

## Oblique Kinds of Blackness in Esi Edugyan's *Half Blood Blues*

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This paper addresses the meanings of blackness in Esi Edugyan's second novel, arguing that the text lends itself up to a multiplicity of readings. On one hand, this is achieved by exploring the historicity and geography of race, insofar as the text dwells on how the totalitarian German state and the Second World War concur to impose shifting and sometimes even antagonistic forms of racialization on all non-Aryans. On the other, it is the result of bringing together characters that, while phenotypically belonging to the same group, are yet altogether dissimilar as to origins, language and upbringing. Consequently, the novel showcases experiences and subjectivities across the spectrum of what Paul Gilroy has named "the Black Atlantic."

Keywords: Canadian literature; Afro-Europeanness; Black Atlantic; African diaspora; jazz; Esi Edugyan

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## Negritudes oblicuas en *Half Blood Blues*, de Esi Edugyan

Este artículo se centra en los significados de la negritud en la segunda novela de la escritora canadiense Esi Edugyan, argumentando que el texto potencia múltiples lecturas. Por una parte, este efecto se consigue mediante la exploración de la raza desde una perspectiva historicista y geográficamente situada, ya que la obra analiza cómo el régimen totalitario alemán primero y la Segunda Guerra Mundial después coinciden en imponer formas de racialización diversas y a veces contradictorias sobre las poblaciones no arias. Por la otra, es igualmente el resultado de la convergencia de personajes que, aunque puedan ser agrupados fenotípicamente, de hecho, poseen características distintivas en cuanto a su origen, lengua y formación. Por todo ello, la novela constituye un claro ejemplo de las diversas experiencias y subjetividades afrodiaspóricas que Paul Gilroy denominó "el Atlántico Negro."

Palabras clave: literatura canadiense; afroeupeidad; Atlántico negro; diáspora africana; jazz; Esi Edugyan

## I. INTRODUCTION

Canadian author Esi Edugyan's fiction to date characteristically takes risks by depicting black experiences that fail to follow the scripts most familiar to a Canadian readership: the legacy of slavery and migration and adaptation to a large, mostly unwelcoming Canadian city.<sup>1</sup> Her first novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004), focused on a lone black family in a white community of rural Alberta rather than in the midst of a multicultural metropolis. The second, *Half Blood Blues* (2011), shifts its settings to continental Europe in the 1930s and follows the tragic fate of an isolated black figure cast adrift in the midst of the savagery brought about, first, by the fascist rise to power and, subsequently, by the Second World War. In reframing race within more unexpected and lesser known contexts, Edugyan's texts challenge the reader to envision alternative forms of blackness in ways similar to those of another black Canadian writer, Wayne Compton, who has argued that "[t]here are things to be learned from owning and exploring *oblique kinds of blackness*. In the periphery, where there are fewer local expectations of what 'the black experience' ought to be, radical experiments of identity can be tried. And where the standard continental systems of anti-black racism have been unevenly applied, new systems of thought against racism might be expected to emerge" (2010, 13; my emphasis). Taking my cue from Compton, this paper contrives to unpack the meanings of blackness in Edugyan's second novel. I argue that instead of offering one sole meaning, one experience for the reader to take on board and respond to, the text lends itself up to a multiplicity of readings and meanings. On one hand, this is achieved by exploring the historicity and geography of race, insofar as the text dwells on how the totalitarian German state and the Second World War concur to impose shifting and sometimes even antagonistic forms of racialization on all non-Aryans. On the other, it is the result of bringing together characters that, while phenotypically belonging to the same group, are yet altogether dissimilar as to origins, language and upbringing. To that purpose, the novel showcases experiences and subjectivities across the spectrum of what Paul Gilroy has named "the Black Atlantic" (1993).

Edugyan's strong focus on the workings of racialization during the troubled 1930s and 1940s in Europe emphasizes the grammar of the readability of race on the basis of predetermined ideological positions, by setting up contrasting situations in which non-whiteness is visible or invisible to the viewer, and when the former, by looking into how it is construed. This is a subject in which Compton's ideas come in useful too, particularly as developed in his essay "Pheneticizing versus Passing" on the nuances of visual perception and the language of racialization. In it he takes exception to the term 'passing' due to the way it places the responsibility for seemingly crossing racial

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boundaries (intentionally or not) on the person viewed, rather than on the viewer: “The predisposition to make the *viewed* responsible for what the *viewer* sees, reinforced by such inexact terminology, locks together dangerously with prejudices already in play against mixed-race people, who are often seen as inherently destabilizing, ambivalent, or disloyal by definition” (2010, 23; emphasis in the original). Compton then goes on to coin two complementary terms, “pheneticizing” and “cladistizing,” to name how people look and what their ancestry is, respectively. Racial passing, as will be described below, constitutes a recurrent theme in *Half Blood Blues*, as the title strongly suggests, and so Compton’s terms will be of service in the analysis of this text in order to tease out the nuances of racialized discourses at work within it.

