

Tribhuvan University

Evocation of Cultural Roots in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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Approval Letter

This thesis entitled “Evocation of Cultural Roots in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Mr. Gokul Raj Bhatta has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Gokul Raj Bhatta has completed his thesis entitled “Evocation of Cultural Roots in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from 2065/05/01 B.S. to 2065/12/30 B.S. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voice.

Mr. Ghanashyam Bhandari

Supervisor

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Abstract

In Jazz, Morrison evokes distinct African-American cultural roots and at the same time calls for a revisioning of the cultural history of the Jazz Age. She explores specifically the ways in which she thematically sings the blues of black experience through the use of literary techniques and images that inventively borrow from blues patterns and the structure of jazz performance. Though these images occur in relationship to masculinity or are related by male characters for their freedom from racial discrimination, they become contested symbols for women's liberation as well. In this way, she attempts to demonstrate the ways in which she engages in a kind of cultural mourning that ultimately serves both as an expression of grief for lost lives and as a form of re-appropriation of lost African cultural creations.

Chapter I

Introduction

This research is a study of Toni Morrison's famous novel *Jazz* published in 1992. In *Jazz*, Morrison evokes the African cultural roots through the blues tradition. Moreover, the narrator's descriptions of the events in its characters' lives are replete with the images of jazz, and blues – African cultural tradition. Though these images occur in relationship to masculinity or are related by male characters for their freedom from racial discrimination, they become contested symbols for women's liberation as well. Thus, by evoking the imagery of African culture – jazz, blues and music in *Jazz*, Morrison not only advocates for the liberation of the black males, but also stresses on the black women's freedom from all forms of domination.

The train, which earlier symbolized freedom and mobility for men in male blues songs, becomes a contested symbol for the women in this novel. Here, the railroad and train imagery can be seen as a signpost for the male literary tradition of drawing on the blues tradition. Morrison both accepts and problematizes these images by her substitution of the masculine nexus of the crossroads and train with that of the phonograph and the cultural artifact of the race record industry that allows African American women at least some agency in scripting their own blues narratives. So, Morrison both acknowledges and questions the predominance of the male blues tradition, the recording of which eventually supplanted the popularity of women's blues in the late twenties and early thirties.

In her works, Morrison seeks the connection of past and present. By fusing history and art, past and present, Morrison “asserts, interrogates and critiques the social, political and cultural interests of the African Americans”

(Mitchell 49). As the African-American history is the history of racial discrimination, Morrison inevitably deals with racial issues talking race as a metaphor, a way of referring to forces, events, and forms of social decay, economic division and human panic.

Morrison's novels have a complex relationship to history. Her life spans the last two-thirds of a century which has seen significant change in civil rights for black people in American women writers. All her novels are, in a sense, historical novels in which characters, as Christina Barbara has said, are "both subjects of and subject to history, events in real time, that succession of antagonistic movements that includes slavery, reconstruction, depression and war" (2). Her novels are characterized by carefully crafted prose, in which ordinary words are placed in relief so as to produce lyrical phrases and to elicit sharp emotional responses from her readers. Her extraordinary, mythic characters are driven by their moral vision to struggle in order to understand truths, which are longer than those held by the individual self. Her subjects are large: good and evil, love and hate, friendship, beauty and ugliness, and death.

Morrison was of the belief that the primary function of black history and art should be the reinterpretation, reevaluation and rediscovery of black life and experience as lived by the black people. As an Afro-American writer, Morrison had with her a language wit and through which she could powerfully evoke signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive "othering" of people.

Morrison's novels continue the poetic and Gothic branches of the Afro-American narrative tradition. Gothic in the sense that black poetic realists like Morrison "strive more for truth of sensation and environment than for truth of fact, focusing on the supernatural ties of the present to the past and on

psychological and sociological concepts for their images of the ethical conduct in a world of mystery and unnatural events”; poetic in the use the metaphoric and metonymic qualities of the language, the substitutions of figurative for literal expressions, as well as “deft bold stokes of color, distilled experience, and fluting but sharp and frequently recurring images” (Bell 269). According to Barbara Christian, Morrison’s works are “fantastic earthly realism, which is deeply rooted in history and mythology, resonate with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror” (59).

Morrison’s role in developing the American literature, and by means of this, highlighting the often-ignored Afro-America literary tradition is the result of her high ambition, artistic sophistication, strong mythic power and epic sweep. She draws on oral narratives, African folk-tales, bible songs, music, and ghost stories.

Morrison employs distinctive, effortless, suggestive and provocative language, the language the Black loves to play with. The function of the language is like that of a preacher: to make one stand up out of one’s seat, and to make one lose oneself. She treats even old ideas, old situations with the language the readers can speak and hear (Laclair 373).

The themes of Morrison’s novels, however homely and common they appear to be, they are held in the grip of her immense power because they come out as complex ones deserving intellectual sweat.

Morrison introduces the characters who, in Barara Rigey’s word, “are both subjects of and subject to history, events in real times, and the succession of antagonistic movement that includes slavery, reconstruction, depression and war” (qtd. in Peach 2). Her major protagonists “resort to bizarre types of crisis

resolution including murder, incestuous rape, bestiality and self-mutilation, often within the context of parent-child relationship”:

Cholly Breedlove rapes his eleven year old daughter in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva Peace burns her adult son to death in *Sula*; in *Beloved* Sethe murders her infant daughter; Dorcas dies from Trace’s hand in *Jazz*. Erupting out of the world sometimes gently, often with force and terror, these characters

have amazing and terrible pasts-they must find them out, or be haunted by them. Further these characters are eccentric and maimed as a result of their experience as a black man and woman in an environment that defines their humanity by economic, sexual and racial myths. Albeit, she denies to state any truth in her novels, for she says there is no whole truth or whole man and woman, in spite of her creating disintegrated people to challenge traditional western notions of identity and wholeness, her characters persevere in their efforts to cope with or triumph over obstacles in their path to self-esteem, freedom and wholeness. (Burton 170)

Morrison’s fiction has always been concerned with deconstructing the frames of reference within which the African-American identity has been, and is constructed. Cultural hybridity is pertinent for Morrison’s writing and to twentieth century America as well. Each of Morrison’s novels is anchored in an “ever-increasing social complexity and embraces new cultural and ethnic pluralism” (Peach 189). The assertion of plurality is symbolically manifested by her in setting *Jazz* in the city; a place full of cultural complexity and ever-changing possibility. Morrison’s novels can be seen as a search for a collective way of dealing with differentiated identities. These differentiated identities are

themselves the product of racial, gender and geographical differences rather than absolute binaries.

American South is a proper setting of Morrison's fictions. Southern landscape is a psychic landscape, an ancestral home of the homeless black. It is everybody's past and future. South remains in nostalgia for it is, as Morrison contends in an interview with Carolyn Denard, everybody's past, "and the good old days and ma and pa and grandpa and so on" (15). Her characters do not go back to South, what goes is their memory.

To show some kind of tomorrow, to indicate that the next generation will be all right; Morrison finally presents the ability of her characters' negotiation with the place where they had been. Therefore it is Morrison's special privilege to depict southern ethics and manners, because blacks are so familiar with south that they know every particle of it:

Black American shaped the landscape of the American South. The house that were built, the human being that were nurtured in them; the forest that were cleared, and the crops that were planted and harvested were all tented by black hands and formed by African cultural practices, technologies, and sensibilities. The landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, because . . . neither legally nor economically their own, but because spiritually their own through their own labor and under most difficult circumstances (Jones 37).

Morrison displays in her craft a keen sense of and preoccupation with history in writing about the neglected people. In her novels sometimes she examines the pains and woes of slavery, moves to see pre-World War I and II

Africa American urban life, scrutinizes the Great Migration, examines the during and post-Emancipation period, the other times she observes the Arab-Israel, the Vietnam War era, America Civil War, the Civil Right Movement. They and their devastating psychological effects on black people is subject of study for her.

Jazz provides the opportunities for a generational examination of three Southern black women whose lives are shaped and complicated by their racialized and genderized historical circumstances in the South. Morrison offers literary portraits of Southern black women during three significant moments of American history: American slavery, Reconstruction and the Great Migration. Thus, in Eusebio Rodrigues' words, Morrison's novel "jazzifies the history of a people by giving us rapid vivid glimpses of their life in rural south after Emancipation" (742). A cultural and historical conservator, one whose exploration is about "movement from liberation to conservation", Morrison inscribes her three characters: True Belle, Rose Dear, and Voolet- as the texts of their respective historical movement, American slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Migration, by revealing how their particularized histories inform their lives (Morrison 12). As an artist to write history, Morrison has to take the road not taken before so as to bring fact in an artist in writing about history, because:

Historian must necessarily speak in generalities and must examine recorded resources. They habitually leave out life lived by everyday people. History for them is what great men have done. But artist do not have any limitation, and the trust of historians they are obliged not to. (qtd. in Mitchell 49).

The history that Morrison represents does not appear merely as something to be read, nor does it appear to be a reference to the past events. On the contrary

history for her is a great force which comes, as James Baldwin posits, “from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled and shaped by it in many ways” (275). This inescapability, inevitability and all-controlling force of history must be the pointing discussing on Morrison’s *Jazz*.

In recent years, many African American women novelists have written historical novels that dramatize the African American historical past. Black women writes are ever mindful; it seems that master narratives of history have not always truthfully represented the African American experience. Margaret Walker, Octavia Butler, Sherly Anne Williams all revisit the Blake woman’s story during slavery, and by as doing, they examine the veiled cloaked, and sometimes misrepresented interior lives of nineteenth-century black people in bondage. The effects of upward social and economic mobility African American during 1960s and 1970s are interrogated by Pauline Marshall and Taylor’s works, while both Alice Walker and Toni C. Bambara examine the aftermath of 1960s. Historical fiction by Black women writer, as Justine Talley explains, may function in the following ways: literature as recording history; literature as recovering history, literature as writing/righting history; and literature as shaping history (Mitchell 358). These historical concerns urge the imperative to see how Black women writers, like Morrison, employ literature to record, recover, write/right and shape history.

Accordingly, Morrison who engages history in her representation augment the actual history as written- through the representation of imaginable-history as imagined. In theorizing the historical novel, Georg Lukacs posits that the historical novel reflects and critiques the historical and material condition of society. For Lukacs, “literature cannot just reflect what has been reached, the

end-result, without at the same time giving expression to its complicated path” (272).

The history is not only a context but also as a cultural phenomenon; it is a significant trope for Black Women novelists like Morrison. Her novel *Jazz* offers a discursive engagement with history, therefore culture, in order to contest the “erasure” and misrepresentation of Afro-America literary tradition, within the historical discourse of the hegemonic culture. Morrison further intends to show that Afro-America literature is no longer at the margin by naming the novel after jazz music.

In order to prove this idea a cultural and historical study of *Jazz* is viable as well as indispensable. Literary texts are cultural by virtue of social values and contexts they have successfully absorbed. The world is full of texts which divorced from their immediate surroundings are virtually incomprehensible. To recover the meaning of such texts, to make any sense of them at all, we need to reconstruct the situation in which they are produced. Because if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of Afro-America work of literature, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead a heightened understanding of cultural within which it is produced.

This study examines how *Jazz* voices the problems, challenges and experiences of the black women in America; how jazz depicts series of conflicts and confrontation: “dispersion and rootedness, dislocation and relocation, trauma and triumph, silence and sounding, rupture and continuity, independence and interdependence, south and north village values and urban attitudes” (Kyan and Mejoza), which define the Diaspora of African American; how the musical

instrument jazz is supposed to voice the cultural, racial, and ethnic identity of African American.

Morrison's novel *Jazz* can be taken as a major achievement in her attempt to find for Afro-America people a voice in the literary tradition of America. The so called "melting pot" could by no means mingle all voice into one: jazz sounds distinct even among a band of numerous furors. Whether it is cacophonous or mellifluous, jazz stands for its own identity. It strikes the chords of bondage and liberation, anger and content, pain and joy of the black people through its echoes. So, it is necessary to listen and respond to the voices jazz embodies. *Jazz* is the voice of resistance empowering itself against the invisible, yet all-pervasive power of a dominant culture and its time honored oppression. In Morrison, it is plausible to listen to the voice of the author as that of a rebel as well as that of a revolutionary rebelling against the iron-fisted control of white Puritan values: patriarchy, thrift, temperance, piety, and industry-and revolutionary as opposed to the constraints of the cultural ideology, and approving the dynamicity or change a culture is prone to undergo.

The thesis has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory outline of the work -- a short introduction to Toni Morrison and her works. Moreover, it gives a bird's eye view of this entire research.

The second chapter tries to explain the theoretical modality briefly that is applied in this research work. It discusses culture, cultural roots and cultural identity with reference to African culture.

On the basis of the theoretical framework established in the second chapter, the third chapter analyzes the text at a considerable length. It analyzes how the blacks' past has played significant role in the lives of blacks in modern times in America, through jazz music which Morrison associates with the

liberation of black men and women in modern times. This chapter sorts out some extracts from the text as evidence to prove the hypothesis of the study.

Finally, the fourth or the last chapter will sum up the main points of the present research work and the findings of the research work.

Chapter II

Cultural Roots and Identity

Cultural studies emerged from the premises that there is no single culture which is superior to other cultures. So, cultural studies negates the idea of 'universal culture'. It is now a multi or post disciplinary field of inquiry, which ruptures the boundaries between itself and other subjects. It transcends the confines of particular discipline such as literary criticism and history. As Lawrence Grossberg and others emphasize that the intellectual promise of cultural studies lies in its attempts to "cut across diverse social and political interests and address many of the struggles within the current scene" (qtd in Guerin 240). It is now difficult to pinpoint the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear substantive topics, concept and methods which differentiate it from other disciplines.

Cultural studies is politically engaged. Cultural critics see themselves as "oppositional" to the power structures of society; they question inequalities within power structures and seek to restructure relationships among dominant and subordinated cultures. Barker's view on this studies is crucial here. He believes that it is always connected to 'power' and 'politics'. He says, "Cultural studies is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice", where knowledge is never an objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality (qtd in Guerin 241).

Cultural Studies in this sense is a 'discursive formation'. For Stuart Hall, as quoted in Cultural Studies, it is a "a cluster (or formation) of idea, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with particular topic, social activity or institution site in society" (6).

A good deal of cultural studies is centered on question of representation, that is, on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us. Indeed, the central strain of cultural studies can be understood as the study of culture as signifying practices of representation which requires us explore the textual generation of meaning.

The proposition from this observation can be drawn as – cultural studies refers to multi stranded intellectual movement that places cultural analysis in the context of social formation, seeing society and culture as the product of historical processes unlike frozen artifacts, emphasizing the inextricable relations between culture and calling attention to social inequalities- thus always making a committed call for democratization.

Cultural Identity

Identity is the meaning or self-concept that one gives to oneself or the meaning in general that human beings give to themselves. In other words, it is the sum totality of values attached to individuals by an age and community, in terms of their class, caste, group or culture and institution of any kind. Thus, with the change in values or the intellectual development in human history, man's concept of self has always changed. It has sometimes only been modified and at other times radically changed.

Identity has become the central area of concern in cultural studies during the 1990s. Identity is the process how we describe ourselves to each other. Cultural studies explores how we come to be the kinds of people we are, how we are, produced as subjects, and how we identify with descriptions of ourselves as male female, black or white, young or old , Asians or Europeans. As perceived within the domain of cultural studies, identities are not things which exist simply

there with universal qualities, rather they are discursive constructions. Thus, in this sense, identities are constituted or made. Balibar perceives: “Identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity or by erasing of identities” (186).

Identity, a discourse of tradition, is not transparent or unproblematic. For critics like Stuart Hall identity is a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within representation. There are, according Hall, at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’. The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Hall writes: “Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provides us, as ‘one people’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (111). Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in the postcolonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world.

Cultural identity, in the second way of thinking, along the many points of similarity has critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather ‘what we have become’. Hall writes about the second notion of cultural identity as:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere,

have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (112)

In this second sense, identity is subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a 'mere' recovery of the past, waiting to be found, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. It is only from this second position of the identity proposed by Hall that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the 'colonial experience' out of which are constituted the identities such as Indianness, Carribeanness, Africanness and Blackness. The ways in which such identities were positioned by and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. The dominant or superior culture has the power to influence or dominate the other. So, not only, in Said's 'Orientalist' sense, were we constructed as the other within the categories of the West by those regimes but also, they had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'other'.

Afro-American culture which emerged from slavery evolved through creolization as it came into close contact with Euro-American culture. There occurred an interaction between African tradition and Euro-American tradition where Afro-Americans tried to maintain and build up their culture through music, song, folklore myth and magic. So, this medley of the elements of African tradition with the Euro-American culture is known as Afro-American culture. For the blacks in the United States, this cultural creolization has involved two complex and dynamic aspects. First, among Africans themselves, a creolization process developed as Africans captured from different places. It was a process of

mutual cultural exchange where synthesis took place. Secondly, almost simultaneously, this dynamic mixture of African culture was interacting and exchanging with Euro-American cultures, which were themselves varied because of the different national identities and cultural patterns of the oppressive slave traders and plantation owners.

For the Afro-Americans, art was an important part of their way of life and was closely associated with everyday activities. They created their art as an instrument by which they contacted the spirit using supernatural forces. They did so to overcome the dangers of their environment and to express their religion. They believed in the universal life force which the almighty pours into the world and gives life to every creation. They even believed that the dead retain their living force through certain rituals performed.

Although Africans were inspired by what they do at the rituals, they also like invisible spirits to be visible. So, they carved sculptures which serve as a medium for the access to the spirit world. The figures of ancestors and spirits, masks and other cult objects are the mediums of links between god and man. The inspiring figures are supposed to bring fertility riches and the blessing upon the successors.

Africans often use masks, which they believe enable the souls of the dead, to make their appearance in a visible form. The designs of the masks depend upon its major purpose. They should be unreal as far as possible. In order to know the full meaning of the mask, one must be able to witness the ceremonies of which the mask is used. Not only the mask but also other carved objects and sculptures are used in the rituals.

Human motifs were first priority of all African tribes. They formed an analogy to particular divine forces and myths. The navel and genitals signified the continuance of mankind. The sculptures seen with a large navel can be interpreted as a sign that a very powerful spirit would lift the body or womb. A large head could be an indication of great intelligence and will power of the spirit world.

Afro-Americans blended old styles with new when cooking, smiting, wood-carving, story-telling and gospel singing traditions. They sang folk songs reflecting their secular life, as Blaissingame points out:

The secular songs told of the slave's loves, work, floggings, and expressed his moods and reality of his oppression. On a number of occasions he sang of the proud defiance of the runaway, the courage of the black rebels, the stupidity of the black rebels, and the stupidity of the patrollers, the heartlessness of the slave traders and the kindness and cruelty of masters. (23)

They sang songs that began in the fields of the plantations to pass the themes of salvation and freedom of Christianity with a native style of singing and dancing.

Slave spirituals were among the earliest forms of artistic self-expression available to African Americans; the songs were based on Christian hymn tradition, but often departed radically from the complacent austerity to white hymns. This spiritual tradition provided the birthing ground for what Levine calls "the most highly personalized genre of African-American music: the blues" (221). By the early 20th century, the blues had emerged as a dynamic and powerful addition to the music of black America. In this regard, Schultz remarks, "In the spirituals, black Americans first started to sing of their feelings of

homelessness; in the blues, they continued to sing it" (127). In a 1960 interview, blues musician Sidney Bechet identified the source of the essential connection between music and story telling. He says "Me, I want to explain myself so bad. I want to have myself understood. And the music, it can do that. The music, it's my whole story" (qtd. in Levine 190). Although gospel and blues often differ in focus and style, both genres are musical expressions of the cultural need to the story of people.

Mahalia Jackson once remarked that blue songs "are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope" (qtd. in Levine 174). This comment is not negative judgment of blue singers; perhaps the blues developed to fill a need that gospel could not address. A deep despair that fills so many blues songs provides a communal outlet for emotions that would otherwise choke the singer; the blues may provide a way of recognizing and sharing human pain in order to overcome it. According to John Lee Hooker, the blues are "not only what's happened to you, it's what happened to your fore parents and other people. And that's what makes the blues" (qtd. in Levine 237). This historical and cultural breadth of the blues illustrates the vitality and strength of the close connection between music and folklore. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston suggests that "[s]omewhere songs for sound-singing branched off from songs for storytelling until we arrive at prose" (qtd. in Hurston 877). She asserts that folklore is nothing less than "the boiled-down juice of human living" (875).

In addition to music, the African-Americans relied on the oral traditions, much as their African ancestors did. Orature and storytelling is a way of bridging gaps between the Black community's folk roots and the Black American tradition.

Blaissingame outlines the value of the folk tales which emerged out of slave environment:

The [folk] tales also represented the distillation of folk wisdom and were used as an instructional device to teach young slaves to survive. A projection of the slave's personal experience, dreams, and hopes, the folk tales allowed him to express hostility to his master, to poke fun at himself, and to delineate the workings of the system. At the same time, by viewing himself as an object, verbalizing his dreams and hostilities, the slave was able to preserve one more area which whites could not control. (36)

So, elements of African culture synthesizing with the slave culture, slave experience and Euro-American culture ultimately became the components of the Afro-American culture.

This Afro-American culture – myth, black art, folk tales and rituals – has been richly reflected in the writings of Afro-American writers. Lately, the experimental flourish of the Counterculture and Civil Rights Movement eras have brought tremendous developments in American writing especially in drama. According to William Herman, by the mid-'70s, new conditions in the nation – political, social, cultural, and technological – combined to “displace drama as a major vehicle of cultural expression” (9). The move of drama from the center of the cultural stage has not meant its death, however. With Broadway's loss of primacy, regional activities have come to the fore, and this has meant unparalleled growth for minority – black, Chicano, women, gay productions. In style and subject matter new patterns and concerns have arisen. Reverting to what Gerald M. Berkowitz defines as the mainstay of twentieth-century American

drama, domestic realism, dramatists have started to express their concerns “through the everyday, personal experiences of ordinary characters” (167). In black drama, the traditional emphasis on cultural identity has continued. Instead of Amiri Baraka's once-dominant revolutionary style, characterized by images of revolt at work now is the claim to possess an authentic black culture expressed through a recognizably black sensibility. This emphasis can be seen in the work of August Wilson, whose plays deal with the common folk, “those who were continuing to live their lives,” rather than “what you could get from the history book” (qtd. in Bigsby, 297). Wilson has little interest in those black figures and experiences that have been at the center of political and social activism.

August Wilson has dedicated himself to writing a cycle of plays dramatizing black experience during crucial historical periods in order to play out his individual sense of commitment to the cause of black America – which is to allow black men and women to tell American history, “a history that, so far, whites have mostly told” (Goldman 40). To him, blacks can best write and stage their experiences and cultural identity. This vision frames the significance of his project, which involves a concern for the survival struggle of black cultural values in the midst of a hostile white culture. Wilson writes: “The message of America is ‘Leave your Africanness outside the door.’ My message is ‘Claim what is yours’” (qtd. in Freedman, 39-40). Wilson's sense of identity looks emphatically toward Africa, and carries a large part of his ideological program. He seeks the recognition of African American identity - acceptance of the fact that Afro-American mythology is not “strange,” but “a common, natural part of life”; he seeks acknowledgment of African Americans' link “to Africa, to who we

are" (qtd. in Freedman, 240). Wilson obviously denies the assumption that slavery exterminated African culture. He believes with Lawrence Levine:

From the first African captives, through the years of slavery, and into the present century black Americans kept alive important strands of African consciousness and verbal art in their humor, songs, dance, speech, tales, folk beliefs and aphorisms (Levine 444).

Despite the long and painful historical separation, there remains an African sensibility among African Americans. Wilson consciously seeks to integrate this sensibility and all else that stems from African culture into his plays.

Many a time, Wilson tries to trace the aspects of Africanness in his writing by reading it through Wole Soyinka's drama. Conceptually and practically, Soyinka draws on Yoruba ritual drama and mythology. In his *Myth, Literature and the African World*, he explores African world views and rituals and how these can help to build a true modern African drama. Grounded in his reinterpretation of Yoruba culture, the book provides the foundation of his ritual dramatic theory, within which rituals function on both the literal and metaphorical levels. Ritual scenes, structures, moods, ideologies, and moralities pervade Soyinka's dramatic texts. The world view that dominates his plays recognizes the reality of the invisible world (gods, spirits, the unborn, and the dead - the ancestors) whose forces determine the lives of humans. Morality, the driving force governing the social and cosmic orders, lies in a harmonious relationship with the past (hence the ancestors), the invisible forces, and among humans themselves. To varying degrees, Soyinka's characters live out this essentially religious world view. Scenes and values that belong to the secular life

do exist in his plays, but Soyinka believes that, if only because of its collective status, dramatic performance necessarily has something ritual about it. Hence he prefers the term participant to audience to name those who attend his dramas. More than one critic has asserted that "elements of mysticism, ritual, spiritualism and storytelling" (Dworkin 2) pervade Wilson's plays, and Wilson himself makes the point that "I try to give [these elements] to both my characters and the audiences because they are part of what we are" (Goldman 6). The sense of the past and cultural practice is central among Wilson's concerns in his writings. The past subsumes a number of the cultural aspects that the researcher shall be considering and introduce the two main strains of twentieth-century black American cultural thought represented by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. As Wilson asserts, "You have to make a decision about where you're going to go, whether you are going to assimilate or separate. I offer my plays as part of that debate" (qtd. in Bigsby 298).

So, his writing dramatizes Wilson's complex notion of the past, which is at once the contemporary South, the slave era, and Africa (Freedman 36). Wilson argues that it is only by assuming Africanness that the black American attains a sense of plenitude and eventually comes to understand who he or she is. Here he reveals a philosophical affinity with Soyinka in that Wilson's attitude, like Soyinka's, exemplifies what we may term mythical thinking, since it assumes original oneness as the essence of being, of life. Soyinka writes:

When we left [the South] we left people back there. . . . [the] connection is broken, that sense of standing in your father's shoes. . . . what I'm trying to do with my plays [is] make the connection.

Because I think it's vital. Having shared a common past we have a common past and a common future. (qtd. in Bigsby 298).

Here, Wholeness and life stand out, and are unequivocally and inextricably linked with each other.

Soyinka observes that the sense of tragedy for the Yoruba involves "the anguish of an original severance, the fragmentation of essence from self" (145). Ritual ceremonies are an attempt to retrieve the original oneness; they are re-enactments of the gods' dramas in their first attempts to re-unite with humans (144). Retrieval and re-unification govern the structures of a number of Soyinka's plays, including *Death and the King's Horseman* and *A Dance of the Forests*, which deal with the themes of the past, present, and future. In the Yoruba mind, these temporal sequences are intimately interdependent realities that confer meaning, harmony, and wholeness to life. Soyinka further says: "Life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (146). For the Yoruba, "the past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living and the future to the unborn" (148). In ritual moments, the occasions par excellence when these three essential instances unite in a single locus, these three instances realize the state of original oneness. The past, the present, and the future are faces of the same reality, of life, of being. To deny or to search for the past engages and determines one's ontological self, one's identity.

Evincing the essential desire, as Soyinka views, "to penetrate even deeper into that area of man's cosmogonic hunger, one which leads him to the profounder forms of art as retrieval vehicles for, or assertive links with, a lost sense of origin" (54), Wilson displays, with his concern for the past, a true sense of Africanness.

African American Art and Music

From its early origins in slave communities, through the end of the twentieth century, African American art has made a vital contribution to the art of the United States. During the period between the 1600s and the early 1800s, art took the form of small drums, quilts, wrought-iron figures, and ceramic vessels in the southern United States. These artifacts have similarities with comparable crafts in West and Central Africa. In contrast, African American artisans like the New England-based engraver Scipio Moorhead and the Baltimore portrait painter Joshua Johnson created art that was conceived in a thoroughly western European fashion.

During the 1800s, Harriet Powers made quilts in rural Georgia, United States that are now considered among the finest examples of nineteenth-century Southern quilting. Later in the 20th century, the women of Gee's Bend developed a distinctive, bold, and sophisticated quilting style based on traditional African American quilts with a geometric simplicity that developed separately but was like that of Amish quilts and modern art.

Midnight Golfer by Eugene J. Martin, mixed media collage on rag paper. After the American Civil War, museums and galleries began more frequently to display the work of African American artists. Cultural expression in mainstream venues was still limited by the dominant European aesthetic and by racial prejudice. To increase the visibility of their work, many African American artists traveled to Europe where they had greater freedom. It was not until the Harlem Renaissance that more European Americans began to pay attention to African American art in America.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there were very few widely accepted African American artists. Despite this, "The Highwaymen," a loose association of 27 African American artists from Ft. Pierce, Florida, created idyllic, quickly realized images of the Florida landscape and peddled some 50,000 of them from the trunks of their cars. They sold their art directly to the public rather than through galleries and art agents, thus receiving the name "The Highwaymen". Rediscovered in the mid-1990s, today they are recognized as an important part of American folk history.

Composer Duke Ellington, pictured receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Richard Nixon, is often held to be one of the most influential musical figures of the 20th century. African American music is rooted in the typically polyrhythmic music of the ethnic groups of Africa, specifically those in the Western, Sahelean, and Sub-Saharan regions. African oral traditions, nurtured in slavery, encouraged the use of music to pass on history, teach lessons, ease suffering, and relay messages. The African pedigree of African American music is evident in some common elements: call and response, syncopation, percussion, improvisation, swung notes and blue notes.

In the 1800s, as the result of the blackface minstrel show, African American music entered mainstream American society. By the early twentieth century, several musical forms with origins in the African American community had transformed American popular music. Aided by the technological innovations of radio and phonograph records, ragtime, jazz, blues, and swing also became popular overseas, and the 1920s became known as the Jazz Age. The early 20th century also saw the creation of the first African American

Broadway shows, films such as *King Vidor's Hallelujah!*, and operas such as *George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess*. Rock and roll, doo wop, soul, and others developed in the mid-20th century. These genres became very popular in white audiences and were influences for other genres such as surf. During the 1970s, the dozens, an urban African American tradition of using rhyming slang to put down one's enemies (or friends), and the West Indian tradition of toasting developed into a new form of music. In the South Bronx the half speaking, half singing rhythmic street talk of "rapping" grew into the hugely successful cultural force known as Hip hop. Hip Hop would become a multicultural movement; however, it still remained important to many African Americans. The African American Cultural Movement of the 1960s and 1970s also fueled the growth of funk and later hip-hop forms such as rap, hip house, new jack swing, and go. African American music has experienced far more widespread acceptance in American popular music in the 21st century than ever before. In addition to continuing to develop newer musical forms, modern artists have also started a rebirth of older genres in the form of genres such as neo soul and modern funk-inspired groups.

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was another period of resurgent interest in African American art. During this period, several African American artists gained national prominence, among them Lou Stovall, Ed Love, Charles White, and Jeff Donaldson. Donaldson and a group of African American artists formed the Afro-centric collective AfriCOBRA, which remains in existence today. The sculptor Martin Puryear, whose work has been acclaimed for years, was being honored with a 30-year retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in November 2007. Notable contemporary

African American artists include David Hammons, Eugene J. Martin, Mose Tolliver, and Kara Walker.

Chapter III

Evocation of Cultural Roots in the Novel *Jazz*

In *Jazz*, Morrison re-claims black music both by reconceptualizing the Jazz Age and by employing the literary equivalents of its musical forms. In this book, Toni Morrison has done much more than merely protest white appropriation of African-American music. She attempts to demonstrate the ways in which she engages in a kind of cultural mourning that ultimately serves both as an expression of grief for lost lives and possibilities and as a form of re-appropriation of lost cultural creations. Morrison shows her concern throughout her fiction with notions of love and loss within the context of psychoanalytic theories regarding the grieving process. She explores specifically the ways in which she thematically sings the blues of black experience through the use of literary techniques that inventively borrow from blues patterns and the structure of jazz performance. In this way, Morrison evokes a distinctly and uniquely African-American tradition and at the same time calls for a revisioning of the cultural history of the Jazz Age.

Jazz is set during the 1920s, an era of emerging cultural optimism for African Americans. As Morrison explains in an interview, during that period of vibrant social and aesthetic transformations in the decade after the First World War, “black culture, rather than American culture, began to alter the whole country and eventually the Western World. It was an overwhelming development in terms of excitement and glamour, and the sense of individualizing ourselves swept the world” (Carabi 41). In her novel, a series of linked episodes reveal the emergence of that cultural moment through the portraits of half a dozen characters whose lives converge in the “City” – never named but understood as

New York City's Harlem – in the years following the Great Migration and World War I. (6). A central story within the several overlapping ones is a romantic love triangle involving a middle-aged married couple, Violet and Joe Trace, and Dorcas Manfred, an eighteen-year-old girl with whom Joe has a brief love affair. Their relationship, as the narrator informs us at the start, is “one of those deep down, spooky loves that made Joe so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” (3). Though most of the action in *Jazz* takes place in the ‘City,’ several flashbacks are set in rural Virginia, including the self-contained story of a mulatto named Golden Gray, whose life only slightly overlaps with Joe Trace's.

The narrator of *Jazz* is, uniquely, without sex, gender, or age, a presence Morrison seems to designate as the ‘voice’ in order to highlight its function not as a person (of either gender) but as the voice of a talking book which is connected to the artifact of the book as an active participant in the invention of the story of the book, as though the book were talking, writing itself, in a sense. Initially, that voice exults as it records the emergence of a new order. Morrison writes: “Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. History is over, you all, and everything’s ahead at last” (7). The voice enthusiastically celebrates the era of the “New Negro” along with the emergence of opportunity, cultural pride, and vibrant new musical idioms. Yet beneath these high-spirited and rich expressions a contrary one can be perceived, which Morrison indicates as a blues theme of “complicated anger” interwoven with strands of danger, sorrow, and loss (59). This shows Morrison seeking a past harmonious connection and cultural root. As the narrating voice describes the clarinets that wail, the drums that pulse – sometimes joyfully, sometimes sorrowfully – beneath the surface of the characters' lives, Morrison also plays on

the contradictions that are inherent in “blues” music itself by expressing an opposite theme. The voice relates early in the novel, “Word was that underneath the good times and the easy money something evil ran the streets and nothing was safe – not even the dead” (9). This shows that there is a feeling of imminent danger and the need to heed patterns and designs despite containing pervasive optimism for the City’s black community.

While Morrison's use of the phonograph and particular type of records it plays allows the possibility for change and transformation for all of the novel's characters, it seems to provide its female characters in particular with a way to make their communal voice heard. ‘Voice’ suggests a parallel in *Jazz* between agency and the technologically produced cultural form of women's classic blues, an agency the novel both problematizes and yet temporarily affirms through the narrator's unreliability. In working against the notion of the blues as indicative of ‘authentic’ African American male experience, Morrison substitutes for the traditional blues image of the ‘train’ the trope of the Victrola so that her narrator can “play” African American female narratives – codified in *Jazz* by women's classic blues – to which traditional history, as well as that of feminist thought, have been somewhat deaf. This seems to be more on the side of women.

By aligning the narrator with the technological apparatus of the phonograph and the cultural artifact of the race record, Morrison invokes the material production and dissemination of the classic blues and their relationship to life in the city for African Americans. This analogy works in conjunction with the narrator's seemingly incidental, but highly gendered references to phonographs and records. When Felice comes to talk to Joe about Dorcas at the end of the novel, it is an “Okeh record” from Felton's record store that she is

carrying (6). The specificity of the ‘Okeh’ label cannot be accidental, for Leroi Jones pinpoints Mamie Smith's ‘Okeh’ recording of “Crazy Blues” (originally titled “Harlem Blues”) as the product that tapped the potential market of

[t]he Negro as consumer. . . . Friday nights after work in those cold gray Jordans of the North, Negro workingmen lined up outside record stores to get the new blues, and as the money rolled in, the population of America, as shown on sales prognostication charts in the offices of big American industry, went up by one-tenth. (23)

The narrator of *Jazz* addresses how these recent migrants must have felt at arriving in a Harlem whose population was comprised almost wholly of African Americans, and she does so with specific reference to the city's sidewalks and streets:

However they came, when or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement – there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than the heifer's stall and darker than a morning privy, they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did. (32-22)

Evident in this passage are not only direct references to the often crowded and expensive living conditions faced by black migrants, but also metaphorical encodings of the material conditions of their existence before migrating to the city.

The narrator's analogy between record grooves and the city's streets – their physical attributes, location, and allure – foregrounds issues integral to the process of identity and community formation not only for Harlem but for the early twentieth-century African American urban population in general, a process in which the blues was integral. New migrants had to deal with the implications of being free to choose their own sexual partners. Women's classic blues, she argues, were an outlet through which black women worked out the pervasive effects of this freedom, which included the negotiation of the concept of romantic love, jealousy, and community as well as domestic violence.

In *Jazz* Violet is the main character through which these negotiations are articulated, and the sidewalk and street imagery illustrates the playing out of her in-process identity. The narrator's description of her "private cracks" is a blend of images that question her, and perhaps African American women's in general, relationship to the Harlem community and to the social world:

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings of breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globe light holds and bathes each scene, and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time. But the globe light is imperfect too. Closely examined it shows seams, ill-glued

cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street. (22-23)

The cracks Violet encounters are similar to the cracks in a record that make it skip so that it is unable to continue its playing, a correlation that suggests the complexity of the relationship between African American women's lives and various deterministic cultural narratives of not only dangerous sexuality but the often stifling, reactionary domesticity with which it was often countered by women such as Alice.

The past for all the characters in *Jazz* doesn't have to be "an abused record with no choice to repeat itself at the crack," which Violet keeps doing at the beginning of the novel, because, according to our Victrola narrator, confronting history can "lift the arm from the needle" (220) so that new grooves, or narratives, can be etched into the record of African American history. For African American women, however, this etching requires listening to and critiquing dominant historical accounts that exclude, totalizes, or even fashionably commodify and stylize certain aspects of their experiences, as in the case of women's classic blues. Referring fondly to her characters, the narrator expresses her revised view of history's role for African Americans:

When I see them now they are not sepia, still, losing their edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are real. Sharply in focus and clicking. I wonder do they know they are the sound of snapping fingers under

the sycamores lining the streets? When the loud trains pull into their stops and the engines pause, attentive listeners can hear it. Even when they are not there, when whole city blocks downtown and acres of lawned neighborhoods in Sag Harbor cannot see them, the clicking is there. (227)

This description captures Morrison's acute attention to the level of material, historical detail that falls outside of traditional history. While the crossroads-and-train have been the dominant symbol cluster of 'authentic' African American (male) experience, we need only listen attentively for what has been left out. Her portrayal of Harlem in *Jazz* through the trope of the phonograph-and-record as narrator becomes a site of contesting narratives of black female experience and the material conditions of labor and living that have both determined and silenced their identities.

Almost all music critics agree that it was from the blues that jazz music developed, and that essentially jazz elaborates on the characteristic elements of the older form, including the basic twelve-bar structure with flatted third, fifth, and seventh notes, and the call-and-response pattern. As Mary Ellison describes the essential relationship between the two forms, Jazz and blues have always been "different genres of the same music, with jazz emphasizing the instrumental and blues the vocal content. Jazz has consistently been dependent on the blues, from its inception to its most recent developments" (19). Moreover, as Albert Murray has pointed out, even within blues music there is often a contradiction between the vocal expression – which may and often does verbalize melancholy – and the instrumental expression: "more often than not even as the words of the lyrics recount a tale of woe, the instrumentation may mock, shout defiance, or

voice resolution and determination” (69). In *Jazz*, Morrison captures these complex relationships between, and within, the different musics: the narrating voice conveys the literary counterpart of the blues lament, while the narrative structure transmits the literary equivalent of the variations and riffs – short repeated phrases in jazz – of jazz.

In contrast to the expressed early optimism about city life as an invitation to opportunity and freedom, the narrating voice admits late in *Jazz* that the City is – like the voice itself – puzzling, unreliable; beneath the surface are other unarticulated and contradictory stories. In addition, as eventually becomes clear, the narrating voice is itself distracted, as much as are the people it observes, by the attractions of urban life at the dawn of a new age:

Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you're free. . . . You can't get off the track a City lays for you. Whatever happens, whether you get rich or stay poor, ruin your health or live to old age, you always end up back where you started: hungry for the one thing everybody loses – young loving. (120)

The voice's inventions thus also circle back, like the City's entangling circular tracks, to Morrison's central blues theme of 'love or its absence.' This shows Morrison's nostalgia for African cultural past.

The theme of loss in *Jazz* is expressed not only by reference to the blues lament, with its emphasis on lost love, but also formally. Though Craig Hansen Werner and other scholars of literary modernism have noted affinities between Morrison's techniques and the formal experimentation of Woolf and Faulkner,

Morrison argues that these echoes function mainly as hers rather ironic reminder of the connection between modernism and the Jazz Age, for, ultimately, her narrative inventiveness seems to owe less to her literary predecessors than to the improvisational strategies of jazz itself. Some years before she wrote *Jazz*, Morrison described her affinity for the structural openness of this musical form, explaining that

Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you.... There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that – because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more – that you can't have it all right now. (qtd. in McKay 411)

One of many ways in which Morrison inventively translates jazz and blues techniques into their narrative equivalents relates to the way that the structure of *Jazz* depends on a call-and-response pattern. Each of the ten sections of Morrison's novel concludes with an idea or phrase to which the opening words of the next section respond; additionally, like jazz improvisations on a blues theme, each 'response' opens into a new narrative direction. The first section of the novel, for example, ends with the words spoken by one of Violet Trace's parrots, "I love you" (24); the section that follows opens with the response, "Or used to" (27), and shifts – as a musical improvisation might shift to a different basic chord – to reflections on Violet's loneliness; she has released her lovebirds in response to Joe's new interest in the young girl Dorcas, who also reminds Violet of her own childlessness. Similarly, the link between the last two sections of the novel depends on call-and-response for the shifting meaning of a

particular phrase: Dorcas's friend Felice, comparing her grandmother's preparation of catfish with Violet Trace's – the latter's version too heavy on the hot pepper – explains that she drank plenty of water rather than refuse the fish and hurt Violet's feelings because it “eased the pain” (216); the narrative's final section opens with the response, “Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it” (219).

Pain is, indeed, both the central preoccupation of Morrison's novel and the essential subject of the blues. Thus, through the narrative's blues lament – the longing for “the heart you can't live without” (130), as Joe Trace puts it – the evocation of cultural loss that the novel embodies through the characters' lives and stories also functions as Morrison's literary ‘voicing’ of the African-American musical tradition of the blues. Jazz can thus also be said to dramatize both thematically and structurally Ralph Ellison's famous observation that the blues originated in

an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (78-79)

Reflecting this dynamic, while the voice of Jazz lyrically constructs the characters' efforts to recover love and the beloved, the subtext in effect expresses not only the contradiction within the blues but also the equivalent of instrumental jazz variations on the theme, exposing the personal catastrophe of the beloved's radical, irrevocable absence.

Thus, in this novel Morrison represents the subjective inner world in which the conception of the ‘beloved’ originates, expressing the psychoanalytic dimension of cultural loss. The ‘absence of love’ or the sense of the presence of loss that permeates each of Morrison's seven novels to date often stems from a child's experience of involuntary separation from or actual psychological abandonment by one or both parents. Implicitly, such abandonments recapitulate the literal and emotional displacements of slavery, beginning with the genocide of African people who were ripped from their families and cultures and placed on slave ships bound for the West, but who did not survive the Middle Passage – a route passing from West Africa to America for slave trade. Those who did survive were destined to live out the losses upon which slavery was predicated – the specific deprivations, degradations, and abuses of body, mind, and being that are so disturbingly rendered in Morrison's other novel *Beloved*. Using a striking metaphor, Douglas has observed that African Americans, “whose ancestors were kidnapped from their native land and sold into slavery in an alien country, were, in fact, America’s only truly orphan group” (83). Representing the traces of this experience of loss at both individual and communal levels, Morrison's novels are populated by a number of lost and orphaned children. They have not only become literally, but also have they become orphan culturally.

Both literal and metaphoric orphans figure prominently in *Jazz*, beginning with the major figures in the love triangle/tragedy announced on the first page. Joe and Violet Trace and Dorcas Manfred are each the offspring of dead, missing, or emotionally unavailable parents. Dorcas, Joe Trace's eighteen-year-old lover, was orphaned in childhood. Her parents were innocent victims of the violent race riots that consumed East St. Louis in 1917, leaving more than two

hundred African Americans dead – her father was stomped to death and her mother died when their house was torched. Dorcas's friend Felice is, if not an actual orphan, arguably an emotional one. Raised by her grandmother while her parents worked on the railroad line in other cities, Felice knew her father and mother primarily through the brief visits that punctuated their much longer absences. As she phrases it, “I would see them once every three weeks for two and a half days, and all day Christmas and all day Easter. . . . Thirty-four days a year” (198).

More literally than Felice and like her younger rival, Dorcas, Violet Trace was orphaned during adolescence. Her "phantom father" (100) deserted his family to seek his fortune, leaving his wife, Rose Dear, to raise their five young daughters. When Rose Dear was brutally dispossessed from her sharecropper's hut, she moved her family to an abandoned shack. Before long, however, she found her miserable life unendurable and, broken in spirit, drowned herself in the well when Violet was twelve, leaving her daughters in the care of their grandmother, True Belle. Violet was convinced by her mother's suffering and despair that she never wanted children of her own. Several miscarriages and many years later, the inner emptiness produced by that decision haunts her in the form of a “mother-hunger” so intense that she sleeps with dolls and even takes a baby from a carriage. She imagines her husband's lover Dorcas as “a girl young enough to be that [lost] daughter” of her failed pregnancies and, torn between regarding her as “the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled her womb” (108-09), at Dorcas's funeral she finally acts out her anguish by mutilating the dead girl's face. The narrator, regarding Violet's subsequent effort to learn as much as she can about Dorcas, harshly comments, “Maybe she

thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know” (5). Later, the voice speculates that Violet's violent action can be understood as “a crooked kind of mourning for a rival young enough to be a daughter” (111).

At least Violet Trace and Dorcas Manfred had actual parents during childhood; Violet's husband, Joe Trace, never did. Abandoned by his mother at birth and raised by another family, he gave himself a surname that retains the story of the parents who “disappeared without a trace” (124); he reaches the age of fifty still trying to fill the “inside nothing” (37) where the minimal “trace” of primary attachments has expanded to form a space of enormous longing. Although he never locates the woman who had “orphaned her baby rather than nurse him or coddle him or stay in the house with him” (178), in the Virginia woods where he grew up he discovers the den-like home of the woman referred to only as “Wild.” The description of his arrival in Wild's primitive den is especially evocative of the mythical return to the womb followed by rebirth:

He had come through a few body-lengths of darkness and was looking out the south side of the rock face. A natural burrow. . . . Unable to turn around inside, he pulled himself all the way out to reenter head first. . . . Then he saw the crevice. He went into it on his behind until a floor stopped his slide. It was like falling into the sun. (183).

If Joe Trace is in any way reborn, however, it is in an ironic sense, causing an even deeper need; the trail that leads him to his mother's primitive way becomes emotionally entangled with the trail that leads to his young lover. The “little half moons [that] clustered under [Dorcas's] cheek bones, like faint

hoofmarks” (130) signal her “wild” animal link to Joe's mother, Wild. Dorcas temporarily occupies the empty “inside nothing” space in Joe's heart, becoming the “beloved” in a way that temporarily satisfies the unappeased hunger he feels for the mother who abandoned him at birth. Telling Dorcas details of his earlier life that he has never before shared with another person, he explains that she is the central figure in his vision of Paradise:

the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart. You looked at me then like you knew me, and I thought it really was Eden ... (133)

The suggestive meanings of Paradise obviously continue to interest Morrison, as demonstrated by the novel that immediately follows *Jazz*, entitled *Paradise*. The wish/longing for a vanished Eden or Paradise is a nostalgic fantasy that encodes our human knowledge of the inevitable original loss at the individual level: separation from infantile bliss. For actual orphans like Joe Trace, there never could have been a true interlude of this infantile bliss experienced as unconditional love; nonetheless, the longing to “recover” something that never existed in the first place endures as an emotionally powerful imperative. If we analyze psychoanalytically, the figure of the mother remembered from infancy is a not a true memory but a fantasy of her. Moreover, despite the fact that the harmonious world which is now regarded as lost never really existed in the image of Paradise as an inner image or expectation, lives on

within us, creating a nostalgia the intensity of which is in inverse proportion to the amount of external fulfillment encountered in the earliest phase of life.

In *Jazz*, Joe Trace's fantasy of his irrecoverably lost mother fuels a need so insistent that, even into middle age, it demands an outlet for its expression. Soon after Joe discovers Wild's dwelling among the rocks, he calls, "But where is she?" (184). Following a significant narrative pause (produced by the white space of a chapter break), the response – "There she is" (187) – reveals Morrison's consummate narrative sleight of hand as well as her psychological compass: the ambiguous pronoun no longer refers to Joe Trace's mother but to his young lover, Dorcas.

The call-and-response gap between the two female pronoun referred here is significant both structurally and psychologically. Structurally, in addition to the blues pattern, the shift suggests a jazz technique. If one regards the white spaces of the chapter breaks in the novel as the narrative equivalents of rests, then what Paul Berliner says about these 'musical spaces' may also be applied to Morrison's novel:

suspended over the passing beats, a rest ... invites listeners to reflect upon the soloist's most recent figure [here understood as a musical motif], challenging them to anticipate the entrance of subsequent figures. . . . [S]ubstantial rests that shift the figure's placement within a measure can also cause the figure to become transfigured in unexpected ways. (157-88).

Psychologically, the blank spaces or rests might be said to signify the presence of absence: the space once occupied by the lost love-object – originally the mother whose emotional presence or absence profoundly marks subsequent

‘figures’ in intimate relationships. That figure itself becomes imaginatively ‘transfigured’ as Morrison continues to plumb more deeply – in both psychological and cultural terms – what might be called the beloved imago: that figure who signifies the image of idealized love, retained despite – or, more accurately, because of – its absence through loss or death.

Interestingly, Morrison only later realized the full implications of the recurring presence and image of the ‘dead girl’ in her fiction, noticing that “bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. . . . She is here now, alive. I have seen, named and claimed her--and oh what company she keeps” (Naylor 217). That haunting, evolving ‘dead girl’ represents the psychic core of loss and mourning that Morrison, over the course of her fiction, has been figuratively reconstructing. In gathering together those parts of the body, in reclaiming those parts of the self, she narratively attempts to reverse, by ‘remembering’ the literal and figurative dismemberments of the slave experience and its after-effects.

To the extent that a child's earliest primary attachment has been disrupted or severed, he or she – as well as the adult whose psychological reality has been shaped by those critical childhood experiences – yearns for a substitute who might replace the absent beloved, who might fill the empty emotional space that persists in the form of unresolved mourning. Bowlby describes a complication of loss and mourning in which the person who has experienced a loss ‘mislocates’ the absent figure in some other figure in his or her life, regarding that person as “in certain respects a substitute for someone lost,” but for whom ultimately no substitute can suffice (161). Thus, Morrison’s Joe Trace, “a long way from ...

Eden” (180) in every sense, and driven by the feeling that he associates with his unsuccessful search for his mother, follows the trail from “where is she?” to “There she is” – that is, from his absent mother in the woods to his absenting herself young lover in the City. As he soliloquizes,

In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it. I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, and I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough. . . . [I]f the trail speaks, no matter what's in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without. (130)

Locating Dorcas at a jazz party in the City, Joe is angered when he realizes that she prefers a younger man named Acton (suggesting “action”). She tells Joe--in words that threaten the vulnerable space of his “inside nothing” – “I don't want you inside me. I don't want you beside me” (189). As if to punish the original Beloved whose unendurable abandonment is about to be repeated, Joe shoots her emotional surrogate, Dorcas, who bleeds to death from the wound. Later, when Dorcas's friend Felice asks Joe, “Why'd you shoot at her if you loved her?” Joe replies, with a frankness that makes explicit the deficiency that has stunted his emotional life, “Scared. Didn't know how to love anybody” (213).

Another orphan's story in *Jazz*, one that resonates like a blues lament with Joe Trace's story and amplifies its emotional meaning, is the narratively self-contained story of Golden Gray. The most enigmatic character of the narrative, Golden Gray is a young man of an earlier time who also seeks an unknown and radically absent parent. The son of a ‘phantom father’ who never knew of his paternity and a white woman who never acknowledged her motherhood, he is

also, figuratively, the child of a black slave woman who was obliged to relinquish her own children in order to become a surrogate mother for the mulatto boy with beautiful golden skin and hair.

When Golden Gray reaches the age of eighteen, he learns the identity of his father from the woman who “lied to him about practically everything including the question of whether she was his owner, his mother or a kindly neighbor” (143). Tracking his father in the same Virginia woods in which, many years later, Joe Trace attempts to track his mother, Golden Gray finds the cabin of the woodsman Henry Lestory/LesTroy. Awaiting the arrival of the man reputed to be his father, he describes his feelings regarding his missing parent as an amputee might describe his experience of a phantom limb, in language that most explicitly articulates the ‘inside nothing’ produced by a child's experience of abandonment or radical estrangement from a parent:

Only now . . . that I know I have a father, do I feel his absence: the place where he should have been and was not. Before, I thought everybody was one-armed, like me. Now I feel the surgery. . . . I don't need the arm. But I do need to know what it could have been like to have had it. It's a phantom I have to behold and be held by. . . . I will locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement. (158-59)

Here, Morrison recapitulates the imagery of dismemberment that occurs throughout her fiction as a trope for the profound damages inflicted on African Americans by the emotional dismemberments of slavery and its aftermath. Remembering is a crucial compensatory process that might begin to reduce the

pain of literal and figurative, individual and communal, severances that cumulatively persist as cultural mourning.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison seeks to create a novel that expressed the essence of jazz tradition – African music in which the players often improvise. Her intent is to create a novel that not only reflects the evolution of jazz music but that captures the soul of the jazz movement too. From its roots in the slave dances held in Congo Square and its cultivation by the early ensembles of New Orleans, jazz spread across America, affecting a nation's consciousness throughout the Jazz Age. According to Toni Morrison, the so-called Jazz Age was “The moment when an African American art form defined, influenced, reflected a nation’s culture. . . .” (xix). Morrison molds the settings, plot lines, characters, and structure of her novel to evoke the rich history, revolutionary spirit, and progressive style of jazz, as well as to illustrate characteristics of the music. While doing so, Morrison seeks African cultural roots.

Morrison uses the settings in *Jazz* to reflect the history of the jazz movement, as well as address its extensive influence on the Harlem Renaissance—the period during the 1920s where there was a flowering of African American cultural, artistic, and intellectual awareness in Harlem. Morrison invokes a world of Harlem addresses, rent parties, speakeasies, women's clubs, and jazz music, in order to illustrate the significant link between the jazz movement and the Harlem Renaissance. In addition, Morrison uses flashbacks to address significance settings associated with the Great Migration—the period after the Civil War when masses of African Americans from the post-Reconstruction South moved to urban centers around the country such as New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago, hoping to find better opportunities (Tolnay). Morrison uses the settings in the novel to reflect the connection between jazz and African American culture and history.

Morrison creates characters and plot lines that bring to light the history of the jazz movement. The plot revolves around events and relationships in the lives of Joe and Violet Trace. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Joe and Violet meet in the rural South, got married, migrated to the North, and settled in Harlem. Their connection to both the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance mirrors the spread of jazz across the United States. As a result of the Great Migration, Harlem became the center for the popularization and progression of the jazz genre, as well as African American visual and literary arts. Thus, Morrison illustrates the link between African American cultural history and the emergence of modern jazz in Harlem through her characters, Violet and Joe Trace.

Morrison's narrator in *Jazz* draws an analogy between record grooves and the Harlem city's streets – their physical attributes, location, and allure. This foregrounds issues integral to the process of identity and community formation not only for Harlem but for the early twentieth-century African American urban population in general, a process in which the blues was integral. For new migrants had very limited freedom in many ways. At such difficult time women's classic blues were an answer because they provided an outlet through which black women worked out the pervasive effects of this freedom. In *Jazz* Violet is the main character through which these negotiations are articulated, and the sidewalk and street imagery illustrates the playing out of her in-process identity. The narrator's description of her "private cracks" is a blend of images that question her, and perhaps African American women's in general, relationship to the Harlem community and to the social world.

Morrison's use of the phonograph and particular type of records it plays not only allows the possibility for transformation for male characters, but also it

seems to provide its female characters in particular with a way to make their communal voice heard. In working against the notion of the blues as indicative of 'authentic' African American male experience, Morrison substitutes for the traditional blues image of the 'train' the trope of the Victrola so that her narrator can "play" African American female narratives – codified in *Jazz* by women's classic blues – to which traditional history, as well as that of feminist thought, have been somewhat deaf.

Almost all of the major characters in *Jazz* are orphans. They are both literal and metaphoric orphans. Joe and Violet Trace and Dorcas Manfred are each the offspring of dead, missing, or emotionally unavailable parents. Dorcas, Joe Trace's eighteen-year-old lover, was orphaned in childhood. Her parents were innocent victims of the violent race riots that engulfed East St. Louis in 1917. As a result, more than two hundred African Americans died; her father was stomped to death and her mother died when their house was torched. Dorcas's friend Felice is not an actual orphan. She can be regarded as an emotional one. She was raised by her grandmother while her parents worked on the railroad line in other cities, Felice only knew her father and mother primarily through the brief visits. This separation from their parents, literal or metaphorical, evokes the separation from one's cultural roots that Morrison speaks of in the novel.

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