

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

CUNY Graduate Center

2-2019

The Music in *His* Words: The Art of Sound and Folk in Louis Armstrong's Manuscript for *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, "The Armstrong Story"

Adriana C. Filstrup

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2983

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

THE MUSIC IN *HIS* WORDS: THE ART OF SOUND AND FOLK IN LOUIS
ARMSTRONG'S MANUSCRIPT FOR *SATCHMO: MY LIFE IN NEW ORLEANS*,
"THE ARMSTRONG STORY"

by

ADRIANA C. FILSTRUP

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in the Liberal Studies Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

© 2019

ADRIANA C. FILSTRUP
All Rights Reserved

The music in *his* words: the art of sound and folk in Louis Armstrong's manuscript for *Satchmo*:

My Life in New Orleans, "The Armstrong Story"

By

Adriana C. Filstrup

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in the Liberal Studies

Program in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Linda M. Grasso
Thesis Advisor

Date

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis
Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

The music in *his* words: the art of sound and folk in Louis Armstrong's manuscript for *Satchmo: my life in New Orleans*, "The Armstrong Story"

by

Adriana Filstrup

Advisor: Linda M. Grasso

This thesis dives into the musical journey embedded in the autobiographical writings of America's jazz ambassador, Louis Armstrong. It examines Armstrong's typewritten manuscript, *The Armstrong Story*, which was eventually revised by an editor and published as his second autobiography with the title of *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* in 1954 (originally published in France in 1952.) Armstrong's manuscript reads like sheet music, where any sound could affect the harmony of the story. He created a voice that had met every art form before it became the manuscript of his autobiography, but along with that voice, references from Black folk and orality were removed by the editor from the published version, separating it from similar works of his time that treasured these features especially. The original manuscript in the Louis Armstrong House Museum Archives bears visual marks, auto-edits, and a dramatic punctuation, providing a layer of meanings and signifiers missing in the published autobiography. His notes outside the manuscript margins tell of an artist on the road; a star living the luxurious minutes of his privacy in front of a typewriter; an ordinary man at his beloved home, a celebrity at the peak of fame, but most importantly they tell of the Black twentieth century genius in the conscious act

of introducing folk elements with a transnational impact. Armstrong had elevated these elements in music by delivering traditional songs with virtuosity and versatility, and he had a studious affinity for other essentially traditional songs that had already reached universality like opera or indigenous rhythms. This manuscript is the only one closer to his style that was published while the author was alive. His first, *Swing that Music (1936)*, was heavily edited.

This research places the manuscript's relevance in the study of autobiography: in a larger scope, it intends to classify this example, and other similar cases, when an author's style has meaning in and of itself, which may have become lost because of editing for publication; in a narrower focus, it expands Armstrong scholarship by highlighting his autobiography's ontological, anthropological and historic value.

Before writing this book, Armstrong had already offered groundbreaking contributions to music with his instrumental and vocal styles, and he brought with him hundreds of references to his New Orleans folk culture, that proved then to challenge the racially integrated society of the 1950s. Referring to Armstrong's scat singing, Jazz critic Gary Giddins says in *Visions of Jazz*, "he added scat's moans and riffs to the palette of conventional song interpretation, employing them to underscore emotion and rhythm and meaning" (86). His writing inherits the form and characters from those "moans and riffs." It underscores –on the paper as well— "emotion, and rhythm, and meaning", but its literary value was over-shadowed by his celebrity.

New Orleans culture provides a precedent for a writing style that privileges sound, and a narrative that intends to document folk traditions. Deeply rooted in rhythm, a writing style is created from the sound of words – *'Who dat?'* — But Armstrong went further, making a language of his own. It would be inaccurate to call Armstrong's writing solely a reflection of slang or

Black speech. Armstrong used ‘*Jive*’ talk and jazz music as a compositional style in his lines. He could speak music in a sigh.

Armstrong’s is an ideal American success story told in the spirit of Black folk, but that spirit, which brings a much deeper and symbolic legacy, is left on the surface due to his immersion in the mainstream. This thesis identifies an iconic achievement of creative individuality by Armstrong, a Black artist, and proposes a new interpretation of his manuscript that better reads his intentions of preserving folk traditions while making them relevant globally.

Recommended Citation

Filstrup, Adriana C., "The music in *his* words: the art of sound and folk in Louis Armstrong’s manuscript for *Satchmo: my life in New Orleans*, “The Armstrong Story”” (2019). CUNY

Academic Works.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One day, over a delightful lunch with Sarah Rose and Ricky Riccardi, the question of a thesis subject came up. I was uncertain at the time, but Ricky couldn't wait to suggest what he thought was the perfect fit: a look at Louis Armstrong's original manuscript for his second autobiography, "Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans," at that time the latest acquisition of the Louis Armstrong House Museum archives. I did not have to look any further, and for believing in me to do it, and sharing his extensive knowledge I am endlessly thankful to him, and to Sarah for her immediate support and enthusiasm. I am also grateful to both for their diligent work as archivists.

I would like to thank Brendan Murphy, Jean Kim and Jana Jarosz, for reading my drafts, and giving me insightful thoughts on how to make this work better and better, and for making me so honored to share theirs with me. I couldn't have done it without their motivation and appreciation. I want to especially thank Professor Linda Grasso for being everything I needed her to be as my advisor; every step of the way. She traced the footprints to my vision, and made sure to make this work prolific and meaningful.

My team at the Louis Armstrong House Museum, Hyland Harris, Pedro Espinoza, Junior Armstead, Barbara J. Adler, Alexis Lubin, and all our docents supported me when I needed their hand. Hyland also gave me enlightening clues along the way and Ed Polcer listened. Pianist Ricardo Gallo shared important knowledge in music that supported some of my main arguments about Louis's work. Thanks to now former Executive Director of LAHM, Michael Cogswell, for supporting my initial motivation, and giving me an inspiring example with his exhaustive work to preserve Armstrong's legacy. I am thankful to Alaina W. Hebert and Lynn Abbott at the

Hogan Jazz Archive for their incredible assistance and guidance, and to Charles Chamberlain, Kristi Spierling, Greg Lambousy, and many people in New Orleans who kindly gave me some of their time and knowledge during my field research.

None of this would have been possible without my loving mother, Sara Silva, who did everything in her hands to bring me here. I love and admire her infinitely. I am grateful for Andrew O'Neill, who was patient and supportive every minute, for wiping off my eyes in moments of frustration, and for tuning up my writing wisely. I am thankful to Debra Davidia for believing in me all along and giving me valuable encouragement; to my friends and family in New York and in Colombia who believed that I would take this project to the finish line. I dedicate this effort to the memory of trumpeter Daniel Filstrup, who brought me to the Armstrong House for the first time, and whose life I'll always cherish in my heart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Section I: Armstrong, the American icon becomes an author.....	18
Section II: Music, Sounds and Jazz in “The Armstrong Story”	28
Section III: New Orleans and Black folk culture.....	46
Conclusion	54
Appendix	59
Notes.....	60
Works Cited.....	61
Archival Sources.....	63

Introduction

Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) used several autobiographical tools to document his story, an endeavor that took most of his spare time. This commitment to his legacy engaged every free second that Armstrong—a man who traveled 300 days a year—had. His was the story of an African American who, despite growing up with very little formal education, broke barriers of race and achieved social justice; a jazz innovator, and a popular, and international, celebrity in the twentieth century. Throughout his life, Armstrong collected more than 700 home tape recordings, made over 500 autobiographical collages, and 86 scrapbooks, wrote over fifteen thousand letters, and published two autobiographies and several magazine articles under his name. From every factual perspective, and against some general disbelief of readers who questioned the intellectual ability of a man from the South who didn't finish the fifth grade, he earned the right to author “The Armstrong Story”¹.

It was Armstrong himself who had the desire to tell his tale. The manuscript of his second autobiography was typewritten. Each page was identified with the title “The Armstrong Story” on the top, and next to it, what seems to be an attempt to keep a timeline. Louis Armstrong introduces his parents and his hometown, describing the landscape in detail to what he imagined would be a broad audience. He gives away the New Orleans in his mind and explains it in a way everybody can understand. That is because, at the time he wrote it, Armstrong already belonged to the world. His explanations of New Orleans' idioms are generous. As a writer, Armstrong adopts a voice that carries wisdom, and a style that could be defined as a report to the fan. His tone assumes a close relationship with his reader. Often, Armstrong uses the third person to talk about himself, like a subject²; and finally, he incorporates a surprising number of ellipses and visual accents elaborated on with a colorful use of letters and symbols, elements that make sound

another entity in his manuscript. This intention of sound is spread throughout the manuscript, exposing a careful placement of stops, emphases, and nuances that musicians use when playing an instrument in search of their tone, which represents that unique sound that separates them from everyone else. A closer look at the writing suggests that orality is a valuable element of the narrative.

Overall, Armstrong shows strong storytelling abilities and a vivacious sense of humor. He chronicled the red-light district known as Storyville, where musicians, pimps, gangsters and prostitutes were just people and their stories just as relevant as those he encountered in the next fifty years of travels around the world. When *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* was published in 1954, many reviews highlighted Armstrong's ability to allow readers to enter his world in such a natural way that it spotlighted for them the human stories rather than terrifying them with the rough world where they took place. "Although the book is teeming with 'undesirable' characters—the pimps, the prostitutes, the gunmen and loafers—it is a heartening and amusing story, because Louis liked these people, and saw only the good in them,"— said the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1955 (Schuyler 30).

Like this one, other comments focused on the "exotic" landscape that Armstrong placed in his book. These remarks reveal a society with strict moral judgement. Because of it, reviews often included warnings: "*Satchmo* is not a delicate book, because the time and place and even the music upon which it so objectively reports were not at all respectable. But its inherent coarseness is as natural as the texture of blue denim," reported the *Chicago Tribune* in 1954 (Peck 308). Even when a very few wanted to find more about jazz history in Armstrong's book³, others welcomed a broader audience reading it. "You don't have to dig Dixieland to have

yourself a ball with this one –all you need is an interest in humanity,” said the *Oakland Tribune* (Wilson 82).

Armstrong’s writing started right after he left his hometown in the early 1920s. Away from home, writing letters became a common practice for the young musician, and over the years it evolved into another of Armstrong’s hobbies. His first known letter, included in Thomas Brothers’ compilation, *Louis Armstrong: In His Own Words*, was addressed to New Orleans cornet player Isidore Barbarin, who played with Armstrong in the Tuxedo Brass Band. This was the last band he performed with before leaving for Chicago to join Joe “King” Oliver’s band in 1922, the same year as the date of the letter. In it, Armstrong refers to Tuxedo as “A Red Hot Brass Band” and praised his time playing in New Orleans parades. He sends condolences to “Papa” Celestin on his sister’s death, and promises to pass along a message Barbarin requested to be given to “Paul” in a previous letter. These letters indicate Armstrong’s efforts to maintain relationships with his fellow musicians back home, and today they document the evolution of his thoughts, as well as recollecting his bare colloquial writing style.

Armstrong was never to live in New Orleans again, and *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* is an attempt to capture those years through words. As the red-light district closed down in 1917 under Federal Law, the New Orleans Armstrong grew up in would have become a fictional place, like Narnia or Macondo. The multiple references to his hometown revealed to readers Armstrong’s desire for New Orleans to exist and be remembered just as he experienced it, because he believed it to have made him the person and musician he came to be.

Satchmo describes in detail crucial moments in his life that reveal a higher understanding of his character, like the time he lived with his grandmother, Josephine Armstrong, away from his mother and father, after the fight that separated them. He speaks lovingly of his mother, even

while he makes clear that his mother might have been working as a prostitute. Regardless, and with no factual proof, Armstrong allows himself to live with the memory of her as a woman who kept her head up and greeted anyone who knew her. He openly talks about his mother's influence on his personality and upbringing. The strong bond with his mother is the thread that holds the story together. It is there all along, as the personification of his moral philosophy and his roots. His mother taught him a kind of wisdom learned from life experiences, and humor, a kind of intuitive intelligence. "Oh, whata, sense of humor that woman had...." (39), he writes about her. His mother provided him with a sense of wealth while in poverty, doing so by reinforcing the importance of other accessible values such as health, knowledge, and pride.

Among the events that gave Armstrong's life a great turn, which he includes in the narrative, was a stay of about two years in the Colored Waif's Home for Boys. In a 1931 photograph of Armstrong visiting the Waif's Home with his band, he writes, "This is where Louis started out." And certainly, even when recalling being "depressed" when he first arrived, the episode is narrated with joy. He reminisces about seeing a farm with hundreds of animals that look contented, and about falling in love with the smell of honeysuckles. It is in this humble setting—so revealing of folk life—that Armstrong was introduced to formal music education. The reach of all music created remained part of the environment, part of his people's customs and traditions, and part of the imagery that rooted his identity, but had not yet reached further horizons than the segregated areas where Black people in New Orleans communicated artistically⁴.