The complex representation of blackness in *Half Blood Blues* is further compounded by the non-linear arrangement of the story and by the conflicting accounts it incorporates. The book opens with the description of the arrest of Afro-German jazz musician Hieronymus (“Hiero”) Falk by the Nazis—“Paris 1940”—and closes by providing some of the long delayed answers as to his later circumstances—“Poland 1992.” In between those two dates, the narrative shuttles from the repressed memories of those hard times revisited in two large central sections—“Berlin 1939” and “Paris 1939”—to two shorter contemporary units both set in “Berlin 1992” recording Hiero’s friends’ troubled feelings over their recovery. One of them, the African American musician Sid Griffiths, is the story’s narrator, but the author has embedded in the narrative certain clues to suggest his unreliability. Sid acknowledges hiding Hiero’s passport and thus being instrumental in his arrest and deportation to a death camp, but he attempts to justify his betrayal by emphasizing how important it was to complete the recording they were engaged in, also named “Half Blood Blues.” Sid’s guilt over his role in Hiero Falk’s tragic fate has plagued him for decades. He is haunted by Hiero’s ghost to the extent that he gave up music after he managed to escape war-torn Europe and make his safe return to the United States. It is this haunting that constitutes the narrative’s centre, as the repressed memories return with renewed force decades later, on the occasion of a festival in Berlin that will honour Falk’s genius and with the surprising news that he is alive and resides in Poland under another name. Following Avery F. Gordon, haunting can be effective as a vantage point from which to examine the social exclusion of non-white people, and more specifically for my purposes here, the exclusion of people of African ancestry that constitute the novel’s core. For Gordon, “[t]o write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant renegotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows” ([1997] 2008, 17).

In *Half Blood Blues*, the borders of visibility/invisibility, excluding/including are noticeably in flux, the subject of successive renegotiations for which the character of Hiero Falk is the main—but not the only—sign. In order to analyze these discursive

negotiations, I will start by describing the historical context in which they take place, Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and consider both Edugyan's handling of the subject and its import for (black) Canadian Literature.

## 2. THE POLITICS OF (IN)VISIBILITY: AN UNLIKELY H(IE)RO IN (AFRO-) EUROPE

In one of the sources for Edugyan's *Half Blood Blues*, the memoir *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* (1999), Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi critiques the fact that “[b]ecause Germans of my generation were expected to be fair skinned and of Aryan stock, it became my lot in life to explain ad nauseam why someone who had a brown complexion and black, kinky hair spoke accent-free German and claimed Germany as his place of birth” (xiii). Edugyan's interest in the history of black people in Europe was awakened after the publication of her first novel during the year she spent in Germany, a country in which Afro-Germans account for some 167,000 people in some estimates (Blakely 2009, 187) and 300,000 in others (Wright 2004, 185) out of what is roughly a total of eighty million: “As a black woman living in what is, admittedly, a homogenous society (compared to Canada), I began to wonder about the experience of black people who had lived in Germany in the past, specifically during the Third Reich” (Edugyan 2011b, n.p.). Michelle Wright records that, although the presence of black people in the country is much older, most Afro-Germans alive now can trace their origins back to three time periods, the Allied occupations after the First and the Second World Wars, and the postwar years, from the 1950s onwards (2004, 185). Chronologically, the birth of the protagonist of Edugyan's novel tallies with the first of those moments, the Allied occupation of the Rhineland. Over 100,000 troops from western and central Africa had fought in France during the Great War (Khalifa 2008, 15), and between 20,000 and 45,000 black French soldiers were stationed in the German Rhineland in the years 1919 to 1921, many of them from Senegal (Lusane 2002, 72). In *Half Blood Blues*, Hiero's is “a typical war story, but with a kink,” that is, Hiero is one of the denigrated “Rhineland Bastards,” and he grows up in Cologne bullied by his classmates, enduring their taunts and name-calling by going “to some cold place inside himself to wait out the teasing” (Edugyan 2011a, 210 and 209, respectively). As he is later re-fashioning himself as a jazz musician, Hiero manufactures a more acceptable past as the son of a Cameroonian prince studying Medicine in Hamburg who met and married a young German student of Nursing. Hiero's spurious biography is in fact modelled on the real one of Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi, born in 1926 to the oldest son of the Liberian general consul and a German nurse (Massaquoi 1999, xiii).

