

ALL-WOMAN JAZZ BANDS AND GENDERED BEBOPPERS: GAYL JONES AND GLORIA NAYLOR'S JAZZ FICTION¹

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, jazz has been identified with male performers and writers. Thus, the aim of this article is twofold: on the one hand, it underlines the significant role of women instrumentalists and bandleaders in the formation of a jazz counterculture, particularly during World War II; on the other, it connects the cultural meanings and the technical devices of 1940s bebop to Gayl Jones's novels *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Bailey's Cafe* (1992). This essay places special emphasis on bebop quoting, a jazz technique that has conventionally represented a site for the performance and signification of masculinity, but also allows female musicians and writers to deconstruct and question identity stereotypes associated with black womanhood.

RESUMEN

El jazz se ha identificado tradicionalmente con instrumentistas y escritores varones. Por ello, este artículo se propone un doble objetivo: por un lado, subraya el importante papel de las mujeres como instrumentistas y directoras de bandas en la formación de una contracultura del jazz, en particular durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial; por otro, conecta las técnicas del bebop y sus significados culturales con

¹ I would like to thank Professor Francie Cate-Arries for her helpful edits. We have opted for the term "all-woman," instead of the more widely employed "all-girl" or "female" bands. Sherrie Tucker explains in the Introduction of *Swing Shift* that she decided to employ the label "all-girl" hoping that it would "resound with historic dissonance" in a jazz sphere that tended to naturalize girlishness in the 1940s women's bands and in the music that they played (2). Elsewhere, Tucker also opts for the designation "all-woman bands."

las novelas *Corregidora* (1975) y *Eva's Man* (1976), de Gayl Jones, y *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) y *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), de Gloria Naylor. El presente artículo presta especial atención al *bebop quoting*, técnica jazzística que tradicionalmente ha representado un lugar de significación masculina, pero que también permite a las instrumentistas y escritoras deconstruir y cuestionar estereotipos asociados a la identidad/identidades de las mujeres negras.

1. JAZZWOMEN: CHALLENGING MAINSTREAM HISTORIOGRAPHY

Until recently, the narrative of jazz history accorded a place of honor to male instrumentalists and ignored the contributions and achievements of women; the exceptions were the singers, who were somehow more accepted and tolerated in the musical arena. Jazz critic George Simon voiced the belief of many when he wrote that “only God can make a tree, and only men can play good jazz” (qtd. Tucker, *Swing Shift* 12), an assertion that underlines not only the construction of a male-centered jazz canon, but also how this ideology falls into a broader sexualized and gendered discourse.² However, women have been involved with jazz since its inception at the turn of the 20th century in New Orleans. Scholars such as Linda Dahl, Antoinette Handy and, more recently, Sherrie Tucker, Nicole Rustin, and Kristin McGee have published landmark studies on the presence of women in jazz. According to Dahl, female pianists had more opportunities to break into the New Orleans jazz scene, and Handy also refers to a number of female wind players in the early marching bands and ensembles that prefigured jazz. Another important feature of the music is that in these early years it was associated with the low-down undesirable aspects of life. The Storyville district of New Orleans (1898-1917) provided jobs for musicians (mostly male) and, at its height, boasted more than two hundred saloons, bars, dancehalls, and brothels.³ Kathy Ogren remarks that by that time blues and jazz were dubbed “devil music,” a label that circulated both within and beyond the black community. Hence, women had to contend not only with sexism but also with all the prejudices surrounding the music, and of course, with racism.

When the police shut down the Storyville district in 1917, most of the musicians migrated north to Chicago and New York. In Chicago, pianists such as Lil Hardin or Lovie Austin developed jazz and led their own bands; in New York, organist Hallie Anderson, pianist Mattie Gilmore, or trombone player and arranger Marie Lucas trained orchestras for theaters. Nevertheless, the definitive presence of

² The masculinization of jazz is even more notable when dealing with bebop. See, for example, Ake, DeVeaux or Owens.

