

Variations on a Theme:

The Role of Music in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*



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You breathe, your heart beats,
quickens with the music's pulse, and
yours...
your foot pats, these are the things we
don't even think about.
The point then is to move it away from
what we already know,
toward, into, what we only sense.
Music is for the senses.

- Amiri Baraka. (Quote taken
from *The Jazz Cadence...5*).

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Introduction

Black people have a story, and that story
has to be heard.
There was an articulate literature before
there was a print.
There were griots. They memorized it.
People heard it. It is important that there is
sound in my books - that you can hear it,
that I can hear it.
(- Toni Morrison in an interview
with Nellie McKay 152)

The history and culture of the African American people are embodied in their music. Musical genres such as jazz and blues emerge from the chants and songs African slaves brought with them to America, and are closely connected to their roots. For as long as jazz and its predecessors have existed, music has been a way for African Americans to secure their identity and preserve their African heritage. The history of black people's experiences in the United States is filled with pain, suffering, humiliation and the struggle to survive the dehumanizing conditions they have been forced to endure since they arrived as slaves. Work songs, blues and jazz music expresses "the black man's hell on earth" to use musician and critic Max Roach's words (114), and in music "the black man" finds comfort and courage to survive, despite the white man's exploitation of him. In this thesis I will explore the ways in which African American culture and oral tradition, music and song in particular, are transferred onto contemporary African American women's writing.

What most characterizes jazz music is its powerful expression. Jazz is emotional and progressive, it is unpredictable and seducing, all due to structural elements such as poly-rhythm, repetition, call-and-response, and improvisation. I am of the opinion that the very same traits characterize good literature. In a considerable amount of contemporary African American literature the jazz-tradition's expression, and its importance for the perseverance of African identity, is emphasized.

The idea for this project began to grow while I was writing a semester paper on Morrison's use of blues and jazz in *Beloved* and *Jazz*. I found myself so engaged in this topic that I was far from satisfied having written only twenty pages on the subject. I also wanted to look at how other African American writers relate to this issue and decided to continue this study in my master's thesis. Morrison is engaged in black history, culture, heritage and

identity and is particularly concerned with the survival of the black people and their traditions. She has written several novels, articles and studies that express this concern. She also emphasizes the role music has for the perseverance of the African American identity, both collective and individual. However, as I discovered that I could not deal with jazz music without considering its past, the focus of this thesis shifted to include more of the African American culture and history. These contexts are crucial for explaining what African American music is today.

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931, and named Chloe Anthony Wofford. Her parents moved there from the South to bring up their children in an environment where racial prejudice was less of a problem. Morrison's childhood therefore influenced her writing. She grew up in a family of musicians and storytellers and was inspired by the songs and stories she heard as a child. Early on she developed interest in language, folklore and literature. Morrison received the B.A. in English from Howard (where she later returned to teach) and her M.A. from Cornell. Morrison started writing when she moved to New York, where she first worked as a textbook editor at Random House. She continued as senior editor and became a force for getting African American writers published. Growing up in a racially diverse community, it was inevitable for her to disregard racial issues, segregation and the exploitations of the black people, and therefore most of her work reflects her concern for the African American people. *Jazz* is Morrison's sixth novel and was published in 1992. By now, Morrison is known as a central figure in creating a distinct African American literary language and her written work is, without a doubt, inspired by African American oral forms, such as folklore and traditional songs. In 1993, Toni Morrison was the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

As I began working with the novel I discovered the emphasis Morrison put on the musical tradition. Music was lodged in the unconscious of American Negroes who came to America and therefore it is an important part of African American history, identity and heritage. It is also a genuine form of individual and communal expression, in the literary form as well as the musical. What I am about to explore is the relationship between music and literature, or more specifically, the relationships between jazz music as an African American art form and the themes, structure and the historical and cultural context and subtext in *Jazz*. The central subject of my thesis is how the musical expression is manifested in the characters,

themes, and structure of the African American novel, as well as the various functions and purposes jazz serves in these elements of the texts.

Even though my focus is to a larger extent on *Jazz* and Morrison, I feel that there are other writers that lay down the groundwork for what Morrison is expressing. She seems to extend what other writers have written, in characterization, theme, structure and imagery, and I therefore feel it is important to give credit to other African American women writers (such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker).

Many critics have engaged themselves on the subject of relationships between African cultural traditions and the specific literary expression of African American writers. My work is only a small contribution to the large body of writing on this issue. I hope, however, that I add some interesting insights. In the development of my arguments I make use of theoretical analysis by some of these critics.

I have chosen to divide this thesis into four chapters, two theoretical and two analytical. The first chapter will deal with theory and method. I will, by giving account for what a number of critics have written about the issues I will explore (for instance repetition and improvisation), investigate to what extent music may be an apt device for analyzing the novel. In this process I touch upon aspects of the oral culture, such as signifying and call-and-response. Many critics are occupied with the black people's need and struggle for voice and recognition, living under a submissive white culture. I have consulted some of them to explain how black culture (music and writing in particular) has developed from being considered "low-browed" to being a central part of a distinct American culture. I also focus on women's place within this culture, and how they are a source of strength in the African American community, as well as their role in establishing an African American voice.

In the second chapter I have decided to look more closely at African American cultural traditions and how they have transformed. First and foremost this centers on African American music and literature. The idea is, in addition to laying down groundwork for my analysis, to show the changes black Americans and their traditions have gone through since slavery. These transformations are reflected in their music and writing, which are forms of expression providing black people with voice. Through the creative use of oral traditions, survival as well as identity is made possible. This is illuminated in the writing of Morrison and therefore, this chapter is concerned with the black female voice in particular.

In the third chapter I apply what I have discussed in the theoretical chapters to my investigation of the novel and its characters. I will explore the central characters in *Jazz*, as well as other participants such as the reader and the narrator, and their conscious and unconscious relationship to traditional music. I will also explore how their behavior, actions and personalities reflect aspects of music, as well as other oral forms. The most important issue in this chapter is probably development through transformation. Here I am concerned with survival and the legacy of voice.

In the fourth chapter I compare the musical structure of traditional black music and song to the narrative structure of *Jazz*. This involves looking at how composition, imagery and themes in the texts are related to the number of elements and techniques recognizable in a piece of blues or jazz music. Some of the elements I will explore are: improvisation, call-and-response, images of movement and repetition. Dealing with these musical genres involves taking their heritage, the oral tradition, into consideration. I have therefore also included my thoughts on how folktales are woven into the novel. I also consider how Morrison's choice of narrative voice reflects the struggle for a distinct African American expression in which the female perspective is emphasized.

Theory and Method: Music as an Analytical Category

As I mentioned in the introduction, my journey into this topic began while reading Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. Discovering the fascinating ways in which she incorporates music in her narrative encouraged me to further investigate how African American literature and music accompany each other. Jazz embodies transformation of culture, and therefore this study required me to go deeper into the African American oral tradition.

The traditional voice of African American women writers has strong presence in their work. Music, being a part of this voice, is also an integral part their expression. My task is to investigate how Toni Morrison's musical voice and techniques shapes her narrative, and also how she addresses her audience.

Black Oral Culture

The oral tradition bears great significance to the African American people. Many elements of black culture¹ are pervaded, and linked together, by orality. Storytelling, singing and dancing are forms of expression linked to this tradition. Music has been an especially strong medium for black people throughout their American experience in that it has provided them with a voice.