Edugyan has made selective use of Massaquoi's memories, often so as to bring out into the open the theme of the politics of (in)visibility. On one occasion Massaquoi recounts a visit to *Hagenbecks Tierpark*, Hamburg's famous animal park, which also featured “culture shows” that included “‘primitive peoples' exhibits.” There was an African exhibit displaying a spectacular array of African wildlife, but also an “‘African

village,' replete with half a dozen or so thatch-roofed clay huts and peopled, we were told, by 'authentic Africans'" (1999, 25). Such ethnographic displays were popular throughout Europe at the time in conjunction with Europe's colonial expansion in Africa, as the sad story of the nineteenth-century South African woman known as Sara Baartman or "the Hottentot Venus" proves.<sup>2</sup> Massaquoi goes on to describe his shock at discovering Africans that looked nothing like any of his relatives or other African acquaintances, and how mortified he felt at being spotted by the Africans, who "as if they had seen a long-lost relative, [...] were all pointing and grinning" at him, which in turn made other visitors point at the black boy in their midst, mistaking him for "one of 'them'" (1999, 26). This powerful moment of simultaneous recognition—directed from the Africans towards the black German child—and misrecognition—from the white Germans towards the black boy—left a lasting mark on Massaquoi's psyche. For the first time he was discernibly and painfully viewed by other Germans as not one of their own kind. Following Compton's terminology, we could say that he was "pheneticized" as African by both kinds of viewer. This opened the first clearly recognizable fissure in his complete self-identification as both German and black, one that would grow as time went by and the Nazi ideology of race took over, predicated on a strong pre-existing layer of racism against all non-Aryans.

Significantly, one of the novel's most provocative passages builds on this memory (Edugyan 2011a, 168-171). Hiero similarly takes his friend Sid to *Hagenbecks Tierpark* and there is a significant exchange of looks between the African villagers and Hiero, but it is constructed in an altogether different way. There is no sense of embarrassment, no attempt to hide himself from the gaze of other Germans. Rather, Hiero's emotions veer towards resignation and acknowledgment: "Hiero ain't even blinked. There wasn't no shared curiosity in that gaze, no sense of shock. Just calm resignation, like when a man gazes at a portrait of himself from another time" (171). The fracture in the self-perception of the black subject's German identity in Massaquoi's text is replaced here by a powerful realization—and even an acceptance of—the impossibility of such a double identity. We are given to understand that someone phenotypically black is unintelligible as German.

The difficulties of Hiero's life in the periphery of German citizenship as Afro-German are mitigated by the conviviality of the jazz band he joins, the Hot-Time Swingers, which is cast as a multicultural, multiracial group. Besides the African American musicians Chip Jones and the aforementioned Sid Griffiths, the band featured three Germans: one was a Jew, Paul Butterstein, and two were white, Big Fritz Bayer and Ernst von Haselberg, although from different classes, the latter hailing from the aristocracy. With the eventual inclusion of African Canadian Delilah Brown, the ensemble could hardly be any more dissimilar, joined only by their shared love of jazz. This multifaceted, open space is further characterized by its deployment of two

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<sup>2</sup> On this general subject, see Archer-Straw (2000, 30-33); for Sara Baartman, see Hudson (2008).

