



## Article

# Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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**Abstract:** Toni Morrison represents the improvisations of life in the 1920s and posits her novel *Jazz* as a work that negotiates sound as a distinguishing characteristic of her writing genre. Many critics have described Morrison's approach as a Jazzthetic strategy and as such, her rhetorical move enables a renovation of traditional aspects of the novel to render life as complex as a jazz composition itself. This article analyzes Morrison's methods and posits the use of jazz strategies to mimic the displacement, fragmentation, and strife experienced by African Americans during the Great Migration. This essay also intervenes in the debate between the relationship of language and music to examine the ways that Morrison oralizes fiction and engages in a form of cultural circularity, thereby asserting the authenticity of jazz alongside the tension of the Great Migration. Additionally, this essay explains the ways that Morrison makes clear the implications of migrant cultural expression in service of identity formation, suggesting that the micro-novels in the novel *Jazz* are contributors to a larger ensemble that functions epistemologically to render the African American experience as central to American identity.

**Keywords:** sound; orality; jazz; vernacular; ensemble; renovate; migration; music



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## 1. Introduction

In the 1984 essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison explains the value of community as a haven and the novel as a kind of behavioral guide. Her justification for writing is arguably to satisfy a public whose being is often questioned and whose existence is always doubted. Morrison's writing forces a confrontation with our beautifully tragic selves as a reflection of our community. The presence of ancestors emerges to guide readers through human folly throughout Morrison's writing; her 1992 novel does not disappoint. *Jazz* (Morrison 1992), as the second work in a trilogy alongside *Beloved* (Morrison 1987) and *Paradise* (Morrison 1997), invites readers on a musical adventure of ambiguity and romance, and provides access into the era of the Great Migration. Morrison's work embodies what Nathaniel Mackey refers to as a paracritical hinge, showcasing the myriad of possibilities through which readers can engage sonically with her prose. Her writing rekindles a lost spirit of expression, harkening back to a time when jazz and blues sounds retained their authenticity before commercialization altered their sentimental essence. Morrison explains, “the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before. . .” because the “music is no longer *exclusively* ours” (Morrison 1984, p. 58).

Morrison's novel *Jazz* demands a keen sense of reading toward listening as a type of sonic attentiveness; scholars like Nicole Furlonge asserts this practice as essential for comprehending cultural significance. This mode of listening embraces the intricate interplay of sound, speech, and mobility, shaping and defining sonic spaces while influencing cultural materiality. This essay argues that Morrison's novel exemplifies a paracritical approach as she employs jazz strategies to oralize her fiction. This approach allows her to challenge conventional literary forms and engage readers in a dynamic dialogue between past and present, and individual and communal experiences. Morrison employs *hinging* moments

like signifying, improvisational discourse, and jazz characteristics to invite readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning and embrace the complexity and fluidity of African American history and identity. In this way, *Jazz* serves as a powerful embodiment of the paracritical hinge, which scholars like Nathaniel Mackey, Anthony Reed, Tsitsi Jaji, and Nicole Furlonge understand as a liminal space that reimagines established cultural and aesthetic boundaries.

The scholarly discourse surrounding the fusion of fiction and sound centers on the possibilities offered by attentive listening, enabling the observation and transformation of the color line according to Jennifer Stoecker; the establishment of a sonic experience as expounded by Reed; and the advancement of aural literacy as a mode of representing identity according to Furlonge. My interest in Morrison's strategy has to do with her deliberate reliance on jazz characteristics to function as Mackey intends—fiction as a hinge that makes aesthetic and cultural boundaries porous while fusing fiction and music as a reconstituted harmonious expression. I contend that Morrison exploits the hybridity of sound and fiction to renovate jazz as a useful way to recuperate black tradition and posit it as complex as a jazz number itself. Critical to that renovation is the *pivoting* of hinges that enable aesthetic flow. This study seeks to contribute to scholarly conversation by emphasizing the fungibility of the sonic landscape and its constitutive relationship with literature. Further, it underscores the significance of listening to literature to explore the interplay between sound and literary expression.

In a 1996 interview with Sheldon Hackney, Morrison elucidates the unique attributes of jazz that she incorporates in her novel as she aims to portray black life with the same complexity and richness as the music itself. These characteristics include improvisation, egalitarianism, melodic disruption, historical contextualization, and the incorporation of romanticism (Hackney 1996, p. 5). For Morrison, "The power of the word is not music, but in terms of aesthetics, the music is the mirror that gives [her] the necessary clarity" (Gilroy 1993a, p. 181).