A good description of the connection art has to cultural tradition is phrased by LeRoi Jones in his article "Expressive Language": "Words meanings, but also the rhythm and syntax that frame and propel their concatenation, seek their culture as the final reference for what they are describing of the world." He continues, "An A flat played twice on the same saxophone by two different men does not have to sound the same," (Napier 64) meaning that the individual expression of the note makes all the difference. My understanding of this is that culture is the foundation of every artistic idea, be it in writing or in music. Exploring the common source for these two expressive forms became essential in my analysis of an African

¹ I use the terms African American- and black culture as meaning the culture of Americans with African ancestry.

American novel. One's environment is also an important factor for the outcome of an idea, but there has to be collaboration between the underlying cultural tradition and place. It is very interesting how both art genres (music and literature) have developed similarly from forefathers who wrote slave narratives and sang work songs and the blues, and also how they have changed when movement from one place to another has occurred.

However, for this thesis to be doable, I first had to determine the place music has within the African American oral tradition and what jazz, as a musical art form, is and how it has developed throughout the African American experience. I also had to determine what characteristics and functions jazz and the African American contemporary women's novel have in common. My aim was to survey the many ways music and literature accompany each other by defining their similarities on both a thematic and structural level.

In an extract from the article "Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation," Toni Morrison says she tries to incorporate what she regards as "the major characteristics of Black art" into her fiction. An important one is the novel's ability to be both print and oral literature at the same time so that it "can be read in silence," but also be heard (199). The novel should have the same qualities as music. The relationship between the artist/speaker and the audience is important in both literature and in music. Morrison says that what isn't said in the text is as important as what is printed on the paper. People will react differently to the same text, depending on the experiences, biases, assumptions and expectations they bring to it.

Morrison also talks about what she thinks the content of a novel should be: "It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something that opens the door and points the way [...] But it need not solve (those) problems [...]"² (199). One such "guiding" element is discussed in the following section.

² Toni Morrison sees the novel as having important cultural functions. In "Rootedness..." she explains that the novel became a necessity during the industrial revolution because of the emergence of a middle class. The lower and higher classes already had art forms that defined them and separated them from each other. These included song, dance, gossip etc. for the lower classes and paintings (and classical music) for the higher. The new middle class had to produce their own art form, and thus, the novel of manners developed. This new form was meant to instruct people how to behave and live properly. Morrison underlines that the novel also took on much of the healing factor for African Americans when they found that music was no longer exclusively theirs.

An Ancestral Presence

One identifiable element of African American writing Morrison mentions in her article is the presence of an ancestor. This is related to voice, orality and music in the way tradition is passed on by ancestors, but also in the way that African American culture has its ancestors in tradition. The slave song is the ancestor of blues and jazz, and the slave narrative is the ancestor of the contemporary African American novel.

In Morrison's novels there is always an elder character present, one who is not just a parental figure, but a timeless presence. These characters are supposed to instruct and protect the younger and provide them with wisdom, and in turn identity. It is often these elders who determine the future happiness of the main character(s), and the absence of them often causes chaos and an unsettling feeling to the work itself. In my opinion, one of Toni Morrison's most remarkable ancestral figures is Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*. I therefore use her as prototypic figure for discussing if there are any ancestral evidences in *Jazz*. The ancestral mothers within Morrison's (and several other black women writers) fiction celebrate the matrilineal source of strength and joy, and demonstrate an essential ingredient in the recognition of communal identity.

Signifyin(g) – an Oral Tradition of Indirection

Morrison also introduces unorthodox characteristics into the traditional novel genre. She feels that this makes her work more black in that she uses characteristics of black art that are related to oral sources, such as voice and music, and also to the continuing presence of an ancestor. Black literature includes not just books written by and about black people. Also important are the figurative modes in black language. In "Signifyin(g): Definitions [and Theory]" (1988)³, Henry Louis Gates Jr. accounts for the ways in which other critics define "Signifyin(g)." In 1962, Roger D Abrahams calls Signifyin(g) "the language of trickery...[a] set of words or gestures which arrives at 'direction through indirection'" (259). He exemplifies what Signifyin(g) is and what it can be. It is a black term and a black rhetorical

³Adapted from *The Signifying Monkey* in Ervin *African American Literary Criticism – 1773 to 2000*.

device, it can be “[the] ability to talk with great innuendo,” “making fun of a person or situation,” “the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point,” or it can “denote speaking with the hands and eyes”(259), to mention a few. Abrahams also defines the term as to “[...] imply, goad, beg, boast by indirect verbal or gestural means” (260). It is the language of implication as well as indirection.

Abrahams was probably the first to define Signifyin(g) as a particular black rhetorical strategy. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan takes this analysis further. While most critics have focused on Signifyin(g) as a “tactic employed in game activity,” she refers to it as a “way of encoding messages or meanings which involves [...] an element of indirection [...It] is not focal to the linguistic interaction in the sense that it does not define the entire speech event” (260). This definition suggests that Signifyin(g) is a pervasive mode of language use and further, Mitchell-Kernan points out that it is also synonymous with figuration because of the parallels between Signifyin(g) and uses of language that conventional western critics broadly define as figurative. Mitchell-Kernan’s research derives from the black community. Her focus is therefore more on the role of sex and age as variables in language use and to how sex and age of her informants may slant interpretation since “the insult dimension looms large in context where verbal duelling is focal”(261). She says that “linguists have misunderstood what Signifyin(g) means to black people who practice it [...] it underscores the uniqueness of the black community’s use of language.” Signifyin(g) defines the Black community as a speech community in contrast to non-Black communities (261). Therefore Signifyin(g) is similar to western figurative language as well as being distinctively black. This relates to Morrison’s claims for a black literary tradition, mentioned above, and how she wants to transform the written word into “oral print” to make a text “more black”.

Gates tells us that Mitchell-Kernan proceeds to inform the reader of the unique usage of signification in Black discourse. She explains that the extended signification concept in the black community and the range of meanings a word, a sentence or an event has in black vernacular does not exist in (white) Standard English. Signification in Standard English denotes meaning, whereas in the black tradition it denotes *ways* of meanings. An utterance could be an insult in one context and not in another. Therefore the hearer has to attend to all possible symbolic references because Signifyin(g) is the “figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning” (262). The signifier encodes sentences or words so that they imply one thing, but mean another. Mitchell-Kernan’s

conclusion stresses that Signifyin(g) does not necessarily have negative evaluations attached to it. It is an art form, “[...] a clever way of conveying messages” (264).

I argue that Toni Morrison, as Zora Neale Hurston did several generations before her, uses a literary language that blends Negro dialect and Standard English,⁴ probably to create a new voice that is more accessible to both a black and a white audience.

The second part of Henry Louis Gates’ article deals with the double voicing of the black tradition and he lists four examples. I will only define these briefly. Tropological Revision is “The manner in which a specific trope⁵ is repeated, with difference, between two or more texts” (265). An example is Frederick Douglass’ revising and reshaping of the slave song in his slave narrative. This term is relevant to Morrison’s work because she repeats a number of tropes in her novels. For example the trope of the slave narrative, the Great migration and the figure of the double in *Beloved*, the trope of rebirth in *Jazz*, the trope of going West in *Paradise*, as well as the trope of high and low culture opposition, the *ad hoc* nature of black folklore and poetry, and the strong female. The Speakerly Text is “[...A] peculiar play of ‘voices’ at work in the use of ‘free indirect discourse’” found particularly in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This narrative strategy is concerned with representing the speaking black voice in writing (265). Talking Texts are “[...] a black form of intertextuality” black texts speaking to other black texts (265-266). Morrison, for example, talks to her other novels. Examples are that Baby Suggs (*Beloved*) talks to Pilate (*Song of Solomon*), and Wild (*Jazz*) to Beloved (*Beloved*). Also, *Beloved* speaks to the slave narrative, and *Jazz* to the hard-boiled crime novel. Rewriting the Speakerly is the revision and echoing of another text. A primary example is Alice Walker’s direct revision of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in *The Color Purple* (266)⁶, but I will not go further into this topic since it is too far from my project.

