community, so the blackness of his band’s

<sup>56</sup>Ann Petry, *The Street* (London, 1947; first published 1946), 139.

<sup>57</sup>Rudolph Fisher, “The City of Refuge” (1925), in *The City of Refuge: The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher*, ed. John McCluskey Jr, 2nd edn (Columbia, MO, 2008), 38.

<sup>58</sup>On “uplift” see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

<sup>59</sup>Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 188–9.

<sup>60</sup>Ellington, “Duke Steps Out,” 49.

<sup>61</sup>Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot” (1915), in Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New Brunswick, 1998; first published 1924), 59–117, at 113, emphasis in original.

<sup>62</sup>Duke Ellington, “Music Is ‘Tops’ to You and Me ... And Swing Is a Part of It,” n.d. [1938], Duke Ellington Clippings File 1933–1940; Almena Davis, “Duke Ellington Fascinates Interviewer as He Takes ‘Downbeat’ Writer to Task,” *California Eagle*, 9 Jan. 1941, reprinted in *DER*, 145.

personnel was more than the by-product of a segregated entertainment industry. Indeed, their diverse African American and Caribbean origins made the Ellington Orchestra a microcosm of Harlem's cosmopolitan blackness.<sup>63</sup>

The intrinsic, permanent value of black autonomy conveyed by Ellington's statements contrasts with the softer or more strategic pluralisms of leading New Negro thinkers. Locke had stressed that the cultural "racialism of the Negro" entailed "no limitation or reservation with respect to American life," and Ellington would have concurred. But Locke elaborated that such racialism "is only a constructive effort to build the obstructions in the stream of his progress into an efficient dam of social energy and power," thereby signaling that black communalism and cultural particularism were "only" rational adjustments to exclusion, rather than—as for Ellington—"natural," intrinsically beneficial impulses that could help fashion an ideal pluralist order.<sup>64</sup> Du Bois, meanwhile, despairing of interracial cooperation by the mid-1930s, adopted a version of the leftist "nation-within-a-nation" thesis. Yet unlike Ellington's, Du Bois's advocacy of an autonomous black public sphere was grounded in reluctant, strategic calculation. For Du Bois, who famously had decried the "veil" of race, African Americans had been "confined by an unyielding public opinion to a Negro world." In 1936, he recorded

the degree to which we form today a nation within a nation. Most of us are in separate churches and separate schools; we live largely in separate parts of the city and country districts; we marry almost entirely within our own group and have our own social activities; we get at least part of our news from our own newspapers and attend our own theaters and entertainments, even if white men run them.<sup>65</sup>

These lines uncannily retrace Ellington's depiction of Harlem as "practically our own city." Yet Ellington's bid for incorporation of African Americans into US nationhood through recognition of a valued black apartness led him to celebrate the parallel institutions and "civilisation" emerging in Harlem, and downplay the causal force of segregation. Du Bois, instead, counseled the strategic necessity of seizing command of the separate world engendered by segregation and "run" by "white men."

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<sup>63</sup>The band's all-black composition would change only slightly in the postwar period. Drummer Louis Bellson, in 1951, became its first recognized "white" regular, but throughout the 1950s and 1960s the band rarely featured more than one white musician. See Terry Teachout, *Duke: The Life of Duke Ellington* (London, 2013), 274; Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America*, 391. Harlem's reputation as an almost exclusively black community since the interwar period rested on the separate identity of "East Harlem," across Fifth Avenue, a heavily Italian American area that also housed a growing Puerto Rican community (as, to a lesser degree, did Harlem itself). Harlem's diversity—and that of Ellington's band, which, for example, included the Puerto Rican valve-trombonist Juan Tizol throughout the 1930s and 1940s—was a source of pride and musical inspiration for Ellington, who celebrated the Caribbean influence on the United States in a section of *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943). In his mind, however, Harlem's was categorically a *black* diversity. On the unrivaled ethnic diversity of Harlem's black population see Winston James, "Harlem's Difference," in Fearnley and Matlin, *Race Capital?*, 111–42.

<sup>64</sup>Locke, "Enter the New Negro," 633.

<sup>65</sup>Singh, *Black Is a Country*, quotations at 60, 58. For the "veil" see Du Bois, *Souls*, 109.

## Symphonies in black

As the Ellington Orchestra consolidated its position at the forefront of American dance-band music during the 1930s, and Ellington continued to envision a grand composition that would be “an authentic record of my race,” his association with Harlem only deepened. Newspapers, black and white, dubbed him a “Harlemaestro.”<sup>66</sup> The band traversed the country, typically returning to New York for just a few weeks per year, but Ellington’s marketing as “Harlem’s Aristocrat of Jazz” ensured that Harlem always traveled with them.<sup>67</sup> Even as the Depression’s impact, and periodic violence, tarnished Harlem’s image, Ellington found inventive ways to evoke the neighborhood—as “Harlem Air-Shaft” illustrates—and entwine its name with his own. Performing week-long stints each year at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom and Apollo Theater, and benefits for Harlem charities, Ellington endeared himself to local people who had been barred from his Cotton Club performances.<sup>68</sup> “My home is in Harlem, and I expect it to remain there,” he declared in 1938.<sup>69</sup> His championing of Harlem as a place “apart” continued. Yet he was also intent on vindicating black life as an “integral part” of American life. To this end he would interpolate Harlem into other spaces, with interracial audiences in mind.

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Ellington hinted at ideas for the major composition that eventually became his longest, most formally ambitious concert work, the forty-eight-minute *Black, Brown and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America*. Its January 1943 premiere, as the centerpiece of the Ellington Orchestra’s debut performance at New York’s exalted Carnegie Hall, would mark the most fervently anticipated moment of his long career and one of the most controversial. In the preceding years, Ellington variously referred to his work-in-progress as a “rhapsody,” “suite,” “symphony,” and even “opera,” but generally his remarks outlined a chronological and spatial sequence proceeding from “Africa” to the plantations of “Dixie,” and ultimately “home to Harlem.”<sup>70</sup> No less important than this programmatic geography was Ellington’s spatial vision of the performance itself, as he conceived the work specifically for a concert-hall premiere.