³ Tucker's four-year research on New Orleans jazzwomen uncovers a few of the female musicians, mainly pianists and self-trained instrumentalists, who worked in the red light district: cornet Antonia Gonzalez, as well as pianists Mamie Desdunes, Dolly Adams, Camilla Todd, Edna Mitchell and Rosalind Johnson, who was also a song writer and received formal musical training.

women in jazz occurred after the outbreak of World War II. Seen by many as “wartime substitutes” (Tucker, *Swing Shift* 44), all-woman jazz bands bloomed during the 1940s in the United States, mainly for entertainment in ballrooms, theaters, and military audiences during wartime.⁴ The most popular, out of the more than a hundred all-woman jazz bands, were The International Sweethearts of Rhythm and The Darlings of Rhythm. While their names suggest a willingness to commercialize with a socially constructed femininity, the all-man bands usually honored and recognized their leaders, holding names such as The Cab Calloway Orchestra or The Ellington Orchestra.

In this regard, Tucker underlines the pressure the all-girl bands had to bear, having to “look glamorous” and wear “feminine attire,” which often consisted of strapless dresses and high heels, for a public that usually “looked first, listened second” (*Swing Shift* 56, 68). A fact that accounts for the sexualization and the patriarchal commodification of women’s bodies is that discographies were reluctant to record them, and there were very few albums made. Conversely, they appeared in a number of Hollywood short films, a more visually centered medium that also disclosed racial prejudices, since the majority of female black musicians in the bands were light-skinned, a selling point in a white dominated industry. An additional marketable feature is that some female bandleaders were prompted to sing and dance while conducting the orchestra. As Kristin McGee asserts, black “all-girl” bands were often “peripherized and trivialized” precisely for “their assumed purely physical and visual appearance” (166).

The International Sweethearts was the first integrated band with seventeen Puerto Rican, Mexican, Chinese, Native American, white, and mostly U.S. African American women musicians, who contested gender and racial barriers in a Jim Crow society at home and while touring Europe abroad.⁵ Moreover, all-woman jazz bands challenged the gender stereotypes associated with instruments and they included trombone, trumpet, and drummers, popularly considered “masculine.”⁶ Another example of a recodification of masculinity is the “rough-looking” of The Darlings of Rhythm, whose members typically wore suits, no makeup, and produced “unladylike sounds [. . .] through an emphasis on an aggressive approach to the music, on thunderous volume, on authoritative horn and saxophone soloists”

⁴ The documentary *The Girls in the Band*, directed, written, and produced by Judy Chaikin, gives voice to 1930s and 1940s jazzwomen.

⁵ For a thorough study of the band, see Antoinette Handy’s *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* and the award-winning documentary directed by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss. Although the term “African American” is more widely used, I have preferred to employ the designation “U.S. African American” (also employed by historian Millery Polyné) to refer to African descendants in the United States, so as to avoid identifying an entire continent with a specific country.

⁶ Linda Dahl refers to a study conducted by musicologists Susan Porter and Harold Abeles that highlighted the stereotyping of instruments; the flute, violin, and clarinet were perceived to be the most feminine, whereas the trumpet, trombone, and drums were considered more masculine (35-44).

(Tucker, “Nobody’s Sweethearts” 257, 270). Maybe for these reasons and for hiring dark-colored musicians, they never made it to Hollywood, but were a major success within black audiences.

With the end of the war, a new jazz style emerged, one that granted improvisation and virtuosity even more importance than big-band swing, and was mostly played in small ensembles (quartets, quintet, sextets): bebop, or modern jazz, as Ralph Ellison preferred to call it.⁷ An additional difference with swing was that bebop melodies were more dissonant and bebop’s rhythmic sections more polyphonic, qualities that, according to Thomas Owens, added complexity to the new style and distanced it from the mainstream, dancehall swing that was so popular among white audiences. Yet, the feature that is especially suggestive for my purposes of analysis is a technique that undermined distinctions between high art and low art based on power relations. To achieve this, beboppers inserted fragments of European music in their solos, jazzing them up, and reinforcing the value of black music. This practice of “citing” popular Western standards, or any popular music, is referred to in jazz as “quoting.” One of the examples Krin Gabbard mentions to illustrate this playful resource is how Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker inserted notes of George Bizet’s *Carmen* in their jazz composition “Anthropology” (104).

