

Introduction

The Origins of Cool

Organic Existentialists

This is a theory of the origins and functions of the concept of cool in American culture as it manifested in the post–World War II arts of jazz, film, literature, and popular music.

In this era between 1943 and 1963, a new embodied concept and romantic ideal—*being cool*—emanated out of African-American jazz culture to become an umbrella term for the alienated attitude of American rebels. For the next two generations, being cool was an alternative success system combining wildness and composure; it was directly opposed to the social norms of a materialist and rapidly suburbanizing society. Within a decade of its emergence in the mid-1940s, this elusive concept was adopted and interrogated by artists, writers, intellectuals, bohemians, and youth culture. Authors such as Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac struggled to create philosophies out of *cool* and its brother concept, *hip*. The sociologist Erving Goffman found that prisoners used the phrase “playing it cool” to refer to strategies for maintaining dignity against oppressive authority. When *West Side Story* was a hit on Broadway in

1957, it featured a production number called “Cool,” sung by a character named Ice, who advised his fellow gang members to control their anger by cooling their jets.¹

“Cool” represents a convergence of African-American and Anglo-American archetypal modes of masculine behavior. From England came the mythic reserve of the upper class, the Victorian ideal of the gentleman, the social value of keeping a stiff upper lip; the English themselves mock this emotional mode as the passionlessness of “God’s *frozen* people.” Duke Ellington, a world traveler for four generations, thought of Londoners as “the most civilized” people in the world and admired their “sense of *balance*” as a national trait and social value. Ellington hinted at his own adaptation of this sense of balance in his autobiography: “Self-discipline, as a virtue or an acquired asset, can be invaluable to anyone.” Yet this social *class* ideal of stoicism had already begun to lose its allure among Americans after the various artistic and cultural rebellions in the wake of World War I: modernism in the arts and Communism in politics, working-class union socialism and anticolonialism, a populist rebellion in the arts through jazz, social dance, and the cinematic slapstick of Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd.²

Spurred by the disillusion resulting from the Great Depression, rogue figures arose as the shadow selves of Anglo-American positivism: the ethnic gangster, the jazz musician, the devil-may-care song-and-dance man, the hard-boiled detective, and later on, the spy. This symbolic shift from a British class ideal to a tough loner can be located in both popular music and literature, beginning with jazz and pulp fiction in the 1920s. In crime fiction, by the early 1930s, the puzzle solving of Sherlock Holmes and Watson in the drawing room became supplanted by the streetwise analysis of solo gumshoes Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. These new detectives counted more on their street smarts than on brilliant rational analysis, and they were afoot in American cityscapes, as much prone to violence as any average working stiff. The shift to vernacular cool in music can be found in the abandonment of European classical music and ballet for the popular revolution of African-American music, arguably the most influential global artistic culture of the half century between 1920 and 1970. It was not just the global impact of musical practices and tastes through jazz, blues, gospel, swing, soul, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll, but also the style and slang, the physical gestures and kin-

esthetics that informed each genre shift as it hit American city streets and global dance floors.³

In 1955, Norman Mailer observed that the idea of cool underwent a sea change from the English gentleman to the American working-class male. The Englishman's reserve was a matter of upholding class dignity: "They had to be cool because to be cool is for the English the *social* imperative." In America, by contrast, cool was admired as an intrinsic projection of an individual. For Mailer, "cool" was a password synonymous with "grace under pressure," Hemingway's famous definition of courage. Mailer idolized Hemingway and he understood American cool as something achieved only in-the-moment: "Americans are more primal; for us to be *cool in action* is the basic thing." The value of being cool had shifted from a sign of social class to one of admirable and enviable self-mastery. *American* cool became synonymous with a certain stylish stoicism: emotional self-control carried off with a signature style.⁴

An illuminating connection between African-American jazz cool and Anglo-American outlaw cool can be found in the coming-of-age of actor Clint Eastwood, a postwar teenager who idolized jazz musicians. Born in 1930, Eastwood's model for *cool-in-action* was the soloing jazz musician of the late 1940s, and like Jack Kerouac, he hung out in jazz clubs in postwar Oakland during jazz's shift from swing to bebop. When soloing, the individual jazz artist creates spontaneous art on a blank aural canvas: this artistic practice imprinted Eastwood with a heroic ideal. As film critic David Denby perceived, Eastwood's "notion of cool—slightly aloof, giving only the central satisfaction and withholding everything else—is derived from those [jazz] musicians." It may be counterintuitive to link the respective tough-guy cools of Eastwood and Miles Davis but they are closely related as middle-class Americans born only four years apart.⁵

In 1946, Eastwood went to a Jazz at the Philharmonic concert expressly to see and hear his idol, saxophonist Lester Young. "I thought he was the cat's rear end," Eastwood humbly recalled.⁶ Young is the primo-genitor of cool: he disseminated the modern usage of the term and concept of cool; he modeled it as an embodied philosophy; his solos are the foundation for the genre of "cool jazz." Yet Eastwood was equally stirred that night by Charlie Parker's revolutionary bebop solos—his harmonic, supersonic virtuosity imposed on a blues foundation. Bird's angular musical feats were then foreign to Eastwood's tastes but he bought a few of

Parker's records. Three years later he saw Dizzy Gillespie's big band in San Francisco and realized he was "drawn to the whole improvisational element" of jazz, and in the 1950s, he became enamored of "cool jazz" through Stan Getz, Chet Baker, and Gerry Mulligan. Thirty years later Eastwood fulfilled a lifelong dream by directing *Bird* (1988), a biopic of Charlie Parker.⁷

Like jazz, acting is a spontaneous art form, even when scripted. Eastwood redirected the calm center required of the improvising jazz musician into the edgy composure at the center of his acting. Imagine *jazz cool* transported to the frontier: Eastwood took the impassive, aloof face of the postwar jazz musician and made of it the mysterious, intimidating, kinetic cool-in-action of a Western hero living by a private code. Denby calls it "Eastwood's mask," a grim, impassive gravity that managed to project a personal set of values severed from institutional loyalty and the law. In the *Fistful of Dollars* trilogy and *High Plains Drifter*, he plays an American *rōnin*: "He kept his head still, at a slight angle; he narrowed his eyes; he scowled and curled his upper lip . . . he looked mean, amused, coolly amoral." The obvious Hollywood precedent for this mask came from film noir—from Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, and Sterling Hayden—with a nod to John Wayne to the West and Paul Muni to the East. Denby suggested that this mask was "an arrogant teen-ager's idea of acting," but this is an anachronistic analysis. Arrogant, sneering teenagers did not exist on-screen until the 1950s: that's the legacy of Marlon Brando, James Dean, biker films, Elvis, and rock and roll. This *now*-archetypal masculine mode was new to Hollywood in 1941. "Eastwood's mask" extended the stylistic and conceptual revolution of postwar cool into the 1960s and 1970s, as his alienated, elusive, and ethical scowl "establish[ed] an image of implacable male force."⁸

For all that Eastwood rose to stardom in *Rawhide* (1958–65) and spaghetti Westerns, for his directorial debut he chose to play a *cool cat* in *Play Misty for Me* (1971), a jazz DJ. The film features a score by pianist Erroll Garner and several scenes at the Monterey Jazz Festival, including two numbers by saxophonist Cannonball Adderley. Eastwood's second film was an existential western, *High Plains Drifter* (1973), and he plays a nameless protagonist known only as "The Stranger" (perhaps a nod to Camus). The Stranger exacts revenge on a town that once exiled him for

his attempt to bring the local mining interests to justice. In a flashback, he recalls the night he was whipped like a slave by the company's hired thugs. The camera focuses on Eastwood's lined, emotionless face before and after the dream, signaling that his tight, stony gaze resulted from the need to repress the searing pain of that near-fatal whipping.