*Symphony in Black*, a remarkable nine-minute film “short” released by Paramount in 1935, provides a manifesto for this musical and spatial agenda.<sup>71</sup> Featuring the Ellington Orchestra performing the imagined “world premiere” of

<sup>66</sup>“Duke Gets New Offers from Films,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 Sept. 1934, 6; Nelson B. Bell, “Box Office Champions for August’ Reflect Mass Taste Typical of ‘Dog Days,’” *Washington Post*, 26 Sept. 1934, 19.

<sup>67</sup>Quoted in Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 59–60; Vail, *Duke’s Diary, Part One*, 205, 297, 115.

<sup>68</sup>Vail, *Duke’s Diary, Part One, passim*. Ellington polled twenty-first among eighty figures who shared 218,000 votes in a “most-popular-person-in-Harlem contest”; see “Dundas Logan Wins Race,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), 9 Feb. 1935, 1, 5.

<sup>69</sup>Ellington, “Music Is ‘Tops’.”

<sup>70</sup>Florence Zunsler, “‘Opera Must Die,’ Says Galli-Curci! Long Live the Blues!”, *New York Evening Graphic Magazine*, 27 Dec. 1930, reprinted in *DER*, 45; “Introducing Ellington,” *Fortune*, Aug. 1933, reprinted in *DER*, 98; “Ellington Completes Negro Opera at Bedside,” *Down Beat*, Oct. 1938, quoted in *DER*, 153.

<sup>71</sup>*Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life*, dir. Fred Waller (Paramount, 1935).

a “symphony of Negro Moods,” the film illuminates how Ellington’s objective of 1931—to relate African American experience through an extended composition—evolved and shaped his developing vision of *Black, Brown and Beige* as an act of interpolation.

The film proceeds, without dialogue, through four sequences corresponding to the movements of Ellington’s notional symphony: “The Laborers,” “A Triangle,” “Hymn of Sorrow,” and “Harlem Rhythm.” Within each, shots of an enlarged Ellington Orchestra in tailcoats, performing the movements on a concert-hall stage, cut to scenes depicting aspects of black life that inspired this “symphony of Negro moods,” and shots of Ellington composing it in his homely studio. “The Laborers” signals an emerging left-realist impulse Ellington wrestled with as he aligned himself substantially with Popular Front aesthetics and politics—though such realism was often overshadowed by his more celebratory imagery.<sup>72</sup> Black workmen, stripped to undershirts, shovel coal into a furnace, their weary motions accentuated by thudding, drummed downbeats. Next, “A Triangle” opens with joyous, swinging music, as a couple dance the “Lindy Hop”—a style intimately associated with Harlem—in an apartment’s cozy living room.<sup>73</sup> Later, on the street, the man is confronted by a spurned lover played by a young Billie Holiday, whom he pushes to the ground, and who sings a blues lament. The plaintive tone continues in “Hymn of Sorrow,” as an elderly preacher leads a mournful prayer. Ellington remarked publicly that this scene “concerns the death of a baby” and “the conditions” that caused it. This is scarcely evident in the film, likely owing to Paramount’s intervention. Ellington further commented that “Hymn of Sorrow” was the film’s “high spot” and “should have come last.”<sup>74</sup> Paramount seemingly reordered Ellington’s progression to conclude with the rousing “Harlem Rhythm,” featuring cabaret dancers in a “Harlem Hot Spot.”

This alteration ostensibly diminished Ellington’s social critique and bolstered Harlem’s stereotyped association with sensual cabaret pleasures (liquor bottles and the serried legs of a female chorus line appear prominently). But the film’s final moments cut back to the concert hall, where Ellington, at the piano, smiles with satisfaction at the orchestra arrayed beyond him. This ending accentuates the film’s spatial schema and makes Ellington’s artistic practice the film’s true subject, by locating his inspiration (Harlem life), composition (studio), and performance (concert hall), and mapping his movements between them. Shots of the black musicians onstage repeatedly pan out to encompass the stalls and their occupants, many of them white. Here was Ellington’s vision of incorporation, enacted by the interpolation of blackness into the central spaces of US national life and cultural consciousness. Film was itself a highly significant space within US public life into which to project pathbreaking images of black creativity and accomplishment.<sup>75</sup> *Symphony in Black*’s added significance, though, lies in its systematic presentation of the spatial techniques Ellington would deploy in the real-world “premiere” of

<sup>72</sup>On Ellington’s alignment with Popular Front and wartime “Double V” politics see Gaines, “Duke Ellington.”

<sup>73</sup>On the Lindy Hop see Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York, 1982), 307.

<sup>74</sup>Edward Morrow, “Duke Ellington on Gershwin’s ‘Porgy,’” *New Theatre*, Dec. 1935, reprinted in *DER*, 116.

<sup>75</sup>Harvey G. Cohen, “Duke Ellington on Film in the 1930s,” *Musical Quarterly* 96/3–4 (2013), 406–25.



*Black, Brown and Beige* eight years later: sounds and stories of an autonomous black peoplehood (“almost ... our own civilisation”) are drawn from the life of Harlem, mediated by Ellington’s pen and orchestra, and finally received and honored within the concert hall, the spatial embodiment of musical worth and dignity within the elevated precincts of American culture.

