The In-Between of Jazz and the Blues: Beyond Marginality in Esi Edugyan’s *Half-Blood Blues*

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Seldom have I read such poetic words of praise as there are on the introductory pages of the novel *Half-Blood Blues* by the Ghanaian-born Canadian writer Esi Edugyan. As *The Seattle Times* puts it, “the story hurls us from Baltimore, to Berlin, to Paris, to an obscure Polish town—as breathlessly as that trumpet player finishing a long heartfelt riff. From bleak, violent cityscapes, it shifts to the troubled souls of the musicians as they tend the pure flame of art and the impure fire of jealousy.” Indeed, the book, which won many prizes in Canada as well as in America and Europe, features an old bass player, Sid, who basically tells the story of the group of Jazz musicians he played with at the time of the Second World War, presenting, to quote *Newsday* from the introductory pages to the novel : “A bold imagining of a hitherto little-regarded corner of the black Diaspora.” As this paper will show, this marginalized little corner of the black Diaspora is centralized in memory, here, through a palimpsests of liminalities: temporal, spatial, racial and, most gloriously, musical, as well as generic and linguistic, which in the end turns out to be a veritable *ligne de fuite*, to use the term of Gilles Deleuze. Indeed, while the Blues, as a musical genre, represents an endeavour to overcome—or at least live with—racial injustice and grief, Jazz, in its turn, is an overcoming of the Blues towards a brighter future. The symbolics of this transformation is important and can be seen, for instance, in Toni Morrison’s well-known novel *Jazz*. But in the context of a war-ridden Europe, the celebration that Jazz represents is returned towards the suffering of the Blues, the plot of the novel centering around the record that the musicians try to produce in Paris, in the in-between of the two musical styles, its title also the title of the novel: *Half-Blood Blues*.

The temporal in-betweenness that the novel places itself in, though Sid’s memories, goes from 1939 Berlin to 1992 Berlin, via Baltimore and Paris, Montmartre, here around the 14th of June, 1940, the day of the German invasion of Paris, which forms the heart of the story. The very first chapter of the novel presents this central period, through
various types of margins and liminalities: generic, temporal, spatial, psychological, in addition to ethnic and musical. Indeed, two young musicians from Baltimore, the narrator, the bass player Sid, and his friend and fellow musician, the drummer Chip, who had both first escaped racism in their home country and then in Berlin, live there when the Germans arrive, together with a young trumpet player called Hieronymus Falk—Hiero for short, or more often simply “the kid”—and a young woman singer called Delilah Brown, who brings them into contact with the great trumpet player Louis Armstrong. In addition, other Jazz and Blues musicians are mentioned, such as Bill Coleman, Wynton Marsalis, Stéphane Grappelli, Sidney Bechet, Robert Johnson and also Josephine Baker. This is one example of how the novel itself becomes generically liminal at times, moving in-between fiction and historical reality.

All of the main characters, meanwhile, have multi-ethnic backgrounds—African-American for Sid and Chip, African-German for Hiero and African-Canadian for Delilah—their luck being, so far, what could be called their liminal ethnicity, their being on the margin, or rather beyond it, on the threshold between two positions—neither one thing nor another—unclassifiable. This unlike the Jewish pianist of the band, who had already been arrested in Berlin and sent to the camps. Many aspects of this chapter emphasize, expand and symbolize this existential liminality, their room in Paris “like a closet of ghosts” [3], suggesting that they are now—when the Germans have taken over the city and they can no longer perform—neither dead nor alive. In fact, jazz music had increasingly become suspect during the time. As Clarence Lusane reports, in his book Hitler’s Black Victims: The Historical Experiences of European Blacks, Africans and African Americans During the Nazi Era, Goebbels himself said: “Everyone knows America’s contribution to the music of the world consists merely of jazzed-up Nigger music, not worthy of a single mention” [213]. Others linked the music style directly to the Jewish population. Indeed, an article from the German newspaper Der Stürmer with as its headline “Nazis ‘Clear’ Us of Jazz, Blame Jews,” even reprinted in the Norfolk Journal and Guide, argues: “It is quite wrong when people say that jazz hails from the negroes. The Negro race has nothing to do with jazz, since Africans don’t know any jazz music. It’s the Jewish race that invented jazz, and made it fit the Jewish idea of life with its disharmony and distortion” (Lusane 213). Meanwhile, the liminal, indeed Gothic, similes involving ghosts that Sid uses to express the loss of their livelihood may remind us of what the Southern social critic Lillian Smith—writing her memoirs Killers of the Dream in the 1940s and much concerned with the racial situation in the South as well as in other parts of the world—calls children of mixed race: “Little ghosts playing and laughing and weeping on the edge of the southern memory” [125]. In Smith’s case, of course, this concerns situations in which the father is white and the mother is black, the opposite in-betweenness, the father being black and the mother being white, even more unthinkable.