First, the improvisational aspect of jazz is paramount because this feature aptly captures unanticipated variables given a turbulent migration and social climate. Despite a jazz ensemble's training in any rehearsed chord progression, "unanticipated things can happen while the performance is going on...the musicians [just as the people] have to be alert constantly", and such is life (Pici 2000, p. 19). This characteristic is historically important because the tumultuous 1920s assured Negro Americans that negotiating the Great Migration trail would be cumbersome. Community forms the bedrock of an educational approach that fosters improvisation, as Paul Berliner elucidates in his book *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Berliner underscores the significance of cultivating intuition within the American jazz community, drawing parallels to the instinctual prowess developed by black migrants navigating a life on the move. Morrison, in a similar vein, employs nonlinear prose to embody this notion, harnessing the power of community to nurture improvisational skills.

Second, the music is egalitarian, in that a single musician never dominates the whole performance. No voice is dominant or correct. *Jazz* is divided into ten sections, each operating as a micro-novel. Like jazz music, each section functions as its own story—akin to a musical instrumental solo, whereby each instrument/character is heard, and listeners or readers can make sense of the music or text. Morrison's fragmentation mimics a jazz ensemble in this way and offers a discursive field for readers to explore. Morrison also moves away from Eurological narrative form by invoking indeterminacy. By relinquishing control over certain aspects of art, she could open new possibilities and challenge traditional notions of authorship, artistic intention, and character intention.

Third, Morrison acknowledges that typical jazz compositions begin with a unified melody that slowly drifts away, and later returns. Morrison demonstrates her strategy as deliberately Jazzthetic as she incorporates melodic disruption in her prose—"I wanted that narrative line or melody to be established immediately in the first pages, and when the

question becomes whether the narrator was right in his expectations of exactly what the story was, that is the ‘melody’ being taken away” (Hackney 1996, p. 6).

Fourth, the novel is historically situated in 1920s Harlem and invokes post-Reconstruction tumult through a nuanced psychological conundrum for American Negroes. The fragmentation, displacement, and musical influence characterizes the African American experience in similar fashion to those luminaries whose work defined the Harlem Renaissance. Lastly, the romantic drama jumps out at readers on the first page. Morrison recounts Dorcas’s silence when given the opportunity to tell that Joe Trace fatally shot her: “It is that quality of romance, misguided but certainly intense, that seems to feed into the music of that period” (Pici 2000, p. 20). John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” best captures the essence of the drama that unfolds in *Jazz*. Given Coltrane’s immediately intense salvo, Morrison’s plot-forward novel defies categorization just as Coltrane’s “circle of tones” denies easy resolution. The cascading and intricate chord progressions of “Giant Steps” mirror the intricate narrative structure and interwoven storylines of *Jazz*. Both works demand active engagement and challenge traditional expectations, inviting listeners of both novel and music to embrace the complexities of their respective art forms.

Throughout the novel, Morrison employs a narrative strategy to personify jazz music and depict black life through the fragmented recollection of characters that invite readers into a world of gossip and incident. My claim to this novel serving the purpose of relying on jazz characteristics considers Albert Murray’s assertion that like the blues, jazz can be used as an idiom to navigate or *stomp* the effects of displacement and communal rupture given the Great Migration. Just as Stoevever examines Richard Wright as exemplifying the hinge by citing his fiction as “reveal[ing] sound as a key modality of white supremacy’s assault upon black psyches” (Stoevever 2016, p. 186), Ellison’s critique of the importance of blues to navigate writing and identity is critical as well: “the blues is 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 transcend it” (Ellison 1953, p. 78). Morrison’s *Jazz* does similar interdisciplinary work as it unravels the complexities of love, desire, and betrayal within the African American community, using the narrative and structural elements akin to the improvisational nature of jazz music. In this way, the novel becomes a sonic tapestry, intertwining themes of love, loss, and self-discovery with the rhythmic cadences and emotional resonance of jazz, ultimately inviting readers to engage with the intricate interconnections between literature, music, and the lived experiences of African Americans.

