

Ralph Ellison and Jazz in *Invisible Man*, Bharati Mukherjee and Mughal Miniature  
Paintings in *The Holder of the World*, and Contemporary Styles of Graffiti: Genre  
Fluidity Across Written and Visual Narratives

A Thesis

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by

Geoffrey Bogan

Spring 2018

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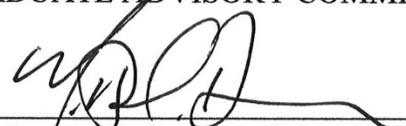
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## ABSTRACT

Ralph Ellison and Jazz in *Invisible Man*, Bharati Mukherjee and Mughal Miniature  
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This thesis both outlines and tests the limits of a methodology that can be used to make sense of references to certain literary genres as they appear in contemporary narratives. While much of my argument refers to literature, as I will note this methodology is valid in reference to visual narratives as well and perhaps even more relevant. Employing both text world and possible world theory, I analyze Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* and Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Holder of the World* for their references to literary genres that are participating in conversations that additionally exist outside of the texts themselves. By referencing these genres, I argue that the authors are attempting to further a dialogue on certain thematic issues they address beyond their respective narratives. I claim that by engaging in these post-narrative conversations readers are able to better extract meaning from the novels and further their overall

comprehension of what is actually taking place. Furthermore, I will address the broad nature of my methodology by discussing how it functions differently depending on medium and application.

Citing examples from a variety of genres that aim to step outside both mainstream and academic discourses, I will argue that one's comprehension of how a reference to a specific genre functions in any given narrative depends on their willingness to trace the initial conversation back to its roots and in some cases reframe the way they approach it. In outlining this methodology, my hope is to provide a new perspective on how academic discourses pertaining to literary genre might effectively navigate the nuances of newly entering conversations that have long existed outside of its realm and their potential reasons for existing as such.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Ralph Ellison and Jazz in *Invisible Man*, Bharati Mukherjee and Mughal Miniature Paintings in *The Holder of the World*, and Contemporary Styles of Graffiti: Genre Fluidity Across Written and Visual Narratives

This thesis is a study of contemporary authors and visual artists that attempt to expand a dialogue beyond their work. They do so by referencing and appropriating aesthetics from literary genres that have vast histories outside of the works they compose. Through my discussion on these artists and their work I will not only engage in these post-narrative conversations but also argue that genre– or rather, categories of artistic composition– is a far more fluid, rather than static, term. By moving freely between principles dictated by the genres they compose in versus the genres they reference these artists allow scholarship on their work to be framed from an intersection of perspectives.

References to outside, or appearingly separate, literary genres occur constantly throughout contemporary written and visual narratives and often times indicate that the creators are attempting to participate in a broader conversation than what might be apparent at face value. Whether it be a reference to a form of art, media, etc., for the purposes of my overall methodology it probably does a disservice to certain genres on an individual basis to label them all under one category for a number of difference reasons. The first of which being that due to the term “genre” being so broad it can literally

encompass any form of art or media that exists in technologically advanced society. Secondly, it would be presumptuous to assume that all literary genres have been given equal attention in academic discourses within humanities fields throughout history. As recent scholarship has proven, much of western academia has historically served the ideological aims of Anglo-male hegemony, hence American literatures “dead white-male” canon. It is important to emphasize that deconstructing this frame is necessary if one is to participate in broader, more global, conversations via the humanities. As Marshall McLuhan notes in *The Medium is the Massage*, “In an electronic information age, minority groups can no longer be ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other” (24).

I have chosen to examine two novels— *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison and *The Holder of the World* (1993) by Bharati Mukherjee— in which the authors appropriate aesthetics from historically neglected and marginalized genres for their written purposes. Ellison does this throughout *Invisible Man* by employing aesthetics pulled from his knowledge of jazz music and continually referencing its historical significance within the African American community. While Mukherjee’s forces her audience throughout *The Holder of the World* to approach her narrative from multiple perspectives utilizing principles she appropriated from Mughal miniature paintings. By placing these notions in conversation with both text world and possible world theory I will argue that by referencing these genres both Ellison and Mukherjee are able to reframe the

conversations they are attempting to have throughout their texts in a way that allows them to extend beyond the narratives themselves. Additionally, I will push the limits of my methodology by offering different mediums of graffiti that further depict literary genres as fluid subjects of study. I have chosen graffiti as a deliberately controversial form of art in order to further demonstrate how deconstructing traditional frames rooted in hegemonic power structures can be beneficial to one's comprehension of how certain genres may be functioning in a broader conversation.

In proposing this methodology, I do not aim to diminish differences that exist in the artistic visions of the artists that I reference nor their artistic processes. It is important to note that these artists come from varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, likely practice different politics, and enjoy success, both commercial and otherwise, all on separate levels. I am aware that as white-heterosexual-male perusing a graduate degree from a state funded university I might also be seen as complicate with the very dominating power structures that the artists I write about aim to critique and deconstruct. While I have deliberately framed my authenticity within a matter of sexual, racial and class identity, it is something I aim to address through mindful self-reflection, cautions of what Robert Young calls "the constitutive and complicating role of the investigator in the formation of knowledge" (170). In the remaining pages of this thesis, I hope to demonstrate the same attentiveness to the artists I reference who aim to subvert traditional power structures through their work while simultaneously existing in a world that is dominated by these very structures.

## CHAPTER II

### Text World and Possible World Theory

In “The Deterritorialization of American Literature” Paul Giles discusses the move to “integrate and reconcile local variation within a larger national matrix” throughout American culture during early parts of the twentieth century (11). For the purposes of the American literary canon, this signified a move from localized settings- such as Willa Cather’s Nebraska or Robert Frost’s New England- to multi-regionally set novels like *Invisible Man* that aim to showcase multiculturalism as an American ideal. Generally speaking, this move reflected a trend for many American authors who were interested in participating in more of a national or even global conversation.

During this time period however, many aspects of U.S. culture that did not conform to the hegemonic ideals of melting pot assimilation and monolingualism tended to get little recognition or glossed over entirely by scholars of American studies. Considering this from a twenty-first century perspective, Giles notes that the reappraisal of American literary works from earlier eras becomes both possible and necessary through what he refers to as a *transnational* approach (23). He identifies the current time period the U.S. is in as the “transnational era” and claims it has moved significant ways beyond the country’s former “national phase” seen throughout earlier parts of the twentieth century due to “the necessarily reciprocal position of [it] within global networks of exchange” (12). Identifying the U.S. in such a position provides an impetus

to think of relations between it as a nation and the rest of the world in terms of “more complex, analogical processes of convergence and divergence” (23). For the purposes of literary scholarship, an effective way of doing so has involved juxtaposing spatial categories as they are presented throughout novels with the actual (real world) places they aim to depict.

Space— both physical and temporal— within a literary narrative is defined by Ruth Ronen in her book *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* as the domain of settings and surroundings of events, characters and objects, along with other domains (story, character, time and ideology), that constitute a fictional universe (421). Furthermore, Ronen notes setting as being the zero point where the actual story events and story states are localized and framed as a fictional place, the actual or potential surrounding of fictional characters, objects and places (423). To further elaborate on the distinction between setting and space, one might consider how a kitchen could be viewed as an actual and physical place but also framed as a domestic space. These terms are all a part of the larger conversation centered around both text world and possible world theories that have started to receive attention from American literary scholars in recent years.

According to Marie-Laure Ryan in *Possible Worlds*, the foundation of possible world theory assumes that:

reality [is] conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists physically [and] is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds. This universe is hierarchically structured by the opposition of one element, which functions as the center of the system, to all the other members of the set (Kripke 1963). The central element is known as the “actual or “real” world.” (1)

In other words, a possible world's capability is dependent solely upon the actual world that is being imagined and portrayed within the text. The fictional world itself is known as the "text world." This concept describes a deictic space, defined initially by the discourse itself, and specifically by the deictic and referential elements in it (Paul Werth, 180).

Ryan also notes that the observations and concepts developed by the various advocates of possible world theory can now be seen as equally valid for narratives realized in other media such as drama, film, comics, or video games (1). While much of her argument refers to literature as will mine, in my conclusion I will suggest that opportunities for the application of possible world theory are perhaps even more prevalent within visual narratives. Moreover, as I continue I will specifically reference possible world theory as it pertains to the "possible worlds" made available through fluidity amongst genres.

## CHAPTER III

### Jazz Aesthetics and Louis Armstrong throughout *Invisible Man*

In this chapter, I will analyze moments from Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, that are influenced by the author's interest in jazz. From an early age, Ellison was an avid student of jazz. First a musician then a writer, he studied music at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama before moving to Harlem, New York in 1936 where he began his writing career. Published in 1952, *Invisible Man* came just prior to the Supreme Court's decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that abolished many forms of racial segregation in the United States. As a combatant to the country's increasing racial tensions at the time of its publication, in an introduction to an edition of the novel published thirty years later, Ellison states that when crafting the narrative he employed his background in jazz as a means of "revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American" (xxii). Though there are a number of references to jazz music throughout the nearly six-hundred page text most deliberate are the narrator's interest in jazz legend Louis Armstrong and additionally his speech scenes taking on call-and-response patterns with the various audiences he encounters. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will develop both of these ideas further by first discussing some jazz history and the genre's implications toward African American experiences and additionally Louis Armstrong's relation to the text. I will also briefly discuss Ellison's own thoughts on music and more directly define the jazz

characteristics that can be seen during the speech scenes. I will argue that the narrator's career as an orator not only reflects his own ideology as demonstrated once he is removed from the main narrative tract in both the prologue and epilogue, but additionally Ellison's own towards appropriating music for his written purposes.

Prior to discussing the text in any capacity, it is important to note music's role in the social legacies of slavery within the United States. Ted Gioia's book *The History of Jazz* opens with a lively description of Congo Square in nineteenth-century New Orleans, Louisiana:

An elderly black man sits astride a large cylindrical drum. Using his fingers and the edge of his hand, he jabs repeatedly at the drumhead—which is around a foot in diameter and probably made from an animal skin—evoking a throbbing pulsation with rapid, sharp strokes. A second drummer, holding his instrument between his knees, joins in, playing with the same staccato attack. A third black man, seated on the ground, plucks at a stringed instrument, the body of which is roughly fashioned from a calabash. Another calabash has been made into a drum, and a woman beats at it with two short sticks. One voice, then another join in. A dance of seeming contradictions accompanies this musical give-and-take, a moving hieroglyph that appears, on the one hand, informal and spontaneous yet, on closer inspection, ritualized and precise. It is a dance of massive proportions. A dense crowd of dark bodies forms into circular groups—perhaps five or six hundred individuals moving in time to the pulsations of the music, some swaying gently, others aggressively stomping their feet. A number of women in the group begin chanting. (3)

As Gioia goes on to note, descriptions such as this can only be gathered from scattered documents and firsthand accounts due to the underground nature of the events that took place there. These descriptions remain vitally important as they represent the first transfer of purely African musical traditions to the New world. Moreover, since New Orleans was the heart of the slave market in the United States throughout the nineteenth-century, as

music historian Ned Sublette notes in *The World That Made New Orleans*, these gatherings acted as a tremendous form of resistance for the communities who participated in them as “overt manifestations of Africanness had elsewhere been so thoroughly, deliberately erased” throughout the country.