Sid, in addition, remembers how he and his fellow-musicians together talk an in-between language “like mongrels [...] half German, half Baltimore bar slang” with “just a few scraps of French” between them [5], the simile a light-hearted wink to the “mongrel-race” that the Ku Klux Klan saw as the feared end-result of desegregation of the South and that was expressed by authors and politicians alike. In the chapter “A Note on Race Relations” of his memoir Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son, William Alexander Percy, for instance, writes:

it took years of battle with root-rot to teach me that it does not ravage with equal devastation every variety of iris. The older purer strains seem immune to it, its
greatest toll is from the ranks of the hybrids [...]. But when we cross human beings
we give no thought to the racial compatibility of the bloods fused and neglect to
observe whether the human hybrids we produce are unhappily subject to rot of one
kind or another. In gardening we have learned that death is the best cure for many
diseases [333].

The marginal language that Edugyan has Sid use throughout—in narration as well as in
quoted monologue—is a melodic, bluesy form of Southern speech that uses the
characteristic absence of copula, as well as the double negation, vowel variations,
concord variations and many other characteristics of the “Southern accent.” We see,
this way, that the language of his friends—whether half-German, half-Baltimore slang
or half-French—has been reworked in Sid’s mind during the more than fifty years that
have past, and moved it into a temporal liminality, a sort of threshold between its past
and its present as part of Sid’s memory, no longer quite theirs but not totally his either.

Trying to cut a record against all odds, for instance, the following conversation ensues :

We sound like like royalty—after the mob got done with em,” said Chip.
Coleman and I ain’t said nothing, our heads hanging tiredly.
But Hiero, wiping his horn with a blacked-up handkerchief, he turn and give Chip a
look of pure spite. “Yeah, but hell. Even at our worst we genius.”

Did that ever stun me, him saying this. For weeks the kid been going on about how
dreadful we sound. He kept snatching up the discs, scratching the lacquer with a
pocket knife, wrecking them. Yelling how there wasn’t nothing there. But there was
something. Some seed of twisted beauty [4].

Many other marginalities and liminalities support these central ones. For instance,
when after this scene Sid and Hiero set out all over Montmartre to get Hiero some milk,
it is at the temporal liminality of dawn—no longer quite night and not yet quite day—
when “a white sun, tender as early fruit” stirs “in the windows of the dark buildings,”
but the air still feels “stale, filled with a grime that burned hot in your nostrils” [11].
Indeed, this temporal liminality is immediately linked back to the previous—ethnic—
one, when they finally find some milk and the barkeeper tells Hiero jokingly : “But I
warn you [...]. You drink all the milk in France, you still not turn white” laughing “his
strange, high, feathery laugh” [13]. As it happens, Hiero, the German Mischling—“a half-
breed”—is much darker than either Chip or than Delilah, who herself is “high yella”
[75] or than Sid, who, as he puts it, is the descendent of “two Baltimore octoroons” [9]
and could have passed for “a right little Spaniard” [9]. In fact, Hiero is “so dark,” Sid
says, that “no soul ever like to guess his mamma a white Rhinelander” [8-9]. By putting
Hiero in this group, Edugyan emphasizes once more the generic liminality of her novel,
as the “Rhinelanders,” of course, are a group of Germans that existed in reality.

In his autobiography Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany, Hans
Massaquoi—like Hiero of Afro-German descent—mentions this specific group of “black
Germans.” He explains :

Unlike the thousands of Africans and so-called “brown babies”—children of black GI
fathers and German mothers—who reside in the Federal Republic of Germany
today, there simply was no black population to speak of in Germany during the
Hitler years, certainly none that I encountered. Not until long after the war did I
learn that a small number of black Germans—the tragic so-called “Rhineland
bastards” fathered by World War I French and Belgian colonial occupation troops—
were exterminated in Hitler’s death camps [xii-xiii].