These examples show a manner in which African American literature reshapes itself through principles its own tradition. This has strong connection to expressive forms such as spirituals, blues and jazz, and is therefore also essential for my analysis of Morrison’s *Jazz*.

Morrison uses Signifyin(g) in her work, but Gates’ analysis only partially accounts for her aesthetic, in which music is central. The following section explains how.

⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey* (251).

⁵ A trope is a figure of speech. Some of the major figures that are agreed upon as being tropes are: simile, metaphor, irony and personification (*Answers.com*).

⁶ For further reading see Henry Louis Gates Jr. “Color me Zora: Alice Walker’s (Re)Writing of the Speakerly Text,” *The Signifying Monkey* (239-258).

Music, Writing and Culture

Morrison says that her writing isn't about herself and her personal dreams, but about the village, community and readers. Her work is in that sense political, due to her focus on power relations between these groups. Her vision is that literature should be beautiful and political at the same time ("Rootedness..." 202). In my analysis I argue that using music as an analytical category allow for both.

If Morrison sees her writing as political, she might feel the same way about music due to the functional similarities. Critic and musician Max Roach also sees the political, as well as the philosophical identity aspects of jazz music. In his 1962 article he describes how jazz music has been "misinterpreted, distorted, misconstrued, and capitalized upon" by the white man (114). He defines jazz as the extension of African chants and songs and the pain, suffering and humiliation of black people since the days of slave trading. "'Jazz' is the indigenous music of the intelligent black man and woman" (114), all aspects of the music are black: the theories of harmony, the drive and emotional intensity, the instruments and the extended harmonic and rhythmic frontiers. Jazz music indicates, in Roach's words, where the "negro" came from and where he is going. To interpret the music one has to know about the black reality:

"Jazz" is persevering, in the face of obstacle and humiliation, to paint some musical, bitter sweet picture that comes out of experience, suffering, and love of the black people [...] Until the white man has been called upon to give and experience as much [...] he can not, in all honesty claim the kind of affinity to the music he insists he has (115).

The healing and strengthening effect of jazz and blues which Roach mentions are well established in Morrison's novels. In *Jazz*, music participates in the healing process several of the characters undergo. Even though jazz is a distracting element of the city for them at first, it nevertheless reconnects them to their roots.

Morrison's attitudes towards writing are both similar to, and different from Roach's attitudes toward jazz music. She feels that a novel should include the characteristics of black tradition, and her work is in many ways an extension of the songs, as well as a testimony to the black experience. She does not, however, make racial distinctions as Roach does. In the

preface to *Playing in the Dark* Morrison says that her vulnerability (as a black writer) would lie in “romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it.” She adds that she has always wanted to free the language from the predictable racial informed and determined chains (xi). In her short story “Recitatif,” as well as the novel *Paradise*, Morrison experiments with the ways in which racial hierarchies are usually constructed.⁷ According to Busia, by resisting the common assumptions designated by skin color, Morrison is free to explore other modes of character representation (103).

Jazz as American Culture

John A. Kouwenhoven searches for artifacts that are distinctively American, and the ways in which they are connected to each other. Among these is jazz. As opposed to Roach, Kouwenhoven suggests that jazz is a more broadly American, rather than a specifically African American, artifact. These insights are relevant to Morrison’s approaches. I believe that it is possible that she sees her work as both African American and American cultural artifacts. Although she draws her inspiration from the African American community and their traditions, she wants readers of all races and cultures to respond to her texts out of their own cultural backgrounds, individual experiences and expectations.

Kouwenhoven begins with the New York skyline and the skyscraper. Both have particular aesthetic qualities and are therefore important for me to mention. He says that the formal and structural principles involved in the skyline resemble a poem or a novel if we analyze its aesthetic, even though it does not make sense when we first look at it. Each building is in competition with the others, and each goes its own way in architectural individualism. None was built with thought to any overall effect. But yet, all the “personalities” come together in unity because of the universal feeling of exhilaration and aspiration. The skyscraper’s aesthetic effect, due to its construction, is an upward motion, a continuation which is equally traceable in music and literature.

Kouwenhoven refers to Le Corbusier’s description of the Manhattan skyline as “hot jazz in stone and steel” (127) because the structural principles of its architecture is

⁷In “Recitatif” she does not identify her characters by race, a rather radical act in the charged atmosphere of racial stereotyping and class classification in America (Busia 103).

transferrable to the structure of jazz. I will take this metaphor further in my discussion of the city imagery in *Jazz*. The essential ingredient in jazz music is its particular kind of rhythm. It is this rhythm that distinguishes jazz from western music and is incorporated in all the branches of the jazz family. Winthrop Sargeant described this rhythm as the product of syncopation and polyrhythm, because both have “the effect of constantly upsetting rhythmical expectations” (Kouwenhoven 128). Andre Hodeir claims that it is an alteration of syncopation and notes played on the beat that rise a kind of expectation, which is one of jazz’s most subtle effects (128).

The rhythmical effect, Kouwenhoven continues, “[...] depends upon there being a clearly defined basic rhythmical pattern to enforce the expectations which are to be upset,” the basic pattern being a 4/4 or 2/4 beat. The structural performance of jazz music is much like the skyline, a “tension of cross purposes” (128). This is caused by the intensity of the rhythm, and the delight of the more subtle effect of a melodic phrase. Even the fact that each musician seem to be on his or her own contributes to this strange unity. Musicians go their own way in inventing rhythmical and melodic patterns which, at first, seem to have no relevance to one another. Yet, the outcome is a precise unity because they all follow the 4/4 beat. The musician knows just when to leave the basic rhythm and when to get back on it.

Sargeant said that the aesthetic effects of jazz had “as little to do with symmetry and proportion as...a skyscraper” [or the skyline of skyscrapers] (Kouwenhoven 129). The jazz performance does not require a climax like most classic European musical pieces, and can stop at any time. The idea of motion is important, both for the viewer’s experience of a skyline of skyscrapers and for the listener’s experience of jazz. Kouwenhoven writes that rather than reaching a climax, a jazz piece creates forward momentum. This may be understood as the forward motion that originates from the rhythm of one instrument that lags behind the next, but also carries over from one measure to the next with the underlying beat of the drum. This may sound out of sync with the beat, yet the musician is still in full control. Timing is everything in jazz music. The “break” which is created when the 4/4 ceases and a soloist goes on a flight ends up precisely, and surprisingly, where it would have been if nothing ever happened. Finally Kouwenhoven notes that jazz also upsets the listener’s expectation for harmony as well as rhythm, and can stop at an unresolved chord which leaves everything up in the air. This, I argue later, is what happens at the end of the novel *Jazz*. Morrison says that a novel’s musical qualities will allow the audience to “stand up and [...]

feel something” (“Rootedness...” 199). To accomplish this effect Morrison provides spaces where the reader may participate in the making of the text. Kouwenhoven’s discussion, then, helps me to see that the “break,” when transferred into literature, can be read as an opportunity for both the character to improvise action, and for the reader to improvise a response.