Given Eastwood's investment in jazz and its history, *The Stranger's* whipping should be seen as a complex combination of solidarity with cool-as-black-rebellion—the mask of stylish stoicism—and the substitution of a white rebel. In 1957, Elvis was whipped on film in *Jailhouse Rock* for his participation in leading a jailbreak over prison conditions. The camera frames him dead-on, his hands tied to an iron bar, in a pose that is half crucifixion and half indebted to slavery, the historical root of both the oppression and musical tradition Elvis inhabited. These are paradigmatic examples of the “love and theft” of African-American culture as it has always informed the concept of cool on the color line.

For Eastwood as for Miles Davis, the sign of rebellion was *the mask of cool*: the projection of toughness and self-mastery through a blank facial expression and a corresponding economy of motion. In 1949, Miles Davis did not yet carry himself with the fierceness now associated with his image. Photos of the time reveal a young man with an open face, intense and attractive yet trusting. (See fig. 1.) This is probably how Juliette Gréco saw him. But Davis was soon hardened by five years of a heroin addiction (1949–54), a period in which he was humiliated by drug dealers and Charlie Parker's arrogance, by his mistreatment by club owners and the New York Police Department. Yet there is a salient difference: even if Miles Davis's mask of cool was as archetypally defiant as Eastwood's, his *sound* was then romantic and melodic.

Miles's romantic postwar trumpet projected “a monk's sound,” Boris Vian wrote, the sound of “somebody who is part of the century but who can look at it with serenity.” That is the secret of a cool aesthetic: artistic relaxation that creates excitement in the listener or audience. In art or in life, it is the ability to be in the center of dynamic action and maintain a state of equipoise: cool head and relaxed, kinetic body. Miles Davis's trumpet floated apart, aloof, riding on the elegance of the rhythm section. What a nice idea if your mind and thoughts could *sound* like that, buoyant yet grounded. “[It] takes a healthy sense of balance,” Vian

wrote of Miles Davis's solos, to create "such complex constructions" and yet "land on your feet."⁹ In other words, to use then-current jazz slang, Miles was a *very* cool cat.

Clint Eastwood's grizzled, sculpted face later offered something similar: the Western gunslinger *as a monk*—but a tough monk, a samurai monk. What a nice idea if your own presence carried such authority, a wordless integrity. In the early 1960s, Eastwood supplanted John Wayne—a.k.a. "the Duke"—as the rogue Western gunslinger, since the latter's rebel roles were mostly behind him, from *The Searchers* (1954) dating back to *Stagecoach* (1939). The Duke was now as iconic as Uncle Sam, his face like something carved in granite on Mount Rushmore, his persona set in stone. In contrast, Eastwood's cowboy brought *existential cool* to the Western figure: it signaled the hope that there was and would always be a free, autonomous American out there on the frontier, what I will call here an *ethical rebel loner*.

In postwar cities, the jazz musician was the emblematic cool existential figure. Through his public, improvisatory negotiation of a denied individuality, and as the creators of an Afro-Western musical culture, the jazz musician was global culture's first non-white rebel. Having been dehumanized at every level, African-Americans practiced cool through rituals of self-affirmation that Albert Murray once called "survival technology." Using the portable cultural resources of music, style, slang (as coded language), humor, and physical gesture, these rituals communicated crucial lessons for anyone in the process of social and self-reinvention, whether oppressed, Othered, or culturally lost. In the nightly public assertion of the self-in-resistance, the jazz musician performed the kind of existential freedom called for by French existentialists Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir.¹⁰

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This work is concerned with three intertwined questions. First, what do we mean when we say a person is cool? Second, how and why did this word and concept emerge into postwar American life?

The word and concept of "cool" first surfaced in the postwar African-American jazz vernacular as an emblematic word synonymous with "relaxed intensity." A cool person projected a charismatic self-possession

that was both “low-key and high-wattage,” as one film critic described jazz singer Abbey Lincoln.¹¹

In an artistic sense, cool came to refer to someone with a signature artistic style so integral as to exude an authentic mode-of-being in the world: Miles, Bogart, Brando, Eastwood, Gréco, Elvis, Lady Day, Sinatra. Such a person created something from nothing and gave the world some new artistic or psychological “equipment for living,” to use a phrase of Kenneth Burke’s. A signature style is *yours* and can only be carried *by you*: it cannot be abstracted except through dilution and commodification since it reflects an individual’s complex personal experience. In this sense, cool was “making a dollar out of fifteen cents,” to pull another phrase from the African-American vernacular. Lester Young was once at a bar when a tenor saxophone solo floated out of the jukebox. “That’s me,” he said happily. As he listened his mood collapsed—he realized it was one of his many imitators. “No, that’s not me,” he said sadly. To steal someone else’s sound or style and capitalize on it has always been *un-cool*, the pretense of posers.¹²

The new canvas for identity was a person’s body and bearing, style and attitude, the outer signs of a new, modern *portable* self. Whether marked by fedoras or leather jackets or tattoos, our bodies were now the mobile canvas of identity. Consider the contrasting public personae and personal styles within the same artistic fields of Bogart and Brando, of Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Rollins, of Lauren Bacall and Audrey Hepburn. Cool was originally associated with being distinctive, singular, and synthetic: an individual created his or her cool out of highly personal resources.

The third question refers to a historical conundrum of postwar cool. How is it that we can consider Bogart, Bacall, Sinatra, and Mitchum cool along with their seeming opposites, Kerouac, Brando, Dean, and Elvis? The answer concerns a necessary remapping of post-1945 cultural history into two distinct phases I will call here *Postwar I* (1945–52) and *Postwar II* (1953–63), as split by the end of the Korean War (1950–53).