That concert would be greeted as a major occasion in the wartime artistic life of New York City. After Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky conducted at its opening in 1891, midtown Manhattan’s Carnegie Hall had become the United States’ most iconic classical music venue. Benny Goodman’s swing band had performed there in 1938, and Ellington was reportedly “livid” to have been beaten to it by the white bandleader.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the Ellington Orchestra’s appearance on 23 January 1943 was “the first time a major black composer would present an evening of original music in New York’s most prestigious concert hall.”<sup>77</sup> Goodman, Marian Anderson, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Eleanor Roosevelt, Frank Sinatra, and Leopold Stokowski were among the capacity audience Hughes described as “almost half-and-half—half colored and half white.”<sup>78</sup>

A benefit for Russian War Relief (though Ellington’s onstage remarks focused more on the US war effort), the concert also honored the Ellington Orchestra’s “Twentieth Anniversary.”<sup>79</sup> The program’s first half, culminating in *Black, Brown and Beige*, appeared more specifically to commemorate twenty years of Ellington’s association with New York and, above all, Harlem. Following a distinctively Ellingtonian “Star Spangled Banner” came “Black and Tan Fantasy,” first recorded in 1927.<sup>80</sup> The title referenced nightclubs, most famously in Harlem, that had catered to a racially mixed clientele at the height of the “Negro vogue.”<sup>81</sup> In commencing the evening’s program by recalling the interracial encounters of 1920s New York, Ellington seemingly invited his audience to reflect on the distance between the white “slumming” of those years (“Oh, I met a million of those cats” seeking “this unusual experience. A form of slumming, something to look down on,” he would tell Carter Harman) and the alternative mode of interracial encounter embodied in the concert itself, which brought Harlem—a fuller, multifaceted Harlem—down to Carnegie Hall, at the geographic center of Manhattan and symbolic center of American art music, on Ellington’s terms.<sup>82</sup>

The printed program grouped “Black and Tan Fantasy” with “Rockin’ in Rhythm” (1931) and two other short compositions credited to Ellington’s son, Mercer, as forming one of three segments within the concert’s first half.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>76</sup>Teachout, *Duke*, 4.

<sup>77</sup>Mark Tucker, editorial remarks in *DER*, 153.

<sup>78</sup>Anna Harwell Celenza, “The 1940s: The Blanton–Webster Band, Carnegie Hall, and the Challenge of the Postwar Era,” in Edward Green, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington* (Cambridge, 2014), 121–33, at 127; Langston Hughes, “Here to Yonder: The Duke Plays for Russia,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 Feb. 1943, 14.

<sup>79</sup>*The Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts, January 1943* (Prestige 340004-2), CD; concert program, 23 Jan. 1943, reprinted in *DER*, 161.

<sup>80</sup>Bubber Miley was listed as Ellington’s co-composer of this piece. See concert program, 161.

<sup>81</sup>See also Ellington’s Harlem-based film *Black and Tan*, dir. Dudley Murphy (RKO, 1929).

<sup>82</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0008-2 (31 Oct. 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews.

<sup>83</sup>Harry Carney co-composed “Rockin’ in Rhythm.”

Between this opening segment and *Black, Brown and Beige* was a trio of musical “Portraits” of the actor and comedian Bert Williams, the tap dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and the singer Florence Mills. All three were famously associated with Harlem.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the program notes mentioned Robinson’s popular status as unofficial “Mayor of Harlem.”<sup>85</sup> Ellington’s inclusion of these tributes takes on added significance in light of an article he had written for a black theater magazine in 1938, while recovering from a hernia operation. The view of midtown Manhattan’s skyscrapers from his Wickersham Hospital window had “thrilled” Ellington. He had

spent some time comparing the marvelous sky-line to our race, likening the Chrysler tower, the Empire State building and other lofty structures to the lives of Bert Williams, Florence Mills and other immortals of the entertainment field ... And it seemed to me, from where I was lying, that in addition to their great talent, the qualities which have made really great stars are those of simplicity, sincerity, and a rigid adherence to the traditions of our own people.<sup>86</sup>

Ellington’s words make plain the vividly spatial, and urban, character of his artistic, social, and racial imagination. Transmuting iconic features of New York’s architectural topography into the towering figures of Williams and Mills, he conveyed patriotic reverence for the “marvelous sky-line” that emblemized American modernity while simultaneously blackening this archetypal American space by bringing Williams and Mills down from Harlem and memorializing them at the very center of Manhattan—much as the performance of his “Portraits” at Carnegie Hall would do five years later. Here again, in both cases, was a vision of incorporation, a spatial inclusion that achieved a blackening of the US national domain. This was integration not as racial amalgamation or even cultural syncretism, but as the interpolation of autonomous black expression (“rigid adherence to the traditions of our own people”) into the venerated, now interracial, spaces of US national life.

*Black, Brown and Beige* then clinched Harlem’s induction into the sacral realm of American art music, before the concert’s second half reverted to more familiar short-form Ellingtonia. More has been written about *Black, Brown and Beige* than any other Ellington composition, and much of this concerns its sweeping musical narration of black history.<sup>87</sup> While it is the final movement, “Beige,” that has its programmatic basis in Harlem, that movement’s significance derives from its place within the larger “Tone Parallel.” Over the years, Ellington had characterized

<sup>84</sup>Williams (in 1922) and Mills (in 1927) had been honored with two of the “great funerals of Harlem,” as Robinson would be (in 1949); see Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 230.

<sup>85</sup>Irving Kolodin, “Notes on the Program,” 23 Jan. 1943, reprinted in *DER*, 162.

<sup>86</sup>Duke Ellington, “From Where I Lie,” *Negro Actor*, 15 July 1938, reprinted in *DER*, 131.

<sup>87</sup>See esp. Lisa Barg and Walter van de Leur, “Your Music Has Flung the Story of ‘Hot Harlem’ to the Four Corners of the Earth! Race and Narrative in *Black, Brown and Beige*,” *Musical Quarterly* 96/3–4 (2013), 426–58; Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 203–43; Gaines, “Duke Ellington”; Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 182–99; Lock, *Blutopia*, 108–18; Mark Tucker, “The Genesis of ‘Black, Brown and Beige,’” *Black Music Research Journal* 13/2 (1993), 67–86.

the historical trajectory of his work-in-progress in ways that assigned equal weight to Harlem—a slender portion of Manhattan that had been a major site of black settlement for scarcely three decades—as to “Africa” and “Dixie” as spatio-temporal markers of Black World-historical proportions.