The estimate is that as many as 200,000 French soldiers occupied the Rhineland region,
although it is not clear how many of those were black soldiers from the countries
involved, mainly Senegal, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Madagascar. It is thought that
between 500 and 800 children were born out of relations between these black soldiers and young German women. Of course these contacts were often presented in terms of rape and abduction, or else prostitution, as witnessed by the titles of certain newspaper articles, such as Edmund Morel’s “Black Scourge in Europe. Sexual Horror Let Loose by France on Rhine, Disappearance of Young German Girls” in the Daily Herald of April 9, 1920, and his articles “Horror on the Rhine” and “The Prostitution of the Rhineland” published in Foreign Affairs of August 1920 and June 1921 respectively. Another newspaper puts it as follows: “Are we to tolerate silently the fact that in the future, the light-hearted sons of white, attractive, well-built, intellectually-superior and lively, healthy Germans, are to be replaced by the croaking noise of grey-colored, syphilitic mulattoes?” And major German political parties of the time warned that “for German women and children, men and boys, these primitives are a ghastly danger. Their honour, life and limb, purity and innocence are being destroyed”[Lusane 78]. Hitler himself, of course, pointed to the Jewish, considering these children of German mothers and soldiers from French-speaking African countries a contamination of the white race plotted by them. Or as he wrote in Mein Kampf (volume 1, chapter XI): “Jews were responsible for bringing Negroes into the Rhineland, with the ultimate idea of bastardizing the white race which they hate and thus lowering its cultural and political level so that the Jew might dominate”. At first the solution was to get these children out of the country, to deport them to Africa with the help of the Catholic Church (Lusane 79), later to sterilise them, and finally extermination seems to have been the favoured solution. Massaquoi speaks of “the tragic so-called ‘Rhineland bastards’ whom are also called “Black Disgrace” or “Rhineland Mischlingers”; in Edugyan’s novel this group, of which Hiero is a representative, is known as “the Black Shame,” “the Black Scourge” or “the Black Infamy” [49].

Massaquoi himself was not one of this group. Although he grew up alone with his white mother—like the fictional Hiero—his Liberian father was a law student in England and his grandfather was Momula Massaquoi, the Consul General of Liberia in Germany at the time. Little Hans was often shunned, and he was not allowed to join the Hitler Jugend—in contrast, by the way, to another African-German, Weber Egjomue, who features in the documentary Black Survivors of the Holocaust—but he was never in danger of being deported. Indeed, he apparently had quite some playing field. In the chapter “Swingboys” of this autobiography, for instance, Massaquoi tells about his growing up in Hamburg, Germany, where he joined “the Swingboys,” a group of young males whose “unstated aims,” he says, were to express their “antiestablishment mindset, short of getting into serious trouble with the Gestapo; to listen whenever possible to jazz,” which they adopted as their “favorite music because it was banned by the Nazis as Negermusik” (159). Indeed, they, as he puts it, go “to great length to become the direct antithesis of Nazi youths,” with their long hair and sideburns that contrast with the crew-cuts of the Hitler Jugend. But in young Hans’s case, neither the hair nor the sideburns will cooperate, even if his “precocious mustache” becomes much-envied, as it can even be seen by the naked eye. To enhance his sex-appeal even more, Hans decides to take up the trumpet—the same instrument as Hiero in Edugyan’s novel—but even though he throws himself “body and soul into mastering the complexities” of the instrument, he fails “to develop a satisfactory embouchure” [161]. We clearly see racism come in when the trumpet teacher explains to Hans: “I think your lips are too full for playing the trumpet,” illustrating this remark by showing off his own “Aryan lips, which, while playing, he would compress into a razor-thin vertical slit” (161). And
he continues with the curious advice: “Perhaps you should switch to another wind instrument, like the clarinet, which requires a different embouchure where lip size is of no consequence.” Hans then tells the teacher that the “world-famous jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong was not exactly noted for thin lips,” to which the teacher responds that “what came out of Sachmo’s horn wasn’t exactly music either” [161]. This terminates the music lessons there and then, and Hans decides to teach himself and becomes a more than decent trumpet player.

In Edugyan’s novel, Hiero, according to his own account, is from Cologne, his father from Cameroon. In Sid’s words, he explains:

He been royalty there. Kaiser Wilhelm II hisself invite him to this country to be schooled there, to study medicine. He sailed into Hamburg on the Wöhrmann Line in 1899. Met my mama on a school break. That was in April. She was studying to be a nurse. Then he graduate, move on down Köln, marry her [150].

The fictional Hiero’s story, then, resembles much that of Hans, except that it seems Hiero had made his up. Although he did, indeed, grow up in Cologne, where he, in Sid’s words, was called “Chimney Sweep, Monkey’s Son, Blubber-lips. Black-Eyed China man, because of his squint” [188]—his mother, “she sweet as dates, sure, but a little touched”—was, as the stories would have it, “raped by a French soldier” who was “almost seven feet tall and blacker than a power outage” [188]. But, in contrast to myth, as Sid finally understands it: “He aint been a rapist at all. He was a colonial soldier from Senegal, one of them sent to occupy the Rhineland by the French government. And apparently, Marianne Falk had loved him” (188). It is here, again, that the history links up with so many we know from the South, that a story of genuine love and/or sexual attraction had to be turned into one of sexual assault to restore the honor of a white woman who had given in to these feelings. Many stories of disappearance orlynchings turn around these politics, and it is interesting to note that Hiero’s father, indeed, is completely absent from the story.

To continue the comparison between Edugyan’s novel and Massaquoi’s autobiography and carry it a bit further—even if Sid and his “Hot-Time Swingers,” in Half-Blood Blues, do not at all have the opportunity and the energy of young Hans’s “Swingboys”—they, in their own fashion, use as a tongue-in-cheek insult to the Nazis their anthem the “Horst Wessel-Song” and transform it into a jazz piece. Here again the novel demonstrates its generic liminality, as the “Horst Wessel-Lied” (275) in reality is well-known. It was written in Berlin in 1929, by a Nazi commander of the paramilitary “Brownshirts” called Horst Wessel, to imitate the Communists Red Front Fighters’ League and thus provoke them into attacking his men, who could then show their bravery. Nazi groups in other countries made translations and adaptations, including France. As Jeff Jackson argues, in his review of the novel “Vichy France from the Margins: Half-Blood Blues,” Sid and Chip’s piece Half-Blood Blues, from which, of course, the novel got its title, functions “to strike a blow for the cosmopolitan jazz world against racialized nationalism, and it symbolizes how jazz became a form of resistance to the Nazis.” But Chip and his band had actually gotten into talking about Horst Wessel quite by accident one day—not exactly as an act of resistance—during the short time they spent with Louis Armstrong, explaining to the famous trumpet player why Hiero’s position as a black person was much more precarious than theirs. While Chip then starts to sing the words of Wessel’s “Lied” in German, Hiero raises his horn and starts playing “a uneasy nervous beat under the words” [235] and Armstrong soon joins. As Sid remembers it:
He caught Hiero's eye, then, soft like, his whole face puckered up. He come in on the loose beat.
Hell. It wasn’t nothing like before.
It was the sound of the gods, all that brass. It was the old Armstrong and the new, that mature distilled essence of a master and the boy he used to be, the boy who could make his glissandi snap like marbles, the high Cs piercing. Hiero thrown out note after shimmering note, like sunshine sliding all over the surface of a lake, and Armstrong was the water, all depth and thought, not one wasted note. Hiero, he just reaching out, seeking the shore; Armstrong stood there calling across to him. Their horns sound so naked, so blunt, you felt almost guilty listening to it, like you eavesdropping. After some minutes Chip stopped singing, left just the two golden ropes of sound to intertwine.
It was then that I finally heard it. I heard how damn brilliant the kid really was. I hated it [235].

