

WHAT IS JAZZ IN TONI MORRISON'S *JAZZ*?

ANA M^a MANZANAS

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

It is only in his music [...] that the Negro in America
has been able to tell his story.

James Baldwin, «Many Thousands Gone»

Music gives resonance to memory.

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

Throughout her fiction, Morrison incorporates musical patterns in a distinctive symbiosis of literature and fiction. In her works, as the writer explains in an interview with Thomas LeClair, literature is the artistic expression which absorbs the expressive and healing qualities music used to have for black people. Literature gives «nourishment» and does «what the music did for blacks» at a time when black music is not entirely black anymore,¹ and the cultural values and beliefs of African-Americans are being «devoured» by mainstream American culture. Literature does not substitute music, but incorporates the myths, beliefs, and the cultural code which was traditionally recorded in music. «Novel after novel,» writes John Leonard in his review of *Jazz*, «Toni Morrison reimagines the lost history of her people, their love and work and nightmare passage and redemptive music.»² Music (in the form of jazz) gives expression and meaning to

1. Cf. Toni Morrison interviewed by Thomas LeClair in «The Language Must Not Sweat,» *The New Republic* (March 21, 1981), p. 26.

2. John Leonard, «Her Soul's High Song,» *The Nation* (May 25, 1992), p. 706.

Cholly Breedlove's dangerously free existence in *The Bluest Eye*, redeems Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* as he listens to the blues song which codifies his family's mythic history; and it is almost subdued in the pages of *Beloved* as if to mark the forgetfulness of the past the characters have imposed on themselves. After *Beloved*, in which «music is low,»³ *Jazz*, Toni Morrison's sixth novel, gives resonance to the African-American historical/musical memory of the twenties. Music stands at the center of *Jazz* not only from the point of view of its composition, but in as much as *Jazz*, like jazz, incorporates the «unwritten text»⁴ of the twenties.

To give voice to Violet's and Joe Trace's ancestors in rural Virginia, to narrate the violent deaths of Dorcas's parents in the East St. Louis racial riots, and to give the reader the pulse of the Harlem of the twenties is quite a «jazzy» thing to do at a time when African-American women writers such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset seemed to have appropriated the maxim «History is over, you all, and everything is ahead.»⁵ The woman writers representative of the Harlem Renaissance did not describe in their novels the African-American heritage which writers such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer had celebrated in their writings, perhaps, as Deborah McDowell explains, in an attempt to «overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage» under slavery. Instead, «and following the movement by black club women of the era, they imitated the 'purity,' the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie,»⁶ which was tantamount to forgetfulness. Women writers like Larsen and Fauset limited their creative universe to the urban black middle class which had silenced and hidden its racial and cultural heritage. In Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), for example, the writer describes the African-American middle class which incarnates the obliviousness of the past. The history of Fauset's characters dates back to slavery although, as Fauset remarks, they rarely think of that. They are as rooted in American history as any other American, and share a similar work-ethic.⁷ Within the context of the twenties, therefore, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* surprises as «an eruption of funk,»⁸ in the writer's words, as an open statement of the past as opposed to the wave

3. Toni Morrison, «On Fiction and Memory», Logroño, 1991 (unpublished).

4. Music, and more specifically songs, represent «the unwritten text of history and culture» in marginal cultures. Susan Willis, «Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison,» in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New York & London: Methuen, 1984), p. 271.

5. Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 16. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in brackets within the text.

6. Deborah E. McDowell, «Introduction,» *Quicksand and Passing*, Nella Larsen, D. E. McDowell, ed. (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1988), xiii.

7. Jessie Fauset, *The Chinaberry Tree* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931), ix.

8. Funk, as Susan Willis explains, «is really nothing more than the intrusion of the past in the present.» «Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison,» p. 280.

of forgetfulness which dominated black women writers' literary production during that decade. In the same way that jazz as a musical form was considered a manifestation of counter culture, and was seen by part of its contemporaries «as a cultural form independent of a number of the basic central beliefs of bourgeoisie society, free of its repressions, in rebellion against many of its grosser stereotypes,»⁹ *Jazz* reveals the suppressed chapters of African-American history women writers of the twenties took pains to silence. Jazz referred back not to Western intellectual or cultural centers, but to Africa,¹⁰ the continent which remained concealed in their works of fiction. The effect of the music, like that of Morrison's novel, is «the release of all the suppressed emotions, a blowing off the lid, as it were.»¹¹

The impression of some information about to be disclosed is implicit in the sentence which opens the novel: «Sethe, I know that woman» (3), a sentence which immediately establishes intimacy and complicity with the reader. The first person narrator appears as the focus of the narration. In Henry Louis Gates' terms, *Jazz* is a «speakerly text,» «a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition,» and which produces «the illusion of oral narration.»¹² Throughout the text of the novel it is the «I» of the narrator that reveals the life stories of the characters; the «I» is the «eye» of the narration, the voice which gives the reader the feeling of a «told» story:

As for the point of view, there should be the illusion that it's the characters' point of view, when in fact it isn't; it's really the narrator who is there but who doesn't make herself (in my case) known in that role. I like the feeling of a told story.¹³

Contrary to Morrison's narrative voice in her other previous novels, however, the narrative voice in *Jazz* «makes herself known,» she is more than a guide, and does have certain personality: she has a fascination for the city (7), is an attentive, careful, incorporeal listener (8), and a creative improviser: «I watch every thing and everyone

9. L. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 293.

10. Cf. Charles Nanry and Edward Berger, *The Jazz Text* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1979), p. 8.

11. Nigel Thomas quoting Rogers in *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (New York, Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 22.

12. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Criticism* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 181.

13. See Toni Morrison's «The Site of Memory,» in *Inventing the Truth, the Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 121.

and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do» (8). Thus considered, the composition of *Jazz* is based on the «active improvisations»¹⁴ of a curious, imaginative voice. *Jazz* shares with jazz its compositional techniques; like jazz, *Jazz* «finds its very life in an endless improvisation.»¹⁵ The narrative voice in *Jazz* is a complex balance between an omniscient narrator («And when I think about it, I just know how she felt» (63)), able to dig into the distant pasts of the different characters, and an improvisational voice which shows the novel in the making, in the process of being conceived of and shaped. The narration becomes subjective («In my own opinion» (71)), hesitant and inconclusive («I've wondered about it» (71)), and perspectival (like in the description of Golden Gray p. 161); a «risky» selection of feelings and impressions. *Jazz* therefore lays bare the creative process and takes the reader to that particular instant in which creativity springs forth; like jazz, the novel is a journey to literary creation itself.

The narrative voice sets the conflict or «standard tune» which underlies the entire novel in the first pages:

She used to live with a flock of birds on Lennox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church (3).

She even anticipates the outcome of the story: «Violet saw [...] another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in [...] and that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom» (6). Like a jazz musician, the narrative voice tells the story from this introductory outline and improvises the «subtleties»¹⁶ throughout the rest of the novel.

Free from the repressions and omissions of the novels of the twenties, *Jazz* reaches back to the turn of the century (1906), when Joe and Violet Trace, like hundreds of African-Americans, boarded the Southern Sky, the train which represented the mythic journey to the North, the land of freedom and well-being. Like it had done with their ancestors, the City embraced the new-comers («They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them» (32)), and saluted them with blues lyrics. Like many jazz and blues theoretists and musicians, Morrison does not distinguish between jazz and blues¹⁷ in her novel; she just takes the reader to the musical matrix

14. Cf. Toni Morrison, «On Fiction and Memory.»

15. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 234.

16. J. Lincoln Collier, *Inside Jazz* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1973), p. 21.

17. According to Paul Oliver, the blues only became recognized as a music in its own right in the late 1950s. See *The New Grove: Gospel, Blues and Jazz*, Paul Oliver, Max Harrison

of the twenties. The music which had remained absent in the novels of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset flourishes in the pages of *Jazz*: «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» (86). When jazz music does appear in these writers' novels, like in Larsen's *Quicksand*, it momentarily seduces the main character, Helga Crane: «She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music.» However, Helga soon refrains herself and recovers her usual composure, ashamed of her weakness: «She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature.»¹⁸ Contrary to the music which resonates in the novels of the twenties, that of Negro Welfare leagues as in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the music in *Jazz*, as Alice Manfred remarks, is an evocation of the flesh: «[The music] made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law» (58).

Like their ancestors, Violet and Joe were seized with a «permanent and out of control» fascination for Harlem, the city within the City which retained for black people some kind of village value.¹⁹ The narrative voice adopts the «joyous»²⁰ quality of jazz in her extraordinary portrayal of the Harlem of the twenties. The City offered those «running from want and violence» (33) the possibility of starting their lives anew («At last, at last, everything was ahead» (7)); and the newcomers had the chance to think «future thoughts» (7). In the city they thought they would become invulnerable (8), almost omnipotent: «I like the way the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it» (8).

Not all is joyousness in the City, not all the music was jubilant, and the North Violet and Joe encounter is not the promised land. The music carried, as Alice Manfred recognizes, «something hostile» and painful through which African-Americans reflected a reality of everyday violence: «Yet Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in [the music]; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction» (59). Moreover, the City affects the characters in ways they never suspected. Violet, the «snappy, determined girl» (23) who claimed the young man, Joe Trace, who fell on her lap, and who danced with the city, soon reveals what the narrative voice calls «cracks»: she sat in the middle of the street for no reason at all

and William Bolcom (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 36. Frank Tirro, on the other hand, assumes that blues (except for country blues) have become fully «integrated into the jazz repertoire.» F. Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 145. See also LeRoy Jones' *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quilt, 1963).

18. *Quicksand and Passing*, Nella Larsen, D. E. McDowell, ed., p. 59.

19. Toni Morrison, «City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of Neighborhood in Black Fiction,» in *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, Michael Jayet and Ann Chalmer, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981), p. 38.

20. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction*, p. 22.

(17), tries in vain to attenuate the «mother hunger» (108) which preys on her by sleeping with a doll and attempting to steal a baby, and finally tries to disfigure Dorcas' face at the funeral. Joe, the hunter and woodsman, turns into a blues man (119) who experiences a loneliness he never experienced in «a forest empty of people» (129). Tricked by the city, Joe thought he would make himself free by loving young, sly, Dorcas in secret. Dorcas, orphaned by the East St. Louis riots, defines herself not through the racial anger implicit in the music, but through the sensuousness the music evoked: «Dorcas thought of that life below-the-sash as all the life there was» (60). Dorcas is a representative of the young American girls seduced by the devil's music as described in this excerpt from an article in *New York American*: «Girls in small towns, as well as the big cities, in poor homes and rich homes, are victims of the weird, insidious, neurotic music that accompanies modern dancing.»²¹

But like African-American music, Morrison's novel is not only urban; *Jazz* goes back to the rural South, to slavery and the Reconstruction period, a time which had been veiled in Larsen's and Fauset's novels. Sitting in a drug-store, Violet recalls a time of poverty and dispossession under Jim Crow Laws, «when men came; talking low as though nobody was there but themselves, and picked around in [their] things, lifting out what they wanted –that was theirs, they said» (97-98). Only True Belle, Violet's grandmother, alleviated Rose Dear's plight when she returned from Baltimore with ten dollars after many years at the service of Miss Vera Louise –first as a slave and later as a servant. From the past in rural Virginia, Violet was to remember the wonderful stories True Belle would tell about Golden Gray, the golden young man she looked after in Baltimore, and the well, «so narrow, so dark» (105), where her mother, Rose Dear, jumped after True Belle's arrival. Violet met Joe, the man who slept in trees, when he fell «practically in her lap» (105). They knew some people in common (30), and perhaps Joe had also heard about Golden Gray, the man who acts as nexus in their individual stories. While on his way to Vienna, where he expected to meet his father, Henry Lestory, Golden found a pregnant woman unconscious in the forest. The woman disappeared after giving birth to Joe, and Henry Lestory initiated him into manhood through the rite of the hunting. Throughout and after his initiation as a hunter Joe narrates his attempts to approach his mother, Wild, the elusive, dangerous, free

21. *New York American* (June 22, 1922). Quoted by Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 156.

22. Morrison «improvised» *Jazz* from a picture by Van der Zee she saw in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. «In one picture,» says Morrison, «there was a young girl lying in a coffin and he [Van der Zee] says that she was eighteen years old and she had gone to a party and that she was dancing and suddenly she slumped and they noticed there was blood on her and they said, 'What happened to you?' And she said, 'I'll tell you tomorrow. I'll tell you tomorrow.» «Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison: A Conversation,» *The Southern Review*, 21 (1985): 584.

woman who inhabited the forest, and whose presence was announced by «those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings» (176). Away from the South, Joe keeps his intent to find his elusive mother, and remembers clearly Henry Lestory's lesson: «I taught both you all never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it» (175). Morrison effects an agile transition from country to city, from past to present, from Wild to Dorcas through Joe's search for Wild Dorcas in the City: «He isn't thinking of harming her, or, as Hunter had cautioned, killing something tender. She is female. And she is not prey. So he never thinks of that» (180). In the City, however, Joe enacts the forbidden hunt, the killing of the tender and female, as he shoots Dorcas, who offers herself up to her assailant (22) as she dances with young, handsome Acton.

When Felice, Dorcas' girlfriend, approaches Violet with an Okeh record under her arm, her presence makes the narrator nervous: «Now she is disturbing me, making me doubt my own self just looking at her sauntering through the sunshafts like that. Climbing the steps now, heading for Violent» (198). Violet, however, is not «Violent» anymore. She has banished that destructive side of herself: «'Now I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before'» (208). Contrary to the narrator's initial prediction the past does not come back «like an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself» (220), and nobody shoots anybody in the new configuration of «that scandalizing threesome,» as the narrative voice admits: «So I missed it all together I was sure one would the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen» (220). Shunned by her own characters, the narrative voice disappears from the narration and the reader hears Felice's voice unmediated. The inquisitive, curious narrator becomes a frustrated teller in her own narration. Like the characters themselves, the narrator is deluded by the city: «It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human. I missed the people altogether» (220). Aware of the limited power and knowledge of the narrative voice the characters contradicted her «at every turn» (220): «they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of» (221). It was the characters that watched her while she thought she was most invisible; it was the characters that were filling in their own lives while she was gossiping about them. While the narrative voice labored to elaborate some cyclic determination to conclude the novel, the characters were «busy, busy being original, complicated, changeable –human» (220).

Free from the «jazzy» improvisations of the narrator, Joe and Violet venture into reality as they consummate their own improvisation in the novel. Felice imbues the couple with the feeling her name evokes, and Joe and Violet improvise on the narrator's prediction by remembering the meaning of words old age was supposed to erase, and by acknowledging the shadows from the past:

Lying next to her, his head turned toward the window he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly,

slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing. Meanwhile Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well (225).

Morrison concludes the novel with the well-known artifice of the characters freeing themselves from the writer/narrator. However, the writer has elaborated this fictional desertion as a jazzy, human improvisation on the narrator. In *Jazz* the characters liberate themselves from the narrator's spontaneous creativity, and from the obliviousness which characterized the fiction of black women writers of the twenties. Morrison excavates in black artistic manifestations such as jazz to ground an African-American literary aesthetic; in so doing, she «gives resonance» to the historical memory of that period.