syncretic languages: jazz—a blend of African rhythms and European instruments—and a multilingual combination of German and African American-inflected English, which later incorporates bits of French, an idiosyncratic speech that mirrored their complex identities. While making music as much as when talking to each other, the ensemble members became interlocutors in a complex, multilayered exchange, so that, as Molly McKibbin has aptly remarked, what “the novel proposes [is] a sense of diasporic community based on cultural expression” (2014, 424). However, the band’s dialogical potential—that is, their music, but also their ability to produce this hybrid space or “third space”—was affected by the changing political climate. In fact, the description of the jazz band as filtered through Sid’s memories betrays a conspicuous nostalgia for the more racially inclusive and tolerant atmosphere in 1920s and early 1930s Europe.<sup>3</sup> Several sections allude to this happier period between the wars, and more specifically the 1920s, when there was an international “eruption of black expressive cultures and political initiatives,” as Brent Hayes Edwards points out (2003, 2). *Half Blood Blues* is set in the period of swing’s highest popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, and its fictional jazz ensemble was one of many that catered for the European jazz craze. For Eric Hobsbawm, jazz music met the demands for leisure and entertainment of the urban middle classes and its rapid diffusion throughout Europe issued from its association not just with African exoticism, but also with American modernity (1998, 267). Europe rapidly became an important market for jazz, Berlin at the time boasting over twenty cabarets (Kater 2003, 4): “Played in nightclubs, it attracted a young, urban, bohemian audience that identified the music’s syncopated rhythms with its own feelings of anxiety and anarchy” (Archer-Straw 2000, 107). Fittingly, in the text, Sid Griffiths recollects how his own band played in the best nightclubs, had fans across the continent, and made five famous recordings, while critics enthused over “German jazz’s ingeniously complex rhythms” (Edugyan 2011a, 109) and African American musicians were welcomed with open arms, as they provided jazz bands with “black authenticity” in what were otherwise white ensembles: “See, we hailed from the cradle of jazz, and that gave us a feel for the music. I ain’t saying it was racial. It had to do with rubbing up against jazz in your tadpole years” (Edugyan 2011a, 46).<sup>4</sup> Like Berlin, Paris, and more specifically Montmartre, underwent a radical cultural transformation: “Street life, soul food, strolling, and hairstyles—all familiar elements of Harlem’s ambience—gave the quarter the name ‘black Broadway’ in black Paris, or Harlem in Montmartre” (Shack 2001, xvi). Indeed, the City of Light was home to a sizeable black community between the wars, and interest in black culture was so strong that Petrine Archer-Straw refers to this as a period of “Negrophilia,” a term used by the Parisian avant-garde in

<sup>3</sup> I invoke here Homi Bhabha’s concept of a “third space” of reinscription and negotiation in *The Location of Culture* (1994); see also his interview with Jonathan Rutherford (1990).

<sup>4</sup> This assertion may well exaggerate historical facts, as Kater estimates that “among the foreigners employed by German dance or jazz bands, there were extremely few blacks” (2003, 20) even though American bands came on tour.

order to defy bourgeois values (2000, 9). By 1939, the year the members of Edugyan's fictional band arrive in Paris, a community of black musicians and other entertainers had been thriving for two full decades, including such celebrities as Josephine Baker, who is glimpsed in the novel "sashaying all about town with those ridiculous swans and leopards and god only knows what else all following behind" (Edugyan 2011a, 248). Moreover, Paris as a multicultural "contact zone" had an advantage even over the United States, then under the grip of Jim Crow legislation, as a fictional Louis Armstrong off-handedly attests in the novel by remarking that French people treat blacks "a sight more decent than where we from" (260).<sup>5</sup>

The glamorous and overall positive tones of the "black Broadway" image and the stock-piling of famous historical figures in those sections of the novel help the author to set up a striking contrast with those chronologically later sections set in Nazi Berlin and in German-invaded Paris where she further develops her overarching theme that race in general and blackness in particular is not biological and that it is subject to constant renegotiation. Her case is made more obviously when it comes to historical Nazi discourses on non-Aryanness.<sup>6</sup> Edugyan in this sense has followed studies such as those by Clarence Lusane, who contends that "the Nazi racial agenda, rhetoric and practice changed over time, was unevenly applied and carried out, and was often contradictory, especially in the case of Afro-Germans and the experiences of other people of African descent" (2002, 6). Likewise, in his memoir *Massachusetts* had reflected on his unusual luck in being spared the fate of millions of non-Aryan people—extermination, sterilization or medical experimentation—largely attributing it to the fact that "blacks were so few in numbers that they were relegated to low-priority status in the Nazis' lineup for extermination," concluding that he "fell through the cracks of modern history's most extensive, most systematic mass-murder scheme" (1999, 16).<sup>7</sup> Edugyan registers the inconsistencies through the foreign eyes of Chip Jones, when he perceives that "Krauts got some kind of ladder when it come to blacks. Not like what been going on with the Jews" (2011a, 260). Black foreigners, he claims, are treated fairly, but Afro-Germans are instantly classified as "Rhineland bastards," and thus as physical reminders of Germany's humiliating defeat, as well as threats to the purity of the German race. As Chip continues: "'But if you a black Kraut, a *Mischling*, like our boy here, [it] get real ugly'" (260).

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<sup>5</sup> I follow Mary Louise Pratt's definition of a contact zone as "the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now meet. The term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invader's perspective. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" ([1992] 2008, 8).

<sup>6</sup> On the definition of Aryanness in the period, particularly the legal nuances of the term, see McKibbin (2014, 413-418).

<sup>7</sup> However, other Afro-Germans were not so fortunate. Tina Campt has collected in *Other Germans* (2004) the testimony of Hans Hauck, who was sterilized.

Different racializations are, then, not just the result of different geographical coordinates and nation-states, but are historically driven. As the narrative unfolds, Edugyan manages to record momentous changes in racial policies and attitudes across the 1930s through their material impact on the band. The beauty of the music and the harmonious interracial collaboration it thrives on set up a strong tension with the darkness of the historical period. As Sid's memories guide us into the past, the impossibility of maintaining this "third space" of resistance against overwhelming odds becomes more evident. By 1939 Nazi discrimination against non-Aryan music had triumphed. Those that praised jazz now condemned it as "Jewish-Hottentot frivolity" (2011A, 110), that is, as a "degenerate" subculture that had to be expunged. The downturn in the band's fortunes is conveyed through the Gothic aesthetic that Edugyan also embraced in her earlier work, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the fearful characters moving in a newly hostile Berlin become ghostly presences, seeking the safety of invisibility: "Even two years ago, we like to holler through these damn streets like we on parade. Now we slunk in the shadows, squeamish of the light" (97). The Gothic aesthetic does not only affect bodies but also spaces. Locations in the wartime sections are markedly claustrophobic. In "Berlin 1939," the once crowded, sophisticated nightclub "The Hound," erstwhile home of the Hot-Time Swingers, has been shut down and become yet another ghost of the past. Although at the beginning it is not "a dive" (79), after a Nazi ambush the members of the band are trapped within the venue for several days, unable to go out but also frightened of who might come in. The space becomes even more claustrophobic when the SS enter and search the club and the musicians are forced to hide in a small dark closet behind the stage, infusing the whole "Hound" with their fear: "I ain't never thought fear had a taste. It does. In that small darkness it was a thing filling my nostrils, thick as sand in my throat, and I near choked on it" (114). Fear also follows them to wartime Paris, where they all share an apartment, once more trapped inside a small space for months on end as the German troops advance, hiding behind blacked-out windows and awaiting a miracle. By then the band has suffered an onslaught. First, they lost Paul, when he was arrested and deported to the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, where he would die, an event that foreshadows all subsequent losses. Later, they suffered Big Fritz's defection to another band, and by Ernst's decision to stay behind in Germany, in compliance with his father's wishes, in order to secure his friends' safe conduct to Paris when Berlin becomes hostile to black people. Once there, it will be Hiero's turn to be arrested, so that eventually only Sid and Chip remain of the original band. The narrative voice of a much older Sid stresses the ghostliness of their experiences when he summarizes their story early on in *Half Blood Blues*: "Think about it. A bunch of German and American kids meeting up in Berlin and Paris between the wars to make all this wild joyful music before the Nazis kick it

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the manifestations of the Gothic in contemporary Canadian literature and their import in the context of the subgenre of postcolonial Gothic, see Sugars and Turcotte (2009).

to pieces? And the legend survives when a lone tin box is dug out of a damn wall in a flat once belonged to a Nazi? Man. If that ain't a ghost story, I never heard one" (35).

The section located in Paris, 1940, further exposes the arbitrary racialization that non-whites are subject to and the rapidly shifting forms of discrimination and exclusion attached to it. Hiero, Sid and Chip arrive in Paris just hours before the declaration of war against Germany, which converts Hiero, as a German citizen, into the enemy. Once more, a rift occurs between race and nation. Although phenotypically the French would "read" him as a French colonial soldier—and therefore a friend—his German language and culture exclude him—and so he is the enemy. Again, an Afro-German identity becomes unacceptable. As a result, Hiero must walk the beautiful streets of Montmartre in complete silence, hoping for his blackness to be construed as the outward sign of a French colonial identity. Such initial silencing is followed by an even grimmer situation as the French start losing the war and they decide to round up all Germans still remaining in the country. Gradually, things worsen for Hiero, as well as for Chip—who, unlike Sid, cannot pass for white—as the Germans advance towards Paris and the French authorities leave the capital for southern France. At that point, and in a complete turnaround, the fact that they are "pheneticized" as the retreating colonial soldiers, who have failed to fight off the German advance, places them in jeopardy from angry French civilians who target them with both verbal and physical violence (2011a, 296-300 and 313). The third and final shift occurs with the German occupation of Paris, which returns Hiero to his untenable Afro-German identity, and from there to his arrest and deportation to a concentration camp, where only extermination awaits. No other resolution appears viable for the conundrum of his paradoxical doubleness. In *Dreaming of Elsewhere*, Edugyan has admitted to having drawn while she was writing the novel from her own reactions on her first visit to Ghana, her parents' country, specifically "that dizzying feeling of not-belonging in a place where everything is at once both strange and familiar" (2014, 25). Partly at least, what she is describing accords with the scene of recognition and misrecognition between Hiero and the African villagers analyzed above. In particular, by narrating the successive turns and shifts in how black people are viewed by others, and how these always seemingly result in some form of exclusion, the novel successfully explores the periphery constituted by Hiero Falk. He is the outward sign that allows the author to make a case against the arbitrariness of race by denouncing the inherent contradictions in the historical theories and practices of racialization.

However, as the Paris episodes prove, the diverse forms of blackness that *Half Blood Blues* showcases do not end with Hiero Falk. On the contrary, as mentioned above, Edugyan's fiction brings characters taken from other black constituencies to the forefront of the story. In contrast with Hiero's isolation and exceptionality as an Afro-German stands the normative black identity represented by the African American musicians Sid Griffiths and Chip Jones, who display the confidence of those who have grown within the fold of a large black community. By selecting Sid as the narrative voice,

his black-inflected speech pervades the text and channels his world vision as being the dominant one, the norm to the exception embodied by Hiero's life and art. In fact, one of the main threads in this complex work is the rag-to-riches story of the two African American friends, who started out playing jazz in Baltimore's speakeasies at the tender age of thirteen and whose strong bond derives from having struggled together to make their way out of poverty. Even though they share a similar upbringing and many years of friendship, the two characters are shown to be racialized very differently. Edugyan herself has drawn attention to the asymmetrical links between physical appearance and citizenship in her fiction:

The physical difference between the characters in my novel gradually began, for me, to become entangled with their sense of identity, as their freedoms were curtailed or widened accordingly. Sid Griffiths, a light-skinned African-American, can walk freely through the streets of Berlin without dread; Chip Jones, his darker-skinned friend from Baltimore, cannot. Paul, the band's pianist, is an Aryan in everything but blood: blonde, blue-eyed, and Jewish. Hieronymous, as a Black German, is declared a "stateless" person and denied citizenship in his own country. No man among them is allowed to be his authentic self. (2014, 18)

As the author notes, Chip's darker skin places him in constant jeopardy, while Sid is so light he can pass for white if he so wishes, which establishes a powerful difference between them, made explicit in a number of scenes in which passing is entirely performative, that is, "a dialogically negotiated act between the one passing and those who would accept or deny, support or sanction, that passage" (Alexander 2006, 70-71). Wayne Compton has pointed out that racial passing is usually seen as a deceptive act, one in which the person deliberately chooses to adopt another ancestry, and as a result is often perceived as a morally questionable one (2010, 24). This is precisely the way in which racial passing is codified in the novel. It consistently bears negative connotations, most often being associated to a kind of self-erasure and self-denial, for example in Sid's memories of their difficult times in Berlin towards the end, where their peripheral status as barely tolerated visitors is linked to some of his family's opting to pass for white: "And I thought of my ma's family back in Virginia, fair as Frenchmen and floating like ghosts through a white world. Afraid of being seen for what they truly was" (Edugyan 2011a, 97). Moreover, racial passing is not limited to the black characters. A strong parallelism is suggested between Sid Griffiths and Paul Butterstein, whose blue eyes and blonde hair make him "the perfect Aryan man" although he is of Jewish descent (75-76). In one of the earliest scenes in the novel, Sid watches Paul talk and smile charmingly to a man wearing the Nazi party badge on the tram, something that truly nauseates him while being essential to his survival. As Sid bitterly concludes: "sometimes it seemed we'd passed right out of our own skin" (78). The use of the plural pronoun is very significant, as it highlights the strategic alliances

between Jews and blacks in being placed in similar social circumstances. Each act of passing, however, takes its toll. Paul is described as having shaken with fury as he got off the tram, and the constant pressure to assume a fake identity and the need to repress his righteous anger torture him. Like Compton, then, Edugyan displays in *Half Blood Blues* a keen interest in the exploration of various contexts for passing: as a deliberate form of self-denial that can bring interesting social or economic rewards; as dictated by the need to survive in extremely hostile environments; or as an unintentional act of transgression whose responsibility rests solely with the viewer and depends on the racial policies of the period.