It is this last passage that illustrates Hiero’s posthumous success, and it is this piece—the “Horst Wessel track” [275]—that would get the name Half-Blood Blues. In fact, the piece is not just “half-blood,” which Jackson identifies as “the complex mixture of the men’s racial and national identities in a country that increasingly demands purity [...] the product of the mixing of peoples and sounds, even while crossing those boundaries makes their lives more difficult’’”, it is also “half-blues.” Indeed, as Sid says: “It wasn’t true blues, sure, ain’t got the right chord structure, but the kid ain’t cared none ‘Blues,’ he said, coughing roughly, ‘blues wasn’t never bout the chords’ [275]. It is thus that the novel places itself, like Toni Morrison’s novel Jazz, in the interspace between the two musical styles—Jazz and the Blues—indeed, in-between celebration and suffering, this threshold position breaking the chains of “hardship.” Or, as Morrison symbolizes it so beautifully in her novel, between the “woman with a baby on her shoulder and a skillet in her hand” singing: “Turn to my pillow where my sweet man used to be [...] how long, how long, how long” [56]—to which, by the way, Martin Luther King’s beautiful Montgomery speech with its repeated question and answer: “how long... not long” [March 25th, 1965] seems an answer—to Morrison’s young boys “strutting” down 5th Avenue, swaying their hips and shoulders to the new rhythms of Jazz, thus showing they will “never carry no loads no more” [56]. But, to get back to Edugyan’s novel, it is the last part of the passage—“It was then that I finally heard it. I heard how damn brilliant the kid really was. I hated it” [235]—that forms the key to the the series of psychological liminalities—the in-between mental states of the narrator—that the novel confronts us with. Hiero is not the “hero” of the story but he is, indeed, the central figure in the liminal space of the narrator’s psyche, illustrating Faulkner’s famous saying, put into the mouth of his character Gavin Stephens in the novel Requiem for a Nun, that “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past” [80].

All through his narration, Sid, now an old man and invited, together with Chip, to return to Berlin for the premiere of a documentary that they contributed to about Hieronymus Falk—who as young Hiero is believed to have died in 1948, after having survived the infamous work camp of Mauthausen—the emotional liminality of his state of mind is emphasized. Right at the beginning, for instance, he tells how it had not been guilt he had felt, “not that exactly” [5]—such a denial another liminality, as it labels correctly a repressed truth while, as Wilfried Ver Eecke expresses it in Denial, Negation and the Forces of the Negative, it at the same time “denies the correctness of the labeling” [10]. Later he had been “feeling something real close to guilt” [12], while just before they cut the disc that would make Hiero famous, he had run his “fingers down the sleek strings” of his instrument and had started “feeling sort of sad,” like he had been lying
to himself “bout something a long damn time” [277]. This type of time-spanning rumination—in which Sid never reaches a clear emotional position, either one way or another—is a leitmotif throughout his narration, from its beginning to its end. Indeed, when Chip had picked him up to go to the airport, to take the flight to Berlin for the presentation of the Hieronymus Falk documentary, Sid had felt “sort of uneasy” [8], and, again, “something like despair” [28]. Then, after they had arrived and were getting ready for the showing and the accompanying festivities, he had felt “that funny dark feeling” in his chest again [38], and just before the documentary was to start he had gotten “that odd feeling again” [46]. Finally, when he had seen his own face in the documentary, Sid explains: “I got that strange dark feeling welling up in me again. That sense something wasn’t right in me, something bad was coming” [50] and “My heart had inched up my throat till I could hear the blood in my ears. That odd feeling come over me so strong I near couldn’t breathe [...]. The dark felt soft and hot, like an animal crouching on me” [51].

Within the great disaster of the World War, the liminality of these emotional positions, then, returns us to the small personal war of Sid’s life. Arthur Lee Williams’s definition of the Blues—as Bill Ferris recorded it for his doctoral dissertation at Williams’s home in Birdie, Mississippi in July of 1968—expresses it well: “Blues actually is around you every day. That’s just a feeling within a person, you know. You have a hard time and things happen. Hardships between you and your wife, or maybe you and your girlfriend. Downheartedness, that’s all it is, hardship.” Indeed, “hardship” between Sid and his girlfriend seems to be at the bottom of the in-between emotions that Sid cannot completely identify. To his great shock, in the documentary they watch together in Berlin, Sid hears Chip explain on screen his role in Hiero’s arrest by the Gestapo:

Siridney Griffiths [...] he’s a lesson, really. A lesson in what jealousy’ll do to a man. To betray such a genius musicien, and a kid at that, over a woman. Over the kid’s talents, and over a woman. I mean, there he stood, denying his friend, pretending he didn’t even know him, while they dragged the poor boy away. I ain’t saying he pre-arranged it. I ain’t saying that. But handing Hiero over to the Boots, to the Gestapo, like that [...] [52].

