

The Political Power of Soundscapes in Communicating Trauma in
Esi Edugyan's *Half-Blood Blues*

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Introduction

As sound theorist Daniel Morat contends, “the practices of making sounds and listening to them are imbedded in a wider cultural, social, and political framework,” which is “subject to historical change” (3). By Morat’s standard, then, sound and readers’ interpretations of sound captured in the pages of novels are unfixed and fluid representations of precise moments in time that have the potential to change in accordance with the political and social moments in which they are encountered by a reader.

In Esi Edugyan’s 2011 work of Canadian historical fiction, *Half-Blood Blues*, the representations of soundscapes evoke the prevailing political and social ideology in two separate timelines of 1940 and 1992. The timelines reflect the social and political ideology in Europe and America at the time of the Second World War and fifty years after the war commenced, respectively. The movement through time is further complicated by the novel’s structure, which deploys six sections that move between time and place. The shifting timelines and physical settings disrupt linear time and add a layer of fragmentation and distortion that echoes the traumatic experience of racial bias and “othering” that Edugyan’s imagined musicians encounter in the European wartime era, as well as the enduring effects of traumatic experience on the body.

Edugyan’s novel also includes different forms of soundscapes, which offer an imaginative representation of the struggles and hardships experienced by Black musicians as a consequence of their race during the Second World War. Edugyan utilizes the representations of soundscapes to underscore the racially charged hierarchal power dynamic of the Nazi regime that strips the agency of any person who deviates from purportedly Aryan attributes. Through its representations of soundscapes to reflect the political ideology of the moment, Edugyan’s novel

calls attention to the mistreatment of Black musicians during the war and seeks to reclaim their voices through literature.

On the surface, Edugyan's narrative follows jazz musicians Sid, Chip, Hiero, Paul, and Ernest as they navigate the racialized political climates of Germany and Paris in the hope of working with fellow jazz musician and icon Louis Armstrong. However, the novel's representations of jazz music, coupled with the acoustic reality of the musicians' surroundings, reveal the severity of the Nazi racialized climate during the war. Edugyan's novel explores how acoustic discourse communicates beyond the spoken word as the representations of sound, and the absence of sound, are politically implicated by the Nazi regime's power dynamics. The traumatic experience of racial bias and of being labeled "other" silences the musicians and limits their individual agency and autonomy, thus confirming Morat's contention that sound is "imbedded in a wider cultural, social, and political framework" (3).

This MRP will examine how sound informs and is informed by political power dynamics in Edugyan's novel to reveal how representations of soundscapes have the potential to communicate what the spoken word cannot. By referring to scholar Cathy Caruth's discussion of narrative depictions of trauma as a mental wound on the body (*Unclaimed* 4), I will argue that the representations of sound in Edugyan's fiction can fill in the space where the imagined dialogue fails to reflect the severity of traumatic experience for the imagined musicians. Ultimately, both the representations of sound and the silencing of victims reflect the racialized political climate of *Half-Blood Blues*.

The first part of the MRP will examine the representations of conversations amongst the musicians and supporting characters in the novel's 1940 and 1992 timelines. By examining representations of speech in terms of racialized slurs and slang, I will show that the way

Edugyan's characters communicate is reflective of the highly racialized conditions of their upbringing and political climate. I will tease out the connections between the slurs and slang—as examples of severe language—and the political climate in which they are expressed.

The second part of the MRP will examine how Edugyan makes it explicit that there are two forms of jazz, namely “Black” or “real” jazz and “White” jazz. The representations of Black jazz form what Canadian composer and music scholar R. Murray Schafer calls an “acoustic environment” (1) and Edugyan's representations of the Black musicians playing “real” jazz juxtapose the cold and cruel climate of Germany and France in the 1940s. By playing jazz music that also celebrates their cultural heritage, Edugyan's Black musicians exercise their agency within the highly racialized climate they are living in.

The third part of the MRP will focus on the representations of silence in the novel. The lack of acoustic representation and the absence of sound are the most significant representations of fear and trauma within the narrative. While a traumatic event either is occurring or being remembered, the novel confirms Caruth's assertion that the truly horrific must be approached through “literary ... language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (*Unclaimed* 5) and also cannot be conveyed through words alone. Thus, silence functions as a representation of the moment when fear is at its most powerful and limits the ability to speak or express. The silence that creeps over the bar as the Nazi Boots enter, for example, renders the Black musicians powerless and ultimately reinforces the political ideology at large in Germany and France during the 1940s.

In effect, the three parts of the MRP will come together to examine how Edugyan's novel relies on the ethos of a sonic environment to underscore the severity of trauma experienced by

the Black musicians and prove that representations of sound and silence are, at once, implicated within the political climate in which they are expressed and subject to historical change.

Part One: Representations of Conversation—Slurs and Slang

On its most basic level, conversation is a practice that allows ideas and ideology to flow back and forth between participants. While one participant speaks, others listen and respond. The response to auditory expression is always different as a consequence of individual experience, sentiment, and upbringing; however, an overarching and unifying factor of conversation is that a response to the stimulus of sound always occurs. Whether the response to the stimulus be the act of a reciprocal auditory expression or the physical feeling of sound waves vibrating through a surface, the process of making and responding to sound always transpires. Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan discusses the response to sound in his work *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, in which he asserts that response to the stimulus of an auditory expression is an immediate occurrence because

The ear favours no particular “point of view.” We are *enveloped* by sound. It forms a seamless web around us. We say, “Music shall fill the air.” We never say, “Music shall fill a *particular* segment of the air ... We hear sound from everywhere, without ever having to focus. Sounds come from “above,” from “below,” from in “front” of us, from “behind” us, from our “right,” from our “left.” We can’t shut out sound automatically. We simply are not equipped with earlids. Where visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships.

McLuhan makes it explicit that the immersive nature of sound has the potential to completely envelop the listener and elicit a response that reflects individual experience. Unlike the visual experience, where closing your eyes eliminates the stimulus, McLuhan argues for the superiority of sound in providing a more immediate and guaranteed response. Whereas the visual act of looking seems to be one dimensional—we must use our eyes to see and respond—the response to the stimulus of sound is more complex. Although it is ableist to assume all persons are able to hear sounds in the same way, sound can form an immersive environment that engages the physical body as a whole. The sound vibrations stimulate the body through the ear and through physical vibrations. If a sound is loud enough, the vibrations can be felt through a surface via touch. While the act of “touching” a sound does not replace the experience of listening to sound, it allows a larger audience to participate in the sonic immersive environment and creates a complex space for conversation to emerge in diverse forms.

The dialogue in Edugyan’s novel explores the causal relationship between sound and response through depictions of slurs and slang, both of which are implicated by the dominant political power dynamics of the Nazi regime. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the noun “slur” as “an insulting or disparaging remark or innuendo” that produces a “shaming or degrading effect” on the recipient. The effect of the slur relies on the enthymeme of disparity that asserts the recipient of the insulting remark is “lesser than” the person who delivers the slur. In Edugyan’s novel, the Boots, who represent the Nazi troopers, utilize racial slurs to reinforce the political power dynamics of the Nazi regime in 1939-1940 to assert their dominance over those persons who do not align with Aryan race attributes. Language thus becomes weaponized as it delineates who has the power in accordance with Hitler’s ideal society and, more significantly, who does not have any power.

In light of McLuhan's assertion that the act of listening always elicits a response, the sensory experience of being classified under the grouping of a slur situates the recipient in a position of less authority. Edugyan explores the implications of slurs in the first section of the novel set in Paris 1940 as Sid and Hiero attempt to navigate the shadows of the city to enter a bar, despite the threat of being caught without their legal papers. Hiero, being half German and half Black, is in a more precarious situation than Sid because the contact who provided legal papers for the members of their band supposedly was unable to procure the documents for individuals of German descent known as *Mischlings*. *Mischling* directly translates to a Nazi-era legal term "to denote persons deemed to have both Aryan and Jewish ancestry" (Monteath 141). The term relies on the same racialized rhetoric of the "one-drop rule," which asserts that even a single drop of "black" blood taints the "purity" of white blood (Khanna 98). Thus, *mischling* is a term implicated with the weight of the racial political climate and informs the feelings of both the recipient and deliverer of the slur. The label *mischling* communicates the understanding that the recipient will always be classified as "other," "different," and "not to be trusted" because of ancestry or cultural affiliation and that the labeller is in a position of authority.

In the bar scene, Edugyan utilizes Hiero's status as a mixed race individual or *mischling*, without the safety of legal papers, to explore the precarious situation of mixed race people under Nazism. Hiero's German ancestry renders him vulnerable to imprisonment in Paris of the 1940s as France declared war against Germany in 1939 and soldiers were holding persons with German ancestry captive in fear of their potential Nazi affiliation. Yet, in spite of knowing the inherent risk involved in leaving Delilah's flat and emboldened by the influence of "rot," a term for the extreme level of alcohol consumed regularly by the musicians, Hiero and Sid creep through the shadows to hide from the Boots as they make their way from the flat to the club.

After the two musicians arrive safely and find relative comfort amongst fellow minorities, two Boots enter the club and begin assessing each patron's papers. Silence, reflective of the fear and horror of being caught, creeps over the club after the Boots enter and Sid experiences a debilitating stillness as he becomes aware that Hiero is about to be taken. While "the taller Boot was making a real show of thumbing slow through his papers, not saying nothing," the shorter Boot in a voice "calm and soft" is heard saying "Foreigner," "Stateless person of Negro descent," "Hottentot," "Jew," and "Negro" (Edugyan 15). The softness and calm nature of the Boot's voice juxtaposes the cruel and malicious intent of both his words and his presence in the club, and each of the words and phrases are implicated in the wider cultural and political context.

The term "foreigner," while not by definition a racial slur, has the potential to inform an unequal power dynamic between the speaker and recipient when said in a specific context. As the shorter Boot says the word "foreigner," it situates him in a position of authority over each patron in the club because he is supported by the 1940s' political system in Paris and, by extension, the ideology of Nazi Europe. As an enforcer of racialized ideology, the Boot's job requires him to find all persons who pose a potential threat to the political regime and ensure that they are held captive. By referring to the patrons as "foreigners," in the context of Nazi-era politics the Boot criminalizes the act of being from "elsewhere." The sense of othering and disparity relies on the rhetoric of difference to ensure that the power divide between the authoritative figures and the public remains unequal and always favours the authoritative political figures.

The phrase and terms "Stateless person of Negro descent," "Hottentot," "Negro," and "Jew" all confirm a more traditional sense of the function of a slur as they all brand and are

explicitly said with the intent to degrade the recipient. In referring to the patrons as “Stateless” and “Negro,” the Boot continues to weaponize language in order to communicate the unequal power dynamic of the Nazi regime. Both terms invoke the history of slavery, racism, and trauma suffered by Black individuals predicated on inhumane and racial ideas. This misguided and unjust abuse of power strips the patrons of their voice and agency, as responding would only serve to further the abuse of power while continuing to foster the ideology of the Nazis, who systematically imprisoned, tortured, and experimented on any person of Jewish ancestry because they did not fit Aryan race attributes. In calling attention to both the mistreatment of Black people and people of Jewish ancestry, Edugyan makes it explicit that unequal and racial power divides have a long history and, consequently, language becomes implicated in the wider public context that reflects the political ideology of the speaker.

The term “Hottentot” recalls a similar history of slavery, racial bias, hyper sexualization of women, and trauma, as it is a derogatory term used to reference the postcolonial gaze that fetishized the Black body (Netto 149). Initially, “Hottentot” was a Dutch term that originated in the seventeenth century and referred to all people of colour. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it shifted to represent one specific group of peoples from South Africa and today it carries the weight of connotations of slavery and primitivism (Netto 149-50). Referring to a person as a “Hottentot” calls attention to the process of language appropriation and how radical and racialized political systems like the Nazi regime can adopt language and transform it to align with a particular ideology.

Each of the radical and racial slurs weaponized by the Boots forms part of what Schafer calls a “soundscape.” In the introduction to his collection *The Soundscape*,” Schafer states, “the soundscape of the world is changing. Modern man is beginning to inhabit a world with an

acoustic environment radically different from any he has hitherto known” (3). The sound of the patrons in the bar before the arrival of the Boots, the silence that follows their entrance, and the racialized slurs all compose a soundscape of Paris in the 1940s. In this instance, the Nazi political ideologies allow for this extreme form of language to be used by the Boots to assert their dominance over the patrons. The change in the club’s sonic frequency as the Boots enter reflects the traumatic experience of living in the tumultuous political landscape of Nazi Europe for any person who is a perceived threat or deviates from Aryan characteristics. The patrons’ silence in face of racial and radical slurs is informed by the notion that resisting the dominant political paradigm is not an option. While it is possible to interpret the patrons’ silence as a form of resistance and a refusal to comply with the Boots, who are supported by Nazi ideology, in this particular scene where the collective fear in the café is shared by all of the patrons, it seems rather unlikely in the moment of unsurmountable shock and fear that they would unanimously use silence to rebel. That the patrons’ silence is a likely reaction to the stimulus of the slur confirms McLuhan’s assertion that sound always elicits a response.

In addition to slurs, Edugyan’s sonic environment relies on slang to further communicate the atrocities experienced by Black individuals during the war. Through the dialogue of the musicians and the Boots, slang is invested with the weight and significance of the political power dynamics in Nazi Europe. Yet, unlike the slur that, by definition, is used to degrade the recipient, Edugyan invests slang with the potential to both emphasize and resist the political ideology of Nazi Europe. By definition, “slang” is both a “language peculiar to a particular group and an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). The Boots use their slang to inform the political power dynamics of Nazi Europe and reinforce their

authority. Like their slurs, the Boots' slang relies on an extreme ideology of racial hierarchy. In section three, Berlin 1939, Edugyan exposes the severity of slang when the musicians have a physical altercation with a group of Boots. "Jewkikes," "Jewfuckers," "Niggerfucker," and "Nigger kikes" (Edugyan 88) are words yelled from the mouths of the Boots as they physically and orally assault the musicians for having the audacity to be out on the streets.

The racialized slang, coupled with the physical assault, triggers an altercation so severe that one Boot is murdered at the hands of Chip. While the musicians initially try to hide in the shadows as they navigate the streets of Berlin, they are seen by one Boot, forced to leave the relative safety of the shadows, and respond to the combined verbal and physical abuse. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan assert that the response to the stimulus of sound is always immediate because

Auditory space has no point of favoured focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It's not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It has no fixed boundaries; it's indifferent to background. The eye focuses, pinpoints, abstracts, locating each object in physical space, against background; the ear, however, favours sound from any direction. We hear equally well from right to left, front or back, above or below. If we lie down, it makes no difference, whereas in visual space the entire spectacle is altered. We can shut out the visual field by simply closing our eyes, but we are always triggered to respond to sound. (67)

The weaponized slang, coupled with the physical act of violence, enforces the ideology of Nazi Europe and its political leaders. The racial slurs used by the Boots demonstrate how deeply indoctrinated the Nazi ideology is for its followers and supporters. In addition, the slang hurled

at the musicians underscores how the influence of the war and its ideology perverts the mind as the soundscape of the altercation and the slang alerts the attention of three off-duty Boots who come running “hard at ... [the musicians], all plain-dressed but for the damn jackboots under their long pants” (Edugyan 88). The slang alerts the Boots who come running, even when they are not on duty, to enforce Nazi ideology and neutralize the imposed threat to the political power regime.

In the same violent scene, one of the Boots attacking Sid screams, “Where’s your radical pride” (Edugyan 88), as he repeatedly punches Sid on the ground. While Sid remains silent in this moment, Edugyan creates space for slang to serve a more subversive political use. For the members of the band, slang creates an immersive environment that resists the ideology of Nazi Europe as it recalls their cultural heritage and reclaims their agency. Slang opens up a space for the musicians to celebrate their cultural roots in spite of the oppressive and domineering Nazi ideology.

Early in the narrative Sid thinks analytically about the way the musicians speak:

We talked like mongrels, see—half German, half Baltimore bar slang. Just a few scraps of French between us. Only real language I spoke aside from English was *Hochdeutsch*. But once I started messing up the words I couldn’t straighten nothing out again. Besides, I known Hiero preferred it this way. Kid hailed from the Rhineland, sure, but he got old Baltimore in the blood. Or talked like he did.

He was still young that way. Mimicking. (Edugyan 5)

Slang takes a traditional and cultural form as it celebrates the musicians’ Baltimore lineage while it simultaneously works against the rigid confines of Nazi ideology that criminalizes difference. As the musicians converse, they use words and phrases that are reminiscent of their childhood.

From simple phrases like “I’m livin a charmed life” (Edugyan 8) that denotes a moment when life was easy and carefree, to “She was a *Venus*, man” (Edugyan 10) to describe the beauty of a woman, the vernacular of the musicians always resists the power dynamics of Nazi Europe.

As Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, trauma is a “double wound” (3). While trauma originally referred to

an injury inflicted on a body ... In its later usage ... the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach of the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event ... experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 3-4)

The “double wound” Caruth describes is effected through the slurs and slang that are used systematically to crush the agency and authority of the musicians. But, as McLuhan asserts, all sound elicits a response and the othering and racial profiling embedded in the language used by the Boots prompts Edugyan’s musicians to limit the power of the slurs and slang by reclaiming their autonomy through slang of their own. Nonetheless, this particular soundscape of the 1940s in Paris underscores the powerful role language plays in reinforcing political power dynamics. In effect, the slurs and slang Edugyan incorporates in her narrative carry the weight of the cultural, social, and political ideology of the time period. Her use of slurs and slang permits a nuanced treatment of the traumatic experience of Black musicians who try to resist the political tyranny of the Nazi era.

Part Two: Jazz (Black Jazz and White Jazz)

Jazz music plays a pivotal role in Edugyan's novel as it embodies the spirit of celebration in life, as well as the unpredictable nature of the lived experience in both the 1939-1940 and 1992 timelines. Jazz music unifies the dual timelines by underscoring the power of music, which allows the marginalized characters to express themselves despite the political climate they are living in. The 1939-1940 timeline explores the struggles the musicians endure and dedication they must have if they want to create authentic Black jazz within the context of Nazi Europe. The 1992 timeline explores the accomplishment of creating authentic jazz while revealing the enduring trauma of living in wartime and sacrificing everything for a dream.

From the outset, Edugyan's musicians are dedicated to the practice of creating authentic jazz and exploring the laborious process of creating a soundscape that expresses the nature of their existence while reflecting their cultural heritage. The hope of a potential partnership with the legendary Louis Armstrong drives the musicians. Armstrong is a living legend during the 1939-1940 timeline, and the opportunity to work alongside him would ensure that the musicians' sacrifices result in a successful record.

Before his death in July 1971, Louis Armstrong said "What we play is life" (Brothers 12) in reference to the practice of creating and playing authentic jazz music. As Armstrong implies, jazz music captures both moments of triumph and failure and represents the emotions through musical sound. Jazz was born in the late nineteenth century in New Orleans out of the stylistic lineage of the blues and ragtime genres (Gioia 1). As it grew in popularity among the Black community, every musician brought stylistic changes to the genre. Black jazz celebrated the Black voices that came together to create a musical soundscape that took pride in Black culture.

In both form and content, jazz rejected a uniform style and became a collective union of instruments and voices responding to one another (Gioia 1). Its ebb and flow, call and respond style of play demanded that musicians listen intently and work together to develop a unique and powerful musical score. The authenticity of difference and the celebration of Black culture in jazz music resisted systems of oppression predicated on racism and hate by creating a distinctive space for Black voices and culture to be recognized. Today, the connection to Black culture and the celebration of life's overwhelming emotions remain key features of Black jazz.

By including Louis Armstrong in the narrative as both an icon and character, Edugyan utilizes the pathos and ethos of his reputation in the music world to bolster Black voices and invest jazz music with the power to communicate his legacy. As an icon, Armstrong is a symbol of success in a time period and political climate that was built upon systemic racism. Armstrong was born in August 1901 in New Orleans, the place where jazz music was officially created. During his five decades-long career, Armstrong became known for being a trumpeter, composer, and vocalist, as well as an actor. His style of play added to the already developing genre and celebrated the authenticity of difference. As a musician, Armstrong was most commonly recognized for his raspy voice and his trumpet playing; his name became synonymous with the smooth and complex rhythms of jazz music. Armstrong was inducted into the Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame in 2017 and his legacy as a musician lives on to the present.

By including Armstrong as a character in her narrative, Edugyan relies on the cultural capital that surrounds him as an icon to depict true jazz music and to underscore its roots in Black culture. Edugyan's Armstrong becomes a symbol of success in the narrative for the musicians and, consequently, they willingly travel through Berlin and Paris under the most dangerous conditions in the hope of creating a record with him.

From an early age, Chip and Sid yearn to dedicate their life to creating real jazz music like Armstrong. Unified by their mutual desire to become jazz musicians, they grow alongside one another and the foundation of their friendship is solidified in a jazz club. At 13 years old, they are introduced to the intoxicating club scene by their friend Panther Brownstone. This club marks the place Chip first plays “the skins” (Edugyan 178) and Sid first falls in love with a girl and with the power he associates with becoming a musician. From the “dames swaying their hips in shimmering dresses” to the “chaps drinking gutbucket hooch” and the “gorgeous speakeasy slang,” Chip and Sid both believe they have “found what ... life was meant for” (Edugyan 180). While immersed within the sonic environment of the club that celebrates jazz music and its cultural lineage, Chip and Sid are told, “Listen, jazz, it ain’t just music. It *life*. You got to have experience to make jazz” (Edugyan 181). While this scene is presented to the reader as a flashback in the novel’s fourth section, Berlin 1992, the distorted timeframe reflects the struggles the reader knows the musicians have already overcome. By section four the musicians’ success is clearly outlined by Edugyan, yet the narrative explores the struggles and hardships they endured to achieve their dream. The traumatic experience of living in an active war zone is both unpredictable and unsettling for the musicians. Like jazz music that does not follow a prescriptive formula, the climate in Europe is unpredictable and the Black musicians are more susceptible to racialized mistreatment. The fragmentation and disorientation of the novel’s structure mimic the irregularities present in both the unpredictable political climate and jazz music, thus binding form and content.