2. BEBOP QUOTING: SIGNIFYIN’ ON CULTURE, RACE, AND GENDER

The art of quotation in jazz did not originate in the bebop era, but by then the practice was steeped in irony. If we delve into the history of bebop, women are once again underrepresented; male jazz historiographers coincide in giving unanimous credit to saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and pianist Thelonious Monk. As for female instrumentalists, Dahl recovers the contributions of under-recorded trumpeters Norma Carson and Clara Bryant, saxophonist Elvira “Vi” Redd (compared to Parker by some jazz critics), trombonist Melba Liston, and pianists Hazel Scott, Beryl Booker, and Marjorie Hyams. A child prodigy born in Trinidad, “at the age of sixteen Hazel Scott had her own radio show, and at eighteen she was fronting a band, singing popular songs in several languages, and writing most of her arrangements” (Dahl 72).⁸ In her compelling biography of Hazel Scott, Karen Chilton reminds us that she was the first black woman to host a television show, and that she refused to play for segregated audiences. Scott was also famous for giving a jazzy treatment to classical European composers such as

⁷ In his acclaimed collection of essays *Shadow and Act* Ellison praises the virtuosity of Charlie Parker as the founder of “modern jazz” (226) and Minton’s Playhouse (New York) as its birthplace: “the jazzman’s true academy” (208).

⁸ Nicole Rustin reveals that many female instrumentalists, like Hazel Scott, supplemented their incomes through other musical activities, including singing, arranging, and teaching (446).

Chopin, Bach, or Falla's "Ritual Fire Dance," recorded in her 1941 album *Swinging the Classics*.

Another example of an underrated bebop instrumentalist is Beryl Booker, who in 1954 led her own female jazz trio and toured Europe. A particularly interesting musical contribution was her variation of the bebop anthem "How High the Moon," which she recorded in 1949 with jazz guitarist Mary Osborne and bassist June Rothenburg, calling the piece "Low Ceiling." "How High the Moon" is an exemplary instance of quotation and variation in jazz. Composed by white Broadway songwriter Morgan Lewis as a commercial ballad, Charlie Parker, who liked its chord changes, quoted and improvised on the original in his standard "Ornithology" (1946), and popularized it among bebop soloists. Booker, Osborne, and Rothenburg would quote it with new overtures, riffing on the leading melody, and creating their own version.⁹

Interestingly enough, Gabbard assigns quoting "avant-garde" and modern qualities that "signified on" white bourgeois music and culture by deconstructing and mocking cultural and social power relations (93). In the case of Scott and Booker (Gabbard never mentions jazzwomen in his article, entitled "The Quoter and His Culture"), they also signified on gender relations, proving that they could very capably deconstruct and improvise on male classical standards. Gabbard revisits the theory of black signification, developed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his influential *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. According to Gates, signifying is a rhetorical self-defense strategy for African descents in the U.S. and it epitomizes the double-voiced black vernacular tradition, which is based on repetition and revision: "The language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as Signifyin(g) black difference" (66).¹⁰ Therefore, signification is inscribed within black literature and music as a mode of formal revision and critique of canonical texts through parody and pastiche, among other figures of speech.

Gates briefly references signification in jazz, stating that there are "so many examples of Signifyin(g) in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone" (63). As an instance, he refers to improvisation, "so fundamental to the very idea of jazz, is 'nothing more' than repetition and revision" (64). Once again, the musical examples he mentions are of male signature, such as pianist Jelly Roll Morton's "Maple Leaf Rag" (1938) variation and extension of Scott Joplin's 1916 homonymous composition. Another feature of the jazz arrangements he discusses is that they are all "practices of intertextuality," as gestures of admiration and respect among black musicians (64). It should be noted,

⁹ In jazz, a riff is a short, repeated pattern that supports a solo improvisation. Bebop favored this harmonic device as well as longer improvisational phrasing.

¹⁰ In order to signal the oral quality of this trope, Gates omits the -g ending, a mark that also differentiates it from the term coined by Saussure.

then, that in Gate's terms, the playful nature of Signifyin'/Signifyin(g) not always entails parody.

3. JAZZING UP STEREOTYPES: GAYL JONES AND GLORIA NAYLOR

Historically, jazz-influenced literature has been associated with male writers such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Michael Harper or Amiri Baraka, who turned to jazz as a source of experimentation and cultural affirmation, often replicating musical patterns of African origin like call-and-response, improvisation, repetition, and syncopation.¹¹ From the 1970s, a decade that marked the rebirth of black women in literature, female authors have appropriated the codes of jazz in their own terms and written poetry, narrative, and drama under the influx of the syncopated rhythms; examples of this musical influence are Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992), Sherley Anne Williams's volume of poems *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* (1982), Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls who considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), and Toni Cade Bambara's short story "Medley" (1971).¹² Gayl Jones's *Liberating Voices* (1991), a groundbreaking volume of essays in which she theorized on the stylistic influence of African vernacular culture and music in U.S. black literature, also established solid parameters of analysis.