In the first phase (1945–52), cool represented dignity within limits, a calm defiance against authority with little expectation of social change. By the late 1950s, in Postwar II, cool inflected toward a certain wild abandon, a bursting of emotional seams reflecting a hopeful surge against

obsolete social conventions. The late 1940s (Postwar I) was a makeshift period of recovery from war, social instability, and trauma, while Postwar II was a period of expansive middle-class prosperity and American triumphalism masking the underlying tensions of the Cold War. In short, there was at first an anxious phase of instability and readjustment focused on American soldiers, followed by a slow-breaking prosperity in the mid-'50s as it registered on a new consumer cohort of teenagers. I treat each phase as a different cultural era. The first five chapters focus on Postwar I as a lived mindset (or *mentalité*) then there is an interlude explaining the shift in cool to set up six chapters analyzing the icons of the late '50s (Postwar II).

In short, the boomer generation had quite different cultural needs than the earlier Depression-and-wartime cohort that settled down in the late 1940s, and this shift can be read through patterns of popular culture. We are more familiar with the cool icons of Postwar II (Brando, Kerouac, Miles Davis), because the term itself surfaced along with them. It is important to keep in mind that cool is not a transhistorical concept: it is neither reducible to the clichés of timeless or classic style nor to its contemporary sense of commodified rebellion.

Here's an initial definition broad enough to cover both postwar phases: *cool* was a public mode of covert resistance.

Noir Cool

Humphrey Bogart's grizzled face was the mask of cool incarnate, with its flat affect, half grimace, and deadpan cynical gestures. It was the expression of your face at rest when life has made you "beat," a word Jack Kerouac co-opted from the African-American vernacular in his visits to jazz clubs in the 1940s. Theirs was a "beat generation," Kerouac moaned to his friend John Clellon Holmes in 1949. At the time he meant "beat" as in worn out, exhausted, almost without hope. Only in the late '50s did he revise his past by transmuting the connotation of "beat" from "exhausted" to "beatific" (or angelic). In effect, Kerouac's eliding of this one word symbolizes the shift in the concept of cool between Postwar I and Postwar II.¹³

The iconic power of the Bogart persona in Postwar I was to embody

the attitude, stance and feeling of being *beat-but-not-beaten*. Bogart's face was the mask of survival—after the Great Depression and the unmasking of capitalist paternalism, after the regressions of fascism and the unmasking of Stalinist tyranny with the Nazi-Soviet pact, after a world war that involved the total mobilization of American life and left an arms race for a legacy. When French film critic André Bazin eulogized Bogart in 1957, he focused on this aspect of his appeal for European audiences: “The *raison d'être* of his existence was in some sense [simply] to survive. . . . Distrust and weariness, wisdom and skepticism: Bogey is a Stoic.” And to be a Stoic is the ancient Greek philosophical precedent for being cool.¹⁴

The representative cinematic character of *noir cool* is Rick Blaine (Bogart), the owner of the Café Américain in *Casablanca* (1942). Living in exile during World War II, Blaine has committed an unnamed crime and has a track record of working for Leftist causes. He has no religion and proclaims neither virtue nor heroism, only that he looks out for number one. That's a lie, as we learn, but it is a front he keeps up so no one takes him for a sap. *Casablanca* manages to catch a little bit of the terror Europeans felt living under the Nazis, an experience not unlike the colonized under the colonizer, and one that has important implications for existentialism.

Cool represents inchoate social and psychological forces taking embodied form. In other words, a new figure of cool embodies the unspoken, unconscious emotional needs that have not yet reached consciousness in young people. Something new has arrived, its powerful energy amorphous and untheorized, but there he or she stands. It is this triangulation of social need, manufactured product, and artistic stylization that sustains the central importance of popular culture to American society. Cool is clarified through its icons: Astaire and Rogers in the '30s, Brando and Elvis in the '50s, Dylan and Hendrix in the '60s, Madonna and Prince in the '80s. In effect, popular culture represents society—or a generation—thinking out loud.

Why was it Bogart rather than James Cagney or Paul Muni who became the embodiment of American mythic cool? Bogart is still number one on the American Film Institute's esteemed list of male Hollywood icons. What were the social, cultural, economic, and political forces in

play that made Rick Blaine the American anti-hero of 1941 and a man for all seasons? And why did cool itself emerge in Hollywood in 1940–41? Why *this* attitude *then*? And why wasn't it the tall, blond, suave, courageous Nazi hunter Victor Lazlo who became the icon of cool in *Casablanca*? “He’s too good,” a student of mine once quipped with a bit of class hostility, and his response gets to the heart of cool.

To be cool is not the same as being good or nice or heroic. To be cool is to disconnect from the religious framework of virtue and vice, of good and bad, of saints and demons. A cool person has engaged his or her dark side and strives to be ethical on his or her own terms. Victor Lazlo is a saint in *Casablanca*: honest and transparent, good and noble, he is guided by larger causes that map onto the messianic. The less saintly among us—that is to say, all of us—struggle simply to control our desires and instincts. And that’s why Rick Blaine is the American anti-hero par excellence as the industrial world recovered from the Depression. Bogart’s public mask revealed the costs of controlling his desires, the effort of suppressing his jealousy, rage, and hopes. The audience knows that Blaine will kill or betray someone if necessary to advance his cause or save a friend. He is not too good for any action in the service of survival.

Cool is a post-Christian concept, a devaluation of the virtuous (or good) man as an unrealistic ideal. Instead, cool assumes every human being has a dark side, and that to ignore its inappropriate temptations—or never chase one’s desires—was to live as a “sap,” a key Depression-era term. Rick Blaine keeps his dark side under control: he drinks in a darkened room, by himself, and lets out his desires only at extreme moments. Blaine both is representative of the influence of Freudian psychology on Hollywood and he also represents the revelations of the Depression in economics and geopolitics. The Depression left in its wake a set of busted ideals of capitalism and democracy while neither pacifism nor virtue was likely to defeat fascism, state Communism, or the Third Reich. Americans needed a new tough public face for the fight just as big band swing gave GIs a powerful, new machine-age soundtrack. *Casablanca* was marketed by the Warner Brothers studio in conjunction with the French government and film industry, a transatlantic pact emblematic of the cultural conversation in literature, film, and music throughout this work. Colloquially, the unconscious is the dark side, and audiences understood you needed to be *noir cool* to maintain spiritual balance. In fact, “tran-

scendent balance” is one of the core definitions of cool as inherited from its West African origins. (See chapter 1.)

The masculine icons of film noir carried themselves as if each embodied the simplest colloquial translation of being cool: a guy who doesn't give a shit what anyone thinks of his actions. Take the case of Robert Mitchum, the protagonist of *Out of the Past* (1947), an iconic film noir second only to *Double Indemnity* (1944). Mitchum was raised in a working-class family of little means and often ran away to ride the rails during the Depression, bonding with vagabonds and fending for himself before he was thirteen. Tall, broad, and almost supernaturally impassive, Mitchum impressed every director with his work ethic, theatrical fellowship, and range of knowledge. He was a lawless soul and a total professional: hardworking, hard drinking, and hard smoking. Mitchum was arrested in a famous marijuana bust in 1948 and shook it off. Forced by the studio to go into rehab for alcoholism, he stopped in for a drink on the ride home. He looked like a veteran boxer who had learned something from every shot he'd ever taken: beat but not beaten. On-screen, Mitchum moved with reptilian aplomb. His cool aesthetic was effected by projecting a smoldering relaxation that created excitement.¹⁵

Actor Harry Carey Jr. grew up as a studio kid and his experience working under Mitchum's wing on the set of *Pursued* (1947) still left him awed a half century later. The only word that came to Carey's mind to describe Mitchum was “cool”—the supreme compliment of American culture—and he recalled correctly that the word was not yet in circulation.

It's over fifty years later . . . and I still haven't met another guy like that in my life. He was just an overwhelming personality. Big. Powerful looking. I mean, I knew Duke Wayne, and Mitchum . . . was a much more overpowering figure than Duke Wayne was, no question. And Mitchum—I don't know if they even had the word then—[but] Mitchum was *cool*. If they didn't have that expression he must have invented it, because he was just the coolest guy that ever lived. He had his own outlook on life and he didn't let anyone interfere with it. Totally opposite from me.¹⁶

Mitchum was “totally opposite” from the young actor and schooled him on commanding respect on the set by being cool: (a) *carry yourself*

in a relaxed, nonchalant manner, as if you can take the job or leave it; (b) *avoid eagerness*—people will take advantage of you; (c) *ignore the director if he gives you a command*—wait for a request; and (d) *treat all co-workers with respect*, regardless of status or salary. Carey was amazed that Mitchum hitchhiked home every night, taking rides in any kind of car, with anyone, to his home up in the hills. Mitchum was a radical egalitarian in a Hollywood that ran on nuances of hierarchical prestige. Carey's testimony carries considerable authority since he was the son of Harry Carey Sr., one of the original Hollywood cowboys, and grew up admiring his father's cohort on the studio back lots.

In essence, film noir was the Western's Other—an urban rather than a rural genre dealing in new masculine archetypes of cool. In the Hollywood studio typology of the 1940s, Bogart and Mitchum inhabited two distinctive cool personae in direct opposition to the epic heroism of John Wayne or the eccentric decency of Jimmy Stewart. There were existential and even noirish Westerns, of course. Yet in contrast to Mitchum, John Wayne was a muscular Christian saint regressed back to the frontier where Americans could imagine themselves innocent even as the apocalypse hung overhead like a cartoon anvil of doom.

In effect, cool represented an inquiry into the reassessment of conventional morality outside of Christian frameworks and Western philosophical grandstanding. Modernity had triumphed but without covering its losses. That's why the cool figure with his private code was—and remains—so appealing. Rick Blaine's cool signaled a populist desire for a new ethics, which, if not found, would result in a reversion to, say, fundamentalist religion. Many human beings seem unable to live without a transcendent belief system or purpose, or certainly this remains true of Americans.

Cool was a sign of change: it signified a populist upsurge searching for new symbols to critique society. Cool is a mask on Bogart's or Mitchum's face, one that is post-traumatic after the Great Depression and World War II. For audiences, this cool mask valorized rational despair as achieved through reflection on transgression, violence, impulsive desire, or criminality. Cool was the public face of postwar survival: it signified the rejection of innocence, optimism, and hypocritical morality. In chapter 2, I analyze film noir as a genre representing a

deferred engagement with the social trauma of the Great Depression. Until now, film scholars and historians have mostly ignored the aesthetic continuity of noir with Depression-era urban life along with its class hostility.

In a capitalist society where social prestige is based on wealth and possessions, the mythos of cool is simple: *You don't own me. You'll never own me.*

Cool signaled an underground search for an ethics to guide individuals into an era of post-Christian imperfectibility.

Cool is a hidden transcript of the postwar era.

In the Beginning Was the Word

Howl is all "Lester Leaps In."

Allen Ginsberg¹⁷

Legendary jazz saxophonist Lester "Pres" Young first used the colloquial phrase "I'm cool" to mean being relaxed and under control, and in his own style. His intention was both psychological and situational: to invoke the phrase meant a speaker felt he or she was in a safe environment. Given the racism of the Jim Crow era, Young meant something like "I'm keeping it together—in my psyche and spirit—against oppressive social forces." To be cool was to keep the various factors of everyday existence in balance.

Jazz was the dominant postwar subculture of American life, especially in New York, so its innovative practices, slang, and styles spread quickly. The word "cool" was quickly adopted by writers and artists with an ear to both jazz and the street, such as Kerouac, Norman Mailer, and Leonard Bernstein. Young was an underground jazz culture-hero of the era, and Kerouac introduced Beat writers to the "spontaneous method of composition" he appropriated from jazz improvisation. Ginsberg scatted Young's composition "Lester Leaps In" to find the right rhythmic phrasing for "Howl." By 1954, even the *New Yorker* referred to Lester Young as the "pres of cool" at the Newport Jazz Festival, picking up on the nickname Billie Holiday gave him as "the president of all the saxophonists."¹⁸

"Cool" was more of a symbolic matrix than a single word. It was com-

plex, elusive, multilayered, and protean in its associations. If “cool” first surfaced in the African-American vernacular in the 1930s, Young redirected it to mean an ideal emotional mode of balance—a calm, cerebral space of relaxation.¹⁹ As Big Bill Broonzy sang to a woman in “Let Me Dig It” (1938), “Let me cool you, baby / before the ice man come.” In the 1940s, to “be cool” meant the same thing as “being chill” does now. After “cool” was appropriated by the dominant white society, young black men found it necessary to recast cool as “chill” and “chillin’” in the early 1980s, a term with obvious linguistic similarities. As for Young’s role in disseminating the concept, Kerouac revered him as “the cultural master of his generation” of modern jazz, the key to its “mysteries as well as masteries,” the cultural leader of its “styles [and] sorrows.”²⁰

“Cool” also referred to a new musical aesthetic developed by Young, a melodic sensibility he rhythmically reconfigured from the styles of two of his influences, white saxophonists Frankie Trumbauer and Jimmy Dorsey. To have a cool approach to a jazz solo meant to favor the following aesthetic elements: flow and understatement, minimalism and relaxed phrasing, deep tone and nonverbal narration. Young’s influence reached across genres and artistic forms such that B. B. King crafted his solo guitar phrasing from the style of “the man they called the President, [who] played that . . . tenor sax with a laid-back attitude that revolutionized the music. Prez invented cool. Rather than state a melody, he suggested it. . . . Prez was an abstract jazz man and he taught me the beauty of modern art.” For B. B. King, only Miles Davis took Young’s subtle cool revolution further by “us[ing] silence better than anyone. . . . I call him [the] King of Cool.” In his autobiography, B. B. King invoked this cool aesthetic of sound and art only for Young and Davis.²¹

Here’s an example of how cool was used among postwar musicians in a recording like Big Joe Turner’s “Cherry Red” (1952). Turner first sings two verses of this raucous ode to sexual pleasure (“I want you to boogie my woogie / until my face turns / cherry red”), and then trombonist Lawrence Brown takes a slow, controlled solo that is the essence of how jazz musicians “talk” on their instruments. At the end of one soulful phrase, Turner shouts to Brown in the studio, “You’re a cool one, you’re a *cool* one!”²² This was a double compliment referring to both Brown’s solo (as musical communication) and his impressive emotional control (as technical skill). When cool seeped out of the jazz subculture of the

1940s, it was the opposite of pretentious style, superficial rebellion, or faddish consumerism, as it is often used today.

Lester Young and Billie Holiday together invented cool as an aesthetic mode of music. By carefully accenting only certain words or notes through rhythmic nuance and a sophisticated manipulation of musical space, they created a low-key, late-night emotional sphere of adult experience. In the process, they transformed the blues into an urbane American romanticism. Young created the style and phrasing while Holiday's vocal swinging built on the subtle power of cool understatement. Holiday's early recordings reveal a talented young blues singer, but while a journeywoman on the road with the Count Basie Orchestra in the late 1930s, she played Young's records "over and over to get the phrasing," Basie vocalist Jimmy Rushing recalled. In fact, Holiday thought of herself as more of an improvising horn player than a singer and she swung *with* the band, not above it. Between 1935 and 1943, backed by the cream of the Basie and Ellington orchestras, Billie Holiday recorded nearly fifty chamber jazz classics, "a milestone in Western music," jazz critic Will Friedwald declaims, on a continuum "from Bach to Mozart to Ornette Coleman." There is a distinctive ease to the two dozen tracks featuring Holiday and Young—including such classics as "All of Me" and "He's Funny That Way"—such that her voice and his saxophone curl around each other, shape the air into sound, rise into smoky swirls of late-night yearning, then settle into your clothes with the bittersweet taste of romance come and gone.²³

In the '50s, Frank Sinatra retooled this cool aesthetic from the late '30s and made swing over into one of the most globally resonant styles. Sinatra and Billie Holiday were born the same year (1915), and his vocal storytelling was permanently altered after seeing Lady Day at a Chicago club in the late '30s. He understood her artistic genius was in narrating songs as if they were short stories. In addition, Sinatra and Young were musical favorites of one another. "I knew Lester well," Sinatra recalled. "We were close friends, and we had a mutual admiration society. . . . I took from what he did, and he took from what I did." Young admired how Sinatra told a story and how he swung. "If I could put together exactly the kind of band I wanted . . . Frank Sinatra would be the singer," Young told Nat Hentoff in 1956. "Really, my main man is Frank Sinatra."²⁴

“Jazz turned the Cold War into a *cool* war,” according to German cultural historian Reinhold Wagnleitner. The Nazis and the Soviets both banned jazz due to its popularity since neither ideological system had a “sonic weapon” to counter its ensemble individuality and rhythmic power, as Wagnleitner argued in “Jazz: The Classical Music of Globalization.”²⁵ In other words, the popular music of Germany and Soviet Russia were retrograde and unable to engage modernity. Jazz was (and is) the antithesis of all collective ideologies due to the artistic freedom built into the musical form, both individually and within an ensemble. This was untenable for totalitarian societies as a reflection of the state’s top-down values.

Through jazz culture, cool became a set of postwar codes: nonchalant attitudes instead of eager obedience, subversive slang instead of polished eloquence, sly symbolic gestures (suggesting unstated beliefs) instead of blind patriotism, emotional detachment instead of phony affability. During the wartime era, cool started off with a few iconic figures: the jazz musician, the private detective, the existentialist author, the bohemian hipster, the swinging vocalist, the politicized worker.

By the mid-’50s, cool came to represent cultural resistance to all authority rather than political resistance to a known oppressor. Dharma bum and poet Gary Snyder, the most dedicated Zen practitioner of the Beats, defined cool among San Francisco bohemians as “our ongoing in-house sense of [being] detached, ironic, fellaheen hip, with an outlaw/anarchist edge.” By 1964, novelist Ken Kesey called the Merry Pranksters’ cross-country road trip “the search for a kool place.”²⁶ “Cool” carried into the early 1960s certain kinds of unheralded music, an alternative canon of underground literature, and a set of films—it functioned as a loose, underground cultural semiotics.

“Cool” was an emblematic term representing a convergence of Anglo- and African-American masculine ideals from different traditions: this intersection is crucial to its popularity and accessibility. For example, the key ’50s phrase “playing it cool” is a combination of valorizing the rational mind—“keep a cool head,” an Anglo-American phrase—with the African-American phrase “keep cool,” which added connotations of strategic silence and public detachment. For African-American men, “playing it cool” represented an embodied philosophy of survival, as Langston Hughes sketched it in near-haiku form in “Motto” (1951):

I play it cool
 And dig all jive
 That's the reason
 I stay alive

The narrator announces he is streetwise and survives through constant vigilance and awareness. To “dig” means to understand at a deep level and “jive” refers both to the latest slang and to the hypocrisy of the dominant white society during Jim Crow. “Playing it cool” concerns surviving with style but ideally it is only a transitional mode. Hughes then imagines a better society based on reciprocal dignity and social equality.

My motto,
 As I live and learn,
 Is:
 Dig And Be Dug
 In Return.

Three years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Langston Hughes suggested that African-American men should *be cool* until things change. Ralph Ellison claimed this was characteristic of black survival and protest: such “resistance to provocation” and “coolness under pressure” were “indispensable values in the struggle [for freedom].”²⁷

By the early 1950s, the phrase “playing it cool” had worked its way into the American vernacular as an emotional mode, a strategy of masking emotion. To play it cool combined performed nonchalance with repressed vulnerability. In “Satin Doll” (1953), a hit for the Ellington orchestra and then a bigger hit for Sinatra, the singer explains his strategy of seduction: “She’s nobody’s fool / so I’m playing it cool as can be.” Elvis riffed the phrase a few years later in “Fools Fall in Love” (1957) — “They’ve got their love torches burning / When they should be playing it cool” — and was in turn answered by his ex-girlfriend, rockabilly queen Wanda Jackson, in “Cool Love” (1957): “You been playing it cool / I been playing a fool / Now don’t you give me that cool love.” In 1952, Ralph Ellison wrote to a friend about shopping his novel *Invisible Man* around, “Good things are being said and the publisher’s hopes are high, but I’m playing it cool.”²⁸

“Playing it cool” was a vernacular phrase picked up from jazz slang that came to represent a new emotional mode and style: *the aestheticizing of detachment*. These popular songs set up a resonant tension between felt emotion and performed nonchalance. *To be a fool* was to be vulnerable and open to love and warmth, while *playing it cool* signified emotional self-control through repression, wariness, circumspection, and calm deliberation. The opposite of *playing it cool* is *playing a fool*: being sincere or emotionally open, wearing your heart on your sleeve, being an eager beaver.

These songs support one of the original coded meanings of “cool” as inherited from both Anglo- and African-American cultural traditions: the strategic silence of the outlaw or the oppressed, of the Zen warrior or the method actor. Postwar cool was a low-key emotional register expressive of a desire for social change that as yet had no form. To be cool in the postwar era was an outward manifestation of hard-fought inner worth. In the aftermath of World War II, there was an awareness of a *cultural* Cold War: monolithic consumer capitalism versus monolithic centralized Communism. Social change seemed unlikely in this polarized geopolitical Cold War moment of two sumo-wrestling superpowers. Of what importance was a single, critical, independent human being? And if change was unlikely, one could not afford to be eager or enthusiastic. For precedent, postwar cool contained elements of stoicism, quietism, revolutionary consciousness, and moral resignation. So the cool person relaxes into a moment but with an edge.

To be cool was to project a calm defiance.

To be cool signified as the opposite of blind patriotism in the United States and marked a person out as an enemy of propagandists of all political stripes.

To be cool was to be a walking indictment of society.

Cool as an American Mythos

And yet if this was only a historical set of meanings, the word “cool” would have evaporated into thin air like so many other jazz slang terms: “heavy,” “groovy,” “drag,” “mellow,” “uptight,” “outasight.” Why doesn’t “cool” lie on the historical junk-pile of once-common generational slang such as “swell” or “solid,” “making the scene” or “cruisin’ for a bruisein’”?

Here's my theory: cool is a myth or, more precisely, it is the password to an American mythos. Like any myth, it contains truths *we don't know* we know—unconscious beliefs, idealistic hopes, submerged fears, historical evasions. “Cool” carries as yet unrealized truths of the twentieth century. “Cool” is a bejeweled word with many aspects. In the postwar generation, it stood for inchoate rebellion against religious morality and corrupt politics, against repressive social norms and runaway technological worship.

Here's the crucial subtext of the concept of cool: the valorization of the individual against larger dynamic forces. The postwar arts discussed in this work are characterized by an attempt to recuperate the individual—meaning, quite simply, to hold out the potential significance of a single person's actions in the face of global economic, social, and technological forces. In retrospect, it is significant that this was precisely the crux of the argument that broke apart Sartre and Camus in the early 1950s over the latter's study of individual rebellion, *The Rebel*. (See chapter 3.)

To be cool meant to walk the line “between good and evil,” to appropriate Nietzsche's phrase. To be cool meant an engagement of *both* good and evil within oneself, to have experimented with your dark side and to have come out in control (or so your convincing act suggests). Cool worked in opposition to traditional middle-class dualisms of right and wrong, moral and immoral. To be cool meant a quest for spiritual balance or authenticity through secular means; it was unrelated to contemporary meanings of celebrity or trendiness.

Even now, with the idea of cool long since commodified and diffused into the vernacular, to say “*he's cool*” or “*she's cool*” still carries a social charge of charisma, style, and integrity, of having developed an edge to walk that is all one's own. It remains an honorific redolent with populist admiration.

In the offices of the dot-com boom of Silicon Valley in the '90s, for example, “cool” retained its power as an iconic term for “the ethos of the unknown,” as Alan Liu learned while researching his study, *The Laws of Cool*. In the technological workplace, “cool” remains the unique signifier of what is as yet “unencoded and unstructured” in our culture of information, and such unconscious, inchoate desire becomes filtered by an “imagination [that] begins with cool.” That “cool” still carries such

emblematic power makes of it a symbol we can follow back in time to a mythic struggle.²⁹

Cool is an inchoate value awaiting explanation.

Cool is a myth invested in the recuperation of individual agency.

Cool and the End of Western Civilization: 1947

European nations suffered a profound spiritual crisis in 1945, as Tony Judt pointed out in his magisterial study of the continent, *Postwar*. How could it have been otherwise? Western civilization was a failure: the Germans became savage primitives slaughtering other races they found inferior and unclean; the French were humiliated as an occupied nation; the British lost an empire. Most Europeans lived on subsistence rations until the late 1950s while contending with the political agenda of the USSR, both within and without. Without the Marshall Plan, the recovery of postwar Europe might have taken another generation. By 1945, after two world wars and the worldwide depression, “the cumulative effect of these blows was to destroy a civilization,” Judt reflects, and yet since 1989, this history has been rewritten in “a self-congratulatory, even lyrical key” obscuring this lost faith in civilization, Europe, and the West.³⁰

In *Year Zero: A History of 1945* (2013), Ian Buruma writes of that year’s palpable understanding among Europeans that “the Old World had collapsed in . . . disgrace, not just physically, but culturally, intellectually, [and] spiritually,” and this was especially true in countries liberated by the Allies (France and Holland) or conquered by them (Germany, Austria, Italy), and then embodied by American soldiers. From 1945 to 1957, Europeans experienced a foreign army of occupation from an exotic American culture first symbolized by “swing music and . . . easygoing GI manners, and they greeted the soldiers as liberators.” Many European theorists consider that being consumers in this era offered Europeans an outlet for redefinition, “a new freedom to define themselves and shape their own identity.” This was certainly an improvement over the Nazi occupation or totalitarian rule yet carved out neither new national nor European identities. This collapse is the subject of Thomas Pynchon’s epic novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1972), set in 1944 amid images of chaotic migrations and the loss of coherent ideology in favor of

technological progress and escapism. As Buruma asks rhetorically in his memoir, “How are societies, or ‘civilization’ (a popular word at the time), put together again?”³¹

The European Age was over for two reasons. First, Nazi Germany treated even non-Aryan white Europeans as Other. As Simone Weil first set out in *The Need for Roots* (1943), Nazi Germany treated Europeans the same as they treated *non-white* colonized peoples, slaughtering and stealing their lands at will. World War II revealed there was indeed but a thin veneer of civilization over the savagery usually kept off-shore in the colonies, just as Freud suggested in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1931). Second, once white Europeans were treated as Others, it led to a slow-breaking recognition of colonial oppression and imperialism among European intellectuals and, more importantly, to a rise in revolutionary sentiment in these same colonies. As Pankaj Mishra reflected recently, Americans and Europeans seemed unaware until the 1960s that “liberal democracies were experienced as ruthlessly imperialist by their colonial subjects.” Historian Mark Mazower was stunned at the lack of intellectual protest or sympathy he found among European leftists for the colonized before 1945: “One examines the resistance record in vain for indications of an interest in the predicament of colonial peoples.” Nearly alone among European intellectuals, Weil saw a straight line of white, Western imperialism from the Roman Empire to European colonialism to Nazi Germany. Under the Nazi occupation in Paris, the French felt eviscerated as individuals, much like the colonized, a process rendered palpable on every page of Jean Guéhenno’s *Diary of the Dark Years*. (See chapter 5.)³²

Even more self-consciously, the eminent British historian Geoffrey Barraclough declared “the end of European history” in 1955. Barraclough spent thirty years recasting his field away from its default mode of universalizing the Eurocentric perspective and “the human” through Enlightenment models. Everywhere in his travels, Barraclough heard from laymen and intellectuals alike of the need for “a new view of European history.” In 1947, he opened a talk this way: “As we sit here under the looming shadow of the atom-bomb—replete, well-fed, with a . . . courageous smile on our faces, but with inward foreboding, like convicts on the morning of the day of execution—it is a good opportunity to take stock of human history, and see what it is all about.”³³ This sentence might

have come from one of Camus's journals. Barraclough continued: "The European age—the age which extended from 1498 to 1947—is over," he wrote and future problems would have to be solved by "humanity as a whole." Three years earlier, Arthur Koestler forecasted the end of two convergent models that had sustained European intellectuals for half a century: (1) the Enlightenment model and (2) the Soviet Union as the model progressive society that would emerge from the revolution of the proletariat. In "The End of an Illusion," Koestler wrote of Communism as a romantic cult then in its death throes all across Europe. The revelation of the Soviet Union's totalitarian oppression in the late 1940s was like "the end of a chapter in history," a now-stunted revolutionary arc of "the whole development of the socialist idea since the French Revolution."³⁴

Cool was a transitional mask of composure necessary for those rebels who realized that Western civilization had come to an end, at least in its European phase. A decade earlier, American critic Joseph Wood Krutch had pondered this question during the Depression in *Was Europe a Success?* (1934) by invoking Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* as a jumping-off point for the continent's implosion. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas began developing his "post-rational ethics" in a series of papers in 1946–47—certainly "rational ethics" translates as "Western ethics."

As individuals and nations must, Europeans rewrote their wartime narratives—first in the late 1940s and then later in the 1980s. The French turned a complex wartime experience of passivity, collaboration, and silence into a myth of heroic Resistance. The Germans channeled lost imperial dreams into a massive economic engine fueled by the core-dumping of guilt. The British gave up their empire for democratic socialism. Italy eliminated Mussolini and fascism from public memory, emphasizing instead the partisans' battle for the North. Israel was born, an act of historical reparations for a millennium of European anti-Semitism. Yet European self-doubt remained an "obsession with a largely intra-Western dispute" over governmental form (liberal democracy vs. Communism or fascism) while a larger shadow loomed: the blowback from centuries of colonial oppression began to rise in Africa and Asia. If in the 1980s, Reagan, Thatcher, and the end of the Cold War reanimated pride in Western civilization, this work attempts to recapture the lived tensions and doubts of the postwar era.³⁵

Cool was an intellectual's mask of composure in the face of nuclear

anxiety, post-Holocaust meditations, and the concurrent rise of oppressed peoples. “In the face of the atomic bomb, everybody felt powerless,” poet Lewis MacAdams reflected in *Birth of the Cool*, his oral history and study of postwar New York artistic culture. “After 1945, the idea that history was a steady progression toward perfection began to seem naïve.” Working against runaway technological visions of centralized power, new reflections on Western imperialism, and visions of the apocalypse, artists were drawn to a new modality: “Cool—a way, a stance, a knowledge—was born.”³⁶

Here’s an evocative intellectual matrix of 1947. In that year, Simone de Beauvoir toured the United States with Richard Wright as her guide: to jazz and Jim Crow, to the lived experience of the Other, and to the idea of race as a social construction. Beauvoir’s excellent travel memoir, *America Day by Day* (1948) is dedicated to Wright and his family; its strongest sections are meditations on American race relations. A year later, Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) launched second-wave feminism using the analogy of race as the model for gender oppression through the concept of the Other. To illuminate the caste position of women, Beauvoir synthesized Wright’s “phenomenology of oppression” with Gunnar Myrdal’s sociology of race, *An American Dilemma* (1944). While writing *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir wrote of her ambition to her paramour, author Nelson Algren: “I should like to write a book as important as this big one about Negroes; Myrdal points [to] . . . analogies between Negroes’ and women’s status; I felt it already.”³⁷

In 1947, the French intellectual journal *Le Temps Moderne*, as edited by the circle around Sartre and Beauvoir, serialized three works alongside one another: Wright’s *Black Boy* (1944), Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), and Sartre’s *What Is Literature?* (1948). All three authors were friends in Paris, all three theorized the subjective landscapes of lived experience, all three influenced each other’s work on colonialism, subjectivity, and existentialism, all three organized together for a political third way during the Cold War. To understand this intellectual moment, Paul Gilroy raised a key question a generation ago: “What would it mean to read Wright intertextually with Genet, Beauvoir, Sartre?”³⁸ It would mean we might start writing a *post-Western*, postwar cultural history since 1945. In fact, it turned out there was no third political way—at least, not until the so-called Nordic model of social democracy.³⁹

Instead, individual rebellion as theorized through existentialism represented a third *cultural* way: ethical self-consciousness at a *cool* remove. Albert Camus theorized the figure of the rebel as a slave who suddenly says no without saying why: this “no” was in essence a verbal line in the sand, an inchoate rebellion. In other words, individual alienation precedes social and political protest. Such an attitude can also be applied to “the problem with no name” that Betty Friedan identified among white middle-class suburban woman in *The Feminine Mystique*. For the first wave of baby boomers, born in the 1940s, authors and theorists such as Camus, Friedan, and Wright built the ground on which ’60s rebels stood. The African-American cultural critic Margo Jefferson recalled her own coming into consciousness as “admiring and trying to emulate the creeds and tastes of ’40s and ’50s hipsters.” Jefferson followed these social rebels as they “modulated and diversified through the Civil Rights and youth movements, the counterculture, the New Left, and Black Power, feminism, and gay rights.” These interrelated movements emerged under the sign of cool. To take only the most salient example from three of this work’s iconic figures, Marlon Brando, Frank Sinatra, and Orson Welles were all staunch civil rights advocates in the ’50s and ’60s.⁴⁰

Almost alone among American intellectuals, playwright and civil rights activist Lorraine Hansberry perceived the rise of non-white peoples as the primary cause of the postwar intellectual malaise. She railed against its manifestation in existentialism in a fictional dialogue between “He” (a Jewish intellectual) and “She” (Hansberry): “What other than the rise of subject peoples has brought Western Europe and its intellectuals to their present state? . . . What has induced the melancholy other than the collapse of empire[?] . . . In the modern world, ‘the West’ has mistaken its own self-glorified image for the world.” *He* is confused so *She* explains: “I am talking about the death of colonialism.” For Hansberry, the existential malaise was a form of intellectual cowardice, an inability to face up to the rise of oppressed peoples. Western writers and intellectuals floundered around with absurdity while anticolonial revolutions grew in strength every day. “To want to be free and equal is *not* to want to be white,” *She* insists, then frames white people globally as a “misguided world-wide minority,” one she hoped was “rapidly losing ground.” *She* maintains that “the gloom and doom of so much of Western art and thought” was simply a white intellectual response to the revolu-

tions of people of color in Africa and Asia, as well as to the civil rights movement. To Hansberry, Camus's melancholic vision and existential literature more generally were part and parcel of the same malaise, the "Death of the West."⁴¹

Hansberry's best friend, James Baldwin, sounded this note even more clearly in 1963: "All of the western nations have been caught in a lie, the lie of their pretended humanism; this means that their history has no moral justification, and that the West has no moral humanity." Even this was a more refined and political elaboration of the clarion note he hit in the final line of *Notes of a Native Son* (1955): "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."⁴²

Cool at the End of World War II

Cool rises from the ashes of Western civilization: it is the endgame of the West provided by its internal dissidents. *Cool* was the sign of an attempt to recuperate the value of individuality after the failure of collective ideologies and it had three separate manifestations. I will first explore the wartime emergence of cool in jazz, film noir, and existentialism, and then analyze their intersections.