Repetition in Music – A Creative Source of Interplay

In “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture” James A. Snead expands on this issue. He writes that repetition in black culture is most visible in performance, such as the rhythm of music, dance and language. Repetitive words and rhythms are recognized as a “focal constituent of African music and its American descendants – slave-songs, blues, spirituals and jazz” (70). Repetition as a principle of organization shows a desire to improvise upon the dynamic rhythm in African music. An improviser actually relies upon a recurrence of the beat. The call-and-response element, which I will return to later, also requires an assurance of repetition. In African music we find repetition developed out of a dominant conversation with clear alteration, alternating from a solo to a chorus or from one solo to another. The polymetry, so typical for African American music, means that there must be at least two rhythms going on alongside the listener’s own beat (71). The listener’s beat may be explained as a place filled with constant expectation, where one at all times know where the beat must fall to make sense of the gaps the drummer has let fall. The prominence of the “cut” in black music has not often been recognized. “The ‘cut’,” Snead writes, “overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard” (71). The “cut” does not cause dissolution of the rhythm, but strengthens it. It is the unexpectedness with which a soloist will depart from the main theme, or the expected, familiar beat. As a result, black music “sets up expectations and disrupts them at irregular intervals” (72) which in itself is an expectation. This pattern is in many ways similar to what Morrison says is important in a novel, the individual expectation and participation of the audience. The “cut” is what isn’t being said, written or played. While blues is characterized by its directness, jazz becomes more complicated. This complication occurs in the novel *Jazz* as well, when the listener’s/reader’s expectations are put to test by the narrator

telling several stories at the same time or, to look at it another way, one story from several points of views.

High Culture vs. Low Culture

The irregularity and unexpectedness of jazz have not always fitted into the high culture framework. In “Jazz and American Culture,” Lawrence W. Levine is concerned about the relationship between Jazz⁸ (with an uppercase j) and the hierarchical concept of “Culture” (with an uppercase c) by this he means culture in the highest refined form (or what may be referred to as sophisticated upper-class). These two terms emerged at almost the same time at the turn of the twentieth century and came to be understood as the antithesis of each other. Whereas jazz was a product of the new age, Culture was the result of historical development. Whereas jazz was raucous and discordant, Culture was harmonious. Whereas jazz was accessible and spontaneous, Culture was only available through hard study and training. Whereas jazz was an interactive and participatory music in which the audience played an important role, Culture had established boundaries that relegated the audience to a more passive role through observing the true artist (433). Jazz was the performer’s art in the sense that it did not restrain itself to follow the composer accurately. Culture was the composer’s art and upheld the differentiation between composer and performer. The performer was not able to take any liberties in the creator’s work, which was almost sacred. In his study *Highbrow/Lowbrow – The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Levine writes that the sacralization of Culture increased the distance between amateur and professional. Music in America had been characterized by the blurring of this distinction for much of the nineteenth century. The result of this widening gap was that only highly trained musicians, who had the skills to “carry out the intentions of the creator of the divine art” (139), were recognized. Levine says that Susan Sontag argued that the emerging distinction between high and low culture was based on evaluation of the difference between unique and mass-produced objects (164). All cultural settings should create an environment where a person could “contemplate

⁸ Levine uses upper case in his article, but I choose to stay consistent in my use of lower case when referring to musical genres in this thesis.

and appreciate the society's store of great culture *individually*. Anything that produced a group atmosphere, a mass ethos, was culturally suspect" (164).

Levine explains that there were at one point speculations about what American culture was and if it even existed. Most high culture was adopted from Europe, whereas the culture which came from Africa and other non-western sources was not recognized as culture at all. Some began to see African American folk music as an indigenous American musical tradition, but it was not until Europe (finally) began to look to America for musical culture, that jazz music was recognized as valuable art and approved as a true part of American culture by Americans themselves. But first, jazz had to go through years of resistance from critics and members of high society. It was considered "lowbrow," which was synonymous with the unintelligent and uncultivated, while Culture was "highbrow," sophisticated and enlightened⁹. Some of the critique against jazz claimed it to be "merely a return to the humming, hand-clapping, or tom-tom beating of savages," (437) and along side "new poetry" it was "without the structure and form essential to music and poetry" and both was acclaimed "the products, not of innovators, but of incompetents" (437). In *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Levine says that even though rhythm often was associated with melody and harmony, it became horrifying for some when it took shape in ragtime and jazz. A quote from *Times-Picayune* says that rhythm in jazz constituted an "atrocious in polite society, and [...] we should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it. Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great."¹⁰

Levine notes that not all reactions to jazz were negative. Some critiques said it was "the perfect idiom articulating personal feelings" (438) and it was praised for attempting an individual expression, which in turn also became acknowledged as a national expression. Interestingly, jazz was praised for the same reasons as it was criticized for, and Levine lists several:

[...] it was praised and criticized for being innovative and breaking with tradition...for being a form of culture expressing the id, the repressed and suppressed feelings of the individual, rather than submitting to the organized discipline of the superego [...] breaking out of the tight circle of obeisance to Eurocentric cultural forms and giving expression to indigenous. American attitudes

⁹ The terms highbrow and lowbrow refer to a determination of racial types in the nineteenth century. The category scale went from the ape, through the "Human idiot," the "Bushman," the "Uncultivated," the "Improved," the "Civilised" the "Enlightened," and at the top: the "Caucasian" with the highest brow of all (*Highbrow/Lowbrow* 222).

¹⁰ From *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (221)

articulated through indigenous American creative structures. It was, in short, praised and criticized for being almost completely out of phase with the period's concept of Culture (438).

Individuals who felt alienated from the central culture in the 1920s were attracted to jazz. It promised them “greater freedom of expression, both artistically and personally” (439). Jazz made them join a kind of revolt against tradition, and for black musicians in particular, jazz music provided “a sense of power and control, a sense of meaning and direction, in a world that often seem anarchic” (440). In the mid-twentieth century, jazz was becoming the most identifiable symbol of American culture and was positively received in Europe. There, jazz was said to be “a musical revelation, a religion, a philosophy of the world, just like Expressionism and Impressionism.”¹¹ However, the manner in which the black people were left out of the musical equation at this point was evident.¹² Jazz was no longer exclusively African American, just as it was no longer exclusively American. After World War II, jazz music had spread internationally and its trans-cultural significance could no longer be denied. Jazz musicians had from the beginning embraced themes, techniques and the idioms of any music they found appealing. They searched for a distinctive voice geared to the fact that the individual expression was essential. Black musicians regarded jazz as a form of communal expression since its inspiration from the slave song and the blues was their common musical heritage.

Levine concludes his article by saying that jazz tells us a great deal about what was original and dynamic in American culture. James A. Snead makes a similar argument. In “Repetition...” he focuses on how repetition in its many forms is essential for the continuity and identity of culture. Black culture has historically provided a variety of “‘long-term’ coverage, against both external and internal threats – self-dissolution, loss of identity; or repression, assimilation attachment [...]; or attack from neighboring or foreign cultures” (64) and has therefore had to “transform” itself, or repeat itself with variation. I examine this issue further in the following chapter.

¹¹ George Barthelme in a Cologne newspaper (Levine 441).

¹² Already during the Harlem Renaissance, Black musicians and writers were often owned and controlled by rich white patrons or political leaders who had all editorial rights to their work. The result was a muting of the black creative explosion by early thirties (Birch 37).

The Problem of Cultural Difference

The concept “Black culture” was created when “European culture” needed a counterpoint. Hegel, Snead writes, saw black culture as the complete opposite of “white” culture and said that “black culture simply *did not exist* in the same sense as European culture did,” (65) it didn’t have a form of self-expression, such as writing. The main characteristics Hegel finds distinguish black from European culture is interestingly its otherness, its simplicity and its resilience. This was incomprehensible to Europeans. All of Hegel’s remarks may be correct, but are now considered positive characteristics rather than negative. Black culture’s ability to “transform” its simplicity may be, as mentioned, the main reason why it has been able to withstand all threats and preserve its identity.

In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison argues that the Eurocentric learning about African people (of which Hegel speaks) has created a range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings in America as well (7). However, because the European sources of cultural hegemony were dispersed but not yet valorised, the defining of a coherent American culture in forms of its distance from Africanism became the mode for a new cultural hegemony (8). White culture needed black culture, but for different reasons that blacks needed it. White Americans needed it to define themselves as different from European culture, while blacks needed culture to express themselves.

Snead continues his discussion by asking how black and European culture, in a broad sense “differ in their treatment of the inevitability of repetition, either in annual cycles or in artistic form” (67). There seems to be an overall agreement that culture is progressive in one way or another. It is commonly held that mainstream European and American culture has valued a linear progress, whereas the traditional black culture has a more cyclical view. Ceremonies are ways in which black culture comes to term with and highlights the perception of repetition. One element that often accompanies such occasions is dancing. Repetition means circulation and flow in black culture. This flow and circulation pervades several elements of culture like the ritual, dance and the beat. The “goal” in such a culture is deferred and always “cuts” back to the beginning. As I mentioned earlier, Snead states that in music, a “cut” is “an abrupt seemingly unmotivated break with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series” (69). European culture, which depends on accumulation and growth, would never allow “accidents” or “surprises” to happen because that would rupture

the illusion of progress. Black culture, however, uses “cuts” to control their unpredictability. One may call it a kind of “coverage” because the “cut” tries to confront accidents to fit them into the system, not cover them up.

Black music tends to imitate the human voice, and in that connection I would like to mention that Snead places the black church at the centre of the manifestations of repetition in black culture. Both preacher and congregation employ the “cut.” For example, the preacher interrupts himself with phrases like “praise the lord” and the congregation responds to this at random intervals. The repetition of words and phrases is thus exploited as a structural and rhythmical principle. The *ad hoc* nature of black folklore and poetry and the destination in song, encourage a repetitive format that has found its way into the black novel. Morrison in particular continues the use of this sort of repetition. An issue which I will return to later is how she incorporates folklore and song in her novels.

Sherley Williams suggests that the interweaving of general and specific, and individual and group finds no direct correspondence to African American literature except in the literary blues. But “the evocation of certain first person experiences and the extensive use of multiple voices in Afro-American poetry may be, at least in part, an outgrowth from this characteristic of the blues” (186). A congregation of voices underlines the collective dialogue in the African American community in which the blues was an important part. Even though Williams does not mention it, the use of multiple voices can be applied to the novel as well.

The Chorus

While on the subject of multiple voices it is essential to mention the presence of “a chorus,” meaning a community or readers at large, in Morrison’s novels. She says: “the chorus has changed [in each novel] but there has always been a choral note” (“Rootedness...” 200). To illustrate her point, she notes that the chorus could be the town in *Sula*, which functions as its own character, or even nature in *Tar Baby*, which thinks, feels and responds to the action. If we consider both the importance of the reader/author (or reader/text) relationship and the essentiality of having an audience who responds, we might ask whether we, as readers are part of this chorus in *Jazz*. I will explore this issue more thoroughly in my analysis of *Jazz*

and the ways in which the chorus functions at the level of events, characters and/or reader response in Morrison's work.

Call-and-Response – A Collective Dialogue

We do not have to go deep into the African American oral tradition to find a connection to Morrison and her responding "chorus." In "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry" Williams points out that the classic song form is internalized and echoed through the statement [call]/response pattern (183). This repetitive pattern is extensively used in African American writing as well. The primary characteristic of the blues is that it voiced an individual experience rooted in common reality. I will explain the origin of call-and-response in the next chapter.

Williams says that poet Langston Hughes made the same assumptions about his audience as a blues artist would in that they shared the same reality and would respond out of this common reality. She continues: "The particularized, individual experience rooted in a common reality is the primary thematic characteristic of all blues songs no matter what their structure" (183). The themes were often poverty, loneliness, need for love and family etc. An audience's response comes from their private pains brought on by the common oppressive and repressive experience of the American social system. The blues has therefore been an important part of the collective dialogue in the black community since the nineteenth century.

In the same manner, African American literature calls out to the audience and awaits their reply. A black audience is able to respond to the story because they share a common reality and history. However, as both music and literature have become more universally recognizable, more people from different cultures may have similar responses to the same piece. In my analysis of Morrison's *Jazz*, I found call-and-response at several levels of relationship, between the author and reader, the text and reader, the narrator and reader, and in inter-textual relationships between the characters. Call-and-response is also found between this novel and other texts.

***Huck Finn*, the Black Oral Tradition and Toni Morrison**

As jazz emerged, the expression became more universal, which again expanded the range of its audience and performers. In many ways, this also occurred in the literary world. As a context for my further discussion, I would like to mention a non-black novel which embraces many of the African American traditional characteristics that resemble jazz (as Kouwenhoven also suggests). Mark Twain was largely influenced by the oral form, something that is evident in his writing. His essential tool was, as in jazz, timing. He too, saw the “break” as a way to create expectations. His most famous work, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is not constructed in the traditional (white) novelistic form. It has no clear beginning and no end (like the city skyline, skyscraper and jazz music) and its momentum is built up by Huck’s flight from convention and routine. Even though the text is not African American, it is interesting to see that a white writer has, intentionally or not, connected the black cultural tradition and its musical principles to the form of the novel. Some of the same structural elements are seen in the later work of female African American novelists, including Morrison.

It is somewhat easy to see how this applies to Morrison’s novels. She mentions, in an appendix-article in *Huck Finn*, several elements in Twain’s novel which we also find in her narratives, such as episodes of flight, black characters (also female) based on real people with intelligence, creativity, wit and caring, how it closes the gap between academic critics and young readers, and how it transforms its contradictions into fruitful complexities. She also feels that the genius of the novel is its “silent” moments, where “nothing is said, when scenes and incidents...force an act of imagination almost against the will” (“This Amazing, Troubling Book” 387). The withholdings at critical moments work as entrances, gaps, “seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meanings” (388). This relates to Morrison’s idea that a novel should work like music. The spaces allow the audience to respond, and to make the text their own.

Morrison also discusses the relationship between Huck and Jim, a relationship which I find similar to that of Alice Manfred and Violet Trace in *Jazz*. When these characters are together, “the anxiety is outside, not within” (388), the consolation and the healing properties that one character longs for is made possible by the other. One thing that stands out in all these relationships, and of which Morrison speaks in relation to Huck and Jim, is the “talk so

free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else” (388). I wish to propose that the talk between these “couples” is so honest and straightforward that it goes beyond signification. They have nothing to hide when they are together and therefore both their language and souls are completely open.