In this regard, Fritz Gysin states that postmodern fiction no longer uses jazz as a "liberating device" (using Jones's term) but as a "function of writing" (285). However, he does not clarify what he considers "postmodern fiction" and, above all, his approach to jazz fiction contests the legitimacy of the interface between jazz and literature itself: "As some of the recent critical and scholarly literature shows, the crossing of boundaries between the two art forms seems to have become a favorite pastime of writers and critics alike" (275).¹³ It is my aim, however, to prove the thematic and formal connections between music and literature, while pointing to gender stereotypes in these associations, a challenging task in a field that has embraced male-dominated musical ideologies. As an example of such gendered assimilation, Kristin McGee recalls in the introduction of her brilliant study of jazz women in mass-mediated texts, how a jazz scholar abruptly interrupted her in a seminar, curious to know why she would work on something that had already been written by Sherrie Tucker. Due to the lack of perspectives that have been published on the subject of women in jazz, she wonders if she would have been asked that

¹¹ While the term "improvisation" applied to literature is controversial, this essay underscores that a text may render the spontaneity of jazz music. See Rob Wallace's analysis of jazz improvisation in Langston Hughes, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens.

¹² "Medley" is included in Sascha Feinstein's *The Jazz Fiction Anthology*, which collects thirty-two short stories signed by twenty-nine U.S. and international authors; only seven of these are women.

¹³ See also Alan Muton's response to what he considers the "misreading" of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* through the lens of musical associations.

question had she presented a paper on Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker (6). Comparatively, there are still very few jazz histories written by women and/or about women.

In her debut novel *Corregidora*, Jones depicts a complex representation of slavery through four generations of women, who decide to keep the slave-owner's last name, Corregidora, to leave evidence of the incestuous daughters he engendered in Brazil. The legacy of sexual and physical abuse brings about inevitable traumas that Ursa, the youngest of the lineage, will have to confront in the United States. From childhood, Ursa is constantly reminded of the family's mission of engendering testimonies that will be able to retell the atrocities suffered under bondage, in order to counter historical erasure. The *riff* is introduced at the beginning of the novel: "Ursa, you have to make generations" (*Corregidora* 10).¹⁴ This *refrain* is repeated throughout the text as Ursa retells, with variations, the history of her family by means of long improvisational *solos*, which Gysin would prefer to call "stream-of-consciousness" (275), but whose thematic and rhythmic connections with the music allow for a jazz term (*solo*) that highlights the improvisation of a section by a single player:

I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father the master. Her daughter's father. The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria. (59)

Learning about the history of her female ancestors in Brazil and how they, and she, still experienced abusive relationships with men in post-slavery U.S., Ursa gradually changes the pattern of violence and ultimately breaks with the mission imposed by Corregidora women. Instead of making generations, she composes music that will leave evidence of their stories and allow her to improvise open-ended versions. In addition, her piano playing symbolically appeals to the invisibility of female jazz instrumentalists who often had to combine their playing skills with singing: "I'd take the job. I had a two-hour show playing the piano and singing" (*Corregidora* 85).

As a professional singer, composer and pianist, her voice is compared to Billie Holiday's, her contemporary, since the novel starts in 1947, at the peak of bebop: "You got a hard kind of voice [. . .] like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain. Hurt you and make you still want to listen" (*Corregidora* 96). This description of Ursa's voice coincides with the qualities frequently emphasized in Holiday's tonalities, and how

¹⁴ I have used italics for musical terms applied to the analysis of literature.

she made “those hard—and soft—swung notes sound” (O’Meally 96). Moreover, her renditions of commercial, popular songs acquired totally different connotations:

Billie was so often mocking what she rendered up, simultaneously satirizing as she was celebrating romance. She was indeed doing a certain kind of riffing satire that is quite close to signifying. This vocal one-butt shuffle on the sentimental lyrics that Lady Day was simultaneously serving up forms one of the veiled delights of sarcastic slurs, and innuendos, behind Lady Day’s bewitching art. (Forrest 346)

Resembling Billie Holiday, Ursa Corregidora undertakes a musical revision of the sexualized roles reserved for women in her family.