## 2. Jazz as a Literary Catalyst

To appreciate Morrison’s renovation of jazz through fiction, it is important to understand the evolution of the music as a once unpopular genre of sound. Once considered crude noise, jazz suffered scrutiny in its reception in terms of cultural and artistic discourse. The music is understood to have migrated north alongside black folks between 1916 and 1920. Jazz propaganda also morphed into publication and emerging textual production in the 1920s alongside the bourgeois moralist’s views in popular press. According to Nicholas Evans, many moralists “objected to jazz on aesthetic grounds. Their distaste stemmed in part from the music’s aesthetic hybridity which represented to them a cultural promiscuity that flaunted Western artistic conventions” (Evans 2000, p. 95). Morrison explains, “Obviously, jazz was considered. . . to be devil music; too sensual and provocative, and so on” (Schappell 1992, p. 83). For black people, jazz meant a reclamation of their own bodies and a way to confront chaos head on.

Morrison is clear about her fiction relying on jazz as an aesthetic model for her writing, despite the opinion that jazz fiction must be infused by musicality and a jazz atmosphere. This overdetermined definition of the jazz novel situates Morrison’s work on the periphery of jazz fiction; however, Morrison expressed in several interviews that the novel is more than a jazz gesture. Although music is not explicit in the novel, the melody of the text is felt in the authorial restraint to give the audience what they anticipate. Morrison employs music as a superstructure that embodies “the City” as a phenomenon with agency. She

explains, “With *Jazz*, I wanted to convey the sense that a musician conveys—that he has more but he’s not gonna give it to you. It’s an exercise in restraint, a holding back. . .” (Schappell 1992, p. 81). Reading *Jazz* is akin to listening to a jazz ensemble, hoping to anticipate the melody only to find oneself in a world of complex and discursive beauty.

Musicologists and scholars in Black Studies affirm Toni Morrison’s significant contribution to domestic modernism. Paul Gilroy further argues that specific discourses promote the notion of mutually exclusive cultural identities. He postulates the realization of a melting pot of cultures where the space between historically perceived Eurocentric cultures and that of Black Americanism is combined to form a “Black Atlantic”. His theory is complex as it denies authenticity on the part of any culture because he suggests that a genre of sound cannot be genealogically traced due to its promiscuous reception outside a linear historical narrative; *it can, however, be traced through music*. Perhaps in this case, the ability of music to serve as an agent to express suffering on the part of a specific group of people *can be reconceptualized in a spirit of epiphenomenal space time*. This idea suggests that although claims that jazz is authentically black frustrates the paradox of its rhetorical velocity, the consumption of jazz and its ability to physical signify, as Samuel Floyd intends, posits the music as a catalyst to create new realities. Much like the trance that Dorcas and Felice find themselves in at the house party where Joe seduces Dorcas. Interestingly, Gilroy cites Edouard Glissant to emphasize the commonality existing in oral structures of communication and the body: “It is nothing new to declare that for us music, gesture, [and] dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech” (Gilroy 1993b, p. 75).

Morrison’s ability to foster physical signification in relying on the music’s ability to construct new realities deny the reliance of a form of dialectical understanding wherein the white gaze represents a raced antagonist. Michel Foucault’s (1972) theory of discursivity is quite applicable here as he is widely known for arguing against a collective consciousness, which situates history in a traditional and holistic form. In his seminal work, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, he contends that history is a process of ruptures and discontinuities that must be examined in their specificity. This archaeological method requires a comparative analysis of the diversifying effect of objects in a discursive formation like music; the result contributes to new perspectives on concepts in any given discourse and Morrison seems to have adopted this theory in her fragmented narrative style. Her effort to remove the lens of what she considers the white gaze is to posit the black experience as exclusive. This concept becomes problematic if both Morrison and Gilroy agree to consider the dependency of amalgamating Black and European cultures to produce the “Black Atlantic”, whereby jazz music is a product of culture mixing.

We see this emerge in the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and others. In 1928, Hurston recounts the spell that distinguished the musical effect of jazz from its white counterpart in “How it Feels to be Colored Me.” She writes,

“In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. . . My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something--give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

‘Good music they have here’, he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips. Music! The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored”. (Hurston 1928, p. 4)

Morrison offers a similar effect when Dorcas and Felice dance to the ‘low-down music’—

“The right record is on the turntable now; she can hear its preparatory hiss as the needle slides toward its first groove. The brothers smile brilliantly; one leans a fraction of an inch toward the other and, never losing eye contact with Dorcas, whispers something. The other looks Dorcas up and down as she moves toward them. Then, just as the music, slow and smoky, loads up in the air, his smile bright as ever, he wrinkles his nose and turns away.

Dorcas has been acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove. . . The body she inhabits is unworthy”. (Morrison 1992, p. 67)

The music facilitates the tantalizing outer body experiences for Zora and Dorcas; this is Morrison’s point, the “lights-out music” releases inhibition.

Gilroy’s work is important because his suggestion that music should be studied aside from a Hegelian hierarchy suggests music’s ability to adapt to circumstance without what Morrison deems as the white gaze. In the scenes, neither Zora nor Dorcas needs whiteness to validate their raw emotion. As Gilroy explores “some of the ways in which closeness to the ineffable terrors of slavery was kept alive—carefully cultivated—in ritualized, social forms” like music; Morrison shows us that fiction is a useful modality to employ music to negotiate pain safely (Gilroy 1993b, p. 73). Ultimately, music as a form of black modernism is arguably a response to modernity itself, primarily because imaginative proximity to terror such as Jim Crow is an inaugural experience; modernisms to mock that terror become the communicator of such atrocity. Black cultural forms, like jazz, are modern and useful because through them, communities can grapple with humanity and flaws.

### 3. Jazzthetic Strategies

Many scholars, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Mohamed Syad, Richard Hardack, Lars Eckstein, Elissa Schappell, and others have critiqued Morrison’s novels as exemplifying jazz strategies; the metaphors vary from Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday to John Coltrane and Charlie Parker. The cord that binds these critiques signifies Morrison’s own desire to re-represent contradictory things—“artifice and improvisation” (Schappell 1992, p. 85). Gates, Jr. views the latter, improvisation, as “nothing more than repetition and revision”, he relies on “signifying” to connect repetition, revision, and improvisation, stating that improvisation is essentially a combination of repeating and modifying ideas” (Gates 1988, pp. 63–64). He argues that improvisation in music does not imply the absence of revision, variation, or repetition of previously used material; rather, they are integral parts of the creative process. Morrison’s writing assumes similar revision as she demonstrates signifying through the employment of jazz characteristics like call and response, improvisation, melodic variation, and swing rhythm in her fiction.

Morrison’s effort to reflect an African American aesthetic tradition requires a “conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and [a translation] of them into print” (Eckstein 2006, p. 272). Lars Eckstein calls Morrison’s narrative approach a “jazzthetic” one in his essay “A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”. Although his essay discusses specific jazz strategies in Morrison’s *Beloved*, Eckstein draws important conclusions regarding the relationship between music and writing. He writes, “Like language, musical meaning unfolds not only because it *is*, but also because it *does* things in particular situations. . . [music must be understood] as cultural capital that is appropriated. . . it plays an important part in the individual or collective processes of identity formation” (Eckstein 2006, p. 273). This theory is consistent with Adorno’s idea of the capitalistic ambitions of commoditization, and it also reveals an attempt to provoke social action through the canon of the African American Vernacular Tradition (AAVT) by symbolizing black culture in the use of conventions to describe a specific community.

As *Jazz* takes place in the “Roaring Twenties” and aptly replicates the displacement and fragmentation that occurred during the Great Migration, the novel depends on a compilation of several stories narrated by a seemingly omnipresent and indecisive narrator. The main plot is succinctly narrated in the beginning of the novel and serves as a melody



for the remaining story. Although this melody is revisited and told to readers from multiple perspectives, readers may wonder whether to trust the narrator, given the fragmented recollection of the plot. Morrison gives us the melody-in-plot on the first page and uses it to improvise throughout the novel:

He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl [Dorcas]. . .when the women, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. . .But like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl. There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it. . .the man who killed her [Joe] cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail. (Morrison 1992, pp. 3–4)

The opening scene establishes the melody, and as the plot unfolds, characters adapt based on the information provided by the narrator. In jazz performances, melody is immediately set and just as quickly can transition into collective improvisation that the band cohort must adapt to. This uncertainty distinguishes jazz from the blues as members of the ensemble must be alert to the shifting chords. Morrison challenges her readers to participate as an audience through the narrator who guides us through the interiors of Harlem, Violet and Joe's apartment amid the City, the home and heart of Alice Manfred, and an adolescent Dorcas. The novel's opening description of Joe Trace's affection for Dorcas, coupled with Violet's actions at the funeral, builds the narrative much like building a melody of most jazz tunes; it also serves as an invitation to the gossip that drives the narrative.

In the 2005 essay, "Sound and Sign in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", Mariangela Palladino explains how orality is inscribed in written texts as she demonstrates how Morrison incorporates scat and skaz. Morrison does this in the very first line of the novel when she writes, "Sth, I know that women. . .Know her husband too" (Morrison 1992, p. 3). Immediately, the narrator invites the reader into a world of gossip, stories, and rumors—readers must decide whether to trust the narrator and follow the tale. The word "sth" plays an important role in the transformation of the written word into textual orality. The sound is also the first of many proclamations by the narrator that incorporates the reader into the text.

Unfortunately, Palladino contends that the word "Sth" is meaningless; on the contrary, Morrison uses "Sth" as a catalyst to capture readers in a world of gossip and inquiry. Palladino also claims it is a sound that not only implies orality but rather a cognitive process for the reader to hear this word and render its use effective. The use of the word "Sth..." is an employment of *skaz*—which includes the incorporation of meaningless words, parenthetical expressions, and digressions in prose to "define the story as an orally related account" (Palladino 2005, p. 6). Morrison's intertextual use as illustrated in the succinct plot summary in the beginning of the novel provides readers with a narrative to gauge the remaining perspectives. This plot begins in gossip and lays the foundation for shaping a holistic version of the truth.

The imitation of orality in written texts yields the same means of cognition as music does. Morrison can aspire to the status of orality by merging *skaz* with a narrative that mimics jazz music. This can be seen throughout the text in instances where the narrator uses phrases that affirm insecurities and uncertainties in its memory. For example, during an explanation of the lineage and identity quest of Golden Grey, the narrator illustrates uncertainty by expressing doubt in memory. They use expressions such as, "that is what makes me worry" (Morrison 1992, p. 151); "I wonder" (Morrison 1992, p. 155); and "Now I have to think this through. . .I have to alter things" (Morrison 1992, p. 161). These proclamations induce orality in the novel's narrative structure as an oral model. Golden Grey and Wild's story is arbitrarily placed in the middle of the text to link Joe and Violet Trace's relationship to their identity reformulation. Obviously, Grey's story links many characters in Morrison's novel; however, it comes at a time during the story where the reader questions the validity of the narrative. The integration of orality and the mimicking of jazz music in the written text enables Morrison to merge *skaz* with a narrative that

exhibits uncertainty and insecurity—evoking an oral model and jazz-like characteristics in her novel.

Returning to Rice, although he acknowledges Morrison's reliance on improvisatory modes, he explains that Morrison, personified as a jazz musician, must have had a sense of what's come before: "the jazz performer 'always looks behind at what he has already created', so that 'each new musical phrase can be shaped in relation to what has gone before'." In this vein, riffs are vital figures to help the musician turned author structure improvisations (Rice 2000, p. 170).

Carloyn Jones explores this assertion in her essay "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*" as she explains Golden Grey's influence on multiple characters in the novel. Jones writes, "These memories and this figure [Golden Grey] fascinate our narrator. The episode of Golden Grey, the Wild, and Henry... is the pivotal, even mythical, center and the most consciously narrated part of *Jazz*" (Jones 1997, p. 487). Jones's proceeds to juxtapose components of jazz to Morrison's narrative strategy. Her rhetorical analysis of Golden Grey's narrative is especially helpful in the realization of the use of jazz characteristics. Jones cites the many riffs in elements that lie in memories of True Belle for Golden Grey; they link repetition in Violet and Joe's stories: "The lightskinned beloved, tracks and facial marks, murdering the beloved, and the search for the mother and father" (Jones 1997, p. 487). *Jazz* relies on its narrator as a jazz artist to facilitate the repetition and improvisation that Morrison expresses throughout the novel, and riffs can be understood as the connective tissue binding relationships and facilitating improvisation.

Additionally, Morrison engages in intertextuality to translate characteristics of jazz music from an aural-to-literal depiction of ontological pain, resulting primarily from migration. She renovates jazz as a form of black folk art by "render[ing] a period of African American life through a specific lens—one that would reflect the content and characteristics of its music" (Morrison 1992, p. XV). The rhetorical impact of merging music and language in the novel situates jazz music as a soundtrack to the Great Migration. Considering this framework, it is important to understand how Morrison oralizes her fiction to cultivate what scholars refer to as a talking book. This rhetorical move functions to disrupt linear historical narratives and render the AAVT as an impetus to preserve the struggle and terror, to transcend and grow. It also pushes against critics who argue for a mutually exclusive understanding of the two artistic modes.

While the juxtaposition of music and prose yield striking similarities in form, critics like Theodor Adorno disagree with the comparison. He contends that "music is not language"; however, in comparison to signifying language, music can communicate as a means of recognition (Adorno 2002, p. 114). Music and language are analogous enough to sustain Morrison's intentions of mimicking the improvisation of life (Rushdie 2008, p. 52). Morrison's epigraph is an example that implies the juxtaposition of orality and the inscription of music and literature in the novel:

I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name. I am the sign of the letter and the designation of the division. (Morrison 1992, Epigraph)

This passage from "Thunder, Perfect Mind", taken from The Nag Hammadi Library, signifies a nuanced gap between music and literature. Its incompatible duality is embodied in the mysticism of the epigraph and in the identity of the narrator. Morrison's use of the "I" narrator indicates her objective to oralize fiction.

In a 1992 interview, referring to the narrator, Morrison explains that "the voice starts out believing it is totally knowledgeable. It knows everything or says it does, and begins to love its language and love its point of view... then a character's own soliloquy... can object to what the book-voice has said... there are these instruments that comment on that narrative" (Rushdie 2008, p. 53). Morrison's narrative approach in *Jazz*, characterized by a shifting book-voice and the depiction of characters' perspectives, reflects the transformative nature of the Great Migration and its impact on black individuals, again, akin to the improvisational essence of jazz music.

Morrison employs her characters as conduits of greater intellectual ambition by representing the real world in literary art. Barbara Lewis analyzes variations in the character Joe Trace to also illustrate the similarities of jazz in Joe's mannerisms (Lewis 1997). In her essay, "The Function of jazz in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", she likens Morrison's use of the word *slide* to a trombone as she refers to "The Trombone Blues" (Morrison 1992, p. 4). The sliding action of Joe placing money in his pockets also reveals a deliberate attempt on Morrison's part to maintain the connection to jazz—Joe Trace says, "The quiet money whispers twice: once when I *slide* it in my pocket; and once when I *slide* it out" (Morrison 1992, p. 122). Considering the trombone action of sliding, Joe actually *slides* out of the prosecution of the murder of Dorcas because, as the narrator explains, "nobody actually saw him do it" (Morrison 1992, p. 4). In this part of the story, Joe is performing a monologue wherein he depicts the seven changes he undergoes to become "...a new Negro" (Morrison 1992, p. 129). The repetition is akin to Louis Armstrong's 1931 song "Shine" where Armstrong plays a high C note in approximately four different keys; each repetition builds upon the last until it peaks, and the song ends. We also see similar chord progression and repetition in John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*—the central motif revolves around a four-note pattern, known as the "Love Supreme" motif. It is repeated throughout the composition, serving as a unifying element and a foundation for improvisation and exploration. The repetition of this motif creates a sense of continuity and unity much like the initial plotline for the micro-novels that follow in *Jazz*. Joe's maturation is like the crescendo of Armstrong's trumpet and Coltrane's masterpiece.

Notably, Joe Trace's metamorphosis during his "changes" mimics a similar modal jazz structure in Miles Davis's "So What". Joe recalls, "Before I met [Dorcas] I'd would changed into new seven times":

I named my own self. . .I was picked out and trained to be a man. . .Vienna burned to the ground [a complete upheaval]. . .I took my wife to Rome. . .We moved uptown. . .they almost killed me. . .I marched with the three six nine. (Morrison 1992, pp. 123–29)

Similarly, Joe Trace's life initially follows a routine path, but as the story progresses, he experiences a series of events that disrupt this stability, partially due to meeting Dorcas. These changes parallel the variations and improvisations found within the structure of "So What". Both "So What" and Joe Trace's renovation highlight the interplay between stability and experimentation. In the song, the Davis depart from the established structure to explore new musical ideas (improvisation), creating moments of surprise. Similarly, Joe's journey disrupts the equilibrium of his life, propelling him to confront novel experiences, emotions, and challenges that transcend the confines of his established existence. This ultimately culminates in an adulterous relationship with Dorcas, a woman nearly three decades his junior.

While the specific elements of "changes" may not align directly, the broader concepts of transformation, variation, and the interplay between stability and experimentation connect the transformative nature of Joe Trace's story in *Jazz* with the musical exploration found in "So What".

Another example of scholarly criticism that explicates Morrison's strategy lies in Alan Rice's essay "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing". He writes,

Jazz is improvisational. You must be creative and innovative in performance. Even errors take you on to a new level of attainment. Writing is another form of music. There was a time when black people needed the music. Now that it belongs to everybody, black people need something else which is theirs. That is what novels can do, what writing can do. I write to replicate the information, the medicine, the balm we used to find in music. (Rice 2000, p. 169)

This act of re-evoking jazz culture through writing is an innovative and essential contribution to the continual climb up the Hegel hierarchy, as well as an effort to preserve and reify a vernacular tradition that pays homage to the artistic nuance of jazz music,



with clear intent to contain suffering and terror. Rice explains Morrison as utilizing jazz to “signify on past interpretations of African American history [to] create new meanings” (Rice 2000, p. 157). Morrison’s deliberate embrace of the jazz aesthetic signifies her commitment to prioritizing an alternative value system that allows for the unfettered growth of black sentiment, independent of Eurocentric expectations.

#### 4. Jazz as Improvisational Discourse

Alongside the tension between orality and fiction, jazz music and *jazzing*, and melodic disruption, certain features of the music, like improvisation, serve as a direct condemnation against Eurocentric ultramodernisms. While jazz’s hybridity allowed the free flow of its music between folk culture and commercial or popular culture, its sound paradoxically, and simultaneously, *signify* spirituals and ragtime; situating the music as an agent of anti-modernity, consequently folk, and bounded within the AAVT. Coupled with montage and dramaturgy, artists could extend an invitation to their audience and create co-conspirators out of them. Improvisation implies adjusting without preparation; in jazz music, this functions as a type of free play where artists create music without the use of mediated sheet music.

According to Gilroy, “antiphony (call and response) is the principal formal feature of musical traditions” (Gilroy 1993b, p. 78). The function of call and response in Morrison’s novel is important because through the re-memory of certain events, the narrator cannot accurately present accounts of character motives while attempting to remain loyal to the reader by providing the facts; therefore, versions of the same story merge and grow in ascendance. Samuel Floyd explains this conjuring by explaining physical signifying:

The movements of the instruments, the movements of an individual’s limbs, torso, shoulders, head, neck, and eyes—even the wrinkling of the forehead—accompany the sonic gestures made by the musicians, the musical troping they perform on or within the tune or figure, in whole or in part, as they make the performance. These movements are the physical signifiers that are part and parcel of the black musical experience. (Floyd 1996, p. 97)

Perhaps Alice Manfred offers an interpretation of the significance of music as she acknowledges it as fostering a space for remembering and through the possibility of promiscuity in body language. In this way, the overpowering effect of jazz is aptly described by the manner in which the music makes way for sentiment. If the drums could speak for the men who marched in response of the East St. Louis riots, then the music has similar power to seduce Alice’s niece Dorcas in similar fashion that it had Zora Hurston in the famed *Colored Me* essay:

Alice Mandred stood for three hours listening to drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not. . . It was July In 1917 and the beautiful faces were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them. . . Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them. . . [the lowdown music] was getting worse and worse with each passing season. . . Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled bets. . . the lowdown music had something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue. . . It wasn’t the War. . . It was the music. . . It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law. (Morrison 1992, pp. 56–58)

Alice is keen on the influence that lowdown music has on her and Dorcas, and attempts to protect her niece from its seductive powers. Drawing on that which prompts improvisation, the changeability of the music/melody is akin to the varied perspectives of the main plot/chord of the novel. In other words, the paradox of jazz reveals itself in the varied interpretations of its multiple identities—the “nasty dances” for Alice are conversely liber-

ating for Dorcas; just as the drums signify the “cold” for Alice, they also offer consistency and safe-haven for the WWI veteran marchers.

In *The Power of Black Music*, Samuel Floyd examines signifying as it relates to call and response to suggest the importance of materiality in Morrison’s rendition of historical figures. As Morrison employs the drum as a call and response gesture, she calls forward African roots to reconcile the felt sense of black cynicism from the refusal of white society to grant equality to black veterans:

Gates (1988) makes the point that Signifyin(g), by redirecting attention from the signified to the signifier, places the stress of the experience on the materiality of the latter: ‘the importance of the Signifying Monkey poems is their repeated stress on the sheer materiality... of the signifier itself.’ If I interpret Gates correctly, the material signifiers in *Dance, Drum, and Song*, aside from the musicians’ tropings, can also be the body movements of the dancers and musicians—the performers’ physical play as they perform their respective roles. These movements, together with the signifier’s willful play, are ‘the dominant mode of discourse’ in the ring. (Floyd 1996, p. 96)

The drums assert themselves in Jazz as a referent to create “space” as it carries the community through a cathartic and psychological form of self-defense.

Given the trauma that Alice Manfred experiences, she relies on the drums and the lowdown music to interpret the pain of losing her sister and brother-in-law in the East St. Louis riot. Morrison makes visible the material signifiers that Gates describes in the “disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the YMCA, over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted...” (Morrison 1992, p. 57). The drums call and the marcher’s respond in silence as they stomp “down Fifth Avenue... [their] cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T” (Morrison 1992, p. 54). Morrison is keenly aware of this gesture as she employs call and response to merge musicality and Negro sentiment.

Morrison also employs improvisation based on the instinctually of survival that results from the post-Reconstruction migration. An apt example is seen when Joe and Violet are on the train headed for the City:

Violet and Joe left Tyrell, a railway stop through Vesper County in 1906, and boarded the colored section of the Southern Sky. When the train trembled approaching the water surrounding the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side... The quick darkness in the carriage cars when they shot through a tunnel made them wonder if maybe there was a wall ahead to crash into or a cliff hanging over nothing. The train shivered with them at the thought but went on and sure enough there was ground up ahead and the trembling became the dancing under their feet. Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the baggage rack above his head. He felt the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same. (Morrison 1992, p. 30)

Morrison conveys the experiences of Violet and Joe as they embark on their journey north. Not only invoking the historical tension embodied in the Great Migration. Through vivid sensory details, such as the trembling train and the quick darkness in the carriage cars, Morrison creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and anticipation, mirroring the improvisational nature of their mobility. The fluid narrative movement seamlessly captures the characters’ responses to the unpredictable environment, emphasizing their ability to adapt and make spontaneous decisions. When Joe stands up and encourages Violet to do the same, it exemplifies an adaptive mindset and their capacity to engage with and navigate the movement of the train. Furthermore, Morrison’s use of metaphors, like comparing the trembling to dancing under their feet, adds a layer of figurative improvisation, emphasizing the characters’ ability to find meaning during moments of uncertainty. This authorial

skill persists as Morrison pens *Jazz* through a nonlinear structural plot, which enables the unpredictable character development, much like Joe's metamorphosis.

The personification of the City illustrates another effort to reify the abstract nature of jazz music and locate its meaning in folk traditions, particularly in adapting to the North during the Great Migration. Like a jazz tune, the fluidity of the description of the City evolves as the tune eliminates certain rules through improvisation. The narrator describes such a community by asserting the City as a character in the text. The language the narrator uses to describe the City reflects the music, violence, mystery, and allure of the Harlem Renaissance. Although the narrator projects a sentiment of an optimistic condition in the city, s/he warns us to "Look out" (Morrison 1992, p. 7). The image of "a colored man float[ing] down out of the sky blowing a saxophone, and below him in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat," suggests a multi-faceted existence in a new place (Morrison 1992, p. 7). The narrator talks of the city in a pleasurable and exciting way but also clearly explains a three-dimensional place where things are quite different above and below the shadows. The narrator explains:

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half, I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which are the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this makes me dream tall and feel in on thing. (Morrison 1992, p. 7)

The act of transitioning in and out of the shadows of the city indicates the many ways that one can be affected by the surrounding conditions. Another example can be seen in the description of a jazz band on the roof of the City, above the shadows where the light shines. The narrator recounts, "You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played. . . I could hear the men playing out their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk. . . [they were] sure of themselves, sure they were holy, standing up there on the rooftops" (Morrison 1992, p. 197). Through music, the narrator invites the reader to join the collective consciousness they have created; jazz music requires the same attention.

## 5. Conclusions

Although *Jazz* is not about jazz music per se, Morrison's intention of rendering a Jazzthetic novella is met as readers are privileged to the therapeutic sensation of subsuming themselves in a text that epitomizes jazz music. Morrison's novel is successful in not only projecting black life in the 1920s in the written word, but also disrupting traditional ideological narratives that assert mutually exclusivity to differentiating cultures concerning the merger of music and fiction. Music serves a critical role in her work because it functions just as the language does. Despite the tension that exists between music and the written word, both modes of delivery participate in a cognitive process that enhance the sentiment of subjugated people.

Through literary discourse, Morrison pens a speakerly text that encapsulates the complexity of sociological factors given the 1920s renaissance and its corresponding displacement factors. Morrison's novel *Jazz* is a "speakerly text" and a "talking book", and her ambition of situating black voices within the Roaring Twenties is remarkable.

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