The composition’s vast historical and geographic scales have important antecedents in African American music and drama. Du Bois’s pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*, which Ellington might have witnessed in Washington in 1915, had aimed to encompass “10,000 years of the Negro race.”<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, “Africa–Dixie–Harlem” sequences had featured in interwar Harlem cabaret shows. Ellington applied the moral seriousness and historical vindicationism of the former to rework the formulas of the latter, which had typically evoked Africa and the South as clichéd foils for Harlem’s modern spectacles.<sup>89</sup> Through musical segments that he briefly described in remarks before each movement—including “Work Song,” the spiritual “Come Sunday,” “West Indian Dance,” “Emancipation Celebration,” and “The Blues”—Ellington imparted to “Black” and “Brown” a density of diasporic historical references that countered commonplace denials of black history and civilization.<sup>90</sup>

“Beige” assails the primitivist stereotypes that had overshadowed New Negro idealizations of Harlem as “practically our own city.” Indeed, Ellington grapples with his own Cotton Club years, which had involved accommodating to (albeit signifying on) many of those stereotypes. This emerges clearly from an undated typescript in his archive that furnishes detailed, verse-like narratives relating to the composition’s movements. Scholars have differed over whether the document pre-dates or post-dates Ellington’s completion of the score.<sup>91</sup> Yet Ellington mentioned his “annotations” to Harman, and asked, “Would you like to see what I wrote? In 1943? 1942 or 1943? This was before the music was written for *Black, Brown and Beige*.”<sup>92</sup>

Typescript sections headed “Black” and “Brown” trace the journey of “Boola,” a transhistorical figure personifying black experience, from African and southern enslavement to Emancipation. “Beige,” however, brings a shift in voice, as third-person narration of Boola’s story gives way and Ellington himself appears to speak to, and of, present-day Harlem.<sup>93</sup>

HARLEM! Black metropolis!  
Land of mirth!  
Your music has flung  
The Story of “Hot Harlem”  
To the Four corners  
Of the earth!

“Hot Harlem” is exposed as myth, a cabaret confection of “shuffling heels” and the “primeval beat of the jungle” that is audible in the movement’s frenetic, discordant

<sup>88</sup>Tucker, “Genesis,” 69.

<sup>89</sup>Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 183–4.

<sup>90</sup>*Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts*.

<sup>91</sup>See Edwards, “Literary Ellington,” 22 n. 53.

<sup>92</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0001-1 (May 1956), Box 6, Harman Interviews.

<sup>93</sup>Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 291.

opening.<sup>94</sup> Ellington's brief, halting onstage remarks about "Beige" at Carnegie Hall did not name Harlem (unlike the concert's program notes).<sup>95</sup> He did, however, explain its opening as invoking "the veneer that we chip off as we get closer and find that all these people who are making all this noise and responding to the tomtoms are only a few people making a living," who often "don't have enough to eat."<sup>96</sup> Ellington later told Harman that the Harlem cabaret "girl" doing the "squirring dance" was "not in the throes of passion. She was working to get that salary to take home and feed her baby."<sup>97</sup> The typescript for "Beige" similarly strips away the cabaret's exotic "veneer" to reveal a site of labor, exploitation, and suffering:

Who draped those basement dens  
With silk, but knaves and robbers  
And their ilk??  
Who came to prostitute your art  
And gave you pennies  
For your part ...  
And ill-repute?

While Ellington had recoiled from acknowledging segregation in his 1931 article, the typescript portrays a Harlem "shoved and / Shut off" by external forces.<sup>98</sup>

Beyond demystifying the cabaret, Ellington's "Beige" typescript attacks the notion that its sensationalized pleasures represent the sum total of Harlem life:

Harlem ... for all her moral lurches  
Has always had  
LESS cabarets than churches!<sup>99</sup>

A formulation he later reemployed, the insistence that Harlem had "more churches than cabarets" (and "more well-educated and ambitious Negroes than wastrels") points to Ellington's liminal position between the Harlem Renaissance's two major, competing aesthetic and ideological tendencies, and, relatedly, his complex intraracial class politics.<sup>100</sup> Much of the New Negro elite, including Du Bois and Locke, had viewed jazz and the blues with skepticism or outright distaste, instead promoting the adaptation of black spirituals into scored-through concert music

<sup>94</sup>"Black, Brown and Beige" typescript, n.d., Series 5, Box 6, Folder 1, "Beige," 1–2, Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (hereinafter BBB typescript). The Duke Ellington Collection contains several marginally different typescript versions; see Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America*, 609 n. 20.

<sup>95</sup>Kolodin, "Notes," 163.

<sup>96</sup>*Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts*.

<sup>97</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0004-2 (30 May 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews. Here, the "Labor" signified as male in *Symphony in Black* becomes female—as, reflecting Ellington's protective stance, does Harlem ("for all her moral lurches") in BBB typescript, "Beige," 4.

<sup>98</sup>BBB typescript, "Beige," 4–5.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>100</sup>Quoted in Gunnar Askland, "Interpretations in Jazz: A Conference with Duke Ellington," *Etude*, March 1947, reprinted in *DER*, 257. See also Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, 189.

that would be grounded in—but would elevate to the status of “art”—a wholesome, sacred vernacular relatively free of the salacious connotations of urban, working-class, commercialized black secular music.<sup>101</sup> Shane Vogel has good reasons to identify Ellington with the opposing “cabaret school” writers, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman. This countercurrent resisted the bourgeois, puritanical “uplift” morality espoused by the Harlem Renaissance establishment, and reveled in the cabaret and its music as spaces in which heterodox black subjectivities could emerge across sexual, class, and racial boundaries.<sup>102</sup> Yet the manner in which the post-Cotton Club Ellington sought to loosen Harlem’s association with cabarets—in particular, the deeply religious Ellington’s repeated emphasis on “churches”—complicates his cabaret school alignment, even indicating a degree of congruence with the uplift-oriented vindicationism of more socially conservative New Negroes.<sup>103</sup> Du Bois, in 1926, had ridiculed the presumption that “the black cabaret *is* Harlem,” venturing that the “average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere.”<sup>104</sup> Ellington’s reworking of Harlem imagery in *Symphony in Black* and *Black, Brown and Beige*, while not renouncing the cabaret or its music, similarly brought sites of labor, spirituality, and domesticity into view.