As the narrative progresses, Edugyan includes moments where the musicians are actively creating their own jazz record during the 1939-1940 timeline. The process of creating sounds via Black jazz music forms what Schafer calls an “acoustic design.” An “acoustic design” is

described as “an inter-discipline in which musicians, acousticians, psychologists, sociologists and others would study the world soundscape together in order to make intelligent recommendations for its improvement” (Schafer 4). Although Edugyan’s musicians are not cognizant of the alterations they are making to the wartime soundscape through their creation of Black jazz, they are actively resisting the Nazi political ideology that criminalizes difference and reclaiming the voices of marginalized people.

Through representations of acoustic design, Edugyan’s narrative underscores how sound has the potential to create space to celebrate difference in wartime Europe; however, the representations also stress the extreme sacrifices the musicians make in order to achieve their dream. In section three, Berlin 1939, the musicians connect with a fellow musician named Delilah who works with Armstrong. As a *mischling* from Montreal, Delilah is keenly aware of how the political climate in both Germany and France actively works to limit the agency of Black individuals, yet she uses her status as a Canadian citizen to help the musicians navigate the streets and work with Armstrong. While Delilah’s Canadian citizenship works as a buffer in the political climate, by the time the musicians finally begin working with Armstrong they have lost Ernest to his Nazi affiliated father in exchange for their legal papers and Paul to the Boots when he left the safety of the nightclub to get his epilepsy medicine. The toll of losing friends, living in fear, and making severe sacrifices are reflected in the music they play with Armstrong and convey the traumatic lived experience of Black citizens in Nazi Europe.

When the musicians begin playing with Armstrong, Sid is overwhelmed by the experience of working with the living legend: “I ain’t hardly believed it. Hiero, Chip and me was so harmonious, so close in tone colour, it sounded like the same gate squawling on three different instruments. Man, it was smooth” (Edugyan 231). In this moment, the sonic environment

juxtaposes the cruel and cold climate of the war and celebrates the camaraderie of creating music. However, since jazz as a genre reflects lived experience in terms of both highs and lows, and Edugyan is careful not to completely idealize or romanticize this moment of making music, in an instant the music changes, reflecting the unpredictable turns of life as Sid's "damn fingers stumble" and he starts "messing it up" (Edugyan 232). Chip hisses a warning, asking Sid "What you *doin*?" (Edugyan 232), which adds to the soundscape of the moment.

With the smooth air of jazz being lost because of Sid's inability to "get ... [himself] together" (Edugyan 232), the musicians and Armstrong talk about what has brought them to this moment. Personally, they have all been racially profiled and have lost friends and family while following the jazz musician dream. The sonic environment they create before Sid's mishap produces a collective community of difference that celebrates their heritage, their struggle, and their dedication to the dream despite the ongoing war. As music scholar Barry Shank asserts, true musical beauty lies within difference: "the act of musical listening enables us to confront complex and mobile structures of impermanent relationships—the sonic interweaving of tones and beats ... that model the experience of belonging to a community not of unity but of difference" (1). Through the act of making a real and authentic piece of jazz, the musicians are able to celebrate their heritage and cultural difference. Rather than comply with the rigid social and political ideology of 1940 Paris, the musicians embrace their difference and bolster their sense of pride through music.

Working with Armstrong invests Chip and Hiero with complete confidence in themselves as musicians, as they are able to match the energy and vibrance of Armstrong's sound. Sid, however, continues to stumble and consequentially Armstrong decides that the musician will be replaced when it comes time to officially cut a record. The voice of Armstrong saying, "Sid ...

You goin sit this one out, if that okay. It ain't but the first one. We got other discs to press. Jean just got the fingers I want on this one" (Edugyan 242), looms large over Sid. In this moment, Sid becomes overwhelmed by the words coming from his idol's mouth. He begins to question the value of his sacrifice and pain because he is left off the record. But rather than channel his outrage and pain into the music, Sid targets Hiero and betrays his friend in a way that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

As the musicians continue to work with Armstrong on their record, the political climate in France becomes more hostile with each passing day. Armstrong puts the record on hold and promises the musicians that they will resume their project upon their arrival in the United States. As a mixed race person with German blood, Hiero is put in a more precarious situation than Delilah, Sid, and Chip. Delilah's contact is supposedly only able to provide papers for non-Germans because there is less fear about potential Nazi affiliation. However, in a moment of blinding jealousy, Sid is home as the contact's nephew drops off the papers. "*Hieronymus Thomas Falk*. The name crisply printed on a French exist visa, transit visas, an entrance docket into Switzerland" (Edugyan 284) sits in his hands. Instead of telling Hiero, Chip, or Delilah, Sid hides the documents and claims that they never arrived.

Sid's betrayal of Hiero is a layered traumatic event that reverberates through the narrative as his choice to hide Hiero's papers is revealed to be the origin of the musicians' extended residence in Nazi Europe. Hiero, unaware of the betrayal, insists that the three musicians come together to create their own album without Armstrong: "*Half-Blood Blues*. That what he going call it, our Horst Wessel track. It wasn't true blues, sure, ain't got the right chord structure, but the kid ain't cared none" (Edugyan 275). The musicians' record becomes an accumulation of every life experience they have shared as a collective community. The title is reflective of

Hiero's belief that his German ancestry is the reason why the musicians and Delilah are stuck in Paris. The blues elements are reflective of jazz's origin in the blues genre, as well as the musicians' dark and gloomy experiences in Europe. The record, an acoustic design created by the musicians that is predicated on their experiences and cultural lineage, reflects their resistance to the Nazi political paradigm.

Sid alone carries the burden of his choice to hide Hiero's papers. The night when Hiero is taken by the Boots from the club, Sid fully realizes the extent of his actions and he lives knowing that his own selfish choice potentially cost Hiero his life. Fifty years pass and, despite the fame accorded to Sid and Chip for *Half-Blood Blues*, the elderly Sid does not share Chip's pride and happiness in having made the record. In section two, Berlin 1992, Chip makes an unexpected visit to Sid's apartment to convince him to travel with him to Poland following the Falk Festival in Baltimore, where the two are to be recognized for their contribution to *Half-Blood Blues*. Chip reveals that he received a letter supposedly from Hiero asking Chip to visit his home in Poland. Since the musicians have not spoken to Hiero since his capture in Paris, Sid is unsure if Hiero is actually alive. Begrudgingly, Sid agrees to the trip with Chip and the guilt of his choice to hide Hiero's papers weighs heavily on his mind.

The celebratory Falk Festival takes place in an auditorium in Baltimore. Within the confines of the auditorium, where the sound of the crowd "erupted" and fans were screaming "*Chip Jones! Mr. Jones! Sidney Griffiths! Charles! Sid!*" (Edugyan 44), Sid's guilt builds inside. As they sit through the first showing of the documentary honouring Hiero and his contribution to jazz music, Sid is reminded of the night Hiero was captured via a testimonial from Chip. The recording of Chip's voice takes over the auditorium and Sid is blindsided as the recording reveals, "It's a crime for which Sid ain't never been held to account" (Edugyan 52). As Sid

listens to the recording of Chip, he is overwhelmed by both the sense of grief he has been harbouring and the sense of betrayal by Chip for publicizing Sid's involvement in the night Hiero was captured. In the moment Sid describes how he feels: "all a sudden that crushing hot feeling in my chest just drain right away. It like I ain't even there no more. Like something just finished" (Edugyan 52).

Hearing Chip blame Sid for Hiero's capture demonstrates how powerful sound is in communicating trauma. In the auditorium, Sid experiences debilitating panic that is compounded by the presence of numerous fans and his fifty-year-old guilt. In his essay "Acoustic Space," McLuhan asserts that "the ear is closely affiliated with man's emotional life" (66), which is precisely why Sid is overwhelmed by the onslaught of this particular soundscape. And since sound has "no point of favoured focus" (Carpenter and McLuhan 67), Sid cannot escape the moment when his guilt builds and consequently erupts in the auditorium. Sound envelops Sid in a state of grief and he knows he must now become accountable for his actions.

Jazz celebrates Black culture and the connection to lived experience and, as Sid is confronted with his past in the auditory sphere of the auditorium, the soundscape echoes the lived experience of his jazz music. While difficult for Sid to acknowledge, the soundbite from Chip recalls their past and demands a reconciliation. Hearing Chip blame him for Hiero's capture silences Sid, which reveals the limitations of spoken words to communicate when a traumatic experience is occurring or being remembered in real time. Invoking Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth discusses the "pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals" (*Unclaimed* 1) who have experienced traumatic events. Caruth's interest stems from Freud's notion that these encounters with the traumatic, being a nightmare or a memory of the event, "are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the

individual's own acts" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 2). Sitting in the auditorium, Sid is forced to confront the reality of his choice to hide Hiero's papers because he is included within the soundscape of the arena. Sid willingly sacrificed his friend in one of the most heinous political climates because of overwhelming jealousy and his burning desire to create jazz. Hearing that Chip blames him for Hiero's capture brings forward the memories of living in continual fear, the sacrifices each musician made, the people lost along the way, and the reasons for his choice. In this instance, Sid is silenced by the traumatic experience of remembering. Through Sid's encounter with his traumatic past, Edugyan creates a link between jazz music's reflection of real lived experience and the soundscape of the auditorium. Sound in this moment forces Sid to come to terms with his life choices and fully recognize that his actions harmed a person he called friend.

Edugyan's novel works to bolster the voices of the Black musicians by showing their dedication to creating jazz that reflects their cultural lineage. Black jazz gives voice to the musicians within the racialized political climate of Nazi Europe. At the same time, however, Edugyan includes representations of German jazz or White jazz that work to subvert the power and authority of the Black community in favour of the German political figures. White jazz adopts the characteristics of cultural appropriation as the German musicians mimic the practice of playing jazz without recognizing its historical lineage. The Black musicians mock the authenticity of White jazz as they read Albert Basel's review of the German band "The Golden Seven." In the article, Basel, a hypocrite who formerly admired Black jazz for its "ingeniously complex rhythms," now reduces it to "aural vermin" and "Jewish-Hottentot frivolity" (Edugyan 98). Given the fact that jazz stems from Black culture, condemning true jazz while valourizing the appropriated German version seems as if Edugyan is mocking the existence of German jazz as a whole.

In the end, Edugyan's novel lifts the voices of the Black community by celebrating its link to jazz music. By honouring their cultural heritage and by refusing to cower in fear, the musicians resist the oppressive political power dynamics of Nazi Europe. Through jazz, the musicians add to the overarching soundscape of the wartime era and assert their cultural difference, which actively undermines the German political ideology. In effect, Edugyan utilizes sound and the practice of making sounds to move beyond the rigid confines of the political climate in Germany and recognize the marginalized voices of the Black community.

Part Three: Silence

Although the novel is centred around the process of making jazz and the power music has to invest marginalized people with a voice, Edugyan's narrative also includes many moments of silence that reveal the complex and hostile nature of Nazi Europe's political climate. By definition, the noun "silence" is used to describe the total and complete absence of sound (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*) in a sonic environment. Schafer expands this definition. "Man," he claims, "likes to make sounds to remind himself that he is not alone ... Silence is the rejection of the human personality" (Schafer 256), which invests the presence of sound with the utmost importance. To Schafer, the absence of sound is to be regarded with the same scrutiny as the practices of making and analyzing sounds because of its inclusion within a soundscape. Since Schafer asserts that a soundscape comprises all of the sounds of a given moment in time, the absence of certain sounds must be considered an integral element of a particular soundscape.