In her investigation of black characters, narrative strategy and idiom in the fiction of white writer’s in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison discusses the implications of the “Africanist”¹³ presence in *Huckleberry Finn*. She says that the critique of class and race, although “disguised or enhanced by humor and naiveté,” is present in the novel. Because of the humor and adventure, the readers are free to dismiss the critique and instead focus on its celebration of savvy innocence while at the same time “voicing polite embarrassment over the symptomatic racial attitude it enforces” (54). Since the novel is narrated by a child and appears to assimilate the ideological assumptions of its society, early criticism did not acknowledge its social critique. It masks its racial critique by being exaggerated and parodic. On the uncorrupted Huck,¹⁴ Morrison writes, Twain inscribes a critique of slavery and the difficulty of becoming a social individual: “It is absolutely necessary...that the term *nigger* be inextricable from Huck’s deliberations about who and what he himself is – or, more precisely, is not” (55). Many of Morrison’s novels describe this very difficulty of becoming a part of society. Examples include Paul D. in *Beloved*, Milkman (and the Dead-family) in *Song of Solomon*, and of course both Violet and Joe Trace in *Jazz*. I will return some of these in the chapter on characterization.

Twain’s narrative may illustrate the influence black form brought to the American literary canon. Hanna Wallinger says that Morrison expresses that slavery has “enriched the

¹³ Hanna Wallinger says that Morrison uses Africanism (and Africanist) as a “term for denoting the undercurrent of blackness in American literature and culture...and as a term for designating the unspeakable in discourses about class, sexuality, issues of power and domination” (155).

¹⁴Some critics, such as Shelley Fisher Fishkin, have argued that the character of Huck Finn might be based on a black figure. Fishkin sees the many resemblances between Huck and a black child servant Mark Twain once encountered and wrote a piece about (“Sociable Jimmy”) in the *New York Times*. Fishkin suggests that Jimmy became a model for the character of Huck (even though Twain himself claims that the real model was a white boy named Tom Blankenship). It is the use of voice in particular that supports Fishkin’s argument. Jimmy was supposedly the “most artless, sociable, and exhaustless talker” Twain ever came across (376). Fishkin call this translation into character an experiment in African American dialect and Twain’s first extended effort to translate African American speech into print (377). The defining characteristics of Jimmy are, according to critics, black, but it was the charm and naiveté of the boy that captured the American author. Jimmy and Huck’s choice of conversational topics, and their earnestness and innocence in talking and responding, suggest striking similarities beyond diction and rhythm of speech. Their common aversion to cruelty and violence and their determination to fascinate listeners with their long (often made up) stories, also strengthens Fishkin’s argument.

country's creative possibilities"¹⁵ by infusing the uniqueness of African American culture into the American. This tendency is evident in *Huck Finn*, as well as other non-black narratives.

Morrison also says that the representation of Jim as the "visible other," his love and compassion for the white child and his white master, as well as his assumptions that whites are what they claim to be, superior and adult, can be read as the yearning of whites for forgiveness. But this is only made possible when Jim has recognized his inferiority and despises it (56-57). At the level of characterization this dynamic is expressed by two of *Jazz*'s characters, True Belle and Golden Gray. True Belle is the black woman who puts the mulatto child of her white employer higher than her own family. Golden Gray (the mulatto child) is the one who discovers his true identity and despises it. I return to this later.

Black Women – Sources of Cultural and Literary Strength

In the preface to *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes that she cannot rely on the images of "blackness," being a black writer struggling with and through "a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in [her] work"(x–xi). In the first chapter Morrison explains that because American literature has been the preserve of white male views, much genius and power are removed from the overwhelming black presence in the United States (5).

In *Black American Women's Writing – A Quilt of Many Colors*, Eva Lennox Birch explores black women's place in the American literary canon. She stresses the awareness of both the cultural and the historical forces that shape black female narratives. In her introduction, Birch says that black women writers speak out of a marginalized position, and are therefore concerned with establishing a definition which recognizes their strength and individuality. These may be reasons why white women also feel closer in spirit to the writing of African American women. As Barbara Smith believes, there may be more that connects women of different colors than separates them. White women might move more easily towards an understanding of their own cultural prejudice through literature that expresses this reality (Birch 7).

¹⁵ From Wallinger. "Toni Morrison's Literary Criticism" (120).

Black women were excluded from the American literary canon, and the many ways they could have contributed to a distinctively American culture (being bearers of the only indigenous American expression: black folklore, song and dance), were ignored. Birch continues to say that black women have their own literature in the sense that they write about issues they know. They have created a tradition that celebrates African cultural heritage and their mothers' creativity (10). Early black writing, and oral culture, has distinctive elements: spirituality, political awareness, community, creativity and the effects of slavery, and black women has dedicated themselves to preserve this particular literary tradition. Birch claims that Toni Morrison is a writer who emphasizes community and a cleaving to ancestral history as a path to racial and human health in her novels (11). In relation to this I will look at some ancestral forces (which I will argue music is part of) in Morrison's writing and try to strengthen Birch's argument by showing how they contribute to racial, but most of all human, health by granting their "children" a voice.

The current freedom that contemporary African American women have developed has its roots in the real struggles of their ancestors and especially the voice in slave narratives.

The Voices of Slave Narratives

The first black literary voices were planted in institutionalized slavery. Slave narratives are clear statements expressed from the only areas slaves exercised control over, their thoughts and feelings. Stephen Butterfield has noted about these narratives that: "Autobiography in their hands becomes so powerful, so convincing a testimony to human resource, intelligence, endurance, love in the face of tyranny, that, in a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent black American writing" (Birch 13-14).

There are important differences between male and female slave narratives. According to Marjorie Pryse the female oral accounts, especially, force us to recognize the oral as an integral part of that tradition because they "enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition."¹⁶ They record the harsh physical working conditions and additional burdens female slaves had to endure, such as sexual exploitation and the demands of childbearing. So, while male slaves recorded their anger, frustration and feelings

¹⁶ Quoted in Birch (14).

of impotence, women recorded their abuse. However, their common experience of the dehumanizing conditions of slavery creates a powerful collective voice.

Slave narratives, as well as the “spiritual autobiography” (written by black women outside slavery) provided a rich legacy for later writers, but the prominent shaping force of black literature, Birch argues, is the oral culture. The richness in dialect, the inventiveness in language and storytelling are detailed in the research of Zora Neale Hurston and are now an integral part of black women writers who use their language with pride and delight (28).

As Williams and Levine noted, the retrieved folklore and music of African Americans, and their American experience, account for much of the distinctiveness of their literary tradition. Birch mentions Morrison’s work as an example. In her novels, music is a shaping force never far from the surface (29). My question throughout this thesis is: does Morrison succeed in working music into her narrative in a way that strengthens its aesthetic and message, and if so, how.

The Harlem Renaissance and the Search for Identity

It is important to mention the Harlem Renaissance because it is the setting for *Jazz*. In the early nineteenth century, black southerners began to migrate to the North and into the cities where they settled in areas people of their own culture had already established themselves. The migrating blacks needed to find an identity, and in New York, Harlem offered this opportunity for them. It is the burgeoning of black creativity here we refer to as the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem represented a spirit of advancement motivated by the political impulse to improve the social position of black people and here, artists, musicians and writers found a climate congenial to their creative energy (Birch 33). However, black identity could not be affirmed if it did not recognize the oral culture which was an expression of their shared experience, and which was not accorded in the dominant white culture. At the same time, many black artists felt that they needed to build upon oral culture if their contribution to the larger society was to be recognized. Black artists searched the art and music of their ancestors in order to find the roots that made their cultural inheritance unique. Consequently, the Harlem Renaissance and its self-conscious focus on black identity became important for later black writers.