Armstrong reports on several other events that were not all pleasant. Racism, segregation, poverty, crime, and sex are all openly addressed in his book. Nevertheless, an overall look at Armstrong's discourse⁵ shows that he favors humanity over social parameters and results in a

fundamental cosmogony: he speaks of a world that witnessed the birth of the music that is to him as familiar as a native language, and that represents today a trail back to the Black folk origins of jazz: America's most indigenous music tradition.

A referent that stands on the premise that Black music became the vehicle for Black men and women to exist culturally in America is LeRoi Jones' (Amiri Baraka) *Blues People*, and it is worth revisiting some of Jones' reflections:

The Blues timbre and spirit had come to jazz virtually unchanged, even though the early Negro musicians using European instruments had to learn to ply them with the strict European march music as a model. The "classical" timbre of the trumpet, the timbre that Creoles imitated, was not the timbre that came into jazz. The purity of tone that the European trumpet player desired was put aside by the Negro trumpeter for the more humanly expressive sound of the voice. The brass sound came to the blues, but it was a brass sound hardly related to its European models. The rough, raw sound the black man forced out of these European instruments was a sound he had cultivated in this country for two hundred years. It was an American sound, something indigenous to a certain kind of cultural existence in this country. (79)

Jones's narrative mirrors Armstrong's creative spirit, because it parallels the accent on human expressiveness that Black culture contributed to American music. Armstrong understood that music, as a cultural device, could give the country a unified identity. Reluctant to take part in any political agenda, the artist trusted his chances to help redefine the collective cultural identity by creating an authentic sound for his country: a purely Black sound played with European instruments and standards; an encounter that is iconic and distinctive of American culture. The

fact that Armstrong's autobiography came after the cultural impact of Black music in the mainstream is the most visible factor that motivates it.

An example of Armstrong's attempts to include Black narratives in modern society is the event of his European tour in 1965, when he decided to open each concert with a tune that had been out of his repertoire for a while: *Black and Blue*. He decided to change the lyrics of the song from "I'm white inside, but that don't make my case" to "I'm right inside...", as a subtle gesture of protest against inequality. While not aggressive, this action could not be categorized as passive. In his manuscript, Armstrong also shares an anecdote that tells of the legendary fight between the African-American boxer Jack Johnson and white boxer Jim Jeffries. Armstrong recalls running away from the white kids who were trying to punch black children in revenge, after the event ended with Johnson as the resounding winner. Even then, the accent of the story relies on his running abilities, and as he often would, he chooses humor as his delivery strategy: "I said to myself, since I've got to run I might as well run as fast as I know how to run... And brother I started picking them up and lying them down" he tells, and the punch line reads in parentheses: "[I] am speaking of my feet" (Armstrong 14). His perspective favors reconciliation and humor, which exposes again the figure of the ambassador in Armstrong.

Armstrong's regard for Jazz music and the heritage of Black Folk were his motivations to use a syncopated compositional writing style. The use of Black Speech was an organic reaction to the culture in which he'd been raised. These were the sources that informed his writing craft, and their absence from *Satchmo*, the published version of the manuscript, is dismissive of them. These features were fundamental to Black people, especially to the twentieth-century Black artist and intellectual, who was committed to the goal of placing Black icons in the overall collective imaginary of America's cultural identity.

There have been attempts to analyze Armstrong's writing aesthetically by describing the elements that identify it, and the dialogue that exists between his writing and music has been studied by authors like Daniel Stein in *Music is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography and American Jazz*. Stein offers a detailed analysis of the features that unveil the kinship of Armstrong's writings with jazz music, contributes the concept of *autobiographics* manifested in all art forms that Armstrong explored, and informs about the technical background of the writing composition. In Stein's words, "Armstrong's language and writing practices simulate the moment of performance and seek to reproduce the immediacy of musical improvisation" (108). To Stein's observations I add a comparison between the published autobiography and the manuscript, where all these features are accentuated. Additionally, I determine the place of this particular creative non-fictional work in the cultural life of its context.

When Armstrong claimed to represent jazz, he extended the possibility of conceiving a society that acknowledged the success of African-Americans and embraced Black Culture as part of its story. Armstrong urged the nation to take ownership of the Black American, and it is important to note that the stories he produced in every art form were mostly passed along through orality: an intimate feature of Black culture and any other Folk traditions around the world. It was culture and not politics that could preserve the legacy with which Armstrong was concerned. He believed culture could transcend the violent ways of a society that had endured slavery and two World Wars.

Nonetheless, Armstrong's connections to Black folk have been taken often as Uncle Tomism, limiting the exploration of the sources that were intuitively cultivated on the street, and in every space, that were left for Black people to build communities: the church, the parades or the "honky tonks." In the manuscript, the folk features are clearer. The intention to paint the

portraits of Black life, and the importance of music in it, place Armstrong's priorities in a more collective pursuit than merely that of telling his story for fame. The manuscript suggests that orality and speech are indeed important features to Armstrong, and that they inform the cultural background of the author.

It is most likely that the publication of *Satchmo* without the intentional sounds of "The Armstrong Story" was related to the criticism that writers like Zora Neale Hurston faced when she also used Black speech in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Because Armstrong was not recognized as a writer, and he had no career in that field to support his creative choices, the publisher probably decided not to take that risk. Even African-American intellectuals of the time had reservations about exposing these features in literature, considering them flaws. Some felt the need to expose their strengths before the public eye, which was the argument of writer and journalist Richard Wright when he criticized Hurston's work. For that reason, the study of the manuscript should seek beyond the abrupt breakthrough of Armstrong's image into the mainstream, which has mostly overshadowed the use of Black folk features, and correct the dislocation of the manuscript off the margins of literature. Writing was important to Armstrong, as revealed by his comments in a radio interview from the late 1940's, when his celebrity undermined his literary efforts:

ANNOUNCER: That reminds me, you did write a book once, didn't you Louie, without the assistance of a ghost writer or press agent, they tell me?

ARMSTRONG: That's right! We called it "Swing That Music" and it might not have been a literary masterpiece, but every word of it was my own, so I can read it and understand it.

ANNOUNCER: That's more than a lot of celebrities can say about the books they are supposed to have written, Louie. I've been told that you carry a dictionary and a book of synonyms and antonyms in your brief case wherever you go, is that true?

AMRSTRONG: Certainly is. I learned to use them when I was writing the book, and I keep 'em handy now for my letter writing. Then when one of those hard words jumps up, I've got the answer in my bag. I didn't get much education when I was young, you know, so I'm still learning. (Brothers xi)

The autobiography, written as a novel, is a journey in the search of music. Music is the given element in the story because there is an expectation for the encounter between Armstrong and music. Yet, he does not limit his narrative to a lineal trail of his career; he selects characters and important events that in any literary world would enrich a story. So, while these moments exist in the manuscript, they are not exclusive. The reader will learn about Armstrong's first interactions with music, but they cannot be removed from the cultural world that was accessible to Black people. Music was present in church:

In those days, I did not know a Horn (a trumpet) from a comb...Of course I went to church constantly... Quite naturally, you know I would.. With grandma being a Christian woman, as well as my great grandmother...Between the two, they kept me in school, church, and Sunday school...And that's where I acquired my singing tactic, I guess... Because I did a whole lots of singing in church... (3)

Or in the streets:

The 'Lead' singer and the 'Tenor' singer would walk in front together, and the Baritone and the Bass singer would bring up that rear... We would go down the streets, just singing at random, and then finally, somebody would call us to sing a

few songs... We would... And then we would pass our hats around... They would donate what ever they could spare.... And we would put it all together after it was all over... Then we would 'divy up' [...] When I used to sing tenor, I used to put my hand behind my ear, and move my mouth from side to side... And some of the most beautiful tones would appear... Hmmm.. (13-14)⁶

Later on, music was present in the Waif's Home for Colored Boys, which Armstrong entered after firing a gun to the air on New Year's, with the intention of amusing his friends. There, he shared more elaborate concepts of music. "That's the first thing Mr. Peter Davis taught me, out in the Colored Waif's home for boys, —Tone... He said – a musician with a tone can play any kind of music, whether it's Classic or Rag Time" (67), wrote Armstrong.

In the previous examples, the reader is introduced to the Armstrong who spent his time making music from a very young age, showing a surprisingly early exposure to its vocabulary. Even then, the story of the boy struggling to get some coins to bring to his mother, and who later in life would become a popular icon, is as well represented as the image of the successful musician who pioneered the art of the solo, both instrumental and vocal.

From his writing, the manuscript shows an equal appreciation for orality, and the tradition of telling stories— as an author, Armstrong connects music with orality and tradition in a symbiotic interaction. They are important to Armstrong's aesthetic. The published version narrates every event, but in addition the manuscript provides a storytelling style that is musical and oral in its compositional structure; it uses an instinctive structure that is analogue to the language of music, displaying concepts as *rhythm* and *dynamics* comfortably, and an oral narrative that positions Armstrong as the *storyteller*, sometimes even addressing himself in third person.

Reading it out loud, “The Armstrong Story” sounds like Armstrong unmistakably. The originality of his written work brings it closer to the work of other African-American writers of his time, who also relied on the legacy of sound, and particularly in America, in the effectiveness of Black speech to enrich their creative written work.

Monroe Mather Stearns, the assigned editor by publisher Prentice Hall, removed isolated sentences, and some paragraphs, but altogether there are no more than twenty pages omitted. Nonetheless, these editorial elisions remove much of the punctuation and ellipses that Armstrong freely used throughout the manuscript, since they were considered irrelevant to the story. But Armstrong placed them to serve as compasses and silent notes, respectively. They were there to add his sound watermark. He gave the reader his voice.

A comparison of “The Armstrong Story” with the published book quickly unveils the absence of orality, and a closer look fogs Armstrong’s intentions of treating words and punctuation as musical notation. In the story, Armstrong tells of the moment when, after a long wait, the music instructor from the Waif’s Home, Peter Davis, asks a roughly 12-year-old Armstrong to become part of the Home’s brass band. This example is a narrative peak in the story, since the moment is emotionally charged by the previous knowledge of Armstrong being the famous trumpet virtuoso well-known by the readers. In addition, Armstrong makes a point of giving credit to his first teacher, reiterating what he wrote in a 1950 article in *The Record Changer*, a jazz magazine printed from 1942 to 1957, correcting rumors spread by Bunk Johnson, who claimed to be Armstrong’s mentor in his early days in New Orleans. The published story reads:

Mr. Davis slowly came over and stopped by me. “Louis Armstrong,” he said, “how would you like to join our brass band?” I was so speechless and so surprised

I just could not answer him right away. To make sure that I had understood him he repeated his question. “Louis Armstrong, I asked if you would like to join our brass band.” “I certainly would, Mr. Davis. I certainly would,” I stammered. He patted me on the back and said: “Wash up and come to rehearsal.” (40)

In contrast, Armstrong’s version in “The Armstrong Story” manuscript reads:

Mr. Davis stopped right to where I was sitting down... And the first words he said to me was, —Louis Armstrong, how would you like to join the band?... ‘Lawdy’.... That man had me so breathless, and so speechless, and surprised to boot, —why, — I just couldn’t answer him right away.... Then he made sure that I understood him, thoroughly....Louis Armstrong, how would you like to join our brass band (this time).... I said,— er’wa, ‘yes, —‘yes, —yes, Mr. Dave, — I would be thrilled to.....Then he patted me on my back and said, — be to rehearsal after you wash up..... I said, yaassuh... (17)

Most certainly, there are sound characters in Armstrong’s original manuscript that are written with the purpose of also communicating the aural environment. The selection of words and punctuation create *rhythm*: “so breathless, and so speechless, and surprised to boot”: a pattern that could not be recollected from the published version. In addition, the words “lawdy” and “yaassuh” are recognizable expressions of Black speech. When the editor excised them, the narration lost links to the identifiable features of Black folk.

The features from music could be read as the signature of the narrator, or orator even, while the connections to Black speech suggests that “The Armstrong Story” belongs in Black Folk literature. Langston Hughes (1901-1967) published *The Weary Blues* as early as 1925,

influenced by blues verses and jazz music. Amiri Baraka (1934-2014), reflected on the importance of Black music in African-American identity in *Blues People*, published in 1963.

The connection between Armstrong's writing and the structure and features of music has been confirmed by Thomas Brothers, the music professor and author of the unprecedented compilation of letters, *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words*. Brothers locates this musical influence in Armstrong's writing identity:

Armstrong draws on the conventions and symbols of standard English as they suit him. A similar process was at work historically in the formation of jazz, where techniques that arose in the literate practice of European America—mainly harmony—were used by jazz musicians in a fresh way, according to a conception of musical style that arose through aurality. Armstrong the writer thus helps us to understand Armstrong the musician—and vice versa. (Brothers xvi)

There is much more to learn also from the way Armstrong did all his writing, and from all those letters he wrote. In his luggage, there was always a typewriter. His thousands of letters were an answer to the passion of telling stories infused with sound. For example, in a letter to his manager, Joe Glaser, Armstrong says he regrets not being able to type during his trip. "My typewriter fell from on top of all that luggage that was on the truck, And the "Jolt" Sprung' everything. Tch, Tch, isn't it A Drag? And I wanted so badly to swing a lot of Type Writing, "Gappings" on ya." ("Letter to Joe Glaser" 1)

But writing letters was not the only medium Armstrong used to tell stories. In fact, the music was full of them. Armstrong composed more than 80 songs, published as *Satchmo: A Musical Autobiography* in 1957, a 4-LP set recording featuring Armstrong's voice in the most intimate setting that could be given to the listener. Before each tune, he tells the story of his life

and career, including theatrical sketches performed along with his band mates, and a perfectly crafted storyline.

Beyond the writing and the music, Armstrong's crafts included several collages and personal home-tape recordings. In the 1920s, scrapbooks were a popular practice that he, along with other musicians and friends, used. They collected traces of his professional career, and were used as portfolios to get his bands booked. But many of them had a personal tone, lots of humor, and the intention of being revisited and shared. Armstrong owned one of the first home video cameras in the 1930s, but it wasn't until 1950 that his autobiographical crafts found the venue that he might have been looking for. Jack Teagarden, the trombonist of his All-Stars, introduced him to a reel-to-reel portable tape recording. Instantly, the tapes were able to capture Armstrong's sound world: the voices, the laughs, the music, the opinions. Also, the portability allowed Armstrong to bring his beloved recorder everywhere, and he captured hours and hours on the road, backstage, with friends, and at home. His tapes mimicked the shape of his thoughts. He recorded conversations on many subjects he never spoke publicly about, in a casual and uncensored way.

Along with the tapes were the more than 500 collages that humorously illustrated each tape box, working almost as book covers. Today, much of the correspondence he addressed to many of his acquaintances is accompanied by a tape-recorded version. In many other cases, the recording of a letter read out loud by Armstrong is the only surviving document, as he might have not had the means to make a copy any other way at the moment. Listening to these readings one can begin to understand Armstrong's writing style.

For instance, a recording of a letter to British journalist, Max Jones, exposes most of the sound in Armstrong's writing:

This letter was written, August 15th, 1970, but –Boy, ‘ve I been busy! And then, you know, I never write a letter unless I check it... The next day I wanted to mail it and a call come into the office that Duke Ellington had passed out on his job at the Rainbow Room, and that evening they called me... Duke had to appear on the David Frost TV show, and they asked me if I could substitute for him, you see? So, I had to put the letter down, because I hadn’t finished checking it, and little delays like that, you know? You can’t help it. So, I hope you hadn’t sent in the last edition for your book [laughs], because I think this is important for you to wait until you get it, you know? Like the old saying, Max “better late than never” –you understand, daddy? So here is what I wrote to you:

August 15th, 1970. Dear Max: I’m sorry to have held you up for the delay in my writing, but I have been busier than a cat on a tin roof, –you know, he’s a busy cat [laughs]—[...]

We are rehearsing twice a week at my house. My doctor came to our last rehearsal, to hear me blow, and he was perfectly satisfied. Also, he examined me throu-rough-ly, to see if my blowing affected the ol’ ticker, and the beats were perfectly normal, yeaaaaaa..... I should try to answer all of your questions. Seem like a million to me at this moment, but anyways, daddy. For, you, you know, my boy, here it goes...”

(0:00:29-0:03:47)

Notice the action of reading a letter out loud is, to Armstrong, a way to “check it”. It demonstrates a high regard for the sound of the letter, and it resembles the approach that a composer would have with a musical composition.

There is merit in attempting to author an autobiography twice, and in Armstrong’s multiple contributions to documenting history. He used his iconic status to represent the African

American genius, at the same time the Civil Rights Movement began to imagine the possibility of a unified America. "The Armstrong Story" also tells narratives that broke race barriers.

In search of the music, sounds, memory, and folk in Armstrong's manuscript, this work delves into the very intimate experience of his writing craft, looking for points of reference that his writing borrowed from each in order to create an original voice. For example, on a page that was not published, a sentence alluding to sound blends in with the narration of casual events that Armstrong experienced in Chicago.

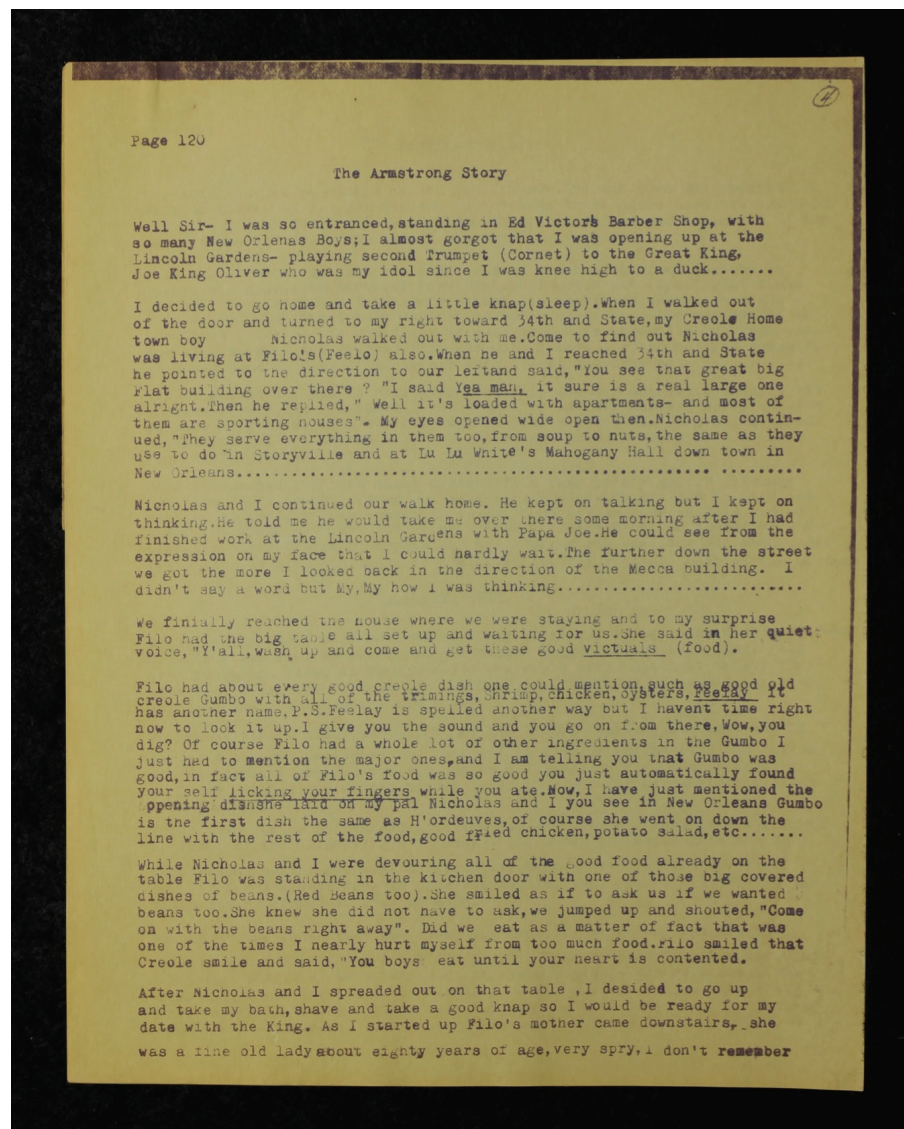


Figure 1. Page 120 in the original manuscript "The Armstrong Story". 1950. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

“Filo had about every creole dish one could mention, such as good old creole gumbo, with all of the trimings [sic], shrimp, chicken, oysters, Feelay it has another name.” And as we hear Armstrong rejoicing on his luck after he lands in the house of Filo, and encountering a lady who not only showed him great hospitality, but gained his heart with her food, we also land on a *post script* that fuels the need for this analysis for the sake of Armstrong’s scholarship and the study of twentieth-century African American life, jazz and folk writing in the genre of autobiography. “P.S. Feelay is spelled another way,” he writes, “but I haven’t time now to look it up. I give you the sound and you go on from there, Wow, you dig?” (120).

Certainly, Armstrong has given the world his sound, and the stories of the collective Black American experience. The manuscript of *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, which Armstrong originally titled “The Armstrong Story”, is a legacy that belongs to America. It is the motivation of this research to raise the volume of this legacy, to revisit the author’s original purpose, and to make it available to contemporary readers and writers who are willing to see the universality of a folk story. More explicitly, this thesis retraces the voice of a Black American genius who survived inequality, celebrated people, and bequeathed the saving grace of their music.

ARMSTRONG, THE AMERICAN ICON BECOMES AN AUTHOR



Figure 2. "Louis Armstrong at typewriter." 1945-1960. Satchmo Collection. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

Armstrong's manuscript of *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* is a testament of the success of a minority American icon. Even though the storytelling defends its own value, the manuscript increases its relevance because of what he represented in his context. He knew that many of the things he did could easily become controversial. Armstrong was aware of his persona –the civil rights pioneer and virtuoso— and he treasured the fortune of breaking barriers and in doing so, strengthening his community. He embraced his role and made sure to make it meaningful. On many occasions, Armstrong explained that he documented his own story “for

posterity.” He pursued his opportunities to become a published author as part of his commitment to the history of African-Americans, but most importantly, to the history of social justice in America, even when he realized then it would not be understood by all. In fact, many of his attempts to defend his beliefs of equality did not have much meaning then to the communities he represented: among musicians or within the African-American community, but he was aware that by writing from his perspective, using his unique, yet unseen style, he would turn a hobby into a powerful historical and political action, one that would be transcendent. Armstrong believed in his art strongly; his artistic identity went beyond the format of a song.

The fact that this manuscript exists, unknown in the archive, affirms a social structure that was built to undermine its value. Armstrong was in control of his own story. His discourse redeemed an underseen community. He aimed to become a universal referent of his own African-American heritage.

Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans was first published in French, translated by Armstrong’s close friend Madelaine Gautier, who in a letter from December 1952 reports to Armstrong: “I went to the publisher before we left Paris, and he told me that in 3 weeks they had sold 6,500 copies of the book— which is exceptionally good for France, for the readers are not so many as in the States,”— she assures (Gautier)⁷. Besides his role as an American icon, there was also his strong image as an international figure, and this is still the case decades later.

In order to remain relevant to other nations and people of different races, Armstrong proposed a way to define “American-ness” that conceived Black people as part of the professional, creative and intellectual setting. His was not an isolated effort, as the spirit of the Black American was starting to resonate throughout many fields and mediums. Armstrong’s

impact went further to influence American culture; he deliberately put a Black face on the American star.

Until the moment of his death, Armstrong believed that he was born on the fourth of July in 1900. Even though, followed by the discovery of his baptismal records, it was later determined that his real birth date was August 4th, 1901, the apocryphal date turned into an ironic prophecy since Armstrong would later commit to personifying himself as the representation of freedom.

Metaphorically, his mistaken birthday date redeems the collective sentiment of Frederick Douglass, who not only was the first Black person in America to write an autobiography in 1845, but who was also the author of the speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* delivered in 1852. Douglass spoke a hundred years before *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* was published in France in 1952 as *Ma vie à la Nouvelle-Orléans*. In his speech, Douglass condemns the celebration and calls it “a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim” (204). Although in that same speech, he later provides a line of hope: “There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery” (204). Armstrong’s writing can be placed among these forces. At the time, the “Negro”—a term that defined the empowered Black individual of the twentieth century—was yearning for creative individuality and inclusion. Armstrong accomplished just that, and throughout various mediums.

As an autobiographical work, Armstrong’s case is unique because he not only documented his own story in writing, but he represented both an individual and collective identity tangible in the style, at a time when many lives of brilliant African-Americans were lost in oblivion, or would not make an impact beyond the Black community. That is also the reason why insistently, Armstrong mentions his mentor Joe “King” Oliver in his writings and

interviews; Oliver composed the jazz anthem “West End Blues” made famous by Armstrong after first recording it with his band at the time, the ‘Hot Five,’ in 1926, and releasing it in 1928. The tune featured a legendary eight-bar solo still celebrated in jazz history today. In spite of his genius, Oliver died in poverty in 1938, after not being able to afford medical treatment. Armstrong’s concern became making sure that his work and the artistic work of his predecessors was remembered. In addition, he managed to recreate the spirit of the culture, and the stories of the people who lived in it.

The value of Armstrong’s autobiographical work should come from the appreciation of its level of detail, diversity and informative qualities. It goes beyond the authority of celebrity. What Armstrong documented was a form of artistry directly connected to the autobiographical memory of the twentieth-century “Negro,” profoundly moved by dreams of creative freedom. In the multiple pieces of Armstrong’s personal archive a lot of his humanity is exposed, proving that “more than simple episodic recall, autobiographical memory is rich with thoughts, emotions, and evaluations about what happened, and provides explanatory frameworks replete with human intentions and motivations. Autobiographical memories comprise the story of our lives, rich in interactions and relationships, and in a very deep sense, provide a sense of self through a narrative identity” (Fivush Et. Al 322).

Armstrong represents the crowds, the working people. He was a humanist, and therefore believed in equality. This universal philosophy emerges from folk values. He praised everything that made humans more human and earthly, which explains his spontaneity when talking about sex or laxatives, topics that remain uncomfortable for public exposure. Folk themes are inexcusably present in the narrative, such as food, music and traditions that portray the vibrancy of Armstrong’s community. American Blacks in the South appreciated intangible values such as

talent, humor, and hard work, which created an atmosphere of freedom. Overall, Armstrong's invitation to laugh was an invitation to freedom. Nevertheless, the separation from material goods created a fond illusion for the Black that acquired them, like in the story of one of the boys at the Waif's Home.

We all crowded around him... also Mr. Jones... Everybody, so glad to see him looking so good, and above all, riding such a beautiful horse... And above all things, he was riding it bareback...Gee...[...] Well, —so much for that... [...] Red Sun was arrested for stealing a horse, (21) tells Armstrong.

Then, the comedy in Armstrong's performances—found as well in his writing—was a weapon of seduction to communicate with the universal audience. It was so powerful, that as noted by Penny Von Eschen in *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, the State Department considered him “perhaps the most effective unofficial goodwill ambassador this country has ever had” (63-64).

Armstrong's shows were armed with every tool of persuasion: inspiration, truth, and humor. The power of music was never underestimated by Armstrong, and he would speak through it every time he felt the need to reach others. Music placed him in front of a microphone, and took his voice across countries. He then realized that everything he said was going to be heard by millions of people. Von Eschen also confirms that Armstrong, “like many Americans, was inspired by the growing national prominence of the southern civil rights movement” (58), and recalls his sympathy for the African struggle mirrored by that of his own people, when he sang “Black and Blue” in front of a crowd of 100,000 people in Accra, capital of Ghana, when he visited in 1956. It is thus important to recognize Armstrong's efforts to be part of that movement in the spirit and shape of a cultural ambassador.

In a 1973 interview, Lucille Armstrong explains the nature of her husband's perspective: Louie was to me the one artist who was completely internationally known. Worldwide. The smallest place in the world, they knew Louie [...] He got involved with the people [...] We were entertained by both the American embassy and foreign embassies wherever we went. Louie wasn't too up on that [...] Louie liked the man in the street. He liked to get to know the people [...] and with all of the success that he has had Louie still remained the man in the street himself [...] Louis had been asked by many reporters on interviews, what did he think about a certain particular thing, and Louis would say "well, man, I'm just a musician." He never would come out publicly, because his theory was that "what I say carries a lot of weight, and I just won't do it." But at home he had his opinions. (00:24:46-00:29:54)⁸

That human interest accompanied Armstrong throughout the years. His attraction to human stories allowed for Armstrong the author to identify with "the man in the street." This affinity responded to a commitment to global humanism, and it was ignited by his own experience. But in Armstrong's case that is not precisely the factor that made him an iconic figure, which was mostly defined by the image of the entertainer. Nonetheless, Armstrong told stories with everything he did whether he played a solo, made a collage, recorded a tape or wrote a book.

His contributions in writing honored his passion for music, and in a humanistic perspective, his honest efforts as an activist advocated both individual expression and cultural heritage. His main goal remained to be the best musician of his time. But music—jazz and blues, and every influence of sound from other rhythms that converged in New Orleans—personalized his storytelling forms, and referenced his creative structure.

Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans is the story of Armstrong's awakening. Without disregarding other testimonies by African-American musicians who wrote valuable autobiographies, like Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie or Billie Holiday, history proves that none of them had an international impact as large as Armstrong's, and what may seem on the surface to be little more than the humblest recounting of a man's childhood was actually a gesture by Armstrong meant to write the stories of the people, and have others learn them. He did so by enabling the oral environment where he learned them himself.

While in certain circles, especially in America, Louis Armstrong was accused of being an Uncle Tom, he amassed several achievements as a civil rights activist, including a response to president Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower, after the 1957 events in Little Rock, Arkansas, when nine Black students were denied access to the, at that time, all-White Central High School. With the intention of pleasing the infuriated, Eisenhower sent in federal troops to uphold integration. Armstrong—America's jazz ambassador—responded by sending a telegram to Eisenhower in which he said:

MR PRESIDENT. DADDY IF AND WHEN YOU DECIDE TO TAKE THOSE
LITTLE NEGRO CHILDREN PERSONALLY INTO CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
ALONG WITH YOUR MARVELOUS TROOPS PLEASE TAKE ME ALONG "O
GOD IT WOULD BE SUCH A GREAT PLEASURE I ASSURE YOU. MY REGARDS
TO BROTHER BROWNELL AND MAY GOD BLESS YOU PRESIDENT" YOU
HAVE A GOOD HEART... (qtd. in Riccardi 165)

In this sarcastic and almost humorous note, Armstrong exercised an elegant display of freedom of speech. An understanding of tone that transgressed music turned him into a staunch advocate. When he needed to protest, he wrote, spoke into his tape recorder, or sang a song. But

it was also this amicable tone that regarded him as “soft” among the African American community.

But if these courageous actions did not grant Armstrong fair credit as a civil rights pioneer, certainly there was little chance that the general public would acknowledge the empowering work of art he created for his people, including his autobiographical recounting. Armstrong’s discourse is not as concerned with reporting on historically racist events or social injustice as it is with contributing to the history of his people’s accomplishments. He sought to inspire the world with music and remind his audience of where it came from.

Since Lucille Armstrong kept her promise to preserve her husband’s legacy—by establishing the Louis Armstrong Archives— scholars of today can draw from Armstrong’s personal library the landscape of history as he perceived it. Treasured in it lives a 1954 copy of Langston Hughes’ *Famous American Negroes* that the author signed and dedicated, writing: “Especially to Louis Armstrong with my admiration and high regard”; a recording of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech *Free at Last*, as well as funeral and news coverage of his death; documentation of the achievements of his favorite boxer Sugar Ray Robinson; and also, news clippings and interviews of his strong statements against the government in relation to the Little Rock Nine.

Black American history is certainly not the only subject found in Armstrong’s library. The variety of materials in his collection not only show how much he treasured them, but a great part of the archive provides testimony that he endeavored to contribute a success story starring a ‘Negro’ in the lead role. This is also true of *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, and it is useful when recollecting the steps historically made towards racial integration, but mostly unnoticed when talking about Louis Armstrong. After unveiling this purpose, the elements that inform the

orality of Armstrong's narrative, which originated in Black folk and he left behind in the manuscript, prove valuable.

An outstanding quality makes "The Armstrong Story" differ from other racial narratives. It is written with a rare pride and a victorious tone over the twisted socio-economical structure. The manuscript reveals reminiscences of characters from an invisible society. Armstrong identifies their stories and provides understanding of their experience. In keeping with his story and character, and despite becoming a celebrity, Armstrong chose to live an ordinary life in the working-class neighborhood of Corona, in Queens, New York. From his den, Armstrong writes: "I would gladly live it all over again" (Armstrong 35).

The iconic figure of Louis Armstrong challenges a society that has not reconciled its traditions with the troubling echoes of its past. When Armstrong appeared in the motion picture *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* in 1932, he sang and played the song *Shine* composed by Cecil Mack, Ford Dabney, and Lew Brown, dressed in a leopard skin, in a scene of a satire of Black heaven that continues to offend Americans, but as the words of the song claim:

'Cause my hair is curly
 Just because my teeth are pearly
 Just because I always wear a smile
 Like to dress up in the latest style
 'Cause I'm glad I'm livin'
 I take these troubles all with a smile
 Just because my color's shady
 That's the difference, maybe, why they call me
 Shine...

Armstrong sings with the true belief of the beauty of his people's culture. While some African-Americans moved away from traditional portrayals of Black folk, such as the irreverent humor of a carnival parade or the misunderstood musicality of Black speech, others found beauty and creativity in these features.

Armstrong continued to introduce these elements into popular culture, later becoming, for example, "King of the Zulus," another event that was heavily criticized. The Zulu parade emerged in 1909. "The krewe, with its headquarters in the rear of a restaurant/bar in the 1100 block of Perdido Street, was originally organized as a benevolent aid society. After some members witnessed a musical comedy at the Pythian Theater that included a skit about the Zulu tribe of Africa entitled "There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me," the Krewe of Zulu was born. Its members were laborers—not intellectuals—and its message was high parody" (Matthews 70). Armstrong became a member in 1916 and was made "king" in 1949.

Influential figures in jazz like Dizzy Gillespie responded with scorn to Armstrong's appointment as Zulu King. "'Louis is the plantation character that so many of us... younger men... resent.' To Louis, carousing the streets of his hometown as a monarch, clad in a red velvet tunic, black tights and yellow cellophane "grass" skirt, the experience was divine" (70). It is understandable that the characters and costumes of carnival can become easily distorted when presented out of context, but Armstrong's praise of popular culture was also a reflection of his artistic preferences. His sophisticated performance style has always been his redeeming quality. For example, the mastery of the solo delivered in *Shine* not only transports the listener to the imaginary heaven, but it is just as grandiose as any rhapsody. The appreciation that Armstrong gave to his culture has been misunderstood. His musical work intended above all to elevate New Orleans folk.

MUSIC, SOUNDS AND JAZZ IN THE ARMSTRONG STORY

Louis Armstrong's writing style is rooted in the ground he knew best: music and *sound*, which is an aural level of the written communication beyond the standard use of punctuation. Armstrong created a system of symbols and a personal punctuation that evoked and was ruled by conversational speech. It was a kind of *voice print*. "Music is my life and I live to play," Armstrong once said. His words emphasize a devotion to music that he displays in his written artwork, and which influenced his creative identity in general. Armstrong's creative self was inspired by the patterns of music, and the way that he created music was applicable to any creative form. But the apparent ornamental role of music was not merely technical. The music around him was full of stories, and the end goal of its architectural use was to tell his own: He used sounds to make stories.

In fact, even when referring to his improvisational style when the music was strictly instrumental, and could be a display of unrelated sounds without words, his creative intention was still to tell a story. There is then a correspondence between the technical and expressive aspects of the use he makes of music. An oral history by trumpeter "Doc" Cheatham recollects the craft of his improvisational technique:

The things I learned from Louis Armstrong are the things that I heard during discussions that he had with other musicians at times. I wasn't in on it, but I was standing back listening. He'd say: "try to tell a story with your horn. Don't just go up there and blow something, you know, that you'd--you don't know what you're doing, making a lot of noise.....He said, make a little story out of it. And to present it so that the people will turn

around and look and listen. Cause you can play a solo in a place where people are drinking and eating, and they don't pay you any mind, they keep on drinking and eating and talking loud. But you can shock them with something effective, that will make them turn around and stop, all of a sudden, and listen." That I've never forgotten. (cited in Harker 40-41)

Louis Armstrong scholar and Director of Research Collections at the Louis Armstrong House Museum, Ricky Riccardi, provides another example. Riccardi took up the job of analyzing Armstrong's trumpet solo in the instrumental song *Back Home Again in Indiana* from recordings that dated between 1952 and 1956. The result reveals that Armstrong worked on his solos continuously and meticulously. He believed the sounds communicated just as much as the words and crafted them with a comprehensive logic. In Riccardi's words,

Charting the progress of "Indiana" is fascinating, as one can hear Armstrong continually toying with ideas, sticking with certain motifs for a number of months before discarding them for something new. He approached his solos like a great composer, studying them each night in his hotel room, listening fastidiously and making changes as he saw fit (67).

Riccardi says that Armstrong addressed his producer, Ernie Anderson, with an explanation of his maniac creative process, saying "When I improvise something, I don't forget it! If it's good, of course I remember it. Every note! That's why I play it again. Nearly everything I ever play I improvised at some time or other. Why that third chorus of 'Indiana' is a masterpiece, man!" (Riccardi 67).

If to Armstrong creating a solo demanded such an enterprise, then the reader might be certain to find the same investment in his writing. In fact, it would not be excessively risky to explain Armstrong's philosophy as an author by saying that the story could be compared to the

melody and the writing style to the solo. Riccardi also recalls that Armstrong explained in simple terms how he played his solos: “The first chorus I plays the melody. The second chorus I plays the melody round the melody, and the third chorus I routines.”⁹ And this would not only refer to the timeline in which the events happen, but to the music that the words carry or the enunciation of each sentence in his writing. Armstrong believed these rhythms enhanced the power of storytelling. As a musical storyteller, Armstrong recognized the memorable impression of the spoken word.

For Armstrong, the intimate relationship between music and words is inescapable, and it also finds an important role in Black literature, which had a heyday in the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s, when many of the Black art forms borrowed from each other. The literature influenced by jazz and Black folk idioms and traditions evolved throughout the decades; it referred back to gospel, slave work songs, and blues; and it organically became an art form that was intimate with music.

The spoken word and poetry in the 1920s set a precedent for the emergence of modern Black music genres such as hip-hop or rap. Both artistic expressions, Black literature and a great deal of Black music used the techniques of spoken word that are found in Armstrong’s vocal style, and which are also present in Armstrong’s manuscript. The editor’s disregard of Armstrong’s voice in “The Armstrong Story” created a gap between Armstrong’s creative style and the Black artistic movements that shaped it. Armstrong’s autobiography was published with the plot of a story and eliminated the possibility it had to contribute to the movements that vibrantly filled African American literature with sounds and colors.

Sound is what brought Armstrong to the top. The recordings that he made in the mid 1920s with his bands, The Hot Five and The Hot Seven, have been universally credited in Jazz

history as the catalyst of a then unexplored improvisational vocal style called ‘*scat*’ singing. Elmer “E.A.” Fearn coined the term in 1926 after he believed he heard the word in Armstrong’s solo of “Heebie Jeebies.” Armstrong must have been aware of the effectiveness of this innovative style, now defined in the *American Dictionary of Music* as “a technique of jazz singing in which onomatopoeic or nonsense syllables are sung to improvised melodies,” but that at the moment had been recorded just once before.¹⁰ The only known explanation of its inclusion is a legendary anecdote. Apparently, Armstrong dropped a sheet of lyrics in the middle of a recording, and trying to save the then expensive shellac-based material, he continued singing making up sounds with his voice.¹¹ *Okeh* records, the record label, was courageous enough to leave it in. Most certainly, the practice of scat singing must have been part of the New Orleans popular music tradition, but Armstrong not only developed the style to perfection, influencing other artists like Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, but he is also responsible for incorporating it into the language of jazz.

Experiments with sound are the parts of Armstrong’s manuscript that the editor stripped out and most of them provide humor. Armstrong constructed several sentences that give preference to sound, but they are excised to conform to standard grammar and punctuation. For Armstrong, some sections seem to focus primarily on the sound of a sentence versus its meaning, and some images are solely contemplative. For example, before entering the “Waif’s Home for Colored Boys,” Armstrong recalls a rural scene from the peripheries of the institution. Here, the accent is in the musicality of the paragraph:

... who’d see something like that, would automatically say, those animals were all loco — that’s why they’re running like that... But to me, even then, —I felt, they wanted to—

express themselves as being very happy, gay, and contented.....Contented
 Cows.....Yea..... (15)

This may seem irrelevant, since the publication of *Satchmo* keeps this spirit with less commas and ellipses, but it would have been fair to the audience and the author to highlight what had been lost or omitted: the effect of hearing Armstrong tell the story, his voice, and the intention of giving the reader a pause followed by a pun. Painting a picture of animals expressing feelings is an odd image that entertains the mind when trying to picture it, and that last “yea...” was familiar to the Armstrong listener. These choices serve not only the purpose of eliciting a laugh, but also as a window into Armstrong’s wit. More precisely, these “voice prints” are a signature that remains in the reader’s memory as a sound.

Armstrong’s artistic trademark was humor, which was the center of his performance, and the tone of his narrative. In a way, Armstrong used the voice of the comedian to tell stories, and he would constantly include them in his performances. These humorous numbers or stories were not written, but improvised. But in Armstrong’s case they emerged from the New Orleans environment. Like any culture, communities pass down the values of tradition in the form of stories. Folk traditions are essentially oral. Stories are Armstrong’s instinctive drive to preserve these traditions, the same way they were passed along to him.

For example, when telling about funerals in New Orleans, and in this case about the tragic death of Armstrong’s school mate, Arthur Brown, Armstrong describes the music, which is a fundamental element in this scenario, by emulating the sounds of the ritual. “We kids felt so bad over it until even the boys cried....And we all chipped in and hired a brass band to play the funeral...” (“The Armstrong Story” 37). Armstrong describes subtle sounds that stayed with him and carefully narrates the dynamic of the band saying:

“...the drummer man with the snare drum removes the handkerchief from under the snare, and the minute everybody leaves the grave yard and hit the street, the snare drum marches for a block or so [and] from there and then, Joe Oliver would blow a sort of warning to the band such as, tat tat-tat ta, and the rest of the band raised their instruments and go into, swinging, DIDN’T HE RAMBLE....It has always been the tradition in New Orleans, to rejoice over the dead...” (“The Armstrong Story” 37-38).

As outstanding as the editor’s job was, the reader is not given this detailed musical set-up in the published version of the book. The editor leaves in Armstrong’s profound respect for his mentor, Joe Oliver, as well as the admiration for his high register and the spirit of this New Orleans tradition. It was published as followed:

After the brother was six feet under the ground the band would strike up one of those good old tunes like *Didn’t He Ramble*, and all the people would leave their worries behind. Particularly when King Oliver blew that last chorus in high register. (“Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans” 91)

But the editor removed many musical aspects of this tradition that Armstrong incorporated. For example, he confirms that taking the handkerchief out changes the sound, that the snare drum plays by itself for how long people walking a one block-long march take, and that the cornet warning, which he sings—tat tat-tat ta—is a call for the instruments to rise up, which replicates the hierarchy of the horn players in New Orleans jazz culture. These are all relevant elements to Louis Armstrong’s music.

It is important to highlight the healing aspect music had in this tradition: “...and the minute that [the] band strike up one of those good ol’, good ones... they leave all the worries behind them...” (“The Armstrong Story” 38). We are left with the metaphor of the music

surviving over death. It ignites the symbolic belief that after the body is buried, the music will continue.

Beyond re-creating his childhood's soundscapes, "The Armstrong Story" provides the evolution of Armstrong's stages as a musician. In the Waif's Home, he acquired a musical education founded in the tradition of the brass bands, as well as European musical formations. He reveals the richness of the sound universe around him, and praises, for example, brass players using the highest register.

What made Louis Armstrong unique was the complexity of his virtuosity. He was a great soloist who incorporated a great tone, impeccable technique, theatrical performance¹², and a tendency to lyricism, which led him to become the definition of jazz in its purest state. Journalist and jazz critic Dan Morgenstern puts this in powerful terms in the preface to *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story 1900-1971* by Max Jones and John Chilton: "The plain truth is that Louis Armstrong created the language of jazz. It is a marvelously flexible and expandable language that can be spoken in ever so many accents, and as long as it is spoken as a living tongue, it will refer back to its creator" (5).

In the world of jazz, Louis Armstrong's sound is unrepeatable, and today, it is an unmediated experience for only a few. Dan Morgenstern emphasizes "the fact that Armstrong was the first jazz artist to demonstrate what a great player and singer could do with a great song (in the process launching many an "evergreen") is but another of the countless contributions he made to the growth of jazz. [...] Not trying to prove anything, Louis Armstrong proved all, and no one could aspire to be anything more than he was. Read the book, then go to the music. As the old song has it, it's right here for you –and for always" (4).

Armstrong's New Orleans heritage was not the only factor informing his sounds. He also used this heritage to create "voice prints" through *rhythm*, musical articulations corresponding to punctuation; *tone*, the distinctive features of the playing or the writing like Armstrong's vibrato in music and expressions as "Tee hee" in his writing; and *dynamics*, which pertained to the intensity of the sounds, which in Armstrong's writing are underlined words, capitalization, and the multiplication of a letter in a word. These features of music enter the writing style, just as Black music imitated conversation and the spoken language when playing foreign instruments. Jazz writing moved on to be a distinctive genre in African American literature, in poetry and spoken word especially.

Another musical term, *syncopation*, is coincidentally shared by both jazz and linguistics. A simple definition of this concept found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary describes it as "a temporary displacement of the regular metrical accent in music caused typically by stressing the weak beat," while linguistics explains it as the sound change produced by the loss of a vowel from the interior of a word. The definitions correspond to each other, since the sound change produced by the disappearance of the vowel will cause that 'temporary displacement' of the accent in the pronunciation. Regardless of the specific use of the concept in linguistics, the shared notion reveals how it is possible that the phonetic alterations in Armstrong's manuscript could be borrowed from music. For instance, in his manuscript Armstrong tells a childhood memory in which the five-year-old sat beyond the 'Colored Only' sign of the New Orleans street cars:

"The colored people used to get their real kicks out of those cars [...] My, my, it certainly would feel good to sit up there once and awhile... It would sorta make you [*handwritten*] feel, a little more important than usual, or, 'somphn' I'd probably never be able to

explain— like I'd like to.... But, as I forsoaid, its, 'something that's down right kicks about it... Maybe it was because we wasn't supposed to be up 'thar'....." (5)

The syncope is in the word 'somphn', which by sound effect reveals to the reader the word *something* and follows to unveil the Black writer. A contraction of the words 'sort of' as 'sorta' also imitates Black speech, but when the editor changes 'there' for 'thar' it eliminates the Black voice speaking and changes the tone. Armstrong wanted to note that his community was taught that there was a place they could not occupy, and symbolically he did later in his life by becoming an icon beyond the limits of race; the ellipsis at the end, as Armstrong would read it several times in his personal tapes, suggests the lingering of that last word, which emphasizes his anger at racial oppression, and expresses his resistance and defiance. In this case, every dot continuously vibrates with the sound of the two letters 'ar'. When compared to the published version, which reads: "It felt good to sit up there once in a while. We felt a little more important than usual. I can't explain why exactly, but maybe it was because we weren't supposed to be up there" (15), it becomes clear that the reader is even further from understanding Armstrong's feeling, or at least his desire to find the right words to express his disappointment in what he believed to be unreasonable racist practices.

While the relationship between sound and meaning is still an uncertain arena in linguistics, one thing is true about sound in language, and that is the strong communicative qualities that it conveys. The sounds of words might not correspond to their meaning precisely, but they can add nuances to it. They are particularly rich in expression. In Armstrong's case, most of the words respond to their colloquial use, but the structure of the writing, its syntax and morphology, emulate the rules of music notation (pauses, tempo, repetition).

The choice of putting the sounds on the paper gives to it the power of expression and oral traditions. This way, an ellipsis might carry a certain tone, or be an invitation to contemplate a thought, a scene, or a theory. It is helpful to keep in mind that the manuscript is Armstrong's report of his own experience. It has a commitment to the truth, and communicates his mind freely. As an oral expression, the manuscript contains all features that make the telling of a story a first-hand experience. The inclusion of pauses and silence are important elements that also communicate the genuine search for reality.

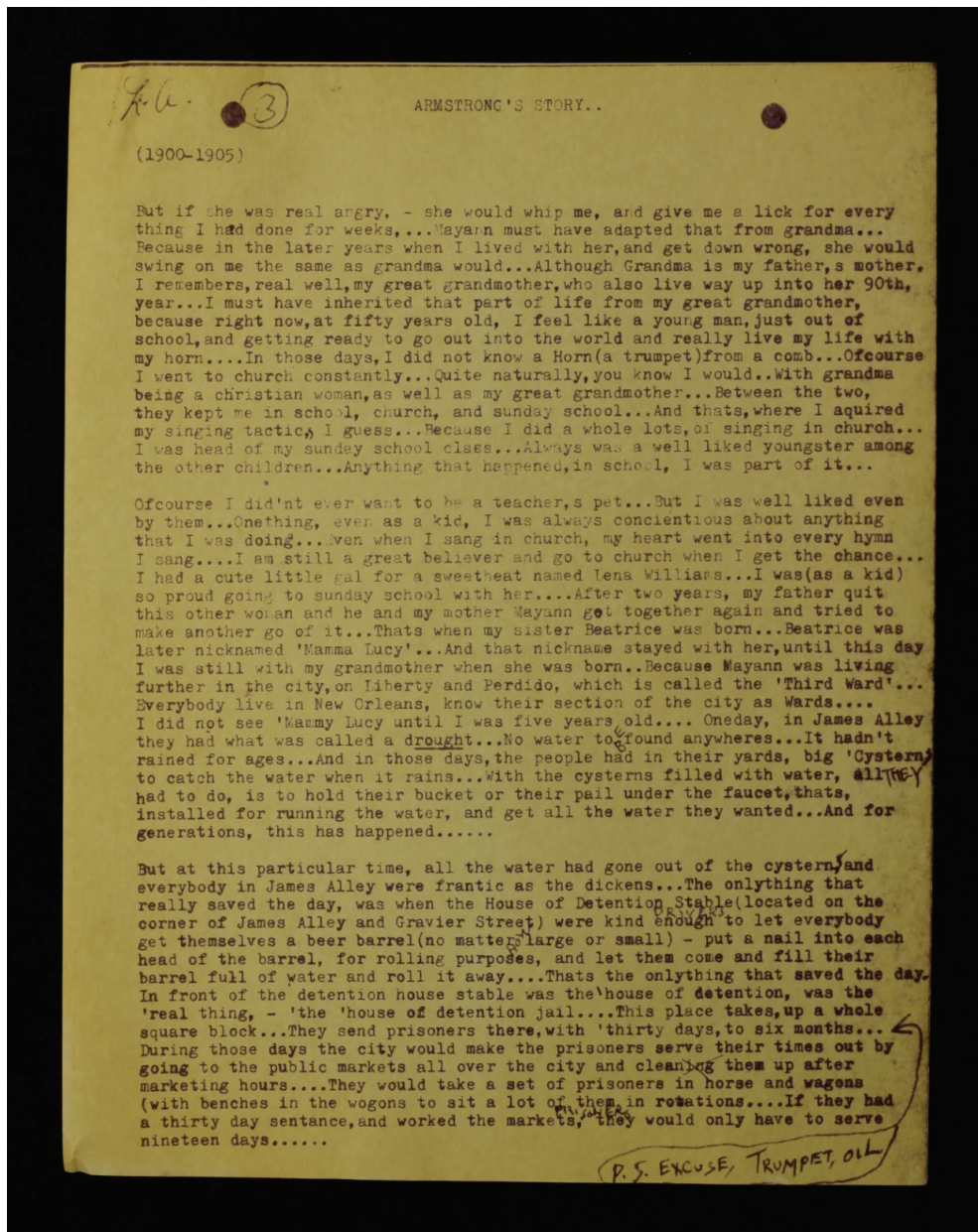


Figure 3. Page 3 in the original manuscript, "The Armstrong Story." 1950. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

In a 1978 article, the critic Jason Berry sensed the need to analyze the narratives influenced by jazz music. He starts by saying “Jazz is also a language. Or, better put a specialized use of English [that] in the United States has grown up around the culture of jazz. But the actual vocabulary of jazz stems from oral traditions of Southern Blacks...” (40). Of the form that the music enters the narrative he writes: “In a strict, technical sense, Jazz literature is

autobiographical, but I believe it is a genre of its own, a distinctive category of literary composition, and as such the language should *speak* to us in a way we are not accustomed to reading, but should have familiarity in reading” (42).

All things considered, Armstrong’s manuscript stands with a solid foundation in elements of Black music. They reflect his personal creativity and his ability to write his aural atmosphere, that of the voice of the Black people. The edited manuscript removes this voice. For example, when narrating a fight between two of the most feared men in Storyville, called Nicodemus and ‘Black Benny,’ *Satchmo* shows a neutral writing that omits the influences that were previously mentioned. The published version reads:

Instead of going home to get his pistol as Nicodemus had done Benny went out in a little alley beside the tonk to wait until Nicodemus came back with his big gun. While he was in the alley he stumbled on a piece of lead pipe about four feet long and as wide around as a Bologna sausage. The minute Benny’s hand touched this pipe he was satisfied that this was what he needed to give Nico a big surprise. Nico rushed down the alley and was about to enter the tonk when Benny swung on him with the lead pipe and knocked old Nico out cold.

There is one thing to be said about the fights between the bad men in my days. There was no malice and there was no dirty work. Let the best man win, that was the rule.

The gang love both Benny and Nico. As soon as Nico had been knocked out the boys in the back room took the gun in his back pocket and hid it so that the cops would not know he had had it on him when he was hit. When the cops arrived they looked high and low for that gun but they could not find it. That’s what I call sticking together. (77-78)

While the reader can understand the plot of the story, there is little information of who is telling it. The reader knows that it is a story by Armstrong, but his cultural relationship has vanished. So, too, has a surprising similarity to the structure and essence of blues. In Armstrong's real words the story sounds like this:

He really gave him a surprise alright... Because, while Benny was slowly 'cruising through this alley, he accidentally stumbled up on a nice round, iron pipe, about five feet long and as wide around as a thick balogne sausage... The minute Benny's hand casually touched this pipe, he was satisfied that that's what he needed to give Nico (Nicodemus, nick name) a big surprise.....When Nicodemus came back, every body was as quiet as a church mouse....And the minute Nico, came up on the corner, he hadn't stopped one second, before Black Benny came running (behind him before he could turn around)— out of the alley Benny came, and before Nicodemus could turn around to see what was happening, — Black Benny had already swung on Nico's jaw, with this iron, and knocked ol, Nico, out, cold.....He hit him direct across the jaw....That was the end of that fight.....One thing about those bad men in my days, when ever they have their tough fights, — after its over with, they call it a day. No malice, — and sneaky things, and dirty works, and stuff....Nay Nay...May the best man win..... The gang love both of them, — Black Benny and Nicodemus... When Black Benny knocked out Nicodemus, cold, — the crowd who were standing around watching the fight, — they all made a mad rush to Nicodemus's pocket, and take his gun and 'hid it, some place where the Peelers (the cops) couldn't find it on him when they arrived....And believe you mee —they looked high and low for the gun....But, not a soul, saw it.... That's, what I call 'sticking together even in their fighting moments..... (30)

Many elements stand out in Armstrong's unpublished segment. Look at the example of the juxtaposition of the trio of words "five feet long" right before "thick balogne sausage." There is an echo or resonance between the two sets of words that somehow correspond to each other, as in the structure of a rhyme in a song or a poem. A more careful editing job, as challenging as it may have been because of the extensive length of the document, would have aimed to preserve this reciprocity, like when transcribing or translating the distinctive features of poetry.

As mentioned earlier, in Armstrong's case this structure belongs to the *blues*. The *blues* often tells stories about trouble, as the scene Armstrong tells here does. The most popular *blues* song, also covered by Armstrong, is W.C Handy's *St. Louis Blues*, which in Armstrong's version and the supportive singer of his *All Stars*, Velma Middleton, goes like this:

I hate to see that evening sun go down
 Yes, I hate to see that evening sun go down
 'Cause it makes me feel like I'm on my last go-round
 If I'm feelin' tomorrow like I feel today
 Yes, feelin' tomorrow like I feel today
 I'm gonna pack my trunk and make my getaway

In the case of the *blues*, no editor or scholar would attempt to "correct" the language, without consciously taking away its essence, or disturbing the coherence of the reality it represents. Since the theme is already there, it is left to take a closer look at how the sounds are built into the writing. But the comparison is much more revealing when reorganizing Armstrong's lines as verses. The musicality of the sentences is not far from the rhymes in a *blues* song, and the punctuation he used apparently arbitrarily, facilitates the breaking out of the

paragraph into verses. The same section in the manuscript has been replaced below and converted into a transcription of the *blues* style. Here is an attempt at a version of what this anecdote would sound like as “The Armstrong Story” blues:

He really gave him a surprise alright...

Because, while Benny was slowly ‘cruising
through this alley,

he accidentally stumbled up

on a nice round, iron pipe,

about five feet long

and as wide around

as a thick balogne sausage...

The minute Benny’s hand casually touched this pipe,

he was satisfied that

that’s what he needed to give Nico (Nicodemus, nick name)

a big surprise.....

When Nicodemus came back,

every body was as quiet as a church mouse....

And the minute Nico,

came up on the corner,

he hadn’t stopped one second,

before Black Benny came running

(behind him before he could turn around)

— out of the alley Benny came,

and before Nicodemus could turn around
to see what was happening,
— Black Benny had already swung on Nico's jaw,
with this iron,
and knocked ol, Nico, out, cold.....
He hit him direct across the jaw....
That was the end of that fight.....
One thing about those bad men in my days,
when ever they have their tough fights, —
after its over with, they call it a day.
No malice, — and sneaky things, and dirty works, and stuff....
Nay Nay...May the best man win.....
The gang love both of them,
— Black Benny and Nicodemus...
When Black Benny knocked out Nicodemus, cold,
— the crowd who were standing around watching the fight,
— they all made a mad rush to Nicodemus's pocket,
and take his gun and 'hid it,
some place where the Peelers (the cops)
couldn't find it on him when they arrived....
And believe you mee
—they looked high and low for the gun....
But, not a soul, saw it....

That's, what I call 'sticking together
even in their fighting moments.....

The expressions "Nay Nay...May the best man win" and "believe you mee," accentuate the rhythm of the story. The repetition of the verse "knocked ol, Nico, out, cold" and later again, in its variation, "When Black Benny knocked out Nicodemus, cold" gives these sentences the character of a motif, which is what happens in all blues compositions and in jazz. The motif represents the center of an idea the artist can come back to, and that can be a reference for improvisation, like observed in *St. Louis Blues*. It is also possible that Armstrong intended the words "believe you mee" to allude to something little (one of Louis Armstrong's young age nicknames was 'Little Louie'). He originally underlined the phrase and added an additional "e" to the word me.

Armstrong's spelling choices are also significant because they reveal his special attention to sound, as is visible in his attempt to recreate words based on their pronunciation. It is surprising how, despite these creative misspellings, the storytelling remains cohesive in structure. There are a considerable number of details, and they are told with suspense, building up tension in the reader until the end.

These examples confirm Armstrong's motivation to write Black speech and other features that would easily identify his writing. But during all the time he was alive, his writing style was only known by those who at some point exchanged letters with him, including a considerable number of unknown people, as well as his friends, family, and professional acquaintances. Armstrong's style was not exposed publicly until it was compiled in *Louis Armstrong: In His Own Words*, published in 1999.

The high regard for the sounds in writing unifies Black authors. “The Armstrong Story” is written as a song containing words and music, and its implications could be summarized in the reflections of Eleanor Traylor, who supports the idea that sounds can enrich and inform writing, especially when referring to African-American narrative:

Music as schema or as significant reference distinguishes one major tradition in Afro-American narrative and fiction. The chordal progressions (tonic, subdominant, dominant, tonic) of the sacred and secular songs of the slaves, their lyrical juxtapositions, their arrangement of anguish and exultation, have furnished an index for the writer, should furnish an index for a richer reading of the text. The oracular, evocative, incantatory, elliptical songs of African American oral literature form a base of traditional reference: the blues mode of Afro-American narrative. Those songs have served Afro-American narrators and novelists as an ancestral touchstone. For Equiano and Du Bois, the songs are masks that codify a façade and ensure interior cohesion; for Martin R. Delaney and William Wells Brown, the songs are shapers of sensibility; for Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin, the songs are racial experience; for Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Arna Bontemps, Maya Angelou, and Amiri Baraka, the songs are the voice of the race; for Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Ishmael Reed, they are *mythos*, traditional form, or mythopoetic method... (171)

For Armstrong, the songs were the people’s experience.

A contemporary writer who shared with Armstrong the inspiration from the collective aspect of music and the cultural setting in which it originated was the great poet Langston Hughes. Hughes similarly discovered the value of the sounds coming from the voices of his own

people, and immortalized them in his poetry. He talks about one of these enlightening moments in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, in one of the scenes when he describes living in Washington.

Their songs—those of Seventh Street— had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going. Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of Black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power.

I'm goin' down to de railroad, baby,

Lay ma head on de track.

I'm goin' down to de railroad, babe,

Lay ma head on de track—

But if I see de train a-comin',

I'm gonna jerk it back. (Hughes 209)

Hughes did not identify with the Black society that praised having roots leading back to prominent white families, but rather with the Negroes on Seventh Street in 1924, who worked hard and sang the blues.

Hughes' appreciation resembles the motivation of "The Armstrong Story", when Armstrong admires many of the musicians who never reached popularity outside New Orleans. "Gee, that neighborhood had a lot to offer.... Of course we kids weren't allowed into the Funky Butt, but we could get a chance to hear the bands play on the 'banquet' (the sidewalk)" (8). These two scenes side to side represent not only the appreciation for Black music and culture, but also the ancient origins of the human interest in hearing stories, whether they are in the form of a trumpet solo, a song, or a poem.

NEW ORLEANS AND BLACK FOLK CULTURE

New Orleans. The first time Louis Armstrong had the opportunity to get a recording date of his own, with the liberty to play anything he chose, he didn't bring into the session musicians who were currently playing with him. In order to show who Louis Armstrong was, he surrounded himself with old timers. Musicians who climbed—just as he did—their way out of New Orleans in the mission of spreading the music, and of course making a living while they were at it. The culture and its characters carried the meaning of his identity. Just as he brought them back to be the “Hot Five,” and with this action paid tribute to what they meant in his life musically, Armstrong found in the writing of his life story the opportunity to endorse his masters, because he now could, and to acknowledge his people, who most likely would be forgotten. He celebrated New Orleans culture incorporating its idioms and expressions, with several explanations for the outsider, creating a native soundscape for the reader, who is transported to this scene of honky tonks, prostitution, poverty and segregation.

Armstrong understands that he is introducing New Orleans' history and culture to a wider audience, but he speaks candidly of the people he met, the qualities he observed and valued regarding what their role was in his impoverished society. In a sense, he was aware that he not only had to narrate the story, but to represent a new order of values.

Armstrong represents the view of African Americans who believed that embracing narratives of integration was the only way to begin to create a society that included them equally across fields and that recognized the Black Culture genius. “They wasn't the most intelligent people... to the extent, but they all had a good heart. You know what I mean?”—he explained to David Frost on a TV interview in 1970. After, when Frost asks him what he learned from those

years, Armstrong takes not even a second to answer: “Everything,” —he assures. In the words of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), “Negro music had to reflect the growing openness of communication with white America” (177).

Now, considering the moral order in Armstrong’s world, his book reveals that his most appreciated values came from New Orleans, or at least from the New Orleans that he experienced. Throughout the narrative, he stresses a genuine concern for others to appreciate his talent, and even the aspiration for equality. Armstrong understood that without the means to change the past, he opened the doors to the deeper values of Black folk culture. The quality that made Armstrong earn the title ambassador¹³ was the role he played as a bridge between the birth of jazz, and the community that loved it. In America, jazz music went from being an exclusively African American experience, to becoming the nation’s cultural heritage. Armstrong embodied the iconic spirit of Black folk and found forms of expression that honored them.

In New Orleans, as in many other Black communities, people sang, laughed and played music. As observed by Professor Daniel Stein in his analysis of Armstrong’s *autobiographics*, “Armstrong regularly describes music as a cultural practice through which New Orleanians communicate and through which they organize their lives in particular socio-cultural settings” (34). By this Stein means that in many situations New Orleans’s response to every event of life, good or bad, was music. Armstrong knew people’s expressions must not be detached from their music.

In response to poverty, the New Orleans Black community perfected a unique kind of music, welcomed the many influences available, and produced some of the best musicians in the country. In response to death, they had parades or “second lines,” which consisted of an entourage of relatives or just civilians drawn by the music played at funerals, who walked

together towards the cemetery or final rest place. Music gave New Orleanians the key to ease their sorrows with joy, and it is understanding the value of this setting that leads to appreciating its contributions.

Thomas Brothers ends his book *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* with a reflection on the relationship between music and New Orleans culture that shows how charged the meaning of it was, allowing Armstrong to always find his way back to his roots:

Jazz as Armstrong learned it was a creation of the ratty people, as Isidore Barbarin would have called them, the “roustabouts unloading banana boats on the wharves—all of my folks,” which is how Armstrong once identified his community, the common laborers, domestics, hustlers, and prostitutes who found themselves confined by the color line to the economic bottom of society. His success was theirs too. It was a victory for the people who nourished him [...] A victory for those people who loved to move their bodies in time with rhythmically exciting music, who spoke in musical ways, who admired instrumentally inflected singing and vocally inflected instruments, who regarded blue notes as the strongest notes you could play. (304-305)

The world presented in “The Armstrong Story” is foreign to modern society and urban life and the people who inhabited Armstrong’s community embody the folk life he knew. Storyville, for instance, was to Armstrong no different than a business center, where people shared talents, provided services and cared for each other. But since Armstrong made the music that represented them speak of all Americans, who also found joy in it, it no longer spoke exclusively about the people from whom it emerged, but rather proposed a unified nation, the basis of which was New Orleans Black folk culture. It is then possible that this was another reason for Armstrong to write a story that conveys a collective spirit.

It is sobering to witness the organic emergence of a cultural response to adversity in the form of a kind of humor that confronts reality, and finds beauty in human experiences, as harsh as they may be. Without ignoring the heavy weight of the history of Louisiana in the early 1900s, and the poor conditions that Armstrong's community endured, the stories he chose to tell were those when his people were laughing and self-possessed of a valuable quality. Sometimes, that valuable quality was to Armstrong an erratic action with a lesson to be learned. Armstrong provided the reader with a human look that went beyond stereotypes. His characters had autonomy from the image that they were socially expected to fulfill, and a tri-dimensional portrayal that displayed them feeling love, compassion, solidarity, and power.

When telling about the shutdown of Storyville in "The Armstrong Story", for example, Armstrong draws the reality through the eyes of those who lived in it:

It sure was a sad scene, watching the law, run all those people out of storyville... They reminded me of a gang of refugees, leaving town... Some of those people spent the best part of their lives, right there in storyville... Some of them, knows, no other life... And such a weeping and carryings, on.... Pretty [much] all of the pimps had to go to work, or go to jail... Of course there were choiced few, such as 'Clerk Wade'— who was (in my estimation) the sharpest pimp of them all.... Why, that guy wore nothing but the best of everything, and had everything his heart desired... [...] He was a goodlooking, tall dark and handsome guy... He kept his hair, cut real short... He had a very nice smile... (41)

In Armstrong's world, the pimps were good businessmen; the prostitutes were tough, and no one would dream of doing them wrong; the musicians entertaining them were the most talented, and the food somehow, was always there also telling a story. The published version leaves behind Armstrong's estimation for "Clerk Wade," which is yet another contemplative

scene, although it again shows Armstrong's decision to see humans with a naked eye. Again, in his story, New Orleans was above all, the mecca of music where the advantage of Black people's natural talents allowed them to believe that it was possible to make a career of music, to be part of the social structure of the twentieth century. Although in this case, New Orleans raised a Black American icon. If music could define Armstrong's understanding of the world, it could also define his writing. Explicitly, the structure of music with its tempo, its pauses, and its motifs are all identifiable in Armstrong's written composition. "The Armstrong Story" speaks with the voice of Black folk, and the influence of music alone is meaningless without their stories.

"The Armstrong Story" provides in a sense, a *foreign-soundingness* originating in Black speech and translated into standard English, because even though Armstrong's use of sound in language is derived from New Orleans' sayings and idioms, it uses other forms that are original to, as mentioned before, Black music, especially from *blues* and *jazz*. This style is foreign to English in that it finds its compositional structure from the sounds of music. As linguist David Bellos explains when talking about the process of translation¹⁴, Armstrong uses foreign utterances from the original source and reproduces the sounds that can be spoken.

Throughout "The Armstrong Story" the reader encounters words that belong to the streets, which Armstrong explained in parentheses, such as "horn (a trumpet)" (3), "youngster (young boy)" (14), "'toating it' (carrying my gun)" (14), "peelers (the cops)" (30), "tail gate (wagon)" (35), "chick (a gal)" (36), "'Spades' (colored folks)" (64), "'Ofay' (white)" (66), "Banquet (the side walk)" (93), "The 'Cats' (the people)" (96), and "a poor boy sandwich (a half loaf of bread with a slice of ham, one could 'read' through)" (105). Only a few of these idioms are preserved in the published book. These words and their explanations paint a vivid picture of the sounds that people in New Orleans heard day to day, and as soon as they find their place in

the manuscript they become portraits of Armstrong's narrative style. As a side note, Armstrong is credited with the association of the word "cat" with the jazz musician¹⁵, and in fact the only expressions that made it into *Satchmo* are those well-known in jazz culture like 'horn' or 'cat'. Other sounds in the manuscript are either underlined or written in quotation marks: "Sho nuff [sure enough]" (18). However, it must be noted that not all the underlined words or words in quotation marks have this purpose, since Armstrong's use of these notations was never systematic.

When talking about the publication of an Armstrong article in 1950, *Downbeat* magazine acknowledged the distinctiveness of the language he uses: "Louis Armstrong, who'll be 50 on July 4, is heading into a new career as a writer. The June issue of *Holiday* will have a 13-page travel diary of his recent European tour written in typical Satchmo idiom. And Harpers Bros. has commissioned him to write a complete and official autobiography. Louis has been working on the Harpers manuscript since January" ("Louis Writes Life Story" 1). His writing received attention for the unique qualities of his style. Thanks to his inclusion of idioms the reader is able to enter the New Orleans sound environment and take part in the artist's sensorial world more vividly. Nevertheless, the *foreign-soundingness* inspired by Black speech is revealing of the isolation of Black culture in the mainstream. "The Armstrong Story" depicts an extended American culture that had already succeeded in music.

Bellos links the ability to represent *foreignness* to an author's wit. "It takes the wit of Chaplin or Celentano to do so for comic effect without causing offense" (59). We could add Armstrong to Bellos' list, as he would come back to folk expressions as his source of humor and create echoes of Black life in America.

The British journalist and author, Max Jones, who wrote a book based on letters sent to him by Armstrong, meditates on the relationship between Armstrong and New Orleans' culture. In his book, *Louis*, he recalls a joke Armstrong told that is again a story from his childhood days. The joke, as interpreted by Jones, is a communion between the humor and its source:

Hailing from Louisiana, Armstrong must have had some childhood knowledge of alligators in the swamps around New Orleans. And he had a standard joke about his mother sending him to get water from a pool. He returns trembling, the bucket empty, saying there's a 'gator in the pool and he's scared to go near. His mother tells him the reptile is more frightened than he is. 'If he's more scared of me than I am of him, Mama, that water ain't fit to drink.' Satchmo's humor, like his music and his most vivid memories, always led back to home. (227)

Indeed, some of this almost innocent humor lives in the manuscript when Armstrong is talking about his childhood, and once again differs from the published book. The following scene tells of Armstrong's life while being raised by his grandmother, Josephine Armstrong. One of the jobs she performed was washing clothes for white families. Sometimes, she would bring the five-year-old Armstrong with her to play with the white kids:

One of those real hot summer days...And right in the middle of the day, these little white kids and myself (a little colored boy) having a time of our little lives, playing hide and go seek.....As soon as they started playing they looked straight at me and said—Louis Armstrong, —“You're 'IT'”.... Ump Ump Ump..... I figured, I wondered, I did everything, wondering, 'where'o'where am I going to hide where they can't find me... Finally I casually looked over in Grama's direction... She was very busy leaning over the wash tub washing like mad..And her placket hole of her mother hubbard skirt was 'justa'

flopping wide open...[...] ‘where did he go?... and— etc etc... Just then, as they were just about to turn their heads from my direction and give up the search, I swiftly ‘stuck my head out of grandma’s placket hold (phffffff), and ‘just then, one of the kids ‘spied me... Then they all said to me in unison, — ‘Oh, there you are.. We found you... I told them. “Yall’ wouldn’t have ‘caught me if grandma hadn’t pooted..... [handwritten note] P. S –or— if I hadn’t stuck my head out. (2)

The manuscript celebrates every sound of the story in such detail, drawing a dramatic tension that anticipates an exciting ending. The simplicity of the story suggests an informative function of the New Orleans scene, the moments where White and Black kids met and became equals. Once again the published version, *Satchmo*, discards most features of orality, and the reason why Armstrong sticks his head out of his grandma’s skirt is left as a euphemism: “Just as they were about to give up the search I stuck my head out of grandma’s placket and went “P-f-f-f-f!” “Oh, there you are. We’ve found you,” they shouted. “No siree,” I said. “You wouldn’t have found me if I had not stuck my head out” (10).

Armstrong’s manuscript about his life in New Orleans, his interpretation of traditional songs like “Do You know What It Means (To Miss New Orleans)?”, “New Orleans Function”, and “A Boy from New Orleans”, among many others that can be traced back to his New Orleans days (and that he performed until the end of his life) are enough proof of his intention to give tribute to his hometown through his art.

Even though the 1954 publication of *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* was almost ignored in Louisiana papers, Armstrong brought the sounds of the people in the streets to 127 pages of his writing, purely Black in style, in a way that could almost be compared today to a form of freestyle in poetry, rap or hip hop; his writing is infused with the rigor of an

anthropologist, and the sensibility of a humanist. The stories from the blues, the syncopation and improvisation from jazz, and the voices of the people are Armstrong's organic templates. It is up to readers to treasure their meanings, and to recognize the reach of Armstrong's communicative power that has traveled beyond America. New Orleans, as the birthplace of blues, jazz, and for the most part an intermediate space between the folk and urban lives of Black people, is a fundamental part of Armstrong's story. In his narrative, New Orleans symbolizes the reunion of cultures in America, where the music and the human experience it fostered found an immortal voice print, but these features are most exclusive to the manuscript.

CONCLUSION

"The Armstrong Story" needs to be reconnected to the history of African-American Literature, Jazz literature, and Black autobiography and located within their respective contributions. Armstrong's manuscript is a work of creative writing, both in content and structure. The language is itself an invention because of the universe of sounds that it recreates from its environment. As Armstrong says, "Afterall, I've always been a great observer in life..." (117). He was himself a fan of life, his own and that of others, and of music. Armstrong absorbed the world around him and put it into words. The words remain silent on the paper, but out loud they speak the language of music. American history is more powerful because of voices like Armstrong's. African-American history is more accurate because of narratives like this one. The implications of this document are beyond one discipline alone; its value in several disciplines makes it an exciting primary document worthy of more study and publication.

Considering that both speech and music are in constant change, analyzing Armstrong's writing style will make them possible to be preserved; documenting them will give credit to the

efforts of their creators, who overcame the obstacle of a hostile creating environment; and testing them in time will confirm the importance of spoken cultures universally. In the manuscript converge the mind of the musician and author, the soul of the man who yearns for freedom for himself and his people.

The power of Black music fills the people who make it and those who dance to it with an undisturbed emotion of togetherness that has been dismembered. We are yet to find a unified message that more vividly portrays the voice of the Black experience as a whole, and connects it to the narrative of American culture. Armstrong's contribution celebrates a breakthrough of race and class barriers, and a transformative moment in the history of America's relationship with the world. The unedited manuscript humbly invites the reader to recapitulate triumphs and achievements, and offers a hopeful note on the evolution of humanity. Armstrong's voice is an ideal common place to converse about the transformative power of creating in the arts.

"The Armstrong Story" finds its best contribution in experience; it is a non-fictional, creative work informed by the environment. Thus, its values lay in the artistic accomplishment of bringing the reader to the streets of New Orleans where Black music was born, and elucidating through "sound prints" a community that collectively found richness in its shared history. If compared to another medium, Armstrong's manuscript is closer to moving images rather than a photograph, and the storyteller speaks of the people, the places, the sounds, and the culture with the generosity of a host.

Armstrong's community found common ground in its intangible treasures. Telling stories and celebrating music created strong bonds that lasted, and it is in the spirit of that experience that Armstrong wrote his story. Oral history has pronounced the most truthful stories people have told, delivered their emotions, and strengthened their purposes. The writer and critic Ralph

Ellison said that the Blues People were those who “accepted and lived close to their folk experience” (Cited in Jones 176). Armstrong’s persistence in retelling the stories of the “folk experience” enables a continuum of a culture that believes Black folk and their experiences are too important to forget.

Armstrong accomplished transposing orality into an autobiography, and explicitly recreated the sounds attached to it. His expression required a political and social battle to reach widespread acknowledgement, and to overcome the problematic representation of *blackness*. The aesthetic of his work confirms the possibilities of embracing sound in writing as a vehicle of meanings. This polyphonic story was at the time of its publication ahead of its times, but today it comprehends a generous universe of sounds and images, whose effect has already transcended the reach of its own century. Wow, you dig?

The most important way Armstrong’s manuscript contributes to contemporary narrative, as opposed to the 1954 published book version, is in the voice—present only in the manuscript—that preserves its connections to its roots, and sings the stories of its people. In the wide sea of styles, in this unpublished manuscript there is a person—Louis Armstrong—who owns an unrepeatable voice and makes music that transcends time. The difference between the two versions also showcases the ways in which Black people’s voices and cultures have been edited or erased from history. Fortunately, Armstrong’s unedited manuscript restores the individuality of the creators who were the subject of stereotypical and generalized depictions in the past, due to the burden of racial discrimination. Jazz was fortunate to have the creative minds of musicians like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Bill Evans, and Charles Mingus and literature celebrates poets and narrators like Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and Sekou

Sundiata. Their voices, as well as “The Armstrong Story”, exist to remind us that it is possible to reach the highest C while singing an ancient song capable of erasing the limits of time, race, and imagination.

Appendix

Published: *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* **Manuscript:** “The Armstrong Story”

Chapter 1, 7-21 -----	1-7
Chapter 2, 22-32 -----	8-13
Chapter 3, 33-51 -----	13-22
Chapter 4, 52-62 -----	22-27
Chapter 5, 63-88 -----	27-36
Chapter 6, 89-108 -----	37-45
Chapter 7, 109-123 -----	46-54
Chapter 8, 124-135 -----	54-60
Chapter 9, 136-149 -----	60-67
Chapter 10, 150-180 -----	67-79
Chapter 11, 181-191 -----	80-86
Chapter 12, 192-210 -----	86-97
Chapter 13, 211-228 -----	97-107
Chapter 14, 229-240 -----	107-112/ 121-124*

*Pages 113-120 in the manuscript are not included in the published book. Neither are pages 125-130. The discrepancy between the page numbers is due to the different formats.

Notes

1. This thesis will identify the unpublished manuscript as “The Armstrong Story” and the published autobiography as *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*.

2. This technique separates Armstrong the author from Armstrong the character in the story, and allows him to assume the voice of the storyteller, a speaker of folk tradition.

3. In 1954, *The Morning News* (Wilmington, Delaware) published a review stating, “Without being puritanical about it, the reviewer wishes Louis had left the social life of New Orleans right there, and concentrated more on jazz music.”

4. Folklorist Dan Ben-Amos defines *folklore* as “artistic communication in small groups.”

5. Armstrong’s reminiscences are often misunderstood as ‘soft’ when referring to Civil Rights. For an example see Riccardi, “What a Wonderful World: the magic of Louis Armstrong’s Later Years,” 162-168.

6. These lines were published as: “The lead singer and the tenor walked together in front followed by the baritone and the bass. Singing at random we wandered through the streets until someone called to us to sing a few songs. Afterwards we would pass our hats and at the end of the night we would divvy up... As for me, I was the tenor. I used to put my hand behind my ear, and move my mouth from side to side, and some beautiful tones would appear” (34). The punctuation from the manuscript has not being altered.

7. Letter from Madeleine Gautier dated December 1, 1952. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

8. Interview with Lucille Armstrong. BBC. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum & Archives.

9. See Riccardi’s Dippermouth blog post “65 Years of “Back Home Again in Indiana.”

10. The song is “My Papa Doesn’t Two-Time No Time”, and the solo break is sung by Don Redman with the Fletcher Henderson band, five months before the recording of “Heebie Jeebies.” Cited in “Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat” by Brent Hayes Edwards.

11. As told in *Esquire* 36 “Jazz on a High Note” (Dec. 1951), P. 85.

12. His theatrical performative style was mostly misunderstood: “Armstrong is the ugliest man on the music hall stage. He looks, and behaves, like an untrained gorilla. He might have come straight from some African jungle, and then, after being taken to a slop tailor’s for a ready-made dress-suit, been put straight on the stage and told to sing,” a British paper called the “Daily Herald” published this racist diatribe in London in 1932.

13. See Von Eschen.

14. See Bellos, Chapter 5 “Fictions of the Foreign: The Paradox of “Foreign-Soundingness” p. 44-59.

15. As shared by The Louis Armstrong House Museum on social media in 2018.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Armstrong, Louis. "The Armstrong Story". 1950. TS. Courtesy of Louis Armstrong House Museum Archives. Queens College, New York.

Armstrong, Louis. *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*. 1954. Da Capo Press, 1986.

Secondary Sources:

Armstrong, Louis. *Fleischmann's Yeast Show and Louis' Home-Recorded Tapes* by Jazz Heritage Society. 2008.

Bellos, David. *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*. Faber and Faber, Inc, 2011.

Ben-Amos, Dan. "A Definition of Folklore: A Personal Narrative." N. 3, 2014. p. 9-28. University of Pennsylvania, accessed 31 Dec. 2018.

"The Book Corner". *The Morning News*, 11 October 1954, p. 13.

Brothers, Thomas. *Louis Armstrong: In His Own Words*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

_____. *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2006.

Buckingham, William D. "Louis Armstrong and the Waifs' Home" *The Jazz Archivist*. Vol. XXIV. Tulane University. 2011.

Douglass, Frederick. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*. Chicago Review Press, 2000.

Edwards, Brent Hayes. "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Spring 2002, pp. 618-649, The University of Chicago Press Stable, accessed 03 Mar. 2018.

Fivush, R. , Habermas, T. , Waters, T. E. and Zaman, W. "The making of autobiographical memory: Intersections of culture, narratives and identity." *International Journal of Psychology*, 46: 321-345. 2011.

Foner, Philip S, editor. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, Chicago:

- Lawrence Hill, 1999, pp 188-206.
- Giddins, Gary. *Satchmo: The Genius of Louis Armstrong*. Da Capo Press, 2001.
- _____. *Visions of Jazz*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Harker, Brian. *Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings*. Oxford University Press. 2011.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. Hill and Wang, New York, 1993.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.
- Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From It*. Morrow Quill Paperbacks. 1963.
- Jones, Max, and John Chilton. *Louis, the Louis Armstrong Story 1900-1971*. Da Capo Press. 1971.
- “Louis Armstrong at Waif’s Home 1931” *Louisiana Digital Library*.
Louisianadigitallibrary.org. Accessed 26 Feb. 2018.
- Morgenstern, Dan. Introduction. *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, by Louis Armstrong, Da Capo Press, 1986, pp. v-xiii.
- Peck Jr., Robert G. “Life to Satchmo: ‘Let’s Go Man!’” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 October 1954, p. 308.
- A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. Directed by Aubrey Scotto, performances by Louis Armstrong, Sidney Easton and Fanny Belle DeKnight. Paramount Picture. 1932.
- Riccardi, Ricky. *What a Wonderful World: The Magic of Louis Armstrong’s Later Years*. Pantheon Books, 2011.
- _____. “65 Years of “Back Home Again in Indiana!”” *The Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong*.
dippermouth.blogspot.com. Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.
- Stein, Daniel. *Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong Autobiography, and American Jazz*. University of Michigan, 2012.
- “Scat.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2018.
- Schuyler, George S. “Louis Armstrong’s Story” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 February 1955, p.

30.

"Syncopation." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2018.

T.C. "the Book Corner". *The Morning News*, 11 October 1954, p.13.

newspapers.com, accessed 17 Oct. 2017.

Teachout, Terry. *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2009.

Traylor, Eleanor. "Music as Theme: The Blues Mode in the Works of Margaret Walker" *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*. University of Georgia Press. 2001.

Von Eschen, Penny M. *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. Harvard University Press, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 15 Oct. 2017.

Wilson, Russ. "His Horn is His Life" *Oakland Tribune*, 14 Nov. 1954, p. 82.

Archival Sources

Armstrong, Louis. Radio Interview. "'Satchmo,' Associated Booking Corp." *Publicity Manual on Louis Armstrong, 1949?* Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

____. "Letter to Joe Glaser" - 2 August 1955. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

Armstrong, Lucille. Interview with Steve Allen, *BBC*, 1973. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

Berry, Jason. "Jazz Literature". *Southern Exposures VI, No. 3*, 1978. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

"The David Frost Show" February 11, 1970. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

Gautier, Madeleine. "To Louis Armstrong." *Louis Armstrong Collection*. 1 Dec. 1952. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

"Jazz Oral History Project with Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham ". Chris Albertson, interviewer. April

1976. Courtesy of the *Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University-Newark*.

“Louis Writes Life Story” *Downbeat Magazine*. 5 May 1950, p. 1. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

Matthews, Bunny. “2001 News Clippings-March 1, 1949: Louis Armstrong’s Reign as King Zulu.” Offbeat.com. 2001. *Jack Bradley Collection*. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

“Reel-to-reel tape recorded by Louis Armstrong - LAHM Tape 436/Louis Tape 134 - Track 1”. *Louis Armstrong Collection, 1970-1971*, Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum