

Trading Meanings: The Breath of Music in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

NICHOLAS F. PICI

"We played music in the house all the time," recalls Toni Morrison in a 1992 interview with Dana Micucci (275). Indeed, Morrison was inundated with music and song during her childhood years in Lorain, Ohio. Morrison's mother, Ramah Willis, was just one of many musicians on her mother's side: she was a jazz and opera singer and played piano for a silent movie theater, while Morrison's grandfather was a violin player (Micucci 275, Fussel 283). Morrison remembers how her mother sang everything from Ella Fitzgerald and the blues to sentimental Victorian songs and arias from *Carmen* (Fussel 284). That music should play such an important role in much of Morrison's writing, then, will probably come as no surprise for her readers. Virtually all of her novels touch upon music in some way or another. And whether that music is slave work songs, spirituals, gospel, or the blues, and whether the vehicle she uses to convey this musical experience is content, language, form, or a blending of all three, the musical motifs are unmistakable in Morrison's writing and inextricable from it. In the case of her second-most recent novel, though, music becomes an even more dominant, overriding force and assumes a role that is, ultimately, more important thematically and aesthetically to the novel's own peculiar artistic integrity than any of the roles music plays in her earlier novels. Morrison's *Jazz*, in effect, breathes the rhythms, sounds, and cadences of jazz music, radiating and enunciating, reflecting and recreating the music's central ideas, emotions, and aural idiosyncrasies perhaps as well as written prose can.

In investigating this topic, a two-pronged approach is taken. First, I endeavor understand exactly *how* and *to what extent* Morrison incorporates elements of jazz music in her novel *Jazz*; subsequently, questions as to *why*

Morrison establishes jazz as a central concern of the novel can be explored. To demonstrate how jazz manifests itself in the novel, four areas are examined: 1.) Morrison's own thoughts and words on the subject; 2.) the content of the novel itself; 3.) the stylistic techniques and language of the novel; and 4.) the structure of the novel. After discovering some of the ways in which Morrison uses and recreates the effects of jazz, one can then begin pondering the significance of this motif and begin speculating about how jazz clarifies Morrison's vision and amplifies the overall meaning of the novel.

Morrison on Jazz

Morrison, as always, seems very willing to discuss the methods and aims of her writing in the case of music and *Jazz*, too. She is most revealing about her ideas regarding this subject in a 1996 interview with David Hackney. In responding to a question about the novel's structure, Morrison says that she "was very deliberately trying to rest on what could be called generally agreed upon characteristics of jazz" (5). She then goes on to address about five distinct characteristics or qualities of jazz music. First, Morrison notes that "jazz is improvisational; that is to say, unanticipated things can happen while the performance is going on, and the musicians have to be alert constantly" (5). Along these same lines, she describes the music as egalitarian, in that a single musician never "dominates the whole performance"; this is "exactly" why, in her novel, Morrison employs multiple voices and viewpoints to narrate the story: "No voice is the correct one, the dominant one" (6). Third, Morrison contends that jazz compositions tend to follow a general musical pattern or arrangement in which a coherent melody is constructed, dissolves away, and eventually returns: "When I listen to jazz," she remarks, "or as anyone does, to a jazz performance, whatever [the musicians are] playing, you hear the melody and then it goes away or seems to, or they play against it or around it or take it off to another zone. Then sometimes it comes back and you can recognize it" (6). In applying this concept to her novel, Morrison says, "I wanted that narrative line or melody to be established immediately in the

first pages, and when the question becomes whether the narrator was right in his or her expectations of exactly what the story was, that is the 'melody being taken away' (6).

A fourth characteristic of jazz, according to Morrison, locates the music in a historical framework, the author suggesting that she intended for the music to function as an embodiment of the ethos of the African-American experience during the 1920s, the time in which the novel's story takes place. *Jazz*, in this way, acts as a "continuation," so to speak, of *Beloved*, a novel that, according to Morrison, reverberates with "classical, spiritual gospel" (6) undertones. More specifically, she reveals that "for the beginning of the twentieth century, I wanted that feeling of dislocation and inventiveness and startling change that was representative of those enormous migrations that were taking place among African Americans, and certainly was characteristic of the music" (6).

Finally, Morrison claims that jazz music is instilled with a certain degree of romanticism, a romanticism dramatized in the novel most poignantly via the central love story (or stories). Speaking to this notion of romance, she talks about the true-to-life story upon which her novel is based, a story in which an eighteen year old girl (who becomes Dorcas in the novel) insisted on allowing the ex-lover who shot her to (Joe Trace in the novel) get away; the girl, not unlike Dorcas, eventually bled to death, having told no one who fired the shots. Morrison comments on her initial reactions to this story: "That seemed to me, when I first heard it, since she was only eighteen years old, so romantic and so silly, but young, so young. It is that quality of romance, misguided but certainly intense, that seems to feed into the music of that period" (6). She goes on, "I was convinced that that reckless romantic emotion was part and parcel of an opportunity snatched to erase the past in which one really didn't have all those choices, certainly not the choices of love" (6). Finally, referring to the character of Dorcas, Morrison says, "I wanted this young girl to have heard all that music, all the speakeasy music, and to be young and in the city and alive and daring and rebellious" (6).

In other interviews and essays, as well, Morrison speaks specifically of jazz or related topics and considerations. In a 1981 interview with Thomas LeClair, for instance, she describes jazz as "open on the one hand

and both complicated and inaccessible on the other" (28). More generally, in her essay "Memory, Creation, and Writing," she offers a paradigm for what could be called a black aesthetic:

If my work is to faithfully reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions. (389)

Incidentally, these traits of the black aesthetic also characterize what could be called the "jazz aesthetic" and, moreover, all seem to inform Morrison's novel *Jazz*. Finally, in her essays "The Site of Memory" and "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison elaborates upon her notions of reader participation and communality of the artistic experience — qualities that are plainly analogous to jazz music, though not explicitly related as such in these essays. In describing her writing process, for instance, Morrison maintains that she "must provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance" ("Rootedness" 341). In the same vein, she declares, "What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along" ("Site" 121). *Jazz*, as will become clear later, creates just such an environment of intimacy and reader-writer interaction.

Musicians and Scholars on Jazz

Keeping in mind Morrison's own conception of and thoughts about jazz, it will now be helpful, in order to verify the reliability of the author's statements, to look at how jazz scholars and musicians characterize their art form. In his *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, jazz scholar and musician Mark Gridley defines jazz, in the most general sense, as music possessing two basic elements: improvisation and jazz swing feeling. Improvisation is, essentially, spontaneous musical composition: when musicians

"improvise," they make up the notes as they go along. Gridley compares improvisation to "the impromptu speaking each of us do every day when we talk 'off the cuff.' We use words and phrases that we have used before. But now we improvise by using them in new ways and new orders that have not been rehearsed" (4). This is similar to a jazz musician's ability to employ and manipulate musical notes, chords, phrases, and sounds in new orders on the spot without previous rehearsal. Originality, surprise, and unexpected results arise from and are the benefits of improvisation.

More difficult to describe is swing feeling. In laymen's terms, music "swings" or "grooves" if it "makes you want to dance, clap your hands, or tap your feet" (Gridley 5). This compulsion to move one's body along with the music can result from several factors: a constant tempo; cohesive group sound between band members; a pleasurable rhythm; and "spirit" (that ineffable, intangible "energy" or "soul" that radiates from certain kinds of music). Gridley notes, however, that for "music to swing in the way peculiar to jazz, more conditions have to be met" (6). Swing feeling, in the jazz sense, is characterized by syncopation, an alternation of tension and release in the listener, and swing eighth note patterns. Syncopation occurs when a musician accents off-beat notes, usually in an irregular manner; it is, in other words, the "occurrence of stress where it is least expected" (Gridley 6). The feelings of tension and release evoked in listeners by the "alternation of more and less activity in a jazz line" (6) also contribute to swing feel. The swing eighth note pattern is a specific sequence and duration of notes often played in jazz music—its implications are moot for my purposes here.

Other key aspects of jazz become crucial not only when defining what this music is but also when exploring the relationship between jazz and Morrison's literature. First, jazz music and performances are invariably multi-instrumental: that is, jazz is typically a band-oriented music, rather than solo music. Trios, quartets, quintets, and big bands composed of various instrumentation are the typical "vehicles" of jazz music. These bands usually feature one or two primary soloists and a rhythm section that provides accompaniment and additional soloing.

Another important feature of jazz is its use of polyrhythms to create a sense of tension and complexity in its sound. Polyrhythmic music is

characterized by the sounding of different rhythms at the same time and is usually accomplished by playing rhythms of two or four pulses over rhythms of three pulses. "Polyrhythms," according to Gridley, "are created by patterns which pit a feeling of four against a feeling of three. . . . In addition to that, the onset of one pattern is often staggered in a way which results in something less than perfect superimposition atop another pattern" (364). For instance, in a typical modern jazz piece, several different rhythms can be heard simultaneously: there is a specific rhythm in the saxophone's melodic line, one in the bass line, the rhythms created by the pianist's two hands, and the rhythms emanating from each of the drummer's four limbs (364).

A further outstanding characteristic of jazz involves the repetition of brief patterns. Riffs, short musical phrases repeated throughout a song which are common to jazz music, can function in two distinct ways: "Sometimes they are theme statements, and sometimes they are backgrounds for improvised solos" (129). Along these lines, many jazz compositions revolve around a distinctive "melody or prewritten theme," known as the "head" (402). The head, as suggested by Morrison, is the particular melody which is established, disappears, and re-appears during the course of the jams and improvised solos of a jazz piece. "Jig-A-Jug," a raucous, upbeat tune written by tenor saxophonist Joshua Redman, clearly illustrates such a head arrangement: a catchy, melodic theme established in the first minute and a half of the song precedes ten minutes of intense improvisation and soloing by each of the four band members (a pianist, bassist, drummer, and Redman on sax); ultimately, the head melody returns, providing the listener with a familiar sound and a sense of resolution and release.

One final characteristic of jazz to consider is the music's call-and-response format. Call-and-response occurs in two ways in jazz. First, since much of jazz is improvised, the musicians in a jazz group could be said to be constantly communicating with each other using their special brand of musical language: they inhabit a musical environment in which one musician must be constantly responding to and provoking the others. More specifically, in true jazz call-and-response format, as Gridley explains, one member or section of a jazz group "offers a musical phrase that is like a

question" while another member or section "follows it with a new phrase that is like an answer" (47). This call-and-response "communication" becomes even more evident when musicians "trade fours" or "trade twos" between themselves—that is, when they alternate solos between each four- or two-measure section of a song (14). Secondly, the term "call-and-response" can refer to the audience-musician interplay that almost inevitably arises at a live jazz performance. It is not uncommon for the audience to play a vital role at a jazz show. For instance, audience members might yelp, shout, or clap at the resolution of a particularly inspiring jam, or they might even dance their way through an entire set of music. Such gestures do not simply show the audience's passive approval; more importantly, they become immediate ways of prodding, provoking, and energizing the musicians, thereby creating a peculiar matrix of constant interaction and interplay between artist and observer.

While this overview of jazz is by no means complete or even very substantial, it does cover the basics of jazz sound and theory and, by acting as both a point of departure and homing beacon, can help the reader to navigate with clearer direction through the churning seas of Morrison's novel. Some striking overlaps, in fact, may already be apparent between Morrison's understanding of jazz and the more technical conceptions of the music.

Jazz and Subject Matter

The subject matter of *Jazz* provides the first body of textual evidence indicating the presence of jazz music in Morrison's novel. In examining the novel's subject matter, the first point of significance is that the word "jazz" appears nowhere within the text of the novel: after greeting the reader on the cover and title page, the term never resurfaces inside the novel. Nevertheless, indirect references to and suggestions of the music are ubiquitous. This "cloaked" music, sometimes mentioned fleetingly and sometimes discussed in greater depth, takes on a variety of appellations in the novel: it is called "race music" (79) by the narrator; Joe Trace describes it as "sooty"; and Alice Manfred, giving her Puritanical

slant on this music of the city, calls it "lowdown music" (57) and "juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house, music" (59). The fact that Morrison never refers to the music specifically as "jazz" simply adds to the mystery, elusiveness, and uncertainty that permeate the novel and give the novel its distinctive flavor.

This music is described in a number of different ways and in a variety of contexts throughout the novel. The "Fifth Avenue drums" show up periodically, usually establishing the background for the "belt-buckle tunes vibrating from pianos and spinning on every Victrola" (59) in the City. The sounds of jazz fill the streets of the City day and night, careening off the rooftops where the makeshift juke bands play. The novel's elusive narrator describes just such a scene in the following section:

Young men on the rooftops changed their tune; spit and fiddled with the mouthpiece for a while and when they put it back in and blew out their cheeks it was just like the light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind. You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played. The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not lowdown the way they love to do it, but high and fine. . . . On the rooftops. Some on 254 where there is no protective railing; another at 131 . . . and somebody right next to it, 133. . . . So from Lenox to St. Nicholas and across 135th Street, Lexington, from Convent to Eighth I could hear the men playing their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk. . . . That's the way the young men on brass sounded that day. Sure of themselves, sure they were holy, standing up there on the rooftops, facing each other at first, but when it was clear that they had beat the clarinets out, they turned their backs on them, lifted those horns straight up and joined the light just as pure and steady and kind of kind. (196-197)

Here, by viewing them as holy, the narrator, in a sense, deifies these rooftop musicians. On another level, this passage also brings to light Morrison's historical accuracy with regard to the instrumentation of combo jazz of the 1920s. Early jazz bands were usually composed of a mixture of the following instruments: trumpet or cornet, clarinet, trombone, tuba, piano, drums and occasionally saxophone, guitar, and string bass (Gridley 54, 82). Throughout the novel, Morrison remains faithful to jazz history by referring only to these particular instruments and by never mentioning instruments that had not yet come on the jazz scene. On yet another level,

the language of the passage, in its non-standard punctuation, curious repetition of words, and distinct rhythmic feel, begins to mirror the characteristic musical forms of jazz—a feature that will be discussed later.

It is largely through Alice's eyes, though, that many of the impressions of jazz in the novel's subject matter are given. In the following passage, for example, Alice offers her take on the overpowering effects of jazz music:

... the dances were beyond nasty because the music was getting worse and worse with each passing season the Lord waited to make Himself known. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled belts. Lower and lower, until the music was so lowdown you had to shut your windows. . . . Because you could hear it everywhere. Even if you lived, as Alice Manfred and the Miller sisters did, on Clifton Place . . . you could still hear it, and there was no mistaking what it did to the children under their care—cocking their heads and swaying ridiculous, unformed hips. (56)

Maintaining this outlook throughout the course of the novel, Alice tries (in vain) to keep her niece Dorcas, whom she has long provided for, away from the "City seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day" (67). Dorcas, however, does "succumb" to the music's seductive powers, as illustrated in the party scene during which Dorcas and her friend, Felice, fall under the spell of the "fast music" (64). In this particular episode, the narrator reveals that "illusion is the music's secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates" (65). Alice, furthermore, feels that the music urges people to "do wrong" (67) and that it "made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law" (58). Even jazz lyrics, in Alice's view, are "greedy, reckless words, loose and infuriating" (60). At the same time, though, Alice also senses tremendous hostility and an underlying anger lurking beneath the "flourish and roaring seduction" (59) of the music; she even feels that the music "had something to do with the silent black women and men" (56-57) marching in protest of the July 1917 race riots in St. Louis.

The most interesting (and problematical) aspect of the novel's musical subject matter, though, lies not in its sheer diffuseness but in its peculiar changeability. The music, as depicted in the novel, is mutable, viewed by

different people in different ways. It assumes various identities depending on the perceiver and the circumstances in which it is being referenced. Sometimes it is sordid, provocative, disorderly, and chaotic; other times, divine, exciting, restoring, and invigorating. Putting the phenomenon into a cultural-historical framework, Gerald Early comments upon the divided response jazz music received during this time:

Jazz in whatever form, was not a completely respectable music in the twenties. . . . Americans disliked jazz because as rib-rock Protestants they were uncomfortable with the idea of music's existing for sensual pleasure, for the joy of the vulgarity that is symbolized and elicited. This fear transcended color; many blacks ostracized their brothers and sisters who played this music, and it was common for the believers to call jazz and blues "the devil's music." (177)

But at the same time, as Early is quick to point out, jazz was also being viewed by many Americans as "sacred music," as a "transcendent" art form (177). In this light, Morrison's characters can be perceived as microcosmic representations of America's conflicting, dual response to jazz during the musical form's advent in the 1920s.

Counterpointing Alice's "fire-and-brimstone" view of jazz music, the penultimate scene of the novel illustrates jazz music's marked powers of restoration. In this particular scene, Violet and Joe have apparently come to terms with their relationship and their recent calamitous past; and as Violet, Joe, and Felice talk in their apartment, a jazz song creeps in their window from a neighboring home, helping to re-new Violet and Joe's love for each other, fueling the couple's "dance of reparations," and indicating their future happiness or "felicity" together. It is Felice, in fact, who, in the following passage, recounts this episode: ". . . the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing" (215). The "rooftop passage" mentioned earlier represents another counterpoint to Alice's outlook. In her apotheosis of jazz musicians, the narrator describes the soothing, conciliatory grace of jazz music: "You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played," these "holy" rooftop musicians (196-197). In these instances in the novel, music acts, in the

words of Richard Hardack, as a "rope, a bridge, a re-cording" (466), as a healer rather than as a perpetuator of sin, disorder, and violence.

Thus, it could be argued that Morrison is using the subject of jazz music in her novel as a metaphor for the ever-changing conditions of African-American life in the 1920s and as a reflection of the perpetual human struggle between right and wrong—a struggle magnified in the historical, socio-cultural specificity of black experience during this time. When Violet and Joe "train-dance" (36) into the City for the first time, for instance, as their movement from country to city and from South to North draws nearer and becomes more real, the high-spirited, chaotic sounds of jazz take the fore and help to reinforce the atmosphere of change, hope, and anxiety that envelops the characters and the narrative as a whole.

Jazz and Stylistics

Morrison, however, goes beyond mere content when attempting to recreate a distinctive jazz "feel" and sound via the novel's style and structure. She employs repetition, unconventional punctuation, and internal rhyme to create a polyrhythmic background for narrative "improvisations"; and she also employs call-and-response techniques, verb tense shifts, and jazz imagery in order to enhance the jazzy ambiance of the narrative.

First, words and phrases are repeated between and within certain lines in the novel, thereby operating as analogues to jazz riffs. For instance, when Golden Gray, describing the suffering he feels as a result of having never met his father, relates his feelings in terms of having a severed limb; and in this description, certain words and phrases are repeated both to emphasize meaning and to enhance rhythmic effect:

Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered, the sliced flesh and tubes of blood cut through, shocking the bloodrun and disturbing the nerves. They dangle and writhe. Singing pain. Waking me with the sound of itself, thrumming when I sleep so deeply it strangles my dreams away. There is nothing for it but to go away from where he is not to where he used to be and might be still. Let the dangle and the writhe see what it is missing; let the pain sing to the dirt where he stepped in the place where he used to be and might be still.
(158)

Golden Gray's "singing pain" echoes throughout this passage, while the phrase "where he used to be" is included (almost awkwardly) in two consecutive sentences. "Blood" courses through the second sentence of the passage, appearing twice within a six-word interval. The "dangling and writhing" of nerves also receives added emphasis through repetition.

Along the same lines, in the "rooftop passage" mentioned earlier, the phrase "kind of kind" (196-197), repetitive and strange and provocative in and of itself, shows up in consecutive paragraphs to mimic the supposed rhythms emanating from heights above. Other examples of repetition and riff-like passages suffuse the novel. This is meaningful because, as Henry Louis Gates asserts in *The Signifying Monkey*, "the riff is the central component of jazz improvisation. It is a figure, musically speaking, a foundation, something you could walk on" (105). Thus, much like jazz riffs, which provide an underlying foundation for the meandering jazz solo, these repetitions in language provide a stable infrastructure within Morrison's otherwise circuitous narrative. Moreover, these repetitions add to the novel's rhythmic movement, compelling us to read the text aloud in order to get the full effect of the language's "musicality." Alan Rice, in fact, asserts that the rhythmic movement engendered in Morrison's novel via use of repetition is the most important attribute of Morrison's "total jazz aesthetic" (424). Rice contends, "It is Morrison's conscious use of repetition as a literary device which foregrounds the musicality of her novels and makes them resemble the involved, convoluted, non-linear, and improvisatory solos of the African-American musicians she values so much" (424). These riffs, Rice argues, serve in authenticating Morrison's "jazzy, prose style" (425).

In his close, stylistic analysis of *Jazz*, Eusebio Rodrigues comments not only on the presence of repetition but also on the effects of punctuation and rhyme within Morrison's prose. In one of the passages from the novel that Rodrigues analyzes, the novel's narrator describes Alice's aversion to jazz music: "It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel house, tonk-house, music. It made her [furious] for doing what it did and did and did to her" (59). Rodrigues, offering a rather convincing stylistic analysis of these lines, contends that the "harsh blare of consonants, the staccato generated by the commas that

insist on hesitations needed to accelerate the beat, the deliberate use of alliteration and of words repeated to speed tempo—all come together to recreate the impact of jazz” (735). Dissecting another section of the novel in a similar manner, Rodriguez goes into even greater detail. In this particular passage of the novel, Dorcas is lying in bed, comforted by the fact that the infectious sounds of the city music are not far off:

Dorcas lay on a chenille bedspread, tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating the skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else. (59-60)

Rodrigues responds in the following manner:

Language [here] is made to syncopate, the printed words loosen up and begin to move, the syntax turns liquid and flows. It is not just the jargon—licorice stick for clarinet, ivories for the piano, skins for drums—but the sounds of jazz that arise from the text and hit the ear.

The syllables “ick” and “ing” act in counterpoint. The “ick,” first sounded in “tickled,” continues to sound, like a pair of drumsticks clicking, in *licking*, *licorice*, *stick*, *ticking*. . . . The participial ending “-ing” (set up by the first “knowing”) is repeated to maintain a continuous flow of movement: *licking*, *tickling*, *beating*, *blowing*, *knowing*, *going*. Internal echo-rhymes (“where,” “somewhere”) quicken the tempo. . . . The whole passage ends with a period that is no period, for the voice does not drop but continues to sound. “Or else” is indefinite, incomplete, it is a warning, or else a promise. It resonates, and how does one punctuate a resonance? (735)

Countless other passages in the novel could be analyzed and interpreted in a similar fashion—and legitimately so. Thus, Rodrigues’ close textual analyses help shed light upon the stylistic care and artistic deliberation Morrison puts forth in crafting the language of this novel—or any of her novels for that matter.

In further attention to form, Morrison also manipulates her sentence structures and employs non-standard punctuation to impart a jazz-like, polyrhythmic tone in her novel. Intentional sentence fragments and run-ons abound (as they do in most of Morrison’s novels), imbuing her style with

either a staccato, stop-start feel or else an effusive, legato-like flow. For example, in the following passage in which Alice contemplates Joe's murdering of her niece, Morrison breaks up nouns and adjectives with periods, allowing them to stand on their own as complete syntactic units: "It [the killing] had not been hard to do; it had not even made him think twice about what danger he was putting himself in. He just did it. One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-his name man" (73). Even though a stop-start flow is produced here, the "multi-descriptor" ("everybody-knows-his-name man") counters this disjointedness; contributes a rhythmic, improvisational feel to the broken idiom; and transforms the passage into a multi-rhythmic unit—a unit that reflects very directly the African American tradition of blending elements of language and music.

In contrast to such fragmented syntax, Morrison, in the middle of the following passage in which the narrator celebrates the City's dark appeal, strings together several phrases and words without any sort of punctuation:

And if that's not enough, doors to speakeasies stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman to decide on the key. She makes up her mind and as you pass by informs your back that she is daddy's little angel child. The City is smart at this: smelling and good and looking raunchy; sending secret messages disguised as public signs: this way, open here, danger to let colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room stop dog on premises absolutely no money down fresh chicken free delivery fast. And good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own. (64)

In addition to its run-on segment, this passage ends with the slant rhyme "moans" and "own": reminiscent of a jazz lyric, this rhyming works to heighten the overall jazz feel of the passage.

Such syntactical patterns mimic jazz in a number of ways. In playing a solo, a jazz musician may slur the individual notes of a phrase together in a legato fashion, then, while still in the same solo, switch to a staccato mode in which the notes are clearly and abruptly terminated after being sounded—much like Morrison's alternating between fragments, run-ons, and standard "complete" sentences. Similarly, a jazz composition as a

whole may be digressive and meandering while at the same time incorporating fragmented phrases and irregular pauses and rests throughout. Moreover, jazz, at its roots, intends to thwart listener expectations with its unorthodox, experimental rhythmic and harmonic patterns; likewise, Morrison tries to reach the same effect by unusual, non-standard punctuation and sentence structure.

Morrison also employs certain call-and-response techniques to further enhance and color her novel with jazz hues. For example, in the following passage, the narrator poses a series of questions and answers regarding the "unarmed women" of the socio-gender "wars" being waged at the time:

Who were the unarmed ones? Those who found protection in church and the judging, angry God whose wrath in their behalf was too terrible to bear contemplation. He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them, He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? Yes but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. Were the women fondled in kitchens and the back of stores? Uh huh. Did police put their fists in women's faces so the husbands' spirits would break along with the women's jaws? Did men . . . call them out of their names every single day of their lives? Uh huh. (77-78)

This question-answer format very much resembles the call-and-response interplay between minister and congregation in traditional black churches and creates a texture much like that of a jazz jam session in which musicians "talk" to each other and prod one another on with notes and phrases that sound like questions and answers. It is this type of antiphonal call-and-response technique that Rice submits as a primary element of Morrison's jazz aesthetic (426).

In addition to this intra-textual call-and-response technique, Morrison, as she attempts to do in all of her work, also lays the groundwork for reader participation within her novel. This reader engagement manifests itself most markedly when Morrison (or, rather, the narrator) switches, rather disarmingly, to a second person point of view, as she does periodically throughout the novel. For instance, in describing the scenery around the cabin Golden Gray comes upon during his search for his father,

the narrator uses "you" with a double signification to confront and challenge the perceptions of both the reader and Golden Gray: "The sigh he [Golden Gray] makes is deep, a hungry air-take for the strength and perseverance all life, but especially his, requires. Can you see the fields beyond, crackling and drying in the wind? The blade of blackness rising out of nowhere, brandishing and then gone?" (153).

In the last lines of the novel, Morrison employs a similar tactic. Here, envious of Violet and Joe's "public love," the narrator expresses her wishes to experience the same kind of uninhibited love:

I . . . have . . . longed to show it—to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. . . .*

But I can't say that aloud, I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

Again, the narrator could be referring to her imagined lover when using "you"; but she may also be acting as a soundingboard for Morrison herself who seems to challenge the reader to revel in the literary experience. Interpreting this final passage, Paula Gallant Eckard maintains that "the narrator speaks directly to us"; she then astutely points out, "In all probability, our hands are holding the written text itself, and as readers we 'make' and 'remake' its music, language and meaning" (19). It is with such artifice that Morrison provides, in her own words, the "places and spaces so that the reader can participate" ("Rootedness" 341), thereby creating a literary environment that necessitates reader involvement. Such an environment reflects strikingly the dynamics of a live jazz performance, during which call-and-response audience participation invariably engenders an interactive musical discourse between musicians and listeners.

Intensifying the novel's jazz feel and tone, verb tense shifts help create a sense of ever-changing perspective. Throughout the text, tense oscillates continually between present, past, and present progressive, oftentimes shifting without warning or without clear reason or discrimination. Such changes in tense are suggestive of the shifting perspectives evident in a

jazz composition when the different band members share the solo spotlight, each offering his or her own "view" or interpretation of the tune being played. These tense shifts are also reminiscent of changing time signatures—a trend pioneered in jazz by pianist Dave Brubeck and his experiments with compound meters. In Brubeck's "Blue Rondo A La Turk," for instance, the meter alternates between an unorthodox 9/8 and regular 4/4 time; this odd juxtaposition of meters creates a clear and unequivocal tension (during the 9/8 measures) and release (when the 4/4 measures are played). Similar sensations of tension and relaxation will almost certainly occur while reading Morrison's novel, the author forcing the reader to contend with and reconcile the novel's many tense shifts.

The final feature of Morrison's jazzy stylistic technique, as Eckard alleges, involves the author's consistent use of certain jazz imagery and words specific to jazz in her novel. Even the first word of the novel, "Sth," recalls the sound of a ride cymbal (the principal cymbal of jazz drum rhythms) or, as Rodrigues suggests, the "muted soundsplash of a brush against a snare drum" (733). Eckard is more specific, though, in her analysis and observes that "[j]azz terms permeate the text" (16). Eckard then goes on to give textual evidence to support her claim, pointing to words like "triplets, duets, quartets" (*Jazz* 50) and "scatty" (*Jazz* 89) as clear jazz references. Executing a close reading of her own, Eckard suggests that the following passage of *Jazz*, in which the narrator describes Violet's hairdressing techniques, is "rendered through musical terms" (16):

When the customer comes and Violet is sudsing the thin gray hair, murmuring "Ha mercy" at appropriate breaks in the old lady's stream of confidences, Violet is resituating the cord that holds the stove door to its hinge and rehearsing the month's plea for three more days to the rent collector. She thinks she longs for rest, a carefree afternoon to . . . sit with the birdcages and listen to the children play in snow. (*Jazz* 16)

In response to this passage, Eckard convincingly claims that words "such as *murmuring*, *stream*, *breaks*, *cord* (chord), *rehearsing*, *rest*, *listen*, *play* carry jazz meanings" (16). She also rightly proposes that Violet's "Ha mercy" functions as a "linguistic punctuation of a metaphorical stream of jazz" (16). Even the word "birdcage," according to Eckard, glimmers with the suggestion of Charlie Parker's nickname, "Bird," and the famous jazz clubs,

Birdland in New York and Birdhouse in Chicago (17), named after this sax master and vanguard of be-bop jazz. Eckard's insightful reading, thus, helps to ground Morrison's novel even more firmly on a solid jazz base.

Jazz and Structure

Whereas Morrison's style reflects more the sounds and rhythms of jazz, the structure of the novel mirrors the typical patterns and configurations of jazz compositions. For instance, one might say that the novel begins with a head melody. The narrator lays out the controlling events of the narrative in the first two paragraphs of the novel, at once revealing the affair between Joe and Dorcas, Joe's eventual killing of his younger lover, and Violet's attempted stabbing of Dorcas's corpse at the funeral. Thus, Morrison accomplishes what she claims she set out to do: that is, establish her "narrative line or melody . . . immediately in the first pages" (Hackney 6) of the text. And, retaining its semblance to a jazz composition, which by virtue of itself will inevitably stray from the established head, the novel, after implanting this initial melodic foundation in the reader's mind, begins to distort, decorate, play with, and improvise upon these central events. Rodrigues maintains that in between the beginning "set melody" and the end of the novel "are amplifications, with improvisations, variations and solo statements, a virtuoso display of jazz" (740). Rodrigues also rightly contends that after this initial head arrangement, the novel abruptly drops the reader "without warning, into a confusing world" (733). Through his examination of the reader/text relationship, Rodrigues goes on to describe (quite accurately, in my opinion) the experience of trying to read and comprehend the rest of Morrison's novel:

The confusion arises from the speed of the telling. Fragments of information rush along unconnectedly. . . .

. . . We read on impatiently, wanting to interrupt and ask questions, but this voice [of the narrator] is in a reckless hurry to tell everything at once without stopping. . . . It slows down at last, a little out of breath, hinting at some kind of mystery at the end [of the first section]. We read on, bewildered but intrigued, looking at the words, listening to their rhythm, their rhythms, seeking desperately to discover the meanings of the text. Halfway through the novel we pause to take stock, to put things together, to get our bearings. (734)

In fact, it is probably not uncommon for readers to stop more than just once in order to “get their bearings” when exploring the dense, meandering paths of *Jazz*. “Like a soaring trumpet” (Eckard 14), the narrative moves along an indeterminate track, repeating itself in places and going off on unanticipated tangents in others, circling back to the head at times while moving off into mysterious spaces at others.

The chapter breaks also contribute, in their own curious way, to the jazz-like structure of the novel. Instead of dividing the sections of her novel into carefully enumerated or titled sections, Morrison signifies each chapter break with blank pages. That is, she stops with one idea or motif, inserts at least one full page of white space, and then picks up the idea or motif from the last sentence of the preceding chapter in the first sentence of the subsequent chapter. All the chapters operate under this design. For instance, the first chapter ends in the following way, with the narrator hinting at the state of Violet and Joe’s relationship: “He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back: ‘I love you’” (24). The next chapter then begins, “Or used to” (27). Thus, the narrator picks up right from where she left off. Rodrigues comments on this structural technique: “Morrison produces a textual continuum by using transitional slurs and glides across sections. . . . Such carry-overs make for rhythmic flow” (740). In other words, by bridging or linking her chapters as she does, Morrison creates a sense of rhythmic continuity within an otherwise circuitous and disconnected narrative. Even though the reader may want to pause after finishing a chapter, Morrison, by transferring one idea to the next so fluidly, makes this rather difficult. Expanding on this idea, Rodrigues implies (perhaps a little too confidently) Morrison’s breaking away from Western standards of art succinctly embodied in the symphony—via these stylized chapter breaks: “Unlike the clearly demarcated movements of a symphony, the sections of *Jazz* never come to a complete stop. Like nonstop sequences during a jam session, they keep moving restlessly on and on giving the text a jazz feel” (740).

Finally, the multiple voices and varying points-of-view of the novel work in reflecting what Morrison calls the “egalitarian” nature of jazz music. The novel constantly shifts viewpoints and narrative tone: Violet, Joe,

Dorcas, Alice, Golden Gray, Felice, and of course the narrator are among those characters who are permitted to give voice to their respective outlooks on the novel's central events and life in general. As suggested earlier, this multiplicity of visions found within Morrison's novel mirrors the multi-instrumentation of combo jazz and the various solo "viewpoints" from which a tune is played by the different band members.

Thus, the novel's overall structure, for all intents and purposes, breaks from such conventional narrative techniques as linear, horizontal movement, nicely divided chapters, and singular point-of-view. Instead, *Jazz* is recursive, tangential, disjointed yet rhythmic, and many-sided in its form. In this way, Morrison's novel is much like a jazz solo that explores all the angles, views, and possibilities available within a very wide and flexible melodic framework. Morrison's novel will not come up to the expectations of readers counting on a more straightforward narrative, in much the same way that jazz music undercuts the expectations of its listeners. Eckard testifies to this by asserting that "black music sets up expectations and then disturbs them at irregular intervals. Improvisations, cuts, and departures from the 'head' or theme and from normal harmonic sequences are evidence of this process" (13). And as Eckard points out, the same could be said of Morrison's literary form.

Jazz Scholars on Jazz

Jazz scholars often struggle in their attempts to describe verbally the music which they study. In their respective books on jazz, Jonny King, Ingrid Monson, and Charles Hartman all explore this common difficulty of transforming the concepts, sensations, and appeal of jazz music into written language. Using metaphors, ironically enough, of "conversation" and "language" to help explain the improvisational interplay that occurs between jazz musicians during a jam session, King bluntly admits that jazz improvisation "doesn't translate well into words" (9). Monson describes the problem in more general terms: "Translating musical experience and insight into written or spoken words is one of the most fundamental frustrations of musical scholarship . . . no matter how

elegantly an author writes, there is something fundamentally untranslatable about musical experience" (74). These scholars make valid points. Nevertheless, even though it is virtually impossible to reproduce exactly the forms, sounds, and feelings of jazz in written language, especially written prose, Morrison must be extolled for her efforts. And as a result of these admirable attempts to infuse a certain jazz style and structure into her novel, Morrison does achieve the necessary degree of "function within form" that crystallizes a text's aesthetic integrity and wholeness. Ultimately, *Jazz* becomes a more complete and integrated work of art because of Morrison's formalistic ingenuity.

Furthermore, *Jazz* is not the only Morrison novel in which elements of jazz music can be detected. Rice warns critics to "be wary of isolating this novel as her only jazz-influenced work. All of her novels have been informed by the rhythms and cadences of a black musical tradition" (423). To illustrate such influence, Anthony Berret, in citing a passage from the novel *Tar Baby*, a passage replete with deliberate repetitions, goes so far as to make a direct comparison between Son (the central character of *Tar Baby*) and jazz great John Coltrane (281).

Significance and Meaning of Jazz in *Jazz*

With the aforementioned evidence at hand, it is clear that Morrison very deliberately and conscientiously constructed her novel with certain principles and ideas of jazz music in mind. Thus, the question arises: How does Morrison's jazz aesthetic function in the novel's wider context of meaning? In other words, how does this jazz aesthetic inform and clarify Morrison's overall vision within the novel?

The significance and meaning of Morrison's jazz aesthetic can be interpreted in several ways, the resulting interpretations, each one valid in its own right, helping to shed light upon some major ideas of the novel. For instance, throughout *Jazz*, Morrison foregrounds the street musicians of the City and their music, rather than "night club jazz" or the flapper scene with which 1920s Harlem is often associated. By treating jazz in such a way, Morrison undercuts Fitzgerald's popularized vision of and notions

about music in the "Jazz Age," a term Fitzgerald himself originated (Early 180): that is, instead of being portrayed, as it is in *The Great Gatsby*, as a mere background for the glamorous lifestyles and "lavish parties" of the rich (Griffin 193), jazz constitutes an integral part of the African American city life in Morrison's novel. Jazz music radiates from Victrolas, glides off rooftops, and ricochets between buildings of the City, infecting the soul of everyone it reaches. Furthermore, by leaving the music "anonymous," so-to-speak, and by never once mentioning the names of popular 1920s jazz musicians—names like Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, or Paul Whiteman—Morrison shifts her emphasis toward the folk traditions of this music and to its communal, grass-roots appeal. In so doing, Morrison casts the traditions of jazz in a less recognized but equally (if not more) important historical light.

Jazz also helps play out a primary theme of Morrison's novel—the opposition between city and country. Setting up this duality in the novel, the narrator characterizes those African Americans who had migrated to northern cities in the following manner: ". . . they were country people, but how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever. . . . There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves" (33). Gerald Early's comments locate this idea within a larger cultural-historical framework:

Once again [during the 1920s], as had become the common cultural dialectic in American life since the middle of the nineteenth century, it was city versus small town, agrarian values versus urban trends. It was just these forces of opposition that clashed during the struggle over Prohibition. . . . In the instance of Prohibition, small town, agrarianism, and the conservative Christian reformism instinct won. In the case of jazz, it was the urban, secular, more liberal element of the culture that won. (178)

Berndt Ostendorf also discusses the origins of jazz in terms of the divergent cultural values of city and country: "Jazz, and this is of central importance, emerged in cities and developed with increasing distance from the cotton fields—it is therefore essentially a city culture. It flowered in cities where a number of classes and cultures merged and meshed" (166). It only makes sense, then, that jazz, itself a fluid and communal music, "emerged," as Ostendorf maintains, "in such cities which allowed a maximum of fluidity

and contact" (166). Jazz, therefore, functions as a metaphor, both historically and within Morrison's novel, of urban cultural values. Via its fast-paced, chaotic, liquid-like sound and its musical eclecticism, jazz reflects the rapid pace, flux, and cosmopolitan atmosphere of cities like New York and Chicago during the 1920s and even today. These city values stand in stark contrast to the slower-paced, tranquilized country atmosphere in which both Violet and Joe were born and raised. Ultimately, then, the jazz of Morrison's novel embodies the cultural milieu of city life and, more specifically, the sense of risk and strength that a city can impart in those who enter its bounds.

By incorporating jazz as she does, Morrison is also trying to reproduce and pay tribute to the music's original powers of cultural unification. Envisioning fiction and specifically the novel as the "new," modern-day black art ("Rootedness" 340), Morrison grounds her prose in the traditions of jazz music hoping to create an art form that will reclaim the uncanny ability jazz once had in joining a people together by dynamically reflecting the African American imagination and black experience in general. Rodriguez clarifies and expands upon this idea:

In *Jazz* Morrison transposes into another medium the music that sprang out of her people and expressed their joys, their sorrows, their beliefs, their psyche. This music—spirituals, blues, ragtime, jazz—has spread throughout the world in our time, and is no longer uniquely or exclusively African-American. There's need now, suggests Morrison, to make fiction do what the music used to do, tell the whole wide world the ongoing story of her people. (736)

Because jazz no longer is (and actually never was) an exclusively black art form, Morrison wants to find a fresh way of artistically representing the common experience in which African Americans share. Along these lines, Berret proposes, "To preserve or restore this intimate circle of affection and understanding, or perhaps to recreate it in the new urban environment, Morrison transposes into her fiction the techniques of jazz that have performed this function so successfully, especially for her people" (271). Thus, in her novel, Morrison attempts to recreate the group togetherness engendered and nourished by jazz—a music that, according to Berret, "presupposes a village atmosphere" and "urges participation by all the senses" (270). Moreover, Morrison seems to be searching out

a new aesthetic mode of expression for the African American experience—specifically, a literary mode that will reflect the ideas, implications, and stylistic tendencies of jazz.

The preceding interpretations of Morrison's jazz aesthetic share a common thread: they all somehow demonstrate or suggest the spirit and times of the Jazz Age. And this may perhaps be the pivotal implication of the novel's jazz motif. That is, Morrison's jazz aesthetic, above all else, is meant to reflect the ethos of 1920s Harlem and, more universally, of 1920s America in general. Encapsulating this idea and explaining in general what this ethos entails, Linden Peach proposes that "it is the sensuality, the unpredictability and the dissonance of African-American life during the Jazz Age which the novel probes and develops" (116). Jazz music and Morrison's characteristic jazz aesthetic, by virtue of their defining characteristics, work well as emblems of the overall "uncertainty and unpredictability of people's lives in the 1920s" (Peach 116). In this light, Morrison's novel, as well as jazz music itself, could even be viewed as showing a distinctive modernist flare and sensibility. Characterized by ideas of flux, fragmentation, and social breakdown, modernism informed the basic ideology of early twentieth century America. Explaining this relationship between modernism and jazz music, Mark Harvey reveals that it was during "the 1920s when jazz most explicitly carried the modernist spirit here and abroad and when its innovations challenged the old order of Western music and culture" (128). It seems as though Morrison, who in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" refers to "the complex, contradictory, evasive, independent, liquid modernity" of the Jazz Age (26), was well-aware of the far-reaching influences of modernism and its relationship to jazz music when writing *Jazz*: understanding this relationship, Morrison, it could be argued, seized the opportunity to use this music as a metaphor for the defining ideas of modernism—ideas that become magnified when considering certain events of historical significance, such as the black migrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As mentioned earlier, *Jazz*, called by Griffin "Morrison's most explicit migration narrative to date" (184), focuses much of its attention on the problems and ramifications of this migratory experience. In fact, this may just be the novel's primary aim: to explore

how blacks struggled with and tried to reconcile the psychological and environmental dualities—the displacement and excitement, the hope and disillusionment, and the newness and disorder—that awaited them in the cities of the North. These migrations demanded of a person a complete reorientation of experience, a reformulating of his or her values, personal vision, and comportment. It was change that permeated the lives of blacks during the 1920s and it is this sense of change that Morrison attempts to instill and reflect in her novel. It is a mutability most poignantly illustrated in the character of Joe Trace, who undergoes seven distinct changes during his young life and who compares himself to a snake that must constantly shed its skin (129). And it is change as embodied by the protean sounds of jazz and, in turn, within Morrison's literary jazz aesthetic.

Finally, even though Morrison focuses exclusively on the role of jazz in 1920s black Harlem, jazz has always been, as Morrison is certainly well aware, a very inclusive art form. When one traces the evolutions of jazz, it becomes clear that jazz is more a product of several converging musical, historical, and cultural forces than a distinct, sharply-defined music invented by a certain group of people at a specific historical moment. Writer and musician Ralph Ellison embraces and gives voice to such a multi-cultural, even-handed understanding of jazz in his writings. Paraphrasing Ellison's ideas, Ostendorf submits the following: "Jazz is the only pure *American* cultural creation, which, shortly after its birth, became America's most important cultural export"; it is, moreover, "a hybrid, a creole, a fusion of heterogenous dialogues from folk traditions of blacks and whites" (165). Far from diminishing the novel's integrity, though, this fact only helps to universalize Morrison's work. With these ideas of inclusion, heterogeneity, and creative freedom embedded in its very fibers, jazz, as it operates within Morrison's novel, becomes emblematic of the struggles and experiences of not only "black America," but America as a whole.

Morrison says that "music was everywhere and all around" during her childhood (Morrison, "All" 284). Thus, it is not shocking to discover that music is also ubiquitous in her novel *Jazz*. However, the implications and true power of the novel's musical motif lies not in its omnipresence, but in its malleability. Much like members in a jazz quintet "trading fours"

between themselves—one musician throwing out musical questions and phrases that are promptly deflected by another's musical responses and counterpoints—this novel, particularly in its treatment of jazz, constantly oscillates between several different meanings. Ultimately, then, Morrison might well be viewed as a literary musician, “trading meanings” between herself and the words she writes.

University of Dayton
Ohio

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