Since the rhetoric of silence hinges upon the idea of absence, the numerous moments of silence might seem to detract from the ebb and flow—the aurality—of Edugyan's narrative as they interrupt the steady flow of sound. However, as Schafer's research suggests, the absence of

sound is as integral to the soundscape as sound itself. Schafer's research investigates noise pollution and the over-saturation of sounds that pollute the soundscape of the world. In fact, Schafer asserts that his role as teacher is to study the soundscape and work to reverse its "vulgarity" (Schafer 3). In his study, Schafer declares that to improve the soundscape he must "discover the significant features of a soundscape, those sounds which are important either because of their individuality, their numerousness, or their domination" (9). In Schafer's terms, then, the representations of silence are integral features of Edugyan's narrative soundscape because of the relationship they have with other sounds within Nazi Europe.

The representations of silence are Edugyan's most subversive and complex mechanisms that signify the severity of the traumatic experience of Black people during the war because they reveal the limitations of language to express the truly horrific. Before Hiero is captured by the Boots, the bar is a soundscape filled with the voices of patrons and the hum of the "radio murmuring in the background" (Edugyan 12). While Hiero and Sid sit at the bar, their conversation turns to how they might continue to improve *Half-Blood Blues*. Hearing Hiero say that they "might as well do another take" of the record since his "damn visas ain't come yet" (Edugyan 13) causes Sid's stomach to lurch. The combination of the "rot" they were drinking in the flat, mixed with the guilt he feels for betraying his friend, overwhelms Sid who, by his own admission, was only "just holding it together" (Edugyan 13). "I be right back. You ain't goin leave without me?" says Sid before he excuses himself to the "basement john" (Edugyan 13). The moments before the arrival of the Boots are integral to the shifting soundscape of the bar. Before their arrival, the bar is a relative safe haven for people who do not align with the Aryan race attributes upheld by the Nazi political regime and for mixed race Germans, like Hiero, who are innocent but are always suspected of being affiliated with Nazi ideology. Like the shadows

that provide cover for the musicians as they move from the flat to the bar, the bar is a cover that creates a space beyond the confines of the shadows. In the bar, marginalized people do not have to hide in order to feel safe.

As the Boots enter the bar, Sid is still in the basement and cannot see who has arrived to beget sudden silence. He notices that “talk [in the bar] got softer. Then the whole place seemed to shudder with the sound of something crashing” (Edugyan 14). In this moment, the soundscape of the bar changes to reflect the presence of extreme danger. The former jovial scene is replaced by “dead quiet. Everything, everyone, felt distinct, pillowed by silence” (Edugyan 14). Here, silence encodes alarm as it reflects the political ideology of Nazi Europe that is predicated on eliminating the voices of Black people. The silence that descends on the scene is reflective of the terror felt by the patrons, regardless of their possession of legal identity papers. But the significance of the silence is even more complex and extends beyond fear. Since the patrons recognize that the political power dynamics of the country supports the authority of the Boots, they know that using their voices to advocate for themselves is futile. As non-Aryans who are criminalized for their difference, to speak up in opposition would implicate them further. Yet, by remaining silent the patrons become complicit with the Nazi power dynamic.

The first voice that Sid hears from the basement comes from the mouth of one of the two Boots dressed “in pale uniforms” (Edugyan 15) standing in the doorway. The word “Foreigner” (Edugyan 15) travels through the air. Hiero stares firmly at the Boots, protecting Sid from being caught in the basement. While one of the Boots “yanked wide the Coup’s door, its chain singing” (Edugyan 16), another takes Hiero’s arm and whisks him and the Jewish boy through the door as Sid stands by watching. The soundscape of the scene changes again as the “[t]he front door shut with a clatter. The lights was all still up in the café. Silence, no one talking at all” (Edugyan 16).

The room shares in the collective silence, and feelings of fear, disbelief, and shock all reverberate through the silent sonic environment. One gentleman breaks the silence by walking up to the barkeep and whispering his order in French. Sid notes, “[n]o one spoke, all of us watching. And then the door jangled cheerfully shut behind him” (Edugyan 16). It remains ambiguous as to whether or not the Frenchman somehow alerted the Boots to the presence of patrons without legal identity papers and if the barkeep was somehow involved in the sweep; nonetheless, the shifting sonic environment in the scene underscores how sound is able to communicate the severity of the political power dynamics beyond the spoken word. The use of differing frequencies in the sonic environment communicates a complex and nuanced depiction of the social and political realities of Nazi Europe. Silence becomes a powerful communicator of fear and the trauma that becomes a mental wound. The sound of silence “imprints itself literally on or into the subject’s mind and brain” (Caruth, *Trauma* 5-6) and becomes a painful reminder of the horrific experience in the bar and, by extension, the time spent in Nazi Europe. For Sid, both sound and the absence of sound become implicated by the political landscape of Nazi Europe and his betrayal of Hiero.