Of the purely African traditions that these gatherings in Congo Square showcased were the eradication of divisions between audience and performer, song and dance, and social and ceremonial that were all integral to Western notions of musical performance at the time. According to Gioia, it is generally thought that these traditions practiced in New Orleans went on to both inspire and shape the future jazz-musician’s self-image. Moreover, he claims that these traditions helped create a dialogue on what it meant to be both a musician *and* African American noting the “synergistic process” that this dialogue largely revolved around— that is, both the Americanization of African music and Africanization of American music (5). Further elaborating, he states, “The celebration of labor, inherent in the African American work song, must otherwise seem strangely out of place coming from an oppressed race consigned to the indignities of slavery. But as soon as one sees the song of work as part of an inherently African approach to day-to-day life, one that integrates music into the occupations of here and now, this paradox disappears entirely” (11). Throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison addresses a similar conversation in regards to African American experiences throughout the pre-Civil Rights era through references to how Louis Armstrong utilized this approach to music.

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1901, Louis Armstrong was closely tutored throughout the early stages of his music career in traditions that spawned from the gatherings in Congo Square. Most notable was his ability to further develop what Thomas Brothers refers to in *Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism* as the “fixed and variable” musical model that was brought to the New World from sub-Saharan Africa. According to Brothers, the model functions as such: “one instrument (or group or instruments) plays a repeated rhythmic figure. This ‘fixed’ level orients the listener or dancer, while the ‘variable’ instrument or group brings the music to life by departing from the repeated figure in interesting ways” (6). By making this uniquely African musical model so central to his own style Armstrong was then able to intensify the audible presence of his African heritage as a result (6-7). To elaborate, given the strong association between race and culture within the United States in the 1920’s, the fixed and variable model became not only key to hearing and understanding Armstrong’s music, but additionally to understanding how his music was socially perceived. As Brothers further notes: “When race is downplayed by jazz historians who prefer to think of the music in a unified ‘American’ way— with whites and blacks both contributing, and with more or less equal debt to Europe and Africa, making jazz a kind of golden multiculturalism *avant la lettre*— these fundamental points are obscured.” (7)

Additionally contributing to the legacy Armstrong leaves behind was his ability to succeed in mainstream white audiences later on in his career throughout the early 1930s. Part of Armstrong’s early musical training consisted of learning how to “rag the tune”–

or, create one's own stylized version of a known melody by adding embellishments and extensions (*LA* 9). By appropriating this early jazz tradition and adding a fresh new approach Armstrong became the best-selling musical performer in the country regardless of genre, race, etc. for a number of years. Significant for the purposes of my argument then is the fact that *Invisible Man* opens as the narrator is listening to Armstrong's version of the song "(What Did I do to Be So) Black and Blue" and is said to descend into the song's depths (9). Upon his descent, the narration takes on a call-and-response pattern in which a preacher probes their congregation with questions on the nature of African American experiences:

'Black will make you...'  
'Black...'  
'...or black will un-make you.'  
'Ain't it the truth, Lawd?' (10).

As he resurfaces, his focus turns back to Armstrong innocently asking: "What did I do / To be so black / And blue?" (12).

In his book *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, Eric Sundquist discusses the historical context of Louis Armstrong's song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" referenced in both the prologue and epilogue of Ellison's novel. Armstrong first heard a version of the song in 1929 when he participated on the black musical stage of New York where it was sung in the show *Hot Chocolates* (115). Ordered by the show's white (and racist) financial backer, the song was initially intended to be a comic one on forms of oppression experienced by African American communities. By employing his style based on traditions of "ragging the tune," later that very same year

Armstrong recorded a version of the song utilizing his background rooted in the African American vernacular and it went on to be viewed, according to Sundquist, “as one of the first overt instances of racial protest in American popular music” (115). By appropriating the song and subverting it on itself, Armstrong’s version of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” conveys anything but humor and consequently digs deep into ideas of racial prejudice.

Significantly, *Invisible Man* opens and closes by framing its narrative with such a reference. The narrator states in the prologue:

Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware the he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aides me to understand his music.... Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music. (8)

The narrator’s “grasp of invisibility” in both the prologue and epilogue function similarly to W.E.B Du Bois’ concept of the African American “double consciousness,” or rather “always looking at one's self through the eyes" of a racist white society, and "measuring oneself by the means of a nation that looked back in contempt.” Moreover, by making connections from this to Armstrong’s career and musical style so early on in the text Ellison is able to frame his narrator’s ongoing struggle throughout the main narrative tract to no longer be “invisible” in a specific way that calls upon prior knowledge of these conversations.

In his essay “Living With Music,” Ellison writes about growing up and being caught between a similar binary constraint in regards to two separate musical traditions: Negro folk— as he says both sacred and profane, slave song and jazz— and the Western classical music that was taught to him in school. On being torn between the two traditions he claims that attitudes clashed while techniques of playing frequently opposed each other— while the folk traditions demanded he play more of what he heard and felt around him, those who sought to teach classical traditions demanded he follow predetermined guidelines that instead dictated how one is supposed to feel and play (7). On this division, he writes:

In the United States when traditions are juxtaposed they tend, regardless of what we do to prevent it, to merge....One learns by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar...Those who know their native culture and love it unchauvinistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar...Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one’s origins are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. (14)

By allowing himself to move freely between what appeared to be opposing musical traditions, Ellison was able to transcend the binary constraint he found himself confined in. Similarly, the narrator throughout *Invisible Man* finds himself confined by the clashing of his origins and societal reflections that dictate who he is supposed to be. It should be noted, however, that while Ellison himself was able to see through this binary way of thinking in reference to music, his protagonist still remains confined to the cave he lives in at the conclusion of the novel because of society's inability to recognize his visibility.

In the same introduction to *Invisible Man* quoted in the opening paragraph, Ellison noted that when creating the narrative there was a challenge involved in communicating certain ideals across the metaphorical barriers of race and class that for so long had prevented “what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity” (xii). He goes on to state that one of the ways he attempted to communicate these ideals across racial lines was by providing his protagonist “with a range of diction that played upon the richness of our readily shared vernacular speech,” and additionally by constructing “a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American types as they operated on various levels of society” (xxii). Moments in the novel this becomes most evident are during the many speech scenes in which the narration takes on call-and-response patterns similar to the melodic patterns of early jazz songs.

In the essay “Jazz,” Micah Issitt notes that call-and-response patterns— where one voice or instrument provides a musical statement that is followed by a response in the form of another voice or instrumental sequence— are meant to reflect a form of folk music that came from field songs of rural slaves and featured simple repetitive melodies and lyrics that reflected the realities and experiences of their communities. Throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison can be seen as appropriating these melodic patterns for his written purposes during the orations his narrator delivers. However, in the musical tradition an improvisational call-and-response pattern is representative of a collective effort that reflects the realities of the group singing. In Ellison’s novel, the call-and-response

patterns seen during the narrator's speeches are instead representative of the constrictions— or lack of— placed on his progressing ideology. When looking at the sequence of these scenes the narrator's career as an orator can be seen as a reflection of the ideology he later exhibits in both the prologue and epilogue.

Prior to giving his first speech of the novel the narrator recalls an earlier oration he had delivered on his graduation day; of which he states,

I showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. (Not that I believed this...I only believed that it worked.) It was a great success. Everyone praised me and I was invited to give the speech at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens. It was a triumph for our whole community (17).

At this initial point in the novel, the narrator is depicted as appeasing false racial perceptions of himself as a means to get ahead. He states at an earlier point: "everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct" (16). Though, as his narration moves on he notes that before delivering his speech to the town's "leading white citizens" he is forced to take part in the "battle royal" where he and a number of his African American classmates are pitted against each other in a boxing ring and forced to fight for the entertainment of the white audience.

After the battle royal concedes the narrator delivers his speech as he stands in front of the audience feeling "limp as a dish rag," and claims that his back feels as though "it had been beaten with wires" (29). As he is speaking the audience continually laughs and talks over him. Moreover, he states: "Whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it. I used the phrase 'social

responsibility' and they yelled: / 'What's that word you say, boy?'" (30). Here, the narration briefly takes on a call-and-response pattern while the crowd refuses to listen to the narrator's speech as uses the words "social responsibility" and they continually yell for him to repeat himself. Furthermore, when he later accidentally uses the phrase "social equality" the crowd is said to yell hostile phrases back at him before an audience member tells him: "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech" (31). Keeping in mind Ellison's objective of bringing the narrator into contact with a number of different types of Americans the narrator is initially depicted as living in a small southern town where he delivers this first speech. And though his speech is prepared in advance, it is clear as he stands before the audience, continually swallowing his own blood while being constantly interrupted by the "lily-white" men of town, that his agency within the speech is entirely confined by outside perceptions of himself (30). The infamous battle royale scene as well as the speech the narrator delivers afterwards depict the harsh realities of a violent hegemonic culture directed towards African Americans in the American south throughout the 1950s. Attended by powerful people from a number of different bureaucracies in his hometown, the narrator recalls seeing "bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors," this speech and the responses he hears from the crowd demonstrates the initial confusion he feels concerning his own visibility in that subjecting himself to the brutality and humiliation of the event ultimately leads to his advancement in receiving a scholarship to attend college (18).

The narrator's second speech occurs much later in the novel after he has distanced himself from the constraints of his university and the small southern town he grew up in. After his struggle to find a job, then leaving the one he gets at Liberty Paints where after he is exposed to shock therapy, he states, "If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, what it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. But there was no relief. I was with resentment but too much under 'self-control,' that frozen virtue, that freezing vice." (259) The voices the narrator is trying to silence in this passage can be seen as the outside influences he has had placed on him as a result of his race up to this point in the narrative. Further pushing the jazz analogy, Ellison's narrator has not yet figured out how to "live with music" or embrace jazz (invisibility) at this point in the novel. In other words, he doesn't want all the things that "add-up" to jazz and is still striving to embrace mainstream values dictated by overarching power forces.

After living in Harlem for a while the narrator really begins to develop his career as an orator and further starts to work through this binary. Having abandoned his former identity based in humility, he can be seen as attempting to locate some sort of new identity on his own. His second speech is completely improvised and happens as he is walking one day and comes upon a large crowd centered on an African American couple being evicted by two white police officers. As the predominantly African American crowd begins to turn aggressive the narrator becomes inspired and yells out to calm to

mass: “Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers! That’s not the way. We’re law-abiding. We’re a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people” (275). From there, the narration takes on brief moments of call-and-response patterns as he receives a number of responses that force him to improvise and rethink his strategy. He states after one man critically calls back to him: “Oh, God, this wasn’t it at all. Poor technique and not at all what I intended” (276). The responses from the crowd during the eviction scene can be seen in a truly jazz light as the narrator works collectively with the crowd to rally them to action rather than allowing them to dictate his actions like the crowd during his first speech. At this point, no longer embracing humility, the narrator wants to deliver speeches to fight for principles he identifies with rather than as a means of self-gain. Moreover, this is the only speech he gives in which he hasn’t been influenced by an outside source like the Brotherhood rendering the fact that he does it out of principle his true desire for later pursuing his career as an orator. Though, as the narrative moves on he isn’t able to speak again without outside influence as the Brotherhood later distorts his want to give speeches on principle, ultimately leading to confinement in his cave throughout both the prologue and epilogue.

After joining the Brotherhood, the narrator speaks to an organized group in Harlem. Similarly to his eviction speech, the narrator improvises this speech he gives on behalf of the Brotherhood and becomes increasingly inspired by responses he receives from the crowd; voices continually call back to him: “Another strike,” or “You don’t pitch no balls, Brother! Not a single one!” (344). The narration later breaks into italics as the

narrator claims: “*Something strange and miraculous and transforming is taking place in me right now...as I stand here before you!*” of which he is referring to the fact that giving his speech and hearing the positive responses has enabled him to feel “*more human,*” (345, 346). Moreover, he states after his speech: “What had come out was completely uncalculated, as though another self within me had taken over and held forth...Even my technique was different; no one who had known me at college would have recognized the speech. But that was as it should have been, for I was someone new...I had been transformed.” (353) While in this speech the narrator is building confidence with his improvisational skills throughout the responses he receives from the crowd, his confidence nonetheless renders him susceptible to the ideology the Brotherhood later forces on him and ultimately secures his role as nothing more than their African American spokesperson used to organize the Harlem district. Furthermore, prior to the narrator telling his audience that speaking in front of them has made him feel more human, Brother Jack tells him, “Careful now...Don’t end your usefulness before you’ve begun” (345). Cautioning him to slow down, in this initial instance Brother Jack and the Brotherhood can be seen as not truly understanding the African American experience as they do not place an urgency on social equality within their political agenda. Moreover, other members of the Brotherhood label his speech “unsatisfactory,” “politically irresponsible and dangerous” (348, 349).

Later on in the epilogue, the narrator distinguishes the Brotherhood’s indifference towards actual social equality as believing in principle over man (574). The irony here

being that to understand the principle of social equality, the Brotherhood first has to understand the experiences of their fellow man. Or rather, the African-American communities they claim to want to liberate from oppression. At this point in the narrative, the narrator's search to locate his visibility through his career as an orator is ultimately overshadowed by the Brotherhood's one-sided ideology. And though he later comes to realize this, during this specific speech he is so enamored by the positive responses he hears from the crowd that he remains blind to their plan to use him for their own purposes rendering it and the responses he hears ultimately confined by the Brotherhood's hypocritical ideology. Though, still feeling the "possibility of being more than a member of a race" the narrator continues his work for the Brotherhood and it isn't until the death of Todd Clifton that he is able to see their lack of recognition of the realities of African American communities in their political agenda.

During the narrator's last speech at Clifton's funeral- though he improvises his words- significantly, the crowd does not call out in response to him. He has become increasingly upset as he further comes to understand the Brotherhood's ideology and prior to speaking to his audience, tells readers:

I looked down into their sun-swept faces, digging for the words, and feeling a futility about it all and an anger. For this they gathered by the thousands. What were they waiting to hear? Why had they come? For what reason that was different from that which had made the red-cheeked boy thrill at Clifton's falling to the earth? What did they want and what could they do? Why hadn't they come when they could have stopped it all? (454)

These rhetorical questions that the narrator prompts readers with are questions that he himself cannot find the answers to. After Clifton's death the narrator realizes that under

the guidance of the Brotherhood, though it initially provided him with what he thought was a means of becoming visible, he was being used as a mere political prop due to his race just as Clifton and the event of his death is. The narrator states of Clifton in his speech: “He had struggled for the Brotherhood on a hundred street corners and he thought it would make him more human, but he died like any dog in a road” (457). The crowd’s lack of response in this scene is indicative of their, and the narrator’s, inability to fight back in the face of injustices such as the shooting of unarmed Clifton. The narrator further states, “They were listening intently, and as though looking not at me, but at the pattern of my voice upon the air” (455). While this speech can additionally be seen as free from the constraints of any authoritative figures the narrator has spent almost the entirety of the novel appeasing, ultimately his inability to provide answers for the rhetorical questions he prompts readers with prior to speaking discourages his desire to further orate. In other words, he doesn’t see the point since he has exhausted himself only to again find himself the result of outsider perceptions. And though he is no longer deceived by the Brotherhood’s ideology, this final speech leaves the community of Harlem in a severely negative state as they later go on to riot in the novel’s final chapters. After being thrown into a manhole during the riots, the narrator tells readers: “Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning” (571).

Similarly, in the prologue the narrator states: “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” (6). Or in other words, the realizations he shares as he inhabits his “cave”

throughout this section are what his character spends the remainder of the novel coming to understand. In the essay “Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form,” Timothy Spaulding notes that by retreating underground the narrator can be seen as “woodshedding”— a jazz term that describes the process of sequestering oneself from public performance for the purpose of developing one’s improvisational skills (487). With that being noted, in the epilogue as he ponders his next action during his woodshed the narrator relays his “plan” to readers and they are exposed to a meditation on the kinds of radical citizenship best suited to effect social change in the narrator’s (Ellison’s) eyes. He states:

Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?— diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states... America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It’s “winner take nothing” that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many— This is not prophecy, but description... (577)

For Ellison, ideal citizenship involves a lack of binaries. He desires a form of agency that strives for diversity without objectification (Jarenski 105). By the conclusion of the novel, however, it still remains unanswered whether or not this form of citizenship exists as the narrator remains confined to his ambiguous hole in which he claims to be hibernating.

Having come to a full realization on the nature of his identity and race politics in the United States the narrator still appears conflicted during his closing narration in the epilogue though notes that he finds further inspiration in Louis Armstrong.

With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, “Open the window and let the foul air out,” while the other says, “It was good green corn before the harvest.” Of course

Louis was kidding, *he* wouldn't have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air's horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with music and his dancing and his diversity, and I'll be up and around with mine." (581)

Here, the narrator again compares his struggle to gain a grasp on the nature of his own invisibility with that of Armstrong's career. While part of Armstrong's success relied on his ability to understand how his music would be socially perceived, the narrator now understands how his successes might be socially perceived in mainstream discourses as well. This allows him to assert his thoughts on the nature of his own 'invisibility' as the novel concludes with: "Being invisible without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"(581) Echoing the novel's opening lines of "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me," the narrator identifies societal perceptions of his race as the cause of injustice within African American communities and notes that he has shared his struggle as a means of communicating the universals inherent within his experience. Though it's worth noting that, among many reasons, references to Louis Armstrong's protest song would imply that Ellison was fully aware of his narrator's realization prior to writing his novel though aimed to create a narrative that would resonate with those whom the ideals he lays forth may be foreign too. In other words, through his narrative and its references to, and mirroring of, certain

jazz aesthetics Ellison bridges the gap across the unfamiliar to the familiar for those who may need it.

Through examining the improvisational call-and-response patterns influenced by jazz as they appear throughout the narrator's speeches I have attempted to demonstrate the forces set in place that dictate the narrator's ability to hold agency over his orations. These forces are represented by the various responses he receives during and after his speeches and by those that may be facilitating and providing a platform for these responses. Moreover, they represent social perceptions of African Americans during the time period that dictated the narrator's inability to be seen as visible. By the novel's conclusion, just as Ellison himself was able to use music as a means to orientate himself in time, throughout *Invisible Man* the narrator calls upon jazz music and influence from Louis Armstrong as a means of doing the same on regards to him visibility, or lack of.

## CHAPTER IV

### Bharati Mukherjee and Mughal Aesthetics in *The Holder of the World*

In this chapter, I will analyze Bharati Mukherjee's appropriation of Mughal painting aesthetics in her fourth novel, *The Holder of the World*. Similar to Mughal miniatures, her novel mirrors the crowded and indirect narratives these paintings so visibly depict. When fragments of the story are added up and "framed," Mukherjee claims that the deliberate indirection of her narrational style should reveal her total "authorial vision" (*Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*). Through her unique narrative style Mukherjee is able to reframe traditional western notions of time and place by creating a multidimensional narrative tract that simultaneously is set between three separate continents and two centuries. In the subsequent pages, I will offer a possible explanation for what Mukherjee's "authorial vision" throughout *The Holder of the World* entails, organizing my argument by first noting criticism on the author then further discussing her use of Mughal aesthetics in response to these criticisms. Additionally, I will offer aspects from Mukherjee's own life that serve to enhance the meta-narrative taking place throughout the novel.

Two prominent themes that have been central to much of Mukherjee's writing are immigration experiences and the constraints of patriarchy. Many critics have noted her ability to create narratives that offer alternative ways to view the self and subvert traditional notions of white-male power. Carmen Wickramagamage summarizes this

view-point as such: She sees in immigration the opportunity for new narratives of self that signify not only the extent of one's release from the constricting aspects of one's primary and social and cultural inscriptions, but also one's ability to alter and to be altered by the new cultural landscape on which one hopes to find or construct one's niche (173). Though she has been praised by some critics, there are those who denounce her work claiming it moves towards a more "assimilationist" standpoint, merely swapping one form of patriarchal embrace for another. For instance, in *Imagining the Nation* critic David Li argues that Mukherjee's narrational style is the result of "authorial class confidence and educational privilege," and often leaves a disconnect from the conditions of her protagonists. Furthermore, Shirley Goek-Lin Lim claims in "Immigration and Diaspora" that "Mukherjee openly embraces a twenty-first century version of assimilation, advocating historical amnesia. . . and reprivilaging the myth of America as the unhindered and sovereign individual. . . reinscribing a manifest destiny on the American landscape" (303).

In self-defense, when asked in an interview about the nature of her relationship with the field of postcolonial studies Mukherjee made the following comment about her critics:

[Their] mission seems to be to deliberately equate Art and journalism, to reduce novels to specimens for the confirming of their theories. If an imaginative work doesn't fit the cultural theories they approve of, it's dismissed as defective...All that [I value as a writer]...all the strategies that I employ to articulate my vision as precisely as I can to the reader, these scholars treat as debris to be cleared for the exposing of camouflage "hegemonic" agendas in the narrative. ( *HOLDERS of the World*)

Of the “cleared” strategies she is referring to, most deliberate is her forementioned use of Mughal painting aesthetics and their affordance of multiple viewpoints. Mukherjee claims to favor the aesthetic for its crowded narratives, sub-narratives, and at times even meta-narratives that when framed within elaborately painted borders uncover “a master-artist's observation on life [and] history” (*Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*). For the purposes of my argument a “meta-narrative” will be defined as one that experiments with the notion of storytelling, often calling attention to its own artificiality. With that being said, if by appropriating Mughal aesthetics Mukherjee aims in some respects to call attention to the artificial nature of her narratives, thus addressing the disjuncture between her and her protagonists noted by critics, is it fair to label her work as limited by her own framing consciousness? Or rather, is articulating her own frame more or less the point when attempting to reveal her own artistic vision?