Nevertheless, while the novel constitutes a powerful account of the racially exclusionary acts enforced by Nazi legislation at the time, it also manages to contain a strong resistance to them by means of the aesthetics and ethics of jazz. In a defiant move, Hiero decides to record the music that will make his name years later, the “Half Blood Blues.” By definition, the blues is a style of music of haunting melancholy, encoding the suffering of the hunted and persecuted. But this version also incorporates jazz’s subversive potential, as Hiero’s blues is a parodic remaking of the Nazi anthem, the “Horst Wessel.” By recasting their sacred music in a code highly racialized as black, the “Half Blood Blues” talks back to the heart of Nazi ideology, defusing its racism with its inclusive biraciality, as conveyed in the name of the musical piece. As Burton W. Peretti observes: “Jazz was a biracial music, but the society that fostered it was violently opposed to biraciality. [...] Jazz musicians did not seek the assignment of hurdling the barriers of race, but they nevertheless were compelled to face them and to confound them on many occasions” (1992, 177). Consequently, playing “Half Blood Blues” becomes a moment of plenitude, when Sid and his friends reach a point of individual and collective fulfillment, which the novel associates with freedom, another key *topos* of the African American experience: “I known without a doubt I ain’t never be involved in no greater thing in my life. This was it, this was everything. We was all of us free, brother. For that night at least, we was free” (Edugyan 2011a, 310).

The interplay of black subjectivities and forms of racialization at a time of crisis opens up critical conversations on race by departing from a black/white binarism. In fact, biraciality features prominently both in the blues itself and in the novel’s title. At one point Chip muses that he always thought the blues was named for Hiero himself, but that he has now concluded that it was named for Delilah Brown, the African Canadian love interest in the tale. In fact, it might as well be named for Sid Griffiths, the main voice in *Half Blood Blues* and the third member of their love triangle, as all of them are mixed-race. They embody what racism always fears the most, the merging of bodies and affects, more evident perhaps against the background of Nazi rhetoric for preventing racial contamination and preserving the purity of the Aryan race that characterizes the period. Mixed-race black subjects like Hiero and the other “Rhineland bastards” raised what Camp et al. has called “specters of racial mixture” (2004, 25). As

such, Edugyan's choice of characters and topics powerfully addresses both Europe and America by way of Africa. Very tellingly, as a black Canadian author Edugyan has also chosen to debunk the African American experience from its central role in the black diaspora. Although filtered through Sid's perceptions, it is Hiero Falk's life that bears the weight of the story and the Afro-European and, in a very small way, the black Canadian identity—as embodied in Delilah Brown, who hails from a black Montreal that made a strong contribution to the jazz scene between the 1920s and 1950s—that are reinserted into the historical script. In so doing, Edugyan is also 'signifying' on the canon of African American literature, and inserting her own black Canadian text, because

{w}riters Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience. This mode of revision, of Signifyin(g), is the most striking aspect of Afro-American literary history. (Gates 1988, 124; emphasis in the original)

Here it is evident that Edugyan has set about creating her own counter-hegemonic text, excavating different forms of blackness expunged from the record while using a black cultural form such as jazz to add her oeuvre to a "black Atlantic" continuum historically featuring the intricate trajectories of black bodies across national and transnational borders. It is worth noting, at least in passing, that such emphasis on biraciality/mixed-racedness together with the deployment of black Atlantic musical modes connect Edugyan once more to Compton in both topics and aesthetics, while the deployment of jazz brings her book close to other black fiction writing published both within Canada—for instance Mairuth Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair* (1997)—and outside, like Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and Zadie Smith's newly released *Swing Time* (2016).<sup>9</sup>

It is significant, however, that the author does not fall prey to the temptation of projecting an idyllic, harmonious relationship between the several black constituencies represented in her fiction. On the contrary, resting at the core of this novel is a conflict of such import that it takes decades to untangle responsibilities and to repair the harm done. Sid's ecstatic statement about jazz and freedom cited above makes his subsequent betrayal of Hiero even more poignant. The news, fifty years later, that Hiero had survived the camp and lives in Poland under a new name unleashes conflicting emotions in the old man Sid Griffiths has become. Guilt over Hiero's demise has plagued him

<sup>9</sup> On the subject of jazz in black Canadian fiction, see Siemerling (2014); on jazz more widely in black women's writing, see Tucker (1993).

for decades, and his best friend Chip Jones publicly accuses him of betraying Hiero out of jealousy over Delilah Brown, rather than for the noble principles he maintains throughout (Edugyan 2011a, 57-58). Narrative reliability becomes an opaque issue; readers have to decide between truth and the semblance of truth in the old friends' accounts. Ultimately, however, there is no doubt as to the consequences for Hiero of Sid's impetuous action, so Sid is well aware of owing reparation. *Half Blood Blues* thus considers the politics of redress, whether reconciliation can be effected after the exercise of violence, and if so, at what price.<sup>10</sup>

The final meeting of the three friends in Poland is therefore a moment of reckoning, when the living have to come to terms with what was lost or repressed for decades. Hiero the survivor is a completely different man from the budding musician he used to be. Under the name Thomas, he had given up music and trained as a blacksmith, working at an ironworks cooperative until retirement. He continues to live in the same now unused buildings, a blind man that turns old machinery into the "nightmarish sculptures" that constitute his own unspoken acts of witnessing to the horrors of the camp (327-328). Hiero's withdrawal from music after the war is the direct result of the part it played in his own survival. It is conceivable that, having been forced to perform daily for the torturers while ghastly acts of arbitrary violence took place, he felt unable to continue to play after his release from the camp. Consequently, silence replaces music with its own intensity in Hiero/Thomas's world, and the representation of the unspeakable becomes displaced onto the realm of dreams and ghostly shapes in his sculptures. For Hiero/Thomas too, there is a ghostly silencing, a loss that haunts him. Paul Connerton has defended the need to forget as part of individual and social healing; he argues that some types of forgetting constitute a success rather than a failure, because "they establish and enhance social bonds" (2008, 34). Among them is a prescriptive forgetting, when after a traumatic period—for instance, a war—a society feels the need to forget in order to move on and to "prevent a chain of retribution for earlier acts from running on endlessly" (34). This may be a similar case, for although the three old friends do not mention either guilt or reparation, the fact that they listen to music together suggests that they choose to forgive and forget the past and that there has been a reconciliation of sorts, one that has been achieved very appropriately through the medium of music. Following Gordon, we can assert that the resolution of this particular struggle with the ghost has been partial to the living ([1997] 2008, 187). Thus, after rehearsing the workings of racialization in the midst of state-enforced terror and war, *Half Blood Blues* both acknowledges past violence and drafts new beginnings, holds together commonality and difference, and allows us to think through ways to move beyond a traumatic past, displaying a strong commitment to life by placing the stress on survivors rather than victims.

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<sup>10</sup> The same topic was prominent in her first novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*. See on that subject Cuder-Domínguez (2014).

### 3. CONCLUSION

All in all, *Half Blood Blues* demands that readers position themselves as to the truth of its fragmented and at times contradictory accounts, which in turn amounts to coming to terms with the radical instability of blackness as a sign and with the ways in which it haunts the master narratives of all times, constituting a ghostly, peripheral presence. As this essay has tried to prove, Edugyan breaks new ground in the representation of the “oblique kinds of blackness” that Compton conjured up, and pushes at the very borders of what it means to be black by bringing together the experiences of black characters from many diverse origins during a period of extreme vulnerability to violence due to the exclusionary racial policies enforced at the time. Indeed, *Half Blood Blues* should be framed within the larger, ongoing project to disrupt the entrenched notion of **Europe** as a white continent, revising European cultural memory with the insertion of black subjectivities and bodies. In that sense, the novel by this Canadian writer intersects with current work on Afro-Germanness and/or Afro-Europeanness. During the 2014 Canada Reads competition, Donovan Bailey defended the novel’s Canadianeness with the argument that Edugyan was “bringing the world back to Canada and showing how we see ourselves” (CBC 2013, n.p.). This was an insightful statement stressing as it does the (trans)national trajectories that black Canadian writing excels at, for *Half Blood Blues* is built on the edge; as an author, Edugyan constantly moves away from her comfort zone and takes her readers there too, compelling us to envision the past—and the present—differently.

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