Even if this is not a completely correct account of what had happened, it is true that Sid—seriously in love with Delilah—had not accepted the attention she was giving to Hiero, and one day told her so: “You need me to say it? You wink and tease and flirt with the kid like you got designs or somethin’ [...] You keep on like this, kid goin to get ideas. Like you mean it or somethin’” (243). Delilah answer is clear:

If I have made him think I love him [...] I hope to god I have. I’ve tried. I’ve tried everything I could think of. Someone has to. Have you ever seen that kid out there, Sid? Have you taken one goddamn look? He’s a sunk little by. Lost as a stray cat. You’re always so worried about you, so damn worried about yourself. He’s just a child and he’s got no one” [244].

At that moment Sid is filled with shame and—staring into Delilah’s face with “its utter emptiness”—he sees “clearly and sharply just how much” she did not love him (244). It is a foolish jealousy, then, that makes Sid lose Delilah. But beyond this, as Chip mentions it in the documentary, is, of course, also the question of “the kid’s talents”: the fact that the great Armstrong, when they were rehearsing, had praised Hiero up to heaven and had left Sid out. “You a fraud,” Sid had consequently told Hiero, “You a damn fraud; You hear me?” and he had spit on the tobaconist’s “filthy floorboards,” while seeing in Hiero’s face that “something inside was wilting, a slow closing over” and that “his eyes gone real dark” [246].
The liminality of spatial imagery is essential here. Indeed, at the exchange of words with Delilah just mentioned, Sid is on the threshold, both literally and figuratively, caught between two contradictory emotions:

“Lilah,” I said.
“Close the door on your way out.”
I watched her face. Nothing, no water on her eyes—nothing.
I turned to go. Even as I shut the door with a click, I was listening for her voice, thinking she might call me back.

She ain’t [244].

And at the exchange with Hiero, it is Hiero who is, likewise, on the threshold:

“Aw, I kiddin Hiero.” I kicked out the chair across from me;
“Come on, bring your ass on over here and split this drink.”
He just stood there a second more, looking at me with a hardened face.

“Hiero ” I called out angrily.
He just turn and walk on out of that shop and into the street, the door banging behind him [246].

The terrible thing that comes out of the complexity of this small, personal war has all the terror of the great one: Sid hides the French exit visa that Hiero had received to leave with the rest of the band, rather than give it to him, and just that moment Hiero is arrested and eventually deported. For more than 50 years Sid, then, lives on in a sort of limbo, until this visit with Chip to Berlin for the Hieronymus Falk documentary and then on by bus to Poland, where—against all expectations—Hiero, an old blind man now, is still alive.

The novel then ends on a linguistic liminality in the form of an extraordinary series of grammatical constructions known as small-clauses, never encountered in the novel previously.11 I will limit myself here to the first and the last few:

I could see Hiero being forced to line up [...].
I seen him called out of that lineup [...].
I heard Hiero playing Wagner’s Lohengrin as new trains pulled up.
I heard him playing The Threepenny Opera’s Cannon Song as bodies was rolled by on lorries and folks marched off to be hanged.
I seen him playing in a brothel of female prisoners, their screams tearing the air as he stood there, lips working, his notes brassy and bright [303-304].

In each of these cases the narrator—Sid—might have chosen a different verbal construction with which to attribute mental activity to his younger self: the that-clause, the how-clause, or the to-infinitive clause, which would have given the following possibilities:

I heard that Hiero was playing/I heard how Hiero was playing/ I heard Hiero to be playing.
I seen that he was playing/I seen how he was playing/ I seen him to be playing.

These would have indicated how the mental activity in question is based on independently existing evidence, on procedural evidence or on evidence present in the immediate context of the utterance respectively. The small-clauses we see so abundantly and exclusively here are different, in that they present the experience of the young Sid without any intellectual mediation by the older, narrating one, that is, without any truth judgment, “raw” one could say12. And, because the small-clause conveys phenomena as experienced rather than epistemically—that is, in terms of what is considered true of the world—such a construction lends itself especially well to the attributing of states of altered consciousness to an experiencer, such as reveries, dreams, psychological stress, drugs-induced conditions, hallucinations and mental
deficiency, when truth-judgment is avoided, deferred, disturbed, altered, impaired or plainly impossible. Here they are used brilliantly to present the liminal state that Sid is in, a state that is neither dream nor reality.