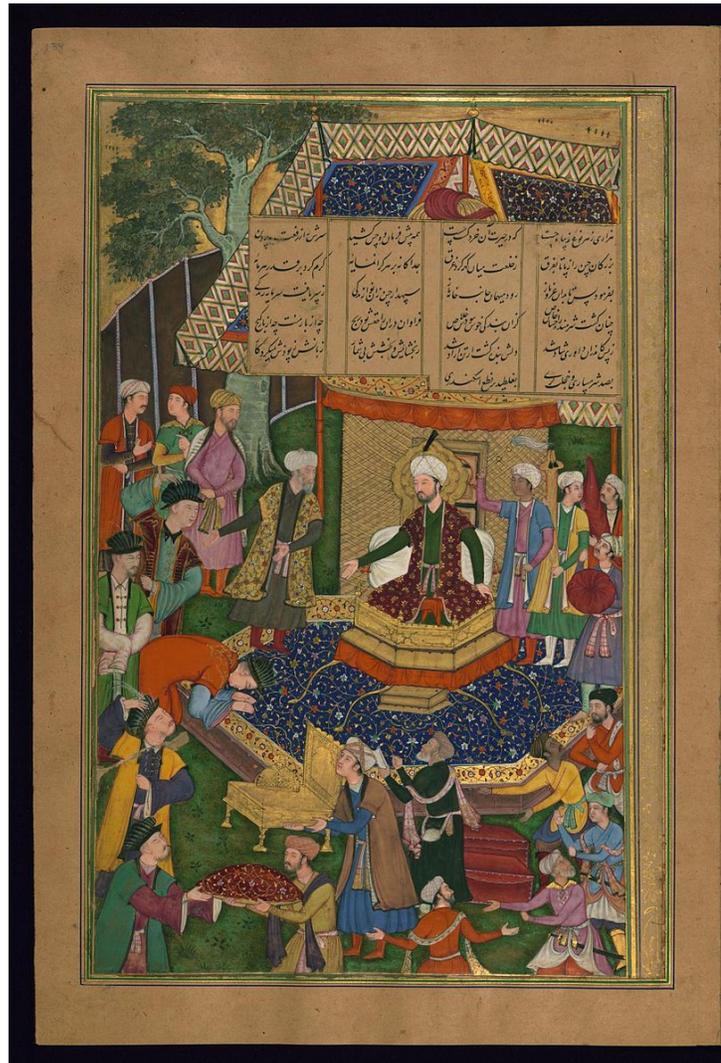
Mukherjee first noted the way in which she wanted to utilize Mughal painting aesthetics in her essay “A Four-Hundred Year Old Woman.” In the essay she states that she was drawn to the aesthetic for its “foreshortening of vanishing points” and “its insistence that everything happens simultaneously” (38). The first apparent influence of Mughal aesthetics in her fiction writing later came in “Courtly Visions,” the last short story published in the collection *Darkness*, which is a reconstruction of a Sixteenth Century Mughal painting entitled “Emperor on Horseback Leaves Walled City” and according to Mukherjee was inspired by her desire to convey the “contextual irony” inherent in the piece. In doing so, she says that her translating of the painting into

narrative makes readers “witness [to] a painter's (via author's) representation of history” (*Holder of the World*). Similarly, throughout *The Holder of the World* narrator Beigh Masters translates Mughal miniatures into narrative as she attempts to “deconstruct the barriers of time and geography” in order to uncover more on the elusive Hannah Easton, later turned Salem Bibi (11).

In “Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory,” Donald Goellnicht argues that by “employing neglected, marginalized, and feminized genres like diaries, memoirs, letters, and photographic stills,” many authors have formed new narrative strategies and techniques that challenge the “masculinist, Western notion of a unified self,” and thus, forms “an important part of the feminist challenge to the traditional, patriarchal hierarchies of genre” (349, 350). Though he fails to mention Mukherjee in this specific analysis, Goellnicht's argument can just as easily be applied to *The Holder of the World* for its references to, and appropriation of, Mughal painting aesthetics. Moreover, in *A Companion to Indian Fiction in English* Florence D'Souza discusses the subversive nature of Mughal miniature paintings (examples of which can be seen in Figures 1 & 2):

The multiplication of points of focus makes possible the juxtaposition of several scenes, while the absence of perspective reduces distance in space (and time) to an all-encompassing foreground (in an eternal present), and the dehierarchized treatment of the centers and the peripheries enables the artist to explore the Other side of normatized representations, endowing the work with a subversive liberty. (186)

By utilizing this aesthetic throughout *The Holder of The World*, stylistically, Mukherjee is able to shift from representing modes of a “masculinist, western unified self” and instead showcase multiple perspectives afforded by her use of Mughal aesthetics.



**Figure 1.** “The Khaqan of China Pays Homage to Alexander the Great” Authored by Amir Khusraw Dihlavi and Scribed by Muhammad Husayn Zarrin Qalam. Image courtesy of Walters Art Museum.



**Figure 2.** “Emperor Akbar receives Sayyed Beg, ambassador of Shah Tahmasq I in 1562.” Image courtesy of *Akbarnama* code, ca. 1590.

The novel follows Beigh’s efforts in twentieth century Massachusetts to locate the world’s “most perfect diamond”— the Emperor’s Tear— with the help of her partner Venn (19). Hannah, a seventeenth century woman who ventures into the worlds of New England, Old England, and the Coromandel Coast in eastern India, is said to have come

in contact with the diamond after being briefly held by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. For eleven years Beigh has attempted to reconstruct details of Hannah's life in search of the Emperor's Tear through gathering journal entries, notebooks, paintings, and trade records that when put into Venn's X-2989 program allow her to interact with Hannah for a brief moment of "time-retrieval" (35). In accordance with Mughal aesthetics, the narrative takes on multiple dimensions. While on the one hand Beigh's search for the Emperor's Tear is a story steeped in subaltern theory, on the other it revolves around her fascination with Hannah's ability to deconstruct her patriarchal frame as she distances herself from Puritan ways of life. Significantly, Beigh states early on in the novel: "I couldn't care less about the Emperor's Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi" (19).

Mughal miniatures are first noted early in the novel as Beigh visits a maritime trade museum in Salem and uncovers paintings of the Salem Bibi from that era. Prior to actually seeing the paintings, as she moves "from unfurnished room to room, slaloming between *us* and *them*, imagining *our* wonder and *their* dread," she describes the museum's current exhibit as such: "the curator's note cards celebrate only Puritan pragmatism...The crude and blackened objects glower as reproaches to Mughal opulence, glow as tributes to Puritan practicality" (12,13). As she first sees the paintings, Beigh further says to the audience: "How they yearned for beauty, these nomads of central Asia perched on Delhi's throne, how endless the bounty must have seemed, a gravel of jewels to encrust every surface, gems to pace their clothes, their plates, their swords. Peacocks

of display, helpless sybarites, consumed not with greed but its opposite: exhibition (8).” Moreover, when she later sees the Mughal miniatures she claims that they make her “feel connected to still-be-detected galaxies,” and notes that the artists “startle with the brightness of their colors and the forcefulness of their feelings. Their world is confident, its paints are jewels, it too displays all it knows” (15). By employing Mughal aesthetics so early on in the text Mukherjee is able to frame her narrative in a way that asks her audience to understand how and why she is referencing it. It should be noted then that, as readers, in some cases this may require that we do background research on the topic prior to engaging with the narrative in order to effectively extract meaning from it.

Parts of the novel itself can be seen as echoing aspects of Mukherjee’s own background. In her essay “Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties” the Indian-born American citizen claims that upon arriving in the U.S. to attend college, she was “ready to fulfill the goals written out for [her] by [her] guiltlessly patriarchal father” (455). Furthermore, she notes that during this time she was under the assumption that identity, her own as well as others, was “absolutely fixed...derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue” (455). It wasn’t until her later marriage to American-Canadian writer Clark Blaise that Mukherjee began deconstructing this frame, throwing her into, as she states, “a New World of scary improvisations and heady explorations” (456). With this in mind, Beigh’s assertion that she “only cares about the Salem Bibi” can be read as implying that distancing oneself from patriarchal constraints are what the

novel's main narrative tract revolves around and additionally hints at Mukherjee's role in the meta-perspective she concludes the novel with.

Mukherjee's own experiences with assimilation and the constraints of patriarchy are relevant considering that both Beigh and Hannah are presented as similarly moving amongst different patriarchal frames in both eastern and western worlds. Though Beigh is only characterized in fragments throughout the novel, her most overt moment of characterization comes when she breaks her narration to recall all of the sexual partners she has had from age fifteen on, leading to her current partner Venn (31). Venn is presented as being the first male in Beigh's life to really take interest in her, she states at one point: "Very few men in my recent past had deflected questions back to me. After ten years of bobbing in the tangle and clutter of semi serious relationships, the most attractive trait I could imagine in a man was a modest interest in other people, notable me, and a perceptible lack of self-involvement. (34)" Venn, in a way, provides the base for Beigh's narration on Hannah with his X-2989 program. Between his historical data and the research Beigh conducts the two attempt to construct "an interactive model of historical or imaginative reality," though as Beigh notes "historical reality to begin with, since there was a data trail" (35). Significantly, Beigh's intentions throughout the novel remain ambiguous and she fails to fully connect with Hannah through this program. She frequently probes her audience with rhetorical questions like: "Why would Hannah Easton suddenly marry a man she recognized as inappropriate and untrustworthy?" that, according to Rob Burton in *Artists of the Floating World*, appear to feed into the larger,

epistemological question clearly framed by Mukherjee herself: how “to touch and bring alive the past?” (69, 286).

Principles afforded by Mughal aesthetics are what allows for the intersection of alternative ways of answering this question throughout the text. It is approached from multiple angles. Venn tries through his computer program; Bugs Kilken, a rich philanthropist and Beigh Masters’ patron, acquires material artifacts in his personal collection; while as we know Beigh tracks down the whereabouts of the “Emperor’s Tear” as well as the identity of the owner. Whether or not Beigh ever fully steps outside her patriarchal frame by the novel’s conclusion is debatable. Though, when considering the X-2989 program and its dependence on historical facts over imaginative reality as well as her being hired by Kilken to track down the diamond, much of her narration throughout much of the novel can indeed be seen as confined by the patriarchal grip.

Hannah also navigates her way through various patriarchal constraints while each of these situations provide her with a vastly different frame of reference as she distances herself from Puritan society. From her marriage with Gabriel Legree that brings her to the Coromandel Coast, to then being captured separately by both the Raja Jadav Singh and the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, readers are told that “in one rainy season, Hannah had gone from wollen-clad English married woman on the Coromandel Coast to pregnant sari-wearing bibi of a raja; a murderer, a widow, a peacemaker turned prisoner of the most powerful man in India” (271). Prior to marrying Gabriel, Hannah lives in Salem and is said to be: “a simple girl who has seen none of the earth and its truths,” though he

claims to “know the heart of womenkind, and none do willingly yield” (68). Later described as both “wild and expansive,” and also a “jealous lover and husband,” Gabriel initially courts fifteen-year-old Hannah with gemstones and a ruby followed by promises for much more (141, 68). Ultimately, Gabriel is the one who provides Hannah with the opportunity to travel to the Coromandel Coast by joining the Honourable East India Company, which indirectly sets forth her journey to becoming the Salem Bibi.

On the Coromandel Coast, Gabriel is said to spend most of his time either at sea or with his bibi while Hannah is left at home with the wives of the other factors, Martha Ruxton and Sarah Higginbotham, who are described as having “savored their roles as guide and guardian to Hannah” after she first arrives (130). Martha and Sarah are characters that can be seen as most confined by patriarchal frames, believing that “accommodation [is] synonymous with expatriate femininity” (134). No longer fifteen at this point in the narrative, Hannah is said to be, “not that innocent of the male entitlements, but had never learned the code of female accommodation,” the narrator— or Beigh— further elaborates by stating, “to accommodate meant to demonstrate an intention to please, even on occasion to yield” (132). Clearly in opposition to Hannah’s former notions of womanhood, Martha and Sarah are able to turn a blind eye to their husband’s infidelity with their bibis. For Hannah, on the other hand, it is said to be a matter of her pride that will not permit forgiveness (198). Appropriately then, Hannah leaves Gabriel prior to his death, deciding “that tolerance and patience and even a pragmatic trade-off between luxury and uncertainty were no longer sufficient” (198). In other words, it is at

this point in the narrative that Hannah begins to altogether deconstruct her patriarchal frame.

Upon first arriving at Panpur Palace after fleeing the Coromandel Coast, readers are told: “Hannah felt she had entered a world whose simplest rules about the saintly and the villainous were unknown to her. She had no way to measure new experiences and nothing in her old life with which to compare them” (225). Considering that she goes from initially thinking that she is being held captive by Raja Jadav Singh, to spending fourteen days “abandoned to pleasure” with him, Hannah can indeed be seen as lacking a frame of reference in her first more deliberate encounter with Eastern culture (234).

However, as her relationship with Jadav Singh persists, readers again are told:

With Gabriel she had clung to Salem’s do’s and don’ts. She had pulled and pummeled the familiar rules, hoping they’d help make sense of her own evolution. With Jadav Singh, she’d finally accepted how inappropriate it was in India—how fatal— to cling... to Europe’s rules. She was no longer the woman [she had] been... What she had left Gabriel for just months before, she would accept from Raja Singh. She was no longer the wife. She was the bibi. (234)

Though just as quickly as Hannah begins her affair with Jadav Singh their world is said to be “rotting” as Morad Farah launches a Nawab attack on Panpur Palace in order to kill the Raja (238). Though he gets injured in an ambush and later dies, significantly, it is Hannah who kills the ruthless Morad Farah in an attempt to save the Raja as she coped with his “alien concept of heroism” (239).

If, as I have argued, Hannah’s transcendence from her patriarchal frame began just prior to her affair with Javad Singh and murdering Morad Farah; then at the novel’s climax as she positions her “Christian-Hindu-Muslim self, her American-English-Indian

self, her orphaned, abandoned, widowed, pregnant self, her *frangi* and bibi self” in order to deliver a single message “to the most powerful man those separate worlds had ever known,” she can certainly be seen as breaking free altogether (269). Ultimately, Hannah’s message is ineffective as the Emperor ignores her plea to stop the war. However, this is less important than the fact that by the novel’s conclusion she is depicted as living back in Salem as a woman that for having “so long indulged a liberty of eccentric dissent that [her] certification of certain extreme positions was considered advantageous to the maintenance of social order” (285).

Rob Burton argues that Mukherjee herself steps in as narrator at times through the novel. He states in reference to *The Holder of the World*: “Attempts to make connections across 300 years of world history, linking the cultures and political economies of the New World with the Old World (England) and the Old-Old World (India), clearly bear the hallmarks of Mukherjee’s own intellectual agenda as an educated Bengali-born Brahmin. (93)” These moments make themselves apparent in the text through Mukherjee’s insertion of her own intellect and for the purposes of my argument serves as a means of enhancing a meta-narrative throughout the novel. As Burton goes on to note from the novel’s conclusion:

As the narrator reflects on the epic sweep of the story she has told, she makes a hurried connection across several generations of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s descendants before [stating] grandiosely: “Time, O Time! Time to tincture the lurid colors, time for the local understudies to learn their foreign lines, time only to touch and briefly bring alive the first letters of an alphabet of hope and of horror stretching out, and back to the uttermost shores” (*HOTW* 286). It is indeed a poetic conclusion yet inconsistent with the narrator’s on going preference for the strict biological details of her subject. (93)

It seems especially significant that Mukherjee concludes the novel with her own narration over Beigh's. In doing so, a meta-narrative can be seen as following Mukherjee's fictional telling of twentieth century Beigh Master's reconstruction of seventeenth century Hannah Easton's narrative; all linked by the goal of deconstructing patriarchal frames and encompassed by Mukherjee's "authorial vision" afforded by her appropriation of Mughal aesthetics.

The late Mukherjee has said that after emigrating to the United States she felt torn between her two cultures and suffered from the "smothering tynarry of nostalgia" ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 456). If by utilizing Mughal aesthetics and their affordance of multiple perspectives throughout *The Holder of the World* Mukherjee aimed to demonstrate this middle ground she felt torn between, then is it fair to label her, as critics have, an apologist for American assimilation merely swapping one patriarchal frame for the next? Or rather, is she simply writing from her own experiences with assimilation and patriarchy in an extremely nuanced way? In reference to her novel, Mukherjee has claimed she chose to use two female protagonists as a means of dramatizing "the need to redefine what it [meant] to be an 'American' in the 1990s," at the time of its publication (*Holders of the World*). In other words, she aimed to convey the contextual irony inherent in her narrative on a twentieth century woman looking back at history in envy of the freedoms a seventeenth century Puritan woman was allotted. And while the constraints of patriarchy, as I have argued, are integral to the narrative it should be noted that this chapter fails to note a number of subaltern theories that are also present throughout the

novel. Consequently, Mukherjee has additionally claimed: “each time you read *The Holder of the World*, I hope you come up with new insights” (*Holder of the World*).

By employing Mughal aesthetics and juxtaposing her own life with the lives of her two fictional protagonists Mukherjee not only reframes traditional western notions of a “unified self,” but also extends the possibility for the conversations she is having to additionally be held beyond the text. If a reader approaches *The Holder of the World* with a limited frame of reference, how are they able to effectively comprehend the narrative prior to expanding their frame to mirror the fluidity of Mughal miniatures? As noted earlier, this might require doing some background research on Mughal painting aesthetics prior to engaging with the novel. And while in this chapter and the last I showcase two particular examples of how moving fluidly between the principals of more than one literary genre can expand conversations beyond what is being said. It is important to note that in doing this both Ellison and Mukherjee aimed to provide a platform for voices that have been historically muted due to both cultural and systemic racism, colonization, and patriarchal frames. While this serves an important social and cultural function for these groups by allowing a version of their voices to be heard in more mainstream discourses it also raises further questions of how one might frame an artist or genre that is intentionally stepping out of mainstream discourses altogether.

## CHAPTER V

### Contemporary Graffiti on North American Freight Trains

Once thought of as a primitive form of communication, the concept of graffiti now carries a tremendous amount of cultural and political baggage in urban environments all over the world. Civic leaders often control and manipulate cultural narratives associated with this form of expression as they appear to the general public. While graffiti's narrative may be framed by terms such as "disruptive" and/or "destructive" for some, for those who seek to understand this illicit act it represents a subversion to hegemonic forces of power. It does so not only by juxtaposing its own narrative alongside that of the visual urban-landscape that is often dominated by those with money and power, but also by not asking for permission to do so. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will further discuss graffiti's legality and how it is seen in the eyes of those in power and furthermore why this scrutiny has led to controversy when trying to place it in mainstream conversations. Moreover, I will discuss different subcultures of graffiti that co-exist in the modern era as a means of demonstrating the extents to which my overall methodology pertaining to genre can reach.

While laws concerning graffiti in the United States fall under an individual state's jurisdiction and can vary from state to state, often times it can lead to felony punishment. Here in the state of California under Penal Code section 594, the penalty given depends on the dollar amount of damage done. In other words, the cost of property damages done

by a vandal (determined by the state) depicts whether they are charged with a misdemeanor or a felony. The vandal can be allotted a separate charge for each “victim,” so multiple victims (multiple markings across different properties) are not stockpiled into one single charge. If the amount of damage (for each charge) is less than \$400, it’s a misdemeanor and is punishable by up to a year in jail or a fine of up to \$1,000. If the damage is more than \$400, the offense may be charged as a felony, requiring a penalty of up to one year in prison or a fine of up to \$10,000.

The ideology behind many of the laws pertaining to graffiti in the United States, such as California’s Penal Code section 594, can be traced back to 1982 when social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling published their idea of The “Broken Windows Theory” in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The theory states that maintaining and monitoring urban environments to prevent small crimes such as vandalism, public drinking, and turnstile-jumping helps to create an atmosphere of order and lawfulness, thereby preventing more serious crimes from happening. Wilson and Kelling go as far to say that the very presence of graffiti in the urban landscape instills fear in those exposed to it. They claim that this fear stems not so much from the act of graffiti itself, but from the incivility that it promotes. There is, however, an important distinction in the way they define incivility. According to Wilson and Kelling, incivility can be described as “young persons gathered to drink and play music” while in the article they go on to discuss the dangers of confronting an “obstreperous teenager.” As outdated as Wilson’s and

Kelling's language regarding incivility sounds in a more modern time period, their ideas currently act as the basis for many laws pertaining to graffiti in the United States.

Stereotyping is problematic in all realms of life for obvious reasons. The way it functions in reference to graffiti within the context of The "Broken Windows Theory" is by labeling it an act committed by groups of young people that aim to instigate fear throughout their environment. Furthermore, if you label these groups of young people as "gangs," as is often done by the mainstream media, the implication can be made that this purposefully incited fear is being done so by members of perceived "other" groups. Laws rooted in these types of ideals remain prevalent due to their hypothesis of deterrence. In reality, narratives about graffiti framed by The "Broken Windows Theory" likely do more to provoke and encourage those inclined to do it. Spend time looking for graffiti while walking around any urban environment within the United States and you will see that this form of expression is thriving well into the millennium.

Up to this point, I have referred to graffiti simply as the act of writing, or otherwise leaving a mark, on a public surface and furthermore only as it functions today. This instinct, however, isn't unique to the current time period and goes as far back to predate human existence. In February of this year, João Zilhão published a study in the journal *Science Advances* that indicates Neanderthals may have been intentionally marking surfaces with symbols as a means of communication long before humans came along. In a *New York Times* article written shortly after the study was published, Clive Finlayson, director of the Gibraltar Museum in the United Kingdom, states that this is an

intriguing discovery as it implies Neanderthals were capable of “symbolic thought.” I’ve chose to quote Finlayson here as I think his notion that primitive cave drawings imply “symbolic thought” remain true for the graffiti seen today. However, due to the law and order style limitations of theories like The “Broken Windows Theory” many are unable to see it as such.

Graffiti’s legality and the extent to which one can be punished if caught in the act is important when fully contextualizing how it functions in the modern era. The irony here is that if the urban visual landscape became more of a communal space, as opposed to one dominated by those with money and power, the drive to do graffiti would likely decrease. In essence, the very nature of graffiti today depends on the duality behind those who tell the graffiti writer not to write on the walls and the graffiti writer’s urge to disobey. And while lawmakers might have you believe that those doing graffiti aim to incite terror throughout the urban environment, glimpses into this underground subculture have revealed that notions such as this simply aren’t true. It is a common misconception that most graffiti is done by gangs who aim to claim territory. While this type of graffiti is in fact real, it is a very small portion of what exists in the overall urban landscape. It is miniscule in amount compared to graffiti that aims to participate in the hip-hop tradition associated with leaving one’s mark in a more intricate and stylized way.

Due to its underground and illegal nature, scholarship pertaining to modern graffiti’s roots in hip-hop is limited. Generally speaking though, graffiti participating in the hip-hop tradition is said have started between both Philadelphia and New York

throughout the 1960s. Tony Silver's and Henry Chalfant's 1983 documentary film *Style Wars* gave those outside the tradition a first glimpse into what was actually taking place right in front of their eyes. The film depicts the graffiti writer as one who writes their name (an alter ego) in a variety of ways with both, though not limited to, marker and spray paint everywhere across the urban landscape. Moreover, it focuses on the fact that a large amount of the graffiti that existed in New York City at the time did so on the city's subway cars.

The modern graffiti writer displays their name in a number of different ways ranging from the tags seen in Figures 3 & 4 (more of a signature).



**Figure 3.** "Twist" tags in Washington, D.C. Image by the author, 2016.



**Figure 4.** "Porsh" tag in Philadelphia, PA. Image by the author, 2016.

To the throw-ups seen in Figures 5 & 6 (bubble letters that connect with one another).



**Figure 5.** “Step” graffiti in San Diego, CA. Image by the author, 2016.



**Figure 6.** “Chao” graffiti in San Diego, CA. Image by the author, 2012.

Up the pieces seen in Figures 7 & 8 (more intricate murals) though it is important to note that these terms more represent points on a spectrum rather than definitive principles as Figures 9-11 aim to demonstrate.



**Figure 7.** “Zoner” graffiti in Salton Sea, CA. Image by the author, 2017.



**Figure 8.** “Bigot” graffiti in Chico, CA. Image by the author, 2017.



**Figure 9.** “Zombra” graffiti in Mexico City, Mexico. Image by the author, 2017.



**Figure 10.** “Keys” “Japhy” “Csaw” and “Paeday” graffiti in San Francisco, CA. Image by the author, 2017.



**Figure 11.** “Case” “Lolo” and “Shrink” graffiti in Salton Sea, CA. Image by the author, 2017.

The names depicted through these often sophisticated lettering structures tell narratives of identity and experience for those writing them. Not only does this involve the writer's own stylistic endeavors, but also the way they interact with their environment around them. A particular interest was taken to the subway cars in New York City due to the fact that after a car was painted one's piece would then have a constantly changing environment associated with it. In other words, the subways acted as mobile canvases and because of their ever present existence in the New York City landscape had the potential

for massive audiences receiving the work in any number of contexts. *Style Wars* additionally notes graffiti's equally assertive counterparts of rap music and break dancing within the hip-hop tradition. Hip-hop, due to it holding these equally assertive counterparts across form, acts as a perfect example of what I describe in my introduction as a genre's ability to be fluid and vary in application. While I could just as easily devote the remainder of this chapter to that notion, I aim to take it another step further specifically focusing on how subcultures separate from hip-hop though still within the graffiti medium intersect with it.

Punishment for those caught doing graffiti has heavily increased since the *Style Wars* days. With that has also come heightened security in and around public transit systems throughout the United States. Now in post 9/11 America it has become an extremely difficult task for a graffiti writer to paint a subway car. That is not to say that painting subway cars has died off completely, though since the early 1990s a more frequently utilized canvas by those nostalgic for the old days has instead been the North American freight train. Interestingly enough, an entirely separate tradition of graffiti had already been utilizing the North American railroad system as a means of distribution. This tradition, made popular by Depression era "hobos" who wrote their names on freight trains in chalk, already had a long history dating back over a century. Similar to graffiti participating in hip-hop, scholarship on this medium is limited though many artists have referenced it in, and used it as inspiration for, their work since the early twentieth century. In an Introduction to the Second Edition of Bill Daniel's *Mostly True: The*

*West's Most Popular Hobo Graffiti Magazine* (2012) the history of train monikers, as I will later refer to them, are defined as such:

The rail tag was born the bastard child of two warring parents; the working stiff and the shiftless wanderer. For the defining era of our country's character, many men embodied the life and habits of both the socially-shackled worker and storied foot loose hobo. This duality is manifested in the astonishingly elegant and modest drawing modality that tramps and railworkers have spent the last 100 years co-evolving.

This modality, as Daniels refers to it, initially started as a means for hobos that rode box cars throughout the early twentieth century to state their existence and communicate with one another. Later on, railroad workers started adding their own style of drawings that typically include, though are not limited to, a single iconic character that can be recognizable from as many train cars as possible.

*Mostly True* includes letters to the editor, photos and write-in stories, as well as interviews with artists. Moreover, it continues on a former conversation that Daniels started back in 2005 with the release of his documentary film *Who is Bozo Texino?* The film is a collection of interviews and shots that Daniel's captured over a number of years while riding freights trains and having conversations with railroad workers, hobos, and artists alike. Moreover, it depicts Daniel's journey to trace the identity of the infamous "Bozo Texino," who is said to be the first railroad worker to start producing drawings on freight trains alongside the hobo monikers that had long existed.

*Who is Bozo Texino?* reveals that the original "Bozo Texino" was said to be a man named J. H. McKinley, through history is unsure if McKinley was the first to claim the moniker. McKinley was known to draw his trademark character of a cowboy smoking

a pipe accompanied by a signature of his pseudonym “Bozo Texino” with chalk on box cars while working his job for the Missouri Pacific railroad in Laredo, Texas. Another man, revealed only as Grandpa, who was growing up in Texas at the time in a railroad family began to notice McKinley’s drawings and started copying them on any and all freight trains that he could. While McKinley started the tradition, Grandpa’s slightly altered version of the moniker made it grow enormously in size as he continued to draw it obsessively on from his childhood in the early twentieth century, through his career on the railroad with Hughes Tool, and additionally into his retirement spanning up through the 1980s. During this time, many other railroad workers and hobos that rode the trains started participating in this past time with their own characters and surnames and additionally switched over to using more permanent paint sticks. Fast forward to today, and any given train car is a public forum amongst those participating in graffiti stemming from hobo, railroad employee, and hip-hop traditions.

Another artist featured in Daniel’s film and subsequent magazine release is a life-long railroad employee who goes by the monikers buZ blurr as well as Colossus of Roads. Blurr, similar to others participating in the tradition, also grew up in a railroad family. His train moniker, which he began drawing in the 1970s while working for the railroad, similarly features a cowboy smoking a pipe though instead goes by the name Colossus of Roads. Blurr’s Colossus of Roads cowboy depicts a side profile and deviates from the original Bozo Texino images in a way that addresses the train’s inevitable mobility. Moreover, blurr refrains from solely signing his pseudonym and instead signs

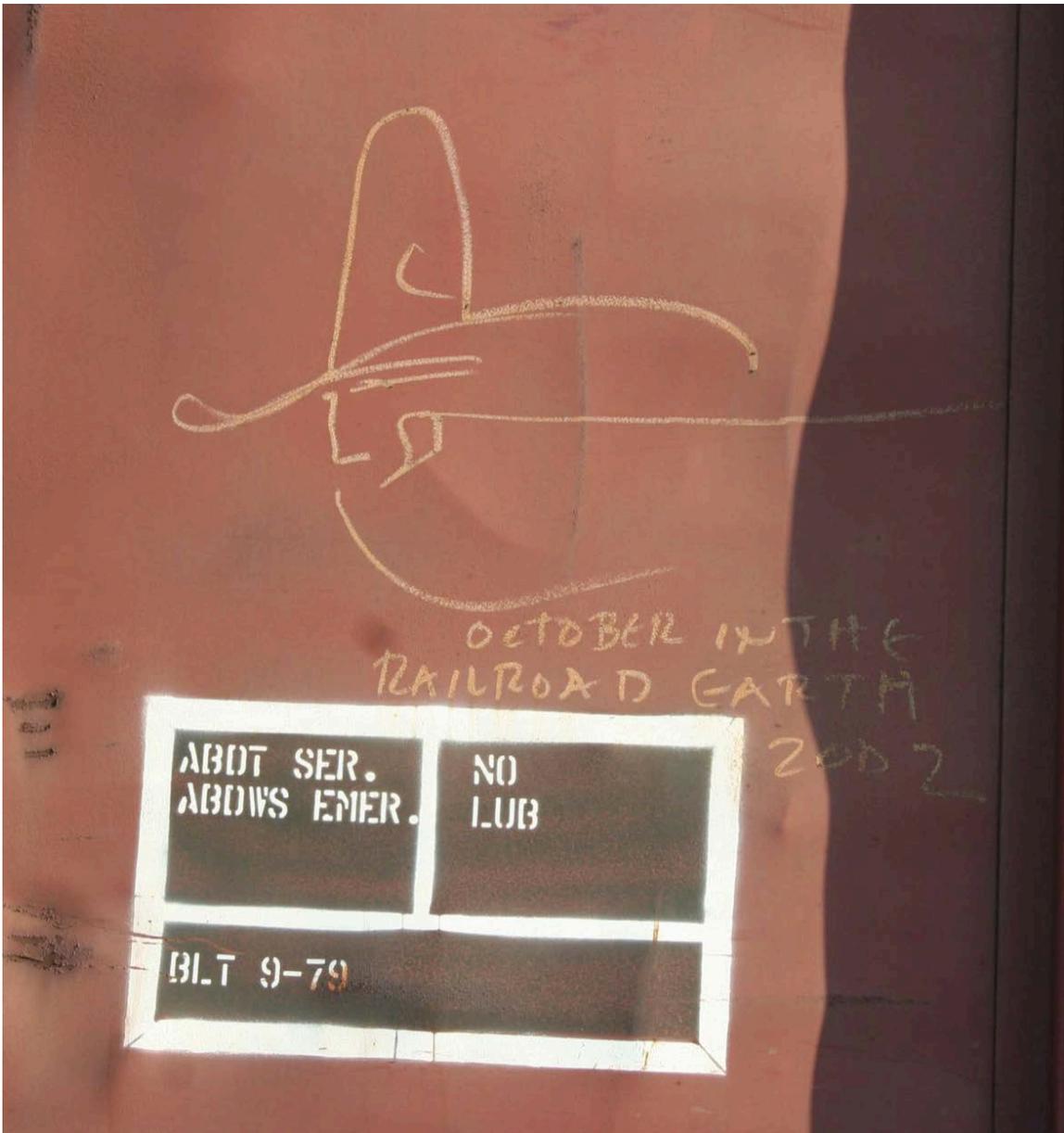
the date and/or references other aspects of his life in accompaniment with the character.

In an excerpt from a manifesto published in his 1984 book *hooohobos FortuitousLogos*

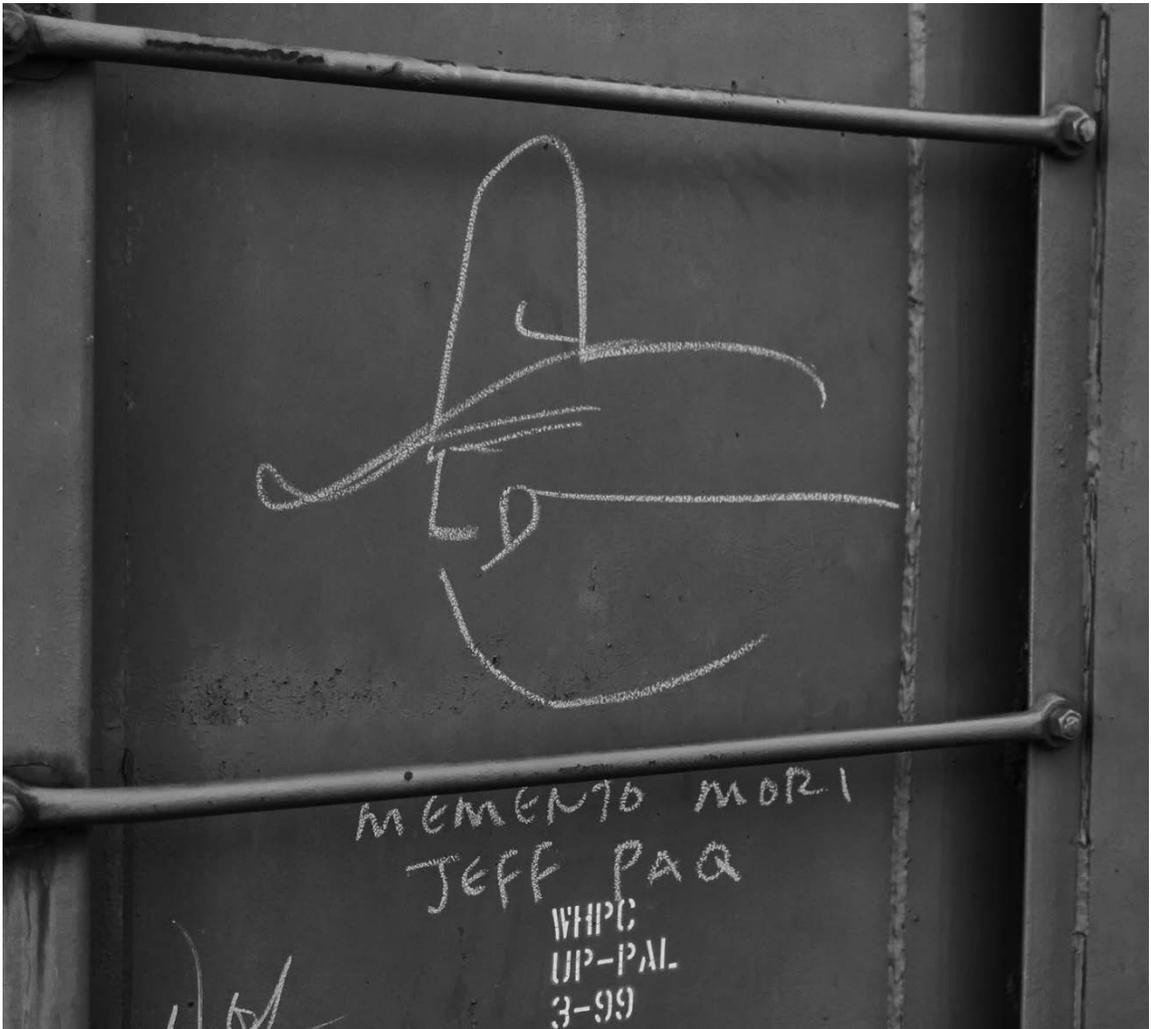
blurr describes his artistic process as such:

To avoid the redundant commonness of the image, I began to put words, names, phrases, anecdote titles, alter egos, etc.. to the drawings. Since this was a record of time and experience, in 1975 I began to document the language used in a book of dates; the drawings being transient in both the sense of constantly moving around and the impermanence of the wax which fades into oblivion according to exposure in weather extremes. Considered a continuous project altered each day with words helped keep me at it, while adding freight car selection, destination, etc.. was already inherent to the system. Admittedly the words are derived from alienation, an attempt at transcendence. Often a reference to the work, just as often a word selection is made merely for its cursive configuration. The meaning or absence of meaning of the words depends on the interpretations of the viewer.

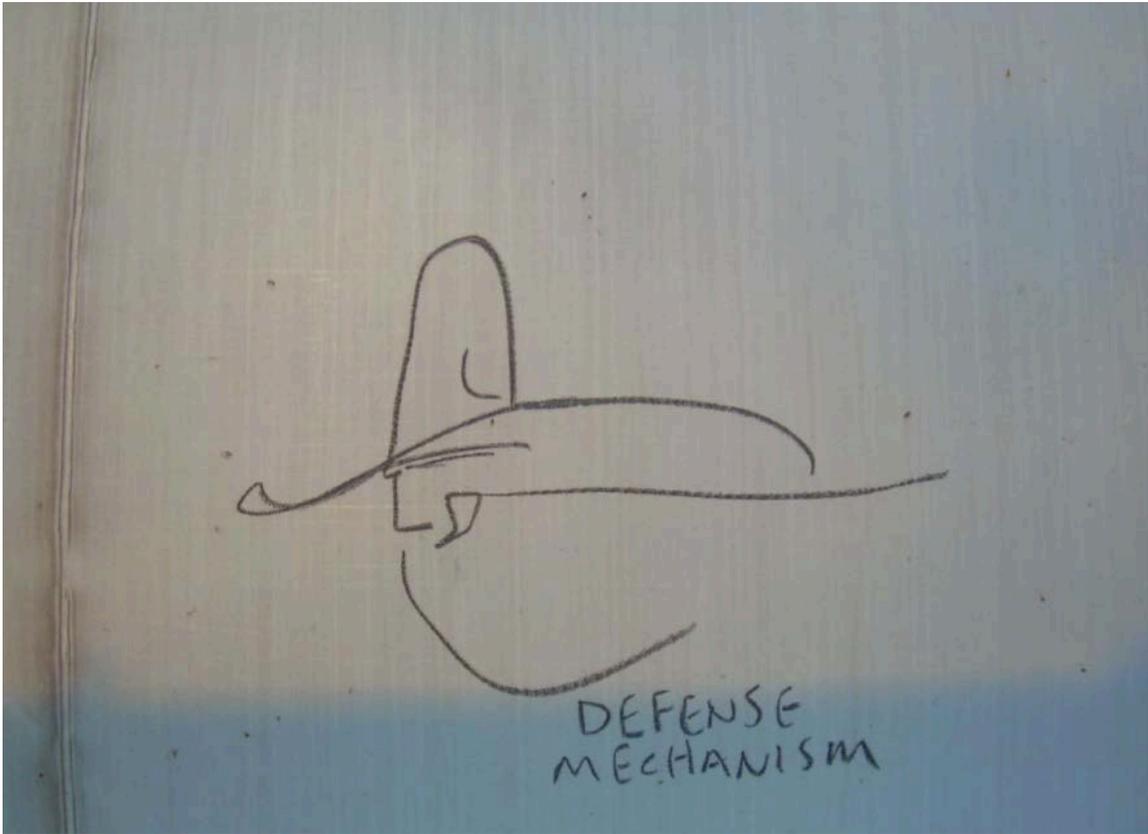
An avid consumer of pop-culture, blurr's drawings of the Colossus of Road cowboy can be seen on freight cars all over North America alongside references to anything ranging from literature, cultural theories, music, politics/ current events, etc. all the way back to things that may be taking place in his personal life (demonstrated in Figures 12-14).



**Figure 12.** “Colossus of Roads” - “October in the railroad garth, 2002.” Image courtesy of Tea Leaf Bench, 2007.



**Figure 13.** “Colossus of Roads” – “Memento mori Jeff Paq.” Image courtesy of Rob Swatski, 2013.



**Figure 14.** “Colossus of Roads” – “Defense Mechanism.” Image courtesy of Tea Leaf Bench, 2007.

Moreover, in this excerpt from his manifesto blurr notes the fact that for those participating in the train moniker graffiti tradition the freight train systems proved to be attractive for their variety of different cars to draw on, and furthermore their ability to travel such vast distances reaching massive audiences all over. In this way, someone like blurr, who did many of his drawings on train cars while they were stopped in the Little Rock, Arkansas area, had the ability for his work to be seen anywhere the railroad went throughout North America. This meant that it could be viewed in any number of foreseen

contexts: by a railroad worker on the job, a hobo riding the rails, someone sitting in their car at a railroad crossing, someone who happens to live or work by the railroad tracks, etc.. The contexts are literally endless.

It is precisely this instinct that graffiti writers participating in the hip-hop tradition picked up on in the early 1990s after subway cars became excessively difficult to paint. Due to its illegality, there are very few formal conversations of record that exist on the intersection between hobo/ railroad employee graffiti and hip hop graffiti traditions. While this may be true, it has been taking place out in the open for nearly the last thirty years on North American freight trains. I have chosen to specifically reference *buZ blurr*'s work as he further brings in references from artistic traditions existing completely outside of graffiti which serves the purposes of my overall methodology. However, it is important to note that not all those who draw train monikers share the same artistic vision. I should also note that *blurr* is one of the very few artists participating in this past time who has been willing to speak openly about their artistic process due to it being held with such taboo. Historically, however, graffiti wasn't always held in such high contempt by major railroad corporations. Since the graffiti tradition on the railroad started with chalk, and furthermore didn't interfere with any of the information on the outside of the train cars vital to railroad employees, it was generally seen as harmless in the eyes of those in power of the railroad systems. In the 1990s, however, when those participating in the already villainized hip-hop tradition brought to the freight cars their much larger works done with aerosol spray paint, it became a much different story.

In an interview by Blake Donner titled “Breakman of Monotony” published in Daniel’s *Mostly True*, blurr describes the intersection of train monikers and hip-hop associated graffiti from his perspective as such:

Coming from a long tradition of chalk and paintstick graffiti, practiced mostly by railroad employees, although motivated perhaps by a sense of alienation and animosity towards the railroad, nevertheless, knew that for their art to be tolerated, they had to keep it on symbiotic relationship, and not be disruptive or malicious. Apparently the spray practitioners had no qualms bridling their expressions as they were covering the car numbers and sir date records, as well as the work of longtime graffiti artists [associated with hobo/ railroad employee traditions]. / As another isolated individual, in a vast system of cold practically, I felt a certain kinship with self-expressive outrage release towards social inequalities, but at the same time, I had a vague sense of fear that I could be easily pinpointed and punished. This paranoia, plus the awareness of the railroads’ hostility towards graffiti [associated with hip-hop traditions], since it hastened their enormous expense of applying AEI (Automatic Electronic Inventory) transmitters on every car, and the installation of AEI readers in every yard... gave me pause to reflect on my own graffiti. It wasn’t meant to be provocative proselytizing for revolution, but merely boxcar icon sloganeering as an equilibrium device for my own sanity. (131, 132)

While in this interview blurr describes a transition period he went through in reference to his own work when adapting to the introduction of aerosol spray on train cars. Similarly, those participating in the aerosol tradition took part in a learning curve when attempting to showcase their work in this new way. Due to the hip-hop tradition being so far rooted in the subversion of dominate forces of power, at first– as blurr notes– those applying their names with spray paint to the train cars took little care at attempting to coexist with the railroad companies. Furthermore –and again noted by blurr– these graffiti writers often failed to recognize the hobo and railroad employee traditions that had existed long before their time. Clashes between the two traditions can be seen in Figures 15 & 16.



**Figure 15.** "Colossus of Roads" Over Unknown Graffiti Writer. Image courtesy of Rob Swatski, 2012.



**Figure 16.** Sprayed Over “Bozo Texino” Moniker. Image courtesy of Todd Bates, 2005.

In the same interview, when asked if he thought that aerosol graffiti and the type of graffiti that he does could coexist in the long run, blurr made the following remarks:

Of course... It must. To keep it free, even if it must be done surreptitiously; the boxcar has evolved into a public forum. Aesthetically, it might be offensive and ugly, but we must remember which side of the Berlin wall carried the graffiti. Until we become a police state, and Big Brother has us all under surveillance, there will be graffiti, given that it is highly unlikely we'll ever achieve the utopia of social contentment. Once I stole a quote from someone, to use as a caption to my drawing: “In a happy world, no one would need philosophers.” Later I witnessed one that someone amended with: “Nor fucking train doodlers!” (133)

Returning to the Introduction of Daniel’s *Mostly True*, he picks up on a similar notion in regard to the future of freight train graffiti as it exists today:

Box car art is a form of social networking that presages the Internet profoundly, and the social scientists are just now beginning to understand, and the marketers are beginning to smell the money... Now into the cultural mix of individuals elbowing for expression space on these parapiatic steel canvases comes the new breed, armed with aerosol-propelled paint, Mean Streaks, and the entire world wide web of "insider info." History will tell if their contributions will keep the magic alive or bury the practice in brash egotism and shameless commercialism. Spend some time out there in the wilds yourself and see what you think. (5)

As time has progressed on into the millennium more and more graffiti writers associated with the hip-hop tradition have begun to see the benefits of painting around the train car numbers and sir date records vital to railroad workers on the job. Not only does this give one's piece a greater chance of not being removed by the railroad companies, it also keeps attention off those who wish to remain undetected when sneaking in and out of train yards they like to frequent. Additionally, as one can see in Figures 17-19, many have now begun to recognize the hobo/ railroad employee traditions that have long existed before their time by making attempts to spray around those works.



**Figure 17.** “Colossus of Roads” Moniker alongside Aerosol Graffiti. Image courtesy of T Hansen, 2007.



**Figure 18.** “Faves” Moniker alongside Aerosol Graffiti. Image courtesy of Rob Swatski, 2013.



**Figure 19.** “Crash” Moniker within Aerosol Graffiti. Image courtesy of Rob Swatski, 2011.

Admittedly these photos do not do this justice, though in many cases spraying around historic train monikers and or the numbers on the sides of train cars fundamentally changes the piece from a further away vantage point. Aerosol practitioners do this as a sign of respect for the traditions that have existed before their time and generally speaking it can only be seen in full when viewing the trains up close in a yard. Ability to spray around the numbers and or historic train monikers while keeping a piece’s shape from the further vantage point proves exceptional talent. While this duality may exist for those at the forefront of the freight train graffiti movements today, due to the mediums

inherent desire to stray free of rules and regulations there are those who still disregard the former railroad traditions altogether. The broader duality that exists between those applying aerosol spray to railcars that respect these traditions versus those that don't remains equally as important however due to the fact that now everyone painting their work on a freight train runs the risk of being charged with multiple felonies.

Generally speaking of course, those at the forefront of the freight train graffiti movements would likely argue that there is definitely a line that those attempting to show their tags and monikers on trains need not cross in reference to historical traditions. However, since those within this group would also likely acknowledge that there is no way to strictly enforce old traditions, nor much of a desire to since they aim to step outside formal power forces all together, as Daniel notes in the quote pulled earlier— time will tell if they will remain alive. Graffiti's ability to remain a hidden subculture has become an increasingly difficult task due to us now living in the information sharing age of the internet. As Daniel also notes, this has led to many attempts to market this form of expression (associated with freight trains or otherwise) on a much larger scale which has led to a lot of backlash within the community.

While punishment for those caught doing graffiti has heavily increased since the *Style Wars* days, so has controversy over what constitutes an appropriate way to showcase and or market it. Or furthermore, whether it is appropriate to do so at all. On the one hand, an argument could be made that the subculture relies on the basis of it only being for those who are able to find their way in. On the other, who could blame a

lifetime graffiti enthusiast for attempting to sell their talents and knowledge if they are to at least comfortably survive in capitalist America. Moreover, what if those selling their work aim to do so in a responsible way that honors the original tradition? Responsibility is a loaded concept in this context, and something I will more clearly define in the following paragraphs.

Despite attempts by the status quo to slander graffiti's narrative, due to its prominence the cultural significance it adds to any given urban environment cannot be ignored. In February of this year, even a federal judge in Brooklyn went as far to recognize it as such when they awarded a judgement of \$6.7 million to 21 different graffiti writers whose work was painted over in 2013 (*New York Times*). In November of 2017 the landmark trial came to a close when a jury decided that real estate developer Jerry Wolkoff broke the law when he painted over dozens of works of graffiti that were on a building he owns (*New York Times*). The building, known as 5Pointz, had long been a landmark for graffiti in New York City and according to a lawyer for the artists was "the world's largest open-air aerosol museum." Though Wolkoff's lawyers argued that since he owned the building it was his to do with as he pleased, a jury found that he violated the Visual Artists Rights Act (V.A.R.A) which has been used to protect public art of recognized stature created on someone's else property in the past (*New York Times*). This case sparked an interesting conversation for obvious reasons due to the fact that the work being protected by the law was produced illegally. Moreover, if the implication from this case can be made that graffiti provides cultural value within any

given community then at what point when attempting to place it in mainstream conversations is it considered no longer within the hands of the community?

Similar to my argument in reference to upholding historic railroad traditions when applying one's work to freight trains, there seems to be a line one need not cross when attempting to market graffiti. However, this line has much greater consequences for crossing in terms of the overall integrity of the medium. Using another very recent lawsuit, I will attempt to display the potential dangers of referencing it in mainstream conversations— especially when financial gain is involved.

In March of this year, *Juxtapoz* magazine reported on a massive controversy that began when fashion corporation H&M used legendary graffiti writer “Revok,” or Jason Williams, also illegally created artwork on a public handball wall in New York City as a part of their new Spring “New Routine” campaign without Williams’ consent. In a January cease and desist letter sent to H&M by Williams and his lawyer Jeff Gluck the two claimed that “unauthorized use of his original artwork, and the manner in which it is using the work, is damaging and is likely to cause consumers familiar with his work to believe there is a relationship between the parties” (*Juxtapoz*). H&M’s lawyers responded to Williams and Gluck with a letter of their own by stating that “under the circumstances, in which your client’s claimed ‘art work’ is the product of criminal conduct, Mr. Williams has no copyright rights to assert” and went on to pursue a lawsuit against Williams claiming that the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation told them that “graffiti on the park handball wall was unauthorized and constituted vandalism and

defacing of New York City property” (*Juxtapoz*). In an interview, Gluck describes the broader issue with the dispute as such:

Regardless of how anyone may feel about the underlying legal issue of illegal graffiti being protected, the real concern here is that while H&M sees value in using graffiti art in their advertisements to boost their revenues and appeal to their target demographic of young people, they also appear to simultaneously undermine and discredit graffiti artwork and the culture via this legal action. I think that is the reason why so many people are upset by this. (*Juxtapoz*)

After tons of backlash from those in within the graffiti communities, and likely due to their already declining public image for other controversial advertisements, as of March 16th after a rollercoaster of events H&M went onto drop their lawsuit against Williams (*Juxtapoz*). While this case isn’t particularly unique in terms of how corporations have tried to appropriate graffiti for profit in the past it nonetheless displays the problems with associating graffiti and financial gain. Moreover, though as of now Williams has come out victorious, numerous other cases involving fashion corporations and graffiti writers have not been fortunate enough to end with the same result.

Controversy over marketing graffiti is likely to increase due to cases like this becoming more and more prominent. There seems, however, to be an obvious difference between what marketing graffiti might look like versus what attempts to showcase and/or document it looks like. While, on the one hand, you have corporations like H&M who don’t even hide their motives when attempting to steal graffiti aesthetics for their own financial gain. On the other, there are documentarians like Tony Silver and Bill Daniel who at one point devoted their lives to responsibly showcasing certain aspects of graffiti subcultures while celebrating very minimal commercial success outside of the

subcultures themselves. Responsibility then, within the context of how one showcases graffiti, seems to rely on whether or not attempts have been made to commercialize it and or reframe it in a more “palatable” way. Neither Silver nor Daniel attempt to reframe graffiti’s narratives for a mainstream audience and instead aim to let the subcultures speak for themselves. This is why their work has generally remained free of criticism from those within the graffiti communities alongside a small number of other films and magazines that have equally enjoyed minimal commercial success. In terms of the medium’s future, time will tell if more like Silver and Daniel will step in as responsible documentarians or if those who aim to commercialize it will do so for good.

## CHAPTER VI

### Conclusion

In juxtaposing the different post-narrative conversations, or possible worlds, that stem from Ralph Ellison's use of jazz aesthetics throughout *Invisible Man*, Bharati Mukherjee's appropriation of Mughal painting principles in *The Holder of the World*, and the visual narratives seen through graffiti on North American freight trains I have attempted to display how scholarship on the works can be framed from an intersection of perspectives. Not only has this entailed noting how the individual artists are participating in genres outside of the works they compose, but additionally how conversations on the genres in questions have historically been neglected and or marginalized by dominating power forces. While each of these conversations may require a vastly different background in terms of how one might properly frame them, on a general level they are all functioning similarly in terms of how audiences outside of their origins might gain access or exposure. As Marshall McLuhan has noted, "It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media" (8).

Prior to concluding, while I have labeled jazz music, Mughal miniature paintings, and graffiti as all being historically neglected and or marginalized genres it is important to note that they function within those categorizations very differently. For instance, though jazz aesthetics may have been discredited by white critics throughout their introduction to American mainstream music, as many scholars have proven these very

aesthetics have gone onto shape much of popular music throughout the Western world while additionally now receiving much praise. On the other hand, there is virtually no Western scholarship on Mughal miniature paintings as European colonization all but erased its existence. While the conversations differ in many ways, they are similarly integral to effectively extracting meaning from both *Invisible Man* and *The Holder of the World* as knowledge of them allows readers to correctly frame their individual narratives. Moreover, it is also important to note that in referencing these genres and their histories of neglect and marginalization both Ellison and Mukherjee aimed to provide a version of the voices of these minority communities that have been historically silenced. Graffiti has historically functioned within a similar framework, especially hip-hop oriented graffiti, though also has major differences due to its increased illegality. While Ellison and Mukherjee aimed to have voices heard that had been historically muted by mainstream discourses, graffiti practitioners know that they can never fully enter these discourses. Generally speaking of course, nor do they want to which is why they may choose to create the way they do.

Responses to the overarching reach of the status quo are what seems to be the force that drives the artists I write about to create the way they do across genres. As McLuhan has also noted,

Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories— for probing around. When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result...Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view— the witless repetitive response to the unperceived.  
(10)

Though much of McLuhan's argument is in reference to television media, it proves equally as important within my overall methodology. In essence, what he is saying is that how one approaches their environment (people, physical surroundings, narratives, etc.) all comes down to framing. To elaborate and once more refer to Mukherjee and *The Holder of the World*, consider an attempt to tell that narrative via a painting from a fixed point of view versus one that offers multiple perspectives as afforded by Mughal aesthetics. From a fixed point of view, a painting of the Emperor's Tear would tell a vastly different story that negates much of the narrative and history that lies behind it. While the fluidity of Mughal miniatures allows that story to be told in full. A similar point can be made in reference to Ellison's metaphor of invisibility throughout *Invisible Man* and how it allows one to be constantly aware of time while simultaneously going ahead and or dropping behind its beat. Or furthermore, what a small hole from a distance in someone's graffiti piece alongside a train might mean. As noted in my introduction, failure to recognize these frames prohibits one from being able to participate in broader, more global conversations via these narratives and others functioning within a similar framework.

Considering how this methodology might function within other contexts, it is easy to see how potential for a plurality of "possible worlds" stemming from visual narratives like film might have the ultimate opportunity. However, this is not to diminish its prominence elsewhere in non-image based narratives. To conclude, academic discourses pertaining to literary genre might benefit from reaching across and or deconstructing long

withstanding categorizations used within the humanities fields in order to have broader, more diverse conversations on the topics. In theory, this would help to minimize potential for approaching any new and or future discourses with fixed points of view as I have demonstrated has been done in the past.

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