While Sid’s visceral reaction to the stimulus of Chip’s soundbite at the Falk Festival forces him to confront his past choices, the moment when all three musicians are reunited in section six, Poland 1992, is the novel’s most powerful representation of silence. As Chip and Sid arrive at Hiero’s home and enter the grounds, Sid notes that “something felt wrong but I wasn’t sure what. Then I known. It was utterly silent, utterly still” (Edugyan 292). The silence forces Sid to remember his past, the people he lost, and those who sacrificed as much, if not more, than he did to ensure that *Half-Blood Blues* was made possible. His friends are metaphorically standing with Sid as he walks through the grounds of Hiero’s home: Ernest, who thought the

“only way to take revenge on his pa was to kill himself” (Edugyan 292) after he traded his life for legal identity transit visas for his friends; Paul, who left the flat for his “epilepsy medication” (Edugyan 292) with Delilah and was caught by “some ex-rival of his, a one-time jazz pianist turned Gestapo toady ... [who] arrested him on charges of treason against the regime, of race pollution” (Edugyan 293); and Delilah, who “hid ... [their] disks in all different bags before quitting Paris ... Even went so far as to sew *Half-Blood Blues* into a secret pocket on the inside of her coat” (Edugyan 293). The silence of Hiero’s grounds forces Sid to recognize his role in the suffering of his friends, and that he must finally tell Hiero about his fifty-year-old betrayal.

As the three musicians reunite, Hiero embraces his bandmates wholeheartedly. Since their last meeting, Hiero has gone blind yet continues to be self-sufficient and independent in his own home, which confirms McLuhan’s assertion that “the ears are all encompassing, constantly alert to any sound originating in their boundless sphere” (McLuhan 68). Hiero’s attention to sounds informs his movement through his home, which underscores the inherent power gained from listening intently. Listening and Hiero’s muscle memory work together to bridge the disparity created by his loss of sight, thus confirming the power of sound to communicate meaning. While the blind Hiero has abandoned the life of jazz, claiming that he “just couldn’t find none of that joy in it no more” (Edugyan 301), he now uses his keen sense of hearing to navigate the landscape of his home. Like Schafer, Hiero listens attentively and utilizes sound and its absence to survive on his own.

As Sid watches Hiero navigate the surroundings of his home without the aid of sight, he chooses to reveal his choice to hide the visas. As he recounts the story, Sid is initially met with disbelief, since Hiero had always thought that the visas had never arrived. Yet, when Sid makes it clear that he had hidden the visas because he “wanted to finish the recording” (Edugyan 306),

silence descends on the porch. Silence between the characters embodies feelings of doubt, shock, and despair that Sid was capable of betraying his friend for jazz. Sid notes, “[t]he silence was so painful between us I finally rose to go” (Edugyan 307). As the silence grows, Sid and Chip come to terms with the fact that they have both done things they are not proud of and must continue to live with the consequences of their actions. The two move off the porch after Hiero leaves and they enter the living area of Hiero’s home. To fill the empty silence, they play a record by Marcella Sembrich. Hiero enters the room and the music pauses. With his milky eyes directed at Sid, he says, “I see you Sid ... I see you like it was fifty years ago. Exactly like that ... Turn it ... Play it again” (Edugyan 309). The three musicians pick up where they left off in Paris 1940, manipulating sounds and creating music. While it remains unclear whether or not Hiero truly forgives Sid for his heinous betrayal, the complex emotions of the scene reflect the complexities of jazz music as a whole.

Conclusion

Edugyan’s novel relies on the ethos of the sonic environment to convey the severity of trauma experienced by the Black musicians and prove that representations of sound and silence are implicated within the political climate in which they are expressed. The slurs and slang Edugyan incorporates in the narrative carry the weight of the racialized political climate of wartime Germany. The practice of using slurs and slang adds to the soundscape of Nazi Europe by underscoring who is supported and who is condemned by the political regime. On the one hand, racial slurs operate as a singular method to bolster the Boots’s political authority while simultaneously stripping the recipients of their power. The slurs become an auditory representation of the Nazi ideology that aims to eliminate people like the Black musicians who

do not align with purportedly Aryan attributes. On the other hand, the musicians use slang to reclaim their power by creating exclusive communities outside the Nazi regime. Through slang, the musicians celebrate their cultural roots and their difference despite the political ideology of Nazi Europe that criminalizes such difference. Thus, the slurs and slang serve as verbal instruments that expose political and social power. By showing that words can be reflective of power dynamics, the potential of language to communicate a nuanced understanding of the political regime is revealed. In effect, Edugyan's soundscape of the war, which includes slurs and slang, calls attention to how sound is embedded in a wider political framework and documents the horrors of the Second World War.

Through depictions of Black jazz and White jazz, Edugyan's narrative allows the sonic environment and the process of creating an acoustic design to uplift the voices of the Black musicians through their jazz music. Each representation of Black jazz invests the genre and the musicians with cultural significance and capital. Louis Armstrong acts as a touchstone figure who carries the ethos of pride in Black success. Like Armstrong, Edugyan's musicians suffer for their artistic expression, yet their voices and musical contributions reverberate through time. Moreover, by including representations of White jazz, which fail to acknowledge the cultural lineage and historical roots of the genre, White jazz is shown to represent the falsity embedded within cultural appropriation. Taken together, the representations of Black jazz and White jazz in Edugyan's novel reveal that sound has the ability to uplift the voices of difference in a political climate predicated on eliminating that very difference.

While the representations of slurs, slang, and jazz music are auditory expressions of how sound communicates, Edugyan's clever use of silence embodies the dynamic nature of sound to move beyond the confines of the spoken word. For Sid, silence suggests how deeply ingrained

are the traumatic experiences of living through the war and betraying a friend. Silence denotes the moment when fear is at its height in the bar as Hiero is being captured; it also forces Sid to come to terms with his past and work to reconcile his wrongdoings, even though forgiveness is not guaranteed.

The representations of soundscapes in Edugyan's novel are informed and informed by the political power dynamics of Nazi Europe. Slurs and slang, jazz music, and silence work within the context of the novel to offer a nuanced and in-depth analysis of how the Nazi political regime criminalized difference. In effect, Edugyan's handling of sound and silence evokes the human trauma that Caruth describes so powerfully as a mental wound on the body.

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