Euro-American cool was a working-class male response to both the trauma and capitalist hypocrisy of the Great Depression and found its artistic form in film noir. (See chapters 2, 5, and 7.)

African-American cool was a psychological and stylistic repudiation of the racial performance of Uncle Tomming as modeled by jazz musicians' art, style, and slang. In their role as creators and emblems of a post-Western, Afro-European musical culture, jazz musicians were the emblematic existential figures of cool. The inward turn of this revolution among African-American men required new language: jazz musicians followed Lester Young's lead in disseminating the terminology of cool itself (e.g., "be cool," "cool it!" "Cool!"). In fact, swing-era jazz culture was already influential and potent enough during World War II that certain phrases—such as "in the groove" or "lay it down"—were used as code by French Resistance fighters to transmit secret messages.⁴³ (See chapters 1, 4, 5, and 9.)

Existential cool in France was a response to both the trauma of Nazi occupation and the fallen promise of Marxism as carried out by the Com-

munist Party. In the postwar era, the capital of Western culture moved from Paris to New York, from an exhausted and depleted Europe to a nation mostly untouched by the ravages of World War II. Existential cool found its narrative form in the detached voice of first-person narratives that remain the philosophy's most accessible expressions. These novels were indebted to the hard-boiled American literature of Hemingway, James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and others. (See chapters 3, 5, and 10.)

The triad of jazz, noir, and existential literature has not yet been explored. These were the popular arts of a distinctively American existentialism, itself a philosophy based on imagining each individual as a blank slate, purged of progress, fate, and innate morality. What happens to someone without a framework? In these art forms, he or she survives to prove that there is no life without dignity and then either proceeds to die trying (in film noir or existentialist fiction) or to turn one's self inside out (in jazz solos or method acting). Sartre distilled existentialism into three little words, "existence precedes essence." What will you do with your existence if your essence comes without a blueprint?

Jazz musicians sounded out the invisible structures of the postwar cage, both personal and social. The iconic actors of film noir walked such a walk. The existentialist writers came up with a new way to talk such a talk. All were only convincing inasmuch as a gait, a narrative tone, or an instrumental voice can communicate an honest rendition of personal experience. As Charlie Parker quipped, "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn." And it won't register in your bearing: this is the earned credit for trying to walk the daily tightrope and tell your story when you get to the other side.⁴⁴

For jazz musicians, cool was a stage persona, a philosophy of relaxation, and a survival strategy. The mask walled off the invasive white gaze and allowed the deep excavation of experience transmuted into emotional communication and spontaneous art. In film noir, cool manifested as the world-weary stoicism of the private detective, a man whose integrity is a threat to both the cops and his clients. In existentialist fiction, it is the dispassionate narrative voice of a man who suppresses violence and sexual desire to project the illusion of emotional self-control.

Film noir has sometimes been considered something of a pulp existentialism, but it has rarely been analyzed as such. Some scholars pay lip

service to the notion of the jazz musician as an existential figure, but there is little rigorous analysis of the musicians or the literature they inspired. In jazz, the mask of cool allowed your music its beauty or its protest—to burn or to churn—while the suited-up postwar musician remained cool at the core, his face blank, his body controlled. In existentialist fiction, the detachment of the narrative voice and the male protagonist serve to flatten underlying traumatic loss: it signifies emotionlessness rendered in style.⁴⁵

Antonio Gramsci theorized “common sense” as a set of agreed-upon values in a society that manifest in distinctive artistic ways for separate social classes or ethnic groups. In this way, existentialist concepts might manifest in jazz for college students and African-Americans, in film noir for white working-class Americans, and in French literature and philosophy for intellectuals and self-conscious social rebels. In a variety of ways, cool was on the street and on the screen, on the tongue and on the page, on the air and in the music.

My theory of the origins of cool unifies the affinities of these three concurrent cultural forms around the search for new masculine modes of subjectivity and identity in the face of modernity, trauma, mass society, technological encroachment, and geopolitical crisis. In Postwar I, the mask of cool affirmed the sheer act of survival for audiences whose belief systems—religious, cultural, ideological, and teleological—had been shattered.

The cool mode was post-traumatic yet a form of affirmation.

Camus declared his philosophical intent in 1954: “I imagine a first man who starts at zero.” The events of 1945 blew up the Western world: its social ideal of rational men (not women), its false Cartesian opposition of mind and body, its white racial arrogance. As early as 1939, Beauvoir suggested to Sartre that he abandon the ideas of “Cartesian thought” and revolutionary salvation: “The only thing left was to begin everything over again.”⁴⁶ Or as Walker Percy distilled Camus’s challenge to American writers: “How can one be a decent and moral man in an absurd world?” Camus sketched a fragmentary answer in a late journal entry: “*The First Man* . . . He did not want to have, he did not want to possess, he wanted [only] to be. For that only obstinacy [is needed].”⁴⁷

How do you look if you have the intellectual or spiritual guts to stare at zero? Maybe beat like Bogart. Maybe blank and impassive like Bird

(Charlie Parker). Maybe beautifully diffident like Barbara Stanwyck. In any case, you'd try to look cool.

Being cool was the performance of calm in the face of ideological breakdown.

Cool is what you need when the master narratives collapse (God and Christianity, civilization and nationalism, racial superiority and patriarchy) and the counternarratives fail (Marxist revolution, isolationism, primitivism). Cool is a transitional mode of a self-in-motion, surviving. For these reasons, the setting for Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952)—the first truly postmodern work—had to be abstract and post-apocalyptic, set in a nameless post-Western nowhere without buildings or markers, a wide spot in the road where two wisecracking tramps wait for a message from God . . . who (it turns out) isn't coming. In an unconscious borrowing from both the philosophical past and the African-American present, European and American men turned to a renewed stylish stoicism—cool—to emotionally weather the postwar spiritual crisis.

Cool was an emergent structure of feeling in postwar America.



Figure 2. Lester Young brought the concept of cool into American culture (Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University).