Formally, Gayl Jones plays with a flexible chronological timeline through Ursa’s *solos*, which fuse past and present, reality and fiction, as well as different geographical locations in the United States and Brazil; the author has explained that “the ordering of the events is primarily *improvisational*. I wanted to get the sense of different times and different personalities coexisting in memory” (Tate/Jones 142, emphasis added to the original). The text’s fragmentation and limited dramatic action permit its release from narrative convention, “further adding to its evocation of the musical” (Brown 122). Another stylistic device that intensifies the sound and the musicality of the text is the use of repetition, which also deepens in the inherited traumas caused by the systematic abuse of Corregidora women during slavery:

‘Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you’d see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there. Soot crying out of my eyes.’ O mister who come to my house You do not come to visit You do not come to see me to visit You come to see me sing with my thighs You come to see me open my door and sing with my thighs Perhaps you watch me when I am sleeping I don’t know if you watch me when I am sleeping. Who are you? I am the daughter of the daughter of the daughter of Ursa. (67)

While the punctuation is omitted, the rhythm of the text speeds up. The references to blues and its melodic twelve-bar framework were common among bebop musicians, who found their roots in this musical genre; DeVaux refers to Lester Young as a “bluesy player” because he had a “blues frame of reference” (112). Likewise, female beboppers rendered blues as the cornerstone of their repertoire, more so if we consider that instrumentalists like Hazel Scott had to combine their music playing with blues singing.

In her second novel, *Eva’s Man*, Jones takes jazz time and prose even further, producing a highly fragmented text. Thus, the novel is comprised of pieces of conversations that the protagonist, Eva Medina, recalls while she is in jail for having castrated the last man who sexually and verbally attacked her. She quotes different sexist sayings that her family and neighbors used to repeat as part of a shared common knowledge on women’s sexualized nature, “once you open your

legs, Miss Billie said, it seems like you caint close them” (15); on women’s moral values, “Naw, she’s nothing but a little bitch just like all the rest of em. Think they wont your love, and they wont your money (138); on their behavior, “IS THIS the savage woman?” (141), or on their bodies: “I don’t like a woman bleeding, it’s nasty” (148). Like female bebopper Clora Bryant did in her album *Gal with a Horn* (1957), Eva appropriates the codes of a sexually and gender biased discourse, improvising situations that ultimately show its devastating effects. She is also compared to Medusa, the biblical Eve, and the lethal local widow “queen bee.” Yet, the protagonist perversely questions and overturns these myths and legends, conceived of stereotyped ideas of womanhood: “the sweet milk in the queen bee’s breasts had turned into blood” (131).

Gayl Jones plays with the narration and with the readers; “Let’s PLAY” is the invitation in capital letters that opens section V, of part Two. In so doing, the narrator and the characters tell the same event in different ways, varying the rhythm and its content. To that aim, Jones uses personal pronouns with ambiguous intentions, alternates the indirect speech with the direct reproduction of conversations or, at times, employs the same quotation for different characters:

‘I bet he wasn’t even that good. I bet you just hadn’t had a man in a long time.’
 ‘How long has it been, Eva?’
 ‘A long time. A long time...I thought you knew already.’ [Elvira and Eva]
 ‘He went in like he was tearing something besides her flesh.’ [Davis]
 ‘The trouble with you is you don’t feel nothing,’ Elvira said.
 ‘A real long time,’ I told him.
 ‘Has the woman talked yet?’ [Policeman]
 ‘Naw, Captain, she ain’t said a word,’ the detective said. (51)¹⁵

As the narration progresses, Eva conjures up longer assortments of quotations that signify on culturally-constructed discourses on gender roles and their destructive effects; see, for example, section V of part Three: “Yes, I was hurt by love. My soul was broken. My soul was broken . . . When he leaves her, her memory turns into blood” (143). In her violated mind, reality and delusion coalesce: “She stands naked on the street. She asks each man she sees to pay her her debt. But they say they owe her nothing” (144). These improvised textual quotations and musings function like a bebop performance, defined by Gabbard as “solos constructed on little more than perversely truncated medleys of popular songs with brief interludes of more conventionally improvised material” (104).

Gloria Naylor and her polyphonic, choral novels take the reader to a literary jam session or group improvisation. Her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*,

¹⁵ I have added the names of the characters to guide the reader.

sets the tone and the leading melody: the “broken dreams” of seven women in a grey brick neighborhood (*Brewster Place* 131).¹⁶ The story that better depicts the musicality of the text is Etta Mae Johnson’s (55-88), in which fragments of significant blues, jazz, spirituals, and biblical passages are quoted: Ma Rainey’s “Lost Wandering Blues” (56), Bessie Smith’s “Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do” (57), Billie Holiday’s “My Man” (55), “God Bless the Child,” and “Strange Fruit” (60), Ella Fitzgerald’s “Detour Ahead” (71), and the celebrated spiritual “Go Down Moses” (63). These quotations prove the relevance of black music for the community and how it voiced the cry of the disenfranchised: “Lost Wandering Blues” (1924) portrays the difficulties of migrant women; “Strange Fruit” (1939) depicts the horror of lynching; and “It Ain’t Nobody’s Business if I Do” (1923) is the outcry of a woman who longs for empowerment:

Slowly, she carried herself across the street—head high and eyes fixed unwaveringly on her destination. The half-dozen albums were clutched in front of her chest like cardboard armor.

There ain’t nothing I ever do
Or something I ever say
That folks don’t criticize me
But I’m going to do
Just what I want to, anyway.
And don’t care just what people say
If I should take a notion
To jump into the ocean
Ain’t nobody’s business if I do...(57)

The nine verses quoted from Bessie Smith’s blues, as well as the other songs mentioned, are inserted within the narration with no quotation marks, which requires an attentive reader/listener to be able to participate in the intertextual dialogue with music.

In addition, these quotations emphasize the relevance of women in music, bringing forth the names of pioneers in blues and jazz. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were among the first to record the blues in the 1920s and their unprecedented sales inaugurated the style of Classic Blues, a distinctively female genre. These singers became icons for other working class black women for raising their voices against social injustices, portraying sexual taboos—including homosexuality, a topic that Naylor also tackles in “The Two” (129-173)—and breaking with the limits of social conventions.¹⁷ Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald were the divas of vocal jazz: Holiday jazzified and re-codified popular love ballads, while Fitzgerald popularized

¹⁶ The novel was adapted into a musical in 2007, directed by Molly Smith.

¹⁷ For more information on the social impact of female blues singers, see Davis and Harrison.

a highly complex vocal jazz technique, called scat, that implied the use of wordless vocables to improvise on standards, such as the already mentioned “How High the Moon.”¹⁸ In her new rendition, which the singer performed and recorded at a live concert in Berlin (1960), she quoted with humor the melodies of more than a dozen popular tunes that included “Deep Purple” or “Poinciana.”¹⁹

As Naylor has acknowledged, *Bailey’s Cafe* is a “set of jazz” (Perry/Naylor 95) and the structure follows a jazz composition in four parts. The novel begins with a solemn introduction, “Maestro, if you please,” that ironically puts jazz on a par with European classical music; I referenced this device earlier in relation to beboppers and their deconstruction of classical music with their solos. It would have been even more disruptive if the leader were a woman, like in the 1940s all-woman bands. The cafe functions as the stage where the jam session progresses while each character improvises his or her story of “broken dreams” (*Bailey’s Cafe* 114). In each *solo* there are quotes that repeat a certain *refrain*, transcribed in italics; a prime example is the first *solo* of the cafe owner, a former soldier in World War II, who accounts for his traumatic experience in the war and repeats five times along his *solo*: “*We weren’t getting into Tokyo.*” This *refrain* heralds the outcome of the war: the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Frank Money, a war veteran in Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012), asserts: “After Hiroshima, the musicians understood as early as anyone that Truman’s bomb changed everything and only scat and bebop could say how” (109).

The musical introduction of the narrator, the owner of the cafe, precedes a chapter called “The Vamp,” which in jazz is the initial improvisation, and it is followed by “The Jam,” with remarkable narrative *solos* such as Sadie’s “Mood: Indigo” or “Eve’s song.” These individual stories, inscribed in a jazz pattern, indicate “the destruction of either men or women who accept a patriarchal vision of women’s reality” (Byerman 88). Thus, Sadie loses the home she had kept for her husband upon his death and ends up in the street: “You see, Sadie was a wino. And Sadie was a twenty-five cent whore” (*Bailey’s Cafe* 40). Eve, on the other hand, owns a brothel and boarding house that serves as a space where the suffering of other women is witnessed and perpetuated: “And she could have used a place to stay too. Had left Mr. Lucky Strike for a new man who’d gotten her pregnant before going back to his wife. From there on in, her story shifted into the familiar *key* of and-nobody-loves-you-when-you’re-down-and-out, so that my mind began to wander” (*Bailey’s Cafe* 82, emphasis added to the original). Eve’s exasperation

¹⁸ See Brent Hayes Edward’s convincing study on the complexities of scat, in which he analyzes Louis Armstrong’s performances and records.

¹⁹ Published in 1933 as a piano composition, the U.S. conductor Paul Whiteman, who proclaimed himself “The King of Jazz,” had “Deep Purple” scored for his all-white and all-male swing band, and it was an immediate hit. Based on a Cuban folk song, “Poinciana” (1936) was interpreted by Glen Miller’s swing orchestra, whose commercial appeal among white audiences was undisputed.

regarding self-victimization underscores that women might also get caught in exploitative practices. Her quotation of Bessie Smith's standard "Nobody Knows You When You Are Down and Out" (1929) serves to problematize certain cultural messages that function as subterfuge.²⁰ Quoting the blues might indeed serve as a source for female wisdom, like in *The Women of Brewster Place* or *Corregidora*, but Naylor is also cautious and critical about its possible misuse.

Every cafe customer is a *soloist* and the readers (audience) are invited to "listen for layers and interconnections between the solos" (Drieling 57). Bailey, as the leader of the jam session, prompts the reader to listen thoughtfully: "Here, I'll show you; let's just take 'em one key down . . . And when you take it one key down to even a lower key, you'll hear. . . . Anything really worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens under the surface. You need to know that if you stick around here and listen while we play all out" (*Bailey's Cafe* 34-35). Again, the musical terms highlight the resonance of the text. Naylor also provides visual cadence to the novel, including double spaces between certain paragraphs within the *solos*, which suggest jazz *breaks*, that is, transitional passages in which the soloist plays unaccompanied. The jazz composition ends with "The Wrap" (*Bailey's Cafe* 218-229), which goes back to the cafe owner: "If life is truly a song, then what we've got here is just snatches of a few melodies" (219).

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The protagonists of the four novels under consideration are black, working-class women, whose voices had long been muffled. The oral and musical qualities of the texts produce stories never heard before. In this sense, after reading Jones's first novel, Toni Morrison, her editor at the time, commented: "no novel about any black woman could be the same after this [. . .] Ursa Corregidora is not possible. Neither is Gayl Jones. But they exist" (*What Moves* 109-10). Gayl Jones and Gloria Naylor signify on the lives of different women, thus questioning monolithic representations of black womanhood. However, Jones and Naylor somehow assume in their fiction the iconic role reserved for women as singers and devote less attention to jazzwoman instrumentalists, which might stem from a blatant omission of their contributions in jazz historiography as well as the lack of archives dedicated to them.

Jazzwomen searched for spaces to be heard and reconfigured male-centered bebop strategies, such as quotation, to deconstruct patriarchal and formal European paradigms. Female beboppers also privileged the practice of improvisation, which in the novels under study takes the form of the musical rhythm of conversations or the flexibility of a non-chronological, "syncopated order of events" (Jones, *Liberating*

²⁰ Composed in 1923 by Jimmy Cox, this blues revolves around a one-time-millionaire who loses his money and friends.

Voices 200). The alliance of jazz and literature results in the conception of distinctive black voices that tell their stories from the women's collective point of view. If we give credit to the contributions of jazzwomen, the connections are even more inspirational. Even though critical interest in highlighting the presence of women in jazz has increased in the last decade, there is still a remarkable deficiency of studies in the field that deconstruct gender-oriented stereotypes.²¹

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²¹ In a May 2015 conversation with British jazz critic and practitioner Tony Whyton, he acknowledged the need to revisit the narrative of jazz, constructed under male-oriented terms. Whyton led a groundbreaking interdisciplinary project (2010-2013), "Rhythm Changes: Jazz Cultures and European Identities," that examined national identities, representations, and stereotypes in jazz. See the project site at: <http://heranet.info/rhythm-changes/index>

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