As “Harlem’s Aristocrat of Jazz,” Ellington traversed intra-Renaissance fault lines, though scholarship has variously assigned him to one side or the other.<sup>105</sup> His music was rooted in urban black vernacular idioms and, like the cabaret school writers, he gloried in the blues (vulgar, profane music, from uplift’s perspective). Flouting Cullen’s bourgeois “parlor” prescriptions, Ellington’s incorporation of Harlem dignified its working-class tenements and the laboring bodies of its male and female workers. Langston Hughes, then, had plenty to applaud from his seat at Carnegie Hall. Yet Ellington also brought to jazz the aristocratic, polished demeanor, honed among the black Washingtonian elite, that had earned him the nickname “Duke” even in his teens. His glorification of Harlem exalted the bourgeois serenity and grandeur of Sugar Hill and “Strivers’ Row”—he later objected to portrayals of Harlem that ignored its “quiet people,” “the doctors, or the lawyers, the dentists, the nurses, the ministers” who lived “a very conservative life”—even as it embraced the air-shaft’s din and the hectic pulse of Harlem’s nightlife.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>101</sup>Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC, 2001).

<sup>102</sup>Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago, 2009), esp. 1–3, 34.

<sup>103</sup>On Ellington’s religiosity see Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 448–51.

<sup>104</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, “Books,” *Crisis* 33/2 (1926), 81–2, at 81, emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup>Ellington is linked to the “cabaret school” in Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, and, relatedly, distanced from Du Bois and Locke but likened to Hughes in Howland, *Ellington Uptown*. Meanwhile, he is characterized as largely sharing Lockean aspirations for black concert music in Anderson, *Deep River*. Ellington in fact attended Harlem society gatherings with both camps simultaneously: with Locke as well as Hughes and Carl Van Vechten in 1930, and with Cullen as well as Van Vechten in 1935. See “Society,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), 9 April 1930, 4; “Bidden for 2, Guests Stay 4 Pleasant Hours Overtime,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), 2 March 1935, 6.

<sup>106</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0004-2 (30 May 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews. On the nickname “Duke” see Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America*, 16. Ellington’s remark about “wastrels” (above) echoes distinctions

Moreover, his determination to secure for black music the cachet of “art”—and recognition by white Americans of its cultural worth within the concert hall, and through extended compositional forms—helps account for Alain Locke’s enthusiastic presence in the Carnegie Hall audience.<sup>107</sup>

This indeterminacy between cabaret and uplift aesthetics—and between uplift’s elitist class politics and the proletarian sensibility evident in *Symphony in Black*—reverberates in the typescript and music for *Black, Brown and Beige*. Having portrayed a community of exploited laborers, now riddled with “dope,” “disease,” and “despair” (“And Harlem ... / How’d you come to be / *Permitted* / In a land that’s free??”), the typescript suddenly resuscitates Harlem’s promise:

Ah, yes! But Harlem  
 You are strong.  
 You’ve stood the test  
 And *they* are wrong!  
 You’ve dodged the snare of subjugation  
 And ripped the bars with education  
 And now you stan[d] prepared to lead  
 Your brothers from the wilderness  
 Of hopelessness and need.  
 TAKE HEART!<sup>108</sup>

Correspondingly, the music moves from a mournful, ensemble-saxophone passage, through a brisker, slightly haughty waltz, and into a stately clarinet and saxophone theme in 4/4 time that Ellington named “Sugar Hill Penthouse.”<sup>109</sup> As the typescript reverts from “despair” to something recalling Ellington’s optimism about Harlem back in 1931, so the music’s allusion to Sugar Hill’s refinement restores Harlem’s idealization as a place of black accomplishment and dignity. The typescript’s assurance that Harlem is again ready “to lead” revives the notion of Harlem as black vanguard, testifying to Ellington’s enduring attachment to the Harlem-centered New Negro strategy of racial vindication.

Ellington never published his typescript, even though, stung by criticisms of *Black, Brown and Beige*’s premiere, he complained that the history it paralleled was unfamiliar to many who had heard it.<sup>110</sup> Much of the disapproval targeted Ellington’s approach to extended form, which was found wanting by reviewers who could only conceive of thematic development in Eurocentric, symphonic terms.

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between “loafers” and a respectable working class in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia, 1899), 60.

<sup>107</sup>By the mid-1930s, Locke regarded Ellington as capable of engendering a “higher level” of “classical jazz”; see Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC, 1936), 99. Nevertheless, as Howland’s study indicates, Ellington’s conception of his extended forms as developments of black popular music and popular arranging conventions differed from Locke’s more Eurocentric idealization of the application of “classical” forms to black folk idioms. See Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 55–6, 103–4, 272, 297–8.

<sup>108</sup>BBB typescript, “Beige,” 4–5, emphasis in original.

<sup>109</sup>This reworked Billy Strayhorn’s “Symphonette-Rhythmique.” See David Schiff, *The Ellington Century* (Berkeley, 2012), 228.

<sup>110</sup>Barry Ulanov, “Ellington’s Carnegie Hall Concert a Glorified Stage Show,” *Metronome*, Jan. 1944, reprinted in *DER*, 212.

The structure of this and other extended Ellington works was repeatedly derided as “fragmentary.” However, the rapidly shifting tempos and themes that such critics found “awkward, abrupt” or “isolated, unintegrated” relate closely to Ellington’s subject matter.<sup>111</sup> Ralph Ellison once wrote that the artist Romare Bearden’s “meaning is identical with his method,” his collage technique “itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams which characterize much of Negro American history.”<sup>112</sup> Ellington’s “Beige,” with its especially “loose, episodic” structure, can similarly be heard as a parallel to Harlem migrants’ telescoped encounters with urban modernity.<sup>113</sup> His “abrupt,” “unintegrated” forms, no less than his idealized Harlem, signified black particularity.

The concert as a whole received considerable praise, and annual Ellington Orchestra concerts at Carnegie Hall over the next five years were milestones in jazz’s recognition as “art” music.<sup>114</sup> The criticisms of *Black, Brown and Beige* help explain why, after January 1943, Ellington never again performed the work in its entirety. Yet the value of his first Carnegie Hall concert as an act of interpolation struck Ellington as deeply significant. Reflecting on his career in 1952, Ellington highlighted that occasion, which had “enabled me to present my Tone Parallel to the history of the American Negro.” Especially significant was “the audience” at that and subsequent Carnegie Hall concerts: the “quality of the appreciation, the attentiveness of the entire crowd of 3,000 people to every note we played” was a “model” that “proved hard to duplicate.”<sup>115</sup> The gathering of this devoted interracial audience, at the heart of American musical and metropolitan life, to listen intently to Ellington’s “record of my race” as performed by his black orchestra, was a vindication in itself. It had been important to Ellington that Carnegie Hall be transformed by the presence of his orchestra and its music, rather than the other way around. Shortly before its premiere, the journalist Helen Oakley reported Ellington insistently denying that *Black, Brown and Beige* was an attempt at “symphonic” or any other “accepted classic form.” Ellington remarked, “The things we use are purely Negroid—we want to stay in character ... We desire to remain true to self.”<sup>116</sup> That self was also resolutely American. Ellington, whose son Mercer was serving in the US Army, concluded his prefatory remarks to “Beige” by observing that “as before, we of course find the black, brown and beige right in there for the red, white and blue.”<sup>117</sup>

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 211; Alec Wilder, “A Look at the Duke,” *Saturday Review*, 28 Aug. 1948, reprinted in *DER*, 258. See related criticisms in James Lincoln Collier, *Duke Ellington* (New York, 1987), 285; Teachout, *Duke*, 242.

<sup>112</sup>Ralph Ellison, “The Art of Romare Bearden” (1968), in Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 697.

<sup>113</sup>Quotation from Brian Priestley and Alan Cohen, “Black, Brown & Beige,” *Composer 53* (1974–5), reprinted in *DER*, 199. My interpretation complements the likening of the “episodic” “Beige” to the “sharp contrasts” of “twentieth-century life” in *ibid.*, 200. On similarities between Ellington’s episodic concert form and popular arranging forms, including those of Harlem floor shows, see Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 103, 128.

<sup>114</sup>Harvey G. Cohen, “Duke Ellington and ‘Black, Brown and Beige’: The Composer as Historian at Carnegie Hall,” *American Quarterly* 56/4 (2004), 1003–34, at 1027.

<sup>115</sup>Duke Ellington, untitled, *Down Beat*, 5 Nov. 1952, reprinted in *DER*, 266–7.

<sup>116</sup>Helen M. Oakley, “Ellington to Offer ‘Tone Parallel,’” *Down Beat*, 15 Jan. 1943, reprinted in *DER*, 156.

<sup>117</sup>*Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts*.

Ellington's increasingly emphatic patriotism had been evident two years earlier when, at the invitation of a Los Angeles church, he had delivered a commentary on the line "I, too, sing America" from a Langston Hughes poem of 1926.<sup>118</sup> More than any other artist, it was Hughes, younger than Ellington by just three years, whose use of Harlem to express the relationship of black peoplehood to American nationhood resonated with Ellington's over a period of decades. Though not intimate friends, Ellington and Hughes had spoken during the mid-1930s about collaborating, and did so in 1941 as contributors to *Jump for Joy*, a Los Angeles musical revue suffused with the ethos of the Popular Front, which lampooned the minstrel-derived stereotypes still pervasive in American entertainment.<sup>119</sup> "The Negro," Ellington averred as he riffed on Hughes's poem, was the "shot in the arm" that had "kept America and its forgotten principles alive."<sup>120</sup> Both men resisted the tide of naturalistic depictions of black life during the 1940s, and the longevity of their commitment to the trope of Harlem similarly marked them out among their generation of black artists.<sup>121</sup> The possibility of the neighborhood's revival as a frontier of black progress, which Ellington held out amid the melancholy of his "Beige" typescript, would also surface in 1951, in a more subdued register, in Hughes's poetic image of Harlem as a "dream deferred." Moreover, Hughes's elaboration of that image as a "Dream within a dream" interpolates the black freedom struggle into the very cadences of US nationalist mythology, anticipating Martin Luther King Jr's most famous oration even as it recalls the distinctively Ellingtonian sense of "nation within a nation."<sup>122</sup>

## Coda

How forcefully Ellington's interpolation of blackness in January 1943 challenged prevailing conceptions of the US cultural domain can be gauged from the title of the *New York Times Magazine's* feature, "The 'Duke' Invades Carnegie Hall."<sup>123</sup> Over time, however, his vision of incorporation would prove politically pliable. As a discourse of national inclusion, incorporation chimed well with the strains of liberal and left patriotism that fashioned a more capacious, egalitarian US nationalism during the Popular Front period, from Franklin Roosevelt's celebration of the "richness" immigrants brought to American culture to Earl Browder's declaration that "Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century."<sup>124</sup>

<sup>118</sup>Duke Ellington, "We, Too, Sing 'America'" (1941), reprinted in *DER*, 146; Langston Hughes, "I, Too" (1926), in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York, 1994), 46.

<sup>119</sup>Denning, *Cultural Front*, 309–19.

<sup>120</sup>Ellington, "We, Too, Sing 'America,'" 147–8.

<sup>121</sup>On Hughes's disavowal of the naturalism epitomized by Richard Wright see Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2, 1941–1967: *I Dream a World*, 2nd edn (New York, 2002), 14–15.

<sup>122</sup>Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), reprinted in Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 387–429, quotations at 429. Regarding King's 1963 discourse on his "dream deeply rooted in the American dream" see Eric J. Sundquist, *King's Dream* (New Haven, 2009). For all that connects Ellington's and Hughes's work, Hughes's was more consistently proletarian in orientation, without the notes of gentility (and uplift) that also characterize the music and self-fashioning of "the Duke."

<sup>123</sup>Taubman, "The 'Duke' Invades Carnegie Hall."

<sup>124</sup>"Speech of the President, Roosevelt Park, New York City," 28 Oct. 1936, at [www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/\\_resources/images/msf/msf01022](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/msf/msf01022); Earl Browder, *What Is Communism?* (New York, 1936), 19. More generally see Denning, *Cultural Front*.



Yet from the late 1940s, Ellington's increasing alignment with tenets of Cold War-era American exceptionalism, evident, for example, in his tributes to American "freedom of musical speech," eased the way for his later adoption as an icon of a distinctly conservative brand of black cultural and social criticism that coalesced during the final two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>125</sup>

An important step toward this mode of veneration was made by the novelists and essayists Ralph Ellison (1914–94) and Albert Murray (1916–2013), two long-term Harlem residents who, in their own ways, elaborated on Ellington's affirmative portrayals of the neighborhood as distinctively black and quintessentially American. For both, Ellington embodied a "heroic" American individualism that found its highest artistic expression in jazz.<sup>126</sup> At the hands of their devotee, the critic Stanley Crouch (1945–2020), who was schooled at Murray's informal "Harlem lyceum" during the late 1970s, such black-and-American patriotism and veneration of Ellington were given a sharply polemical edge and eventually assimilated into a triumphalist post-Cold War American nationalism.<sup>127</sup> A prominent exponent of what has been termed black "neoconservatism," Crouch combined the idea that African American culture and freedom struggles were the historic core of American democratic life with a (viscerally patriarchal) declension narrative wherein music and morality had succumbed to creeping anarchy since the 1960s.<sup>128</sup> Together with his protégé Wynton Marsalis (born 1961), the feted trumpeter and influential director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Crouch has championed "traditional" musical and moral standards, along with recognition of the indispensability of African American culture to American exceptionalism. Into this project they have heavily enlisted the music and aura of Ellington, most conspicuously through their leading roles in shaping Ken Burns's nineteen-hour documentary series *Jazz*, which reached an estimated 23 million American television viewers in 2001.<sup>129</sup>

The elements of Ellington's spatial practice of interpolation, meanwhile, have also proven supple in their adaptation to serve an eclectic range of political and aesthetic purposes. When Richard Nixon held a state banquet in Ellington's honor in 1969, Ralph Ellison reveled in Ellington's being accorded "the highest hospitality of the nation's First Family in its greatest house," anticipating by forty years the tenor of much commentary that greeted the Obamas' arrival at the White House.<sup>130</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton*, which opened on Broadway in 2015,

<sup>125</sup>Ellington quoted in Askland, "Interpretations in Jazz," 256.

<sup>126</sup>Ellison, "Harlem's America"; Ralph Ellison, "Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday" (1969), in Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 680–87; Murray, *Omni-Americans*, esp. 76. See also Daniel Matlin, "Blues under Siege: Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and the Idea of America," in Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (New York, 2012), 195–222.

<sup>127</sup>John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago, 2006), 341, 347; Matlin, "Blues under Siege," 216–17; Stanley Crouch, "Play the Right Thing," *New Republic*, 12 Feb. 1990, 30–37, at 36.

<sup>128</sup>Crouch, "Play the Right Thing"; Bill Shoemaker, *Jazz in the 1970s: Diverging Streams* (London, 2018), 216.

<sup>129</sup>*Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns* (PBS Video, 2001); Wynton Marsalis, "What Jazz Is—and Isn't," *New York Times*, 31 July 1988, H21; Euan P. Staples, "'You Can't Steal a Gift': Narrative(s) of Nation in Ken Burns's *Jazz*," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 21/2 (2002), 15–32.

<sup>130</sup>Ellison, "Homage to Duke Ellington," 680; Jodi Kantor, "Nation's Many Faces in Extended First Family," *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 2009, A1.

similarly interpolated blackness, and a wider racial diversity, into the recitation of the US nationalist and patriarchal narratives of the “Founding Fathers” and “First Family.”<sup>131</sup> However, while each of these examples echoes, to some degree, Ellington’s deployment of his spatial practice in service of a US-national incorporation of blackness, others indicate a more radical potential within Ellingtonian interpolation, when decoupled, or at least loosened, from incorporation’s constraints as a patriarchal US nationalist discourse of inclusion. Faith Ringgold’s 1991 story-quilt picturing black women and girls dancing before the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre and Serena Williams’s joyful dance on Wimbledon’s Centre Court in 2012 are two such instances.<sup>132</sup> The Carters’ music video *Apeshit* (2018), in its defiant exhibiting of black music, dance, and bodies within the Louvre’s galleries, reprises Ringgold’s ambush of the precincts and canons of “Western art.”<sup>133</sup> Each performance reverberates with Ellington’s “desire to remain true to self” when his band had breached another space steeped in white self-regard. Yet they interpolate blackness not into the nation, as Ellington had done, but into a (by their very acts of insertion and interruption) decolonized, depatriarchalized, and deprovincialized conception of humanity.

The Carnegie Hall concert of January 1943 marked the high point of an artistic project in which Ellington had performed his conception of African Americans as “something apart, yet an integral part.” He had done so, above all, through his revision of Harlem’s imagery, and through the sequence of movements by which he interpolated the neighborhood and its symbolism, and the epic of black history, into the physical and imaginative realms of US national life. Ellington had turned to Harlem at critical junctures in his career, and did so again in the immediate post-war years, most notably in composing *A Tone Parallel to Harlem* for performance at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House in January 1951, and in including that fourteen-minute work in his first long-playing record, *Ellington Uptown* (1953).<sup>134</sup> The genesis of *A Tone Parallel to Harlem*, commissioned by Arturo Toscanini for an intended series of works by major composers on the theme of New York City, must have delighted Ellington.<sup>135</sup> The commission and Met premiere seemed to herald a newly canonical place for dignified treatments of Harlem at

<sup>131</sup>For an astute critique see Annette Gordon-Reed, “*Hamilton: The Musical*: Blacks and the Founding Fathers,” *History@Work*, 6 April 2016, at <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/hamilton-the-musical-blacks-and-the-founding-fathers>.

<sup>132</sup>Faith Ringgold, *The French Connection Part I: #1, Dancing at the Louvre* (1991), reproduced in Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, NC, 2005), 122; Clinton Yates, “Serena Williams and the Crip Walk,” *Washington Post*, 5 Aug. 2012, at [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/serena-williams-and-the-crip-walk/2012/08/05/ade59954-df25-11e1-a19c-fcfa365396c8\\_blog.html?utm\\_term=.e126d4018fe0](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/serena-williams-and-the-crip-walk/2012/08/05/ade59954-df25-11e1-a19c-fcfa365396c8_blog.html?utm_term=.e126d4018fe0).

<sup>133</sup>The Carters [Beyoncé and Jay-Z], *Apeshit* (Roc Nation, 2018); Loney Abrams, “‘Apeshit’ at the Louvre, ‘Like Life’ at Met Breuer, and the Persistent Whiteness of Neoclassicism,” *Artspace*, 22 June 2018, at [www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/in\\_depth/apeshit-at-the-louvre-like-life-at-met-breuer-and-the-persistent-whiteness-of-neoclassicism-55500](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/in_depth/apeshit-at-the-louvre-like-life-at-met-breuer-and-the-persistent-whiteness-of-neoclassicism-55500); Alexandria Payne, “I Can’t Believe We Made It’: The Carters and the Politics of Art, Race, and Black Performance” (undergraduate dissertation, King’s College London, 2019).

<sup>134</sup>Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *Ellington Uptown* (Columbia ML4639), 1953, LP.

<sup>135</sup>Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 10.

the center of New York's self-mythologizing as the great American metropolis and apex of national culture.

Yet *Harlem*, as this work became known, has a distinctly nostalgic, even elegiac, quality. After the caustic indictments of white supremacy in the "Beige" typescript, *Harlem's* music and Ellington's programmatic descriptions of it seemed to revert to the celebratory tenor of earlier works such as "Drop Me Off at Harlem" and "Harlem Air-Shaft." From its opening notes, slowly growling the word "Harlem" through Cootie Williams's "speaking" trumpet, the piece evokes a grandeur more easily related to the hopes Ellington had invested in Harlem twenty years earlier, as "practically our own city," than to the postwar neighborhood, scarred by neglect, decay, and depopulation, that was now losing many of its renowned artists and professionals to New York's outer boroughs and suburbs.<sup>136</sup> This nostalgia, effecting a certain slippage between past and present, is equally audible in Ellington's interviews with Harman in 1964. Here, Ellington likens *Harlem* to a musical "stroll" up Seventh Avenue, and comments, "Harlem has—ah, had—a language of its own, a musical language of its own. It wasn't like anybody else. Wasn't like any place else."<sup>137</sup> The quickly self-corrected present tense hints at a wider temporal conflation that he knew was stretching thin. Elsewhere in the interviews, he spoke with frustration, sometimes bitterness, about the creeping loss of the apartness that had characterized Harlem and other black urban communities, and connected this to what he viewed as a loss of the communal solidarity and discipline necessary to the struggle for equality.<sup>138</sup> Ellington perhaps conceived *Harlem* and *My People* (1963) much as the poet Melvin Tolson conceived *Harlem Gallery* (1965), which Tolson called his attempt "to picture the Negro in America before he becomes the giant auk of the melting pot in the dawn of the twenty-second century."<sup>139</sup>

Harlem somewhat receded from the foreground of Ellington's compositional imaginary in the two decades prior to his death in 1974. International travel, including State Department-sponsored "goodwill tours," consumed a growing proportion of his time, and infused new works such as *Far East Suite* (1966), *Latin American Suite* (1968), and *Goutelas Suite* (1971).<sup>140</sup> The strident Cold War Americanism that had studded his remarks since the late 1940s eased his (partial) acceptance of "jazz" as a name for what he now described as an "American music" of "freedom."<sup>141</sup> And, as Harlem's image as the archetypal "ghetto" hardened, this variety of Americanism helped fill the gap left by his eclipsed vision of a proudly

<sup>136</sup>Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 347–50.

<sup>137</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0008-2 (11 Aug. 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews.

<sup>138</sup>Tape AC0422-RTC0004-2 (30 May 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews. Cohen rightly describes the mid-1960s Ellington as rejecting what Ellington saw as black power's anti-white "separatism"; see Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America*, 406, 404. Ellington's vision, however, involved a particular kind of separation ("purely Negroid"; "something apart"), even as it constituted a specific mode of integrationism ("an integral part").

<sup>139</sup>Quoted in Andrew M. Fearnley, "From Prophecy to Preservation: Harlem as Temporal Vector," in Fearnley and Matlin, *Race Capital?*, 27–46, at 34.

<sup>140</sup>Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 121–47.

<sup>141</sup>"Why Duke Ellington Avoided Music Schools," *PM*, 9 Dec. 1945, reprinted in *DER*, 252–5; Tape AC0422-RTC0008-1 (11 Aug. 1964), Box 6, Harman Interviews.

autonomous black neighborhood incorporated into, and honored by, New York City and the wider US nation. Alongside the regret about the loss of black apartness that laced his words to Harman in 1964 was a measure of acceptance and a determination to keep moving. In the 1920s, he had tried to convince fellow bandleader Fletcher Henderson “that we ought to call what we were doing ‘Negro music’,” he told another interviewer the following year. “But it’s too late for that now,” he continued. “The music has become so integrated you can’t tell one part from the other as far as color is concerned. Well, I don’t have time to worry about it. I’ve got too much music on my mind.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup>Quoted in Nat Hentoff, “This Cat Needs No Pulitzer Prize,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 Sept. 1965, reprinted in *DER*, 363.

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