All the liminalities that we have been confronted with in the space of Sid’s narration—spacial, temporal, musical and, of course, racial—thus culminate in this linguistic one. Even if the undecidedness of the liminal position may create anxiety, it also—as Victor Turner puts it in “Betwixt and Between, The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage”—creates “a realm of pure possibility” from where “novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise”\(^{13}\). This position makes possible a new lucidity, a sudden epiphany or manifestation of truth that allows the individual to arrive at a new level of maturity. Valerie Shaw situates this “instant of radiant insight” on a threshold: “a boundary between the ordinary and the mysterious, though what makes it miraculous, or even mythical,” she adds, “is that it fleetingly dissolves that boundary” [193]. It is this dissolution that the linguistic liminality presents. With the help of Chip, Sid is finally able to see the extent of his betrayal, and to tell Chip the terrible thing he had done: to hide Hiero’s visa when it was delivered to the door and to not let anybody know it had arrived. But Chip answers:

\begin{quote}
We all done things we ain’t proud of, Sidney. Especially then [...]. It wasn’t your fault the Boots picked him up. You couldn’t have known what would happen [307].
\end{quote}

It is this ending, with its sense of compassion and redemption, that provides to this beautiful story of marginality and liminality a line of escape from the two extremes of innocence and culpability: the Deleuzian *ligne de fuite*.

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NOTES

1. The story of Sid and Chip’s childhoods in Baltimore may remind one of Southern texts of the times, such as Countee Cullen’s poem “Incident”:

Once riding in old Baltimore / Heart-filled, head-filled with glee, / I saw a Baltimorean / Keep looking straight at me. / Now I was eight and very small / And he was no whit bigger, / And so I smiled, but he poked out / His tongue, and called me, “Nigger”. / I saw the whole of Baltimore / From May until December; Of all the things that happened there / That’s all that I remember.

2. In reality Louis Armstrong was in Paris during the war, but not exactly at this time.

3. Smith explains her title as follows: ”Are we—the nation that first embarked on the high adventure of making a world fit for human beings to live in—about to destroy ourselves because we have killed our dream? Can we live with a dead dream inside us? How many dead dreams will it take to destroy us all?” [20].

4. Since the novel thus features regular characteristics of the Southern dialect, I have not written sic when certain forms deviate from the standard English.

5. In my quotations in blocks, I have preserved the original layout of the novel.

6. See also Casper W. Erichsen. The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism.


www.huffingtonpost.com/chika-oduah/the-afrogerman-experience_b_9234700.html
9. h-france.net/fffh/the-buzz/vichy-france-from-the-margins-half-blood-blues
10. “’How long will justice be crucified, (Speak) and truth bear it?’ (Yes, sir) I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, (Yes, sir) however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, (No sir) because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’ (Yes, sir) How long? Not long, (Yes, sir) because ‘no lie can live forever.’ (Yes, sir) How long? Not long, (All right. How long) because ‘you shall reap what you sow.’ (Yes, sir). How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” [audience responses in parentheses]. Pronounced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on March 25th, 1965 on the steps of the State Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama after the “March from Selma to Montgomery” to obtain the right to vote. (danperkins.blogs.com/doxa/2009/01/how-long-not-long.html).
11. As defined by the linguist Frederike van der Leek, the term small-clause refers to the complement of a mental activity verb—in this case the verb hear—which, if it is verbal, is non-finite and not accompanied by the infinite marker to.
12. As a matter of fact, the grammatical form of the small-clause actually prohibits the addition of an epistemic evaluation, this becoming clear if we use a verb that includes such an evaluation, such as the verb conclude: “I concluded him playing in a brothel of female prisoners, their screams tearing the air as he stood there, lips working, his notes brassy and bright” is, indeed, clearly ungrammatical.

ABSTRACTS

In this paper I show how in the Ghanaian-born Canadian writer Esi Edugyan’s Half-Blood Blues, the marginality of a “hitherto little-regarded corner of the black Diaspora”—the history of the so-called Rhineland Mischlingers—is put in the center of a story that concerns itself with specific memories of the Second World War of a Black American jazz musician. In order to do so, I focus on the different forms of liminality—or in-betweenness—that these memories present: temporal, spatial, ethnic and musical, as well as generic and finally linguistic. I show that these liminalities—at the very margin of marginality, or beyond—will reveal the horrors of war but will also create a Deleuzian ligne de fuite that allows the protagonist to come to terms with this painful period in his life as a musician and as a man.

INDEX

Keywords: Black diaspora, World War 2, Rhineland Mischlingers, Blues, Jazz, liminality, marginality, ligne de fuite

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