The Rise of Female voices

Birch states that Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature marks the entrance of black women authors into the centre of world literature. Despite the disparities in their economic, educational, cultural and familial circumstances and geographical locations, black women writers in America are unified in their effort to speak about, to and for women of all races and backgrounds (241). According to Birch, by interrogating the notions of gender by which women have been subordinated and silenced, and attacking the literary stereotypes which reinforce the negative socialization of black women, African American women writers have succeeded in foregrounding women in general and bringing them into mainstream of both life and literature (242).

Madhu Dubey extends this discussion. In the 1970s black women writers did not receive the appreciation they deserved and they had to "reconstruct and supplement" black nationalistic ideology. It may be interesting for my project to look at how black women, like Morrison, negotiate art and ideology, which is part of Dubey's commentary.

Many feminist critics have been concerned about stereotypes in early black female writing as well as with the later, more multidimensional characterization of black women. Some say that the emerging black nationalism in the 1960s opened up for positive images of women and feel that this was part of a freedom movement. The early black feminists felt that work on revision and reversal of literary stereotypes was emphasized the "struggle for cultural control and self determination" (413). More recent feminist writing regarding the characterization of women is also connected to a black aesthetic agenda. Deborah McDowell, Dubey writes, felt it was necessary for black writers to only portray positive images of black identity, and construct these out of the dynamics of racial difference (413). This issue is a very present tension in Morrison's work which portrays black characters as human beings with both positive and negative attributes, not as sacralized images. Dubey also notes that theorists such as Hortense Spiller and Karla Holloway, both whom have written extensively on Morrison, were motivated by the resistance to the prescriptive model of black identity, and that their work interrogates the tendency to homogenize black women.

The Womanist Ideology of Wholeness

It is important to emphasize the political and affective force of constructing a “whole self.” A double gesture was needed in black feminist theorization of identity. These included the continuing appreciation of cultural history which is essential for modelling a whole, cohesive self, and attentiveness to the differences within the black experience that confines any totalized definition of black identity (Dubey 414). Mae Henderson uses Toni Morrison’s *Sula* to reevaluate identity, and calls it “a kind of model for the deconstructive function of black feminist literary criticism” (414). This reevaluation of identity signals a departure from the criticism of early black female characterization. *Sula* received attention for its non-realist modes of characterization, thus “displacing realist assumption that underwrite the opposition to flat, false stereotypes and whole, authentic character.” She adds that the argument of stereotypes misrepresenting the black female identity questions the realist notion of character being the reflection of a coherent self, because it “presupposes a preexistent knowable self” that should be mirrored in fiction (414).

Dubey adds that Karla Holloway and Michael Awkward, in attempting to situate the innovative treatment of character in a cultural context, have differentiated between the classic, realist individual and the whole (sometimes contradictory) subject posited in some black women’s novels. “Womanist” ideology, in opposition to bourgeois humanist ideology, affirms communally oriented psychological wholeness. However, because of the realist legacy of the novel, a representation of communal inter-subjectivity is difficult. In contrast to for example Alice Walker, who negotiates this legacy by inscribing her “oppositional conception of the whole subject through modes of psychological character delineation that inadvertently reinstate the individual self of classic realist fiction” (414), Toni Morrison employs non-realist modes of characterization into her fiction, which makes it not readable within the “images-of-black-women” critical terms (414). *The Bluest Eye* draws heavily upon stereotypes of the black woman, in order to critique them, and in *Sula* Morrison uses flat modes of characterization that “denaturalize the ‘real’ and divest subjectivity of any authentic presence” (415). By doing this, Dubey argues, she parodies the realist forms in a way that still retain her characters’ notion of wholeness. Black feminine identity in these novels may be best understood as a contradictory interplay between presence and absence, wholeness and fracture (415).

The black woman writer's effort to interrupt the realist legacy, and to create a communal inter-subjectivity, was often assisted by the appropriation of the black folk cultural forms. Black feminist critics are also turning more to metaphors deriving from black folk culture (such as conjuring and specifying) in order to theorize the literary and cultural practices of women. This effort is traced back to black aesthetic discourse which constructed folk forms as the origin of a uniquely black cultural practice.

An Approach to Folk Form

Oral forms sustain displacement and fragmentation brought on by oppression and appears in feminist discussion of African American literature. Susan Willis, for example, has written engaging studies about the relation between oral forms and black women's fiction. She builds her argument around the verbal ritual of specifying (name-calling), a paradigm of the black oral tradition, which she feels builds "non-commodified" narrative integrity (Dubey 415). This relates to what Gates says about Signifyin(g) being a language of implication and indirection. Dubey points out that black oral form, such as the slave song, the blues, and the trickster tale, exemplify the "slippage" (or gaps) between words and their multiple meanings. The slave song encoded two meanings: the expression of religious yearning for freedom and the voicing of political desire for freedom (416). Susan Willis claims that the blending of rural southern oral culture and fiction with the urban North produced new cultural forms that were distanced from the oral mode. The novel now had to depend on metaphorical condensation of oral forms, an apt mode of capturing black historical and cultural displacement from South to North (415). This point relates to Birch's claim that oral culture was the most important shaping force for black literature, and is expressed in Morrison's novels, moving from *Beloved* in the South to *Jazz* in the North.

During the 1960s, due to the Black Arts Movement,¹⁷ black folk culture was assigned ideological value to support nationalistic intentions, meaning that oral forms should

¹⁷ The Black Arts Movement was an important decade in black literary history (and the history of black art in general), started by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in Harlem. This was a period of change and controversy in world literature, a major one being the portrayal of new ethnic voices in America. Hallmarks of Black Arts activity were the development of Black theatre groups and Black poetry performances and journals. The Black Arts Movement spurred political activism and use of speech in African American communities (Kaluma ja Salaam. "Historical Overview of the Black Arts Movement").

“authorize a unique black literary voice” (416). This proved to be productive for black women writers who used the oral form to subvert the authority of white literary culture, even though they didn’t completely commit to the black nationalistic program. They were discerning in their adaptation of oral forms. In certain novels from the 1970s folk culture is “subjected to a sharp scrutiny that exposes its often damaging consequences for black women” (417). However, the representation of community in black female writing at the time shows an approach to folk forms. This matter of usage enabled the writers to affirm communal vision, and to establish a participatory relationship with their readers, often because their theme reflected black female experience. In my analysis of *Jazz* I will elaborate on the ways in which Morrison approaches the black folk form. I will also examine how her characters develop in ways that parallel the historical development of music.

Conclusion

In celebrating their own language, black women writers challenge the hegemony of white male language, and by developing a tradition of their own (characterized by experimenting with form, language, narrative time and theories of gender etc) they have freed themselves from many mainstream literary conventions. African American women have managed to establish themselves as a strength in the literary world, and there they able to strengthen and maintain their culture, as well as share it with the world.

Toni Morrison expresses a need to reclaim the distinctive black cultural heritage, especially the oral. Her writing stresses many distinctive cultural elements in order to spread the importance of multi-cultural richness to her readers from a variety of backgrounds. In this chapter I have dealt with some of these elements, such as repetition, signifying, ancestors and call-and-response. The illumination of black tradition is Morrison’s contribution to the important preservation of a culture that has been challenged for so many years. In *Jazz*, music is Morrison’s most constructive tool for creating characters monologue/dialogue, textual structure, and imagery.

African American Culture, History, and the Musical and Literary Tradition

To be able to examine and understand the contemporary African American novel, we need to know about black historical, cultural and traditional contexts. In slavery, and after, blacks managed to preserve some of the traditions they carried with them from Africa by forging their cultural principles into new forms of expression that would sustain the conditions they met in America. Through these forms they were able to respond to the social, racial and economic exploitation under which they lived. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the preservation of black culture became important for developing self-pride and group cohesion and thus providing survival for the black community.

In this chapter I will, by looking at the historical overview of cultural transformation, explore the ways in which black traditions have sustained, and developed through, the many changes African Americans have endured since their arrival in the New World. I also go into how parts of the oral tradition, such as music and literature, have become important for the African American cultural expression. Then I will explore how black women writers, Toni Morrison included, have creatively made use of the many black cultural expressions in their writing.

African Culture in America

In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence W. Levine stresses the importance of looking at the consciousness of the mass when documenting historical events and developments. His research is dedicated to the study of black people's consciousness in a traditional, cultural sense. He states the importance of referring to African culture differently than we refer to Western, since Africans created a myriad of languages, religions, customs, as well as social, political and economic institutions (3). This caused differentiation of the people and gave them more or less separate identities. There are, however, aspects of the

numbers of cultures that unite them and describes the African “style of life,” to use Robert Redfield’s words,¹⁸ such as folklore, music and dance. In *Shadow and Act* Ralph Ellison writes: “Negro Folklore [...] was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro’s willingness to trust his reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him.”¹⁹ Ellison stresses the importance of black folk tradition as both a delightful and instructive expression that provided slaves with a sense of communal consciousness as well as giving distinction to their lives in the place of their physical freedom. Twentieth century blacks survived because they remained conscious of their folk tradition in church (through call-and-response and gospel), in song and children’s tales. The cultural aspects that survived are now at the core of African American culture. Levine also claims that the West-African slaves shared common cultural views and expressions that could have constituted the basis for a common sense of identity “capable of withstanding the impact of slavery” (4).

In this connection, it is important to repeat that culture is process rather than a fixed condition and therefore the “survival” of African traditions must be seen as a product of transformation. Levine says that culture is the dynamic “product of interaction between past, present and future” (5). This is emphasized in Morrison’s novels in particular, as I will discuss in the analysis. It seems that the ability to react in flexible ways to new situations is an important reason for the resilience of African American culture. This is also true for music, as I will show.

Folklore and the Contemporary Black Writer

Richard Wright says that there is a great deal of nationalism embedded in African American culture, especially in folklore (84). He adds that in the absence of a fixed form of culture, African folklore embodied memories of, and hopes for, their struggle for freedom. Images of hope and despair remained in the daily speech of black people (85). Negro folklore added a greater sense of meaning to their lives, because it expresses the common fate of black life in America. This came to function as a “defense” against white oppression. During the Harlem Renaissance, a complex consciousness was necessary to be able to depict black life, a

¹⁸ Quoted in Levine. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (4).

¹⁹ Quoted in Bjork (11).

consciousness which drew its strength from folklore and molded it with concepts more adaptable to the new environment they lived in. Through the articulation of common experiences, black writers became spokesmen for their people. Through written presentations of their lives and their struggles, showing the complexity of their race, they were attempting to lead a white audience to a better understanding of their sufferings. These presentations were nourished by cultural traditions.

In black communities the individual is considered a member of a social group with responsibilities to the other members. Black women are bound together in their ethnic heritage, in storytelling, gossip, song, dance, and are considered the bearers and protectors of African cultural heritage. They assert themselves as a source of strength for both family and community by passing on this folk tradition from generation to generation. This provides the individual with a sense of identity and secures the familial and racial memory of the black community. In their role as nurturers, black women have made creative use of traditional forms of expression to secure the survival of their people. Karla Holloway states in “A Figurative Theory...” that African American and African history document that the storytellers were mostly women and that their stories and songs were oral archives of their culture (330). The oral tradition that we now find in African American music and literature is preserved to large extent because of these women. As mentioned in the previous chapter, contemporary black women writers have their “own” literature, in the sense that they use the oral form to establish a participatory relationship with the audience, and their themes often reflect black female experience. Also, representation of community in black female writing shows an approach to folk forms which affirm communal vision.

To show the transformation the contemporary black novel has gone through we have to return to the slave narratives and the slaves’ creative use of folklore.

The Legacy of Slave Narratives and Spiritual Autobiographies for Women

As mentioned earlier, Eva Lennox Birch points out that a common truth emerges from slave narratives, as well as other recollections of slave experiences, about the inhumanity they faced and the conditions they endured under the harsh physical work of slave labor. Since

their individual stories are told directly from the only areas they still exercised control over: their “thoughts and feelings” (13), this allows insight into the psyche of the black slave.

Female slaves suffered both because of their blackness and their sex, and were because of this forced to quickly develop into self-reliant and mature individuals. They were often abused by their white masters, and their male counterparts were seldom in position to protect them. Patrick Bryce Bjork writes that black women’s survival under the horrifying conditions of slavery is a “testament to the human spirit” (18).

Although the perspectives of African American women writers are often rooted in their own experience of being black and female, authors such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have all wanted to portray their black female characters as something more than just inferior in terms of race and gender. They have sought to show that the African American woman is a source of strength for her family and her community, and that she in many ways ensures the survival of the black people’s spirit by passing on folk tradition to the next generation. I return to this when discussing ancestors and female friendship in the analysis.

Outside slavery, for example in Boston and Philadelphia, black women formed their own literary societies. According to Birch some of them could skillfully write and manipulate the English language and started writing what is referred to as “spiritual autobiographies” (17). The spiritual autobiographies differ from slave narratives in the refined and restrained language shaped by biblical rhetoric. These narratives expressed a common demand for female selfhood through Christian spirituality (Birch 18). The life narratives of nineteenth century black women present protagonists who transcend the images of victimized slave women and present themselves as pioneers in the struggle of the black woman for independence and self-definition (18).

“Orality” and Music in African American Writing

The African American oral tradition, including music, has had extensive influence on the literary tradition and in fact account for much of its distinctiveness. Williams notes that many critics agree that African American music, speech and lifestyle have influenced the structure of their writing (179). This is seen in the oral style of many literary works. Texts

written by African Americans often appear more spoken than other texts. The relationship between author, or “speaker,” and the audience is highly important, and having the text appear as effortless daily speech, or maybe as song, may attract readers at a different level than other narrative techniques. A text which “talks” to its readers will appear friendlier and more easily encourage the reader to participate in the flow of the words, in conversation, or in duet, with the text itself. To have the reader work with the author in the construction of the novel, adding personal experiences to it and transform it into their own, is equally important. LeRoi Jones emphasizes the input of music into black literature in his writing. He says that black music may be traced to the field hollers [call-and-response] that enabled workers to communicate (Birch 28).

It is important in this connection to give account for the transformation of African American music to be able to see some of the ways in which it is transferred into literature. This will be addressed in the following sections.

African American Musical History and Development

African American music has undergone constant change, just as black people themselves have. Levine stresses how important the forms of African American slave folk culture remained in the decades following freedom, and especially the song (191). Many of the changes Africans experienced after their removal from their homelands, such as the conversion of slaves to Christianity, the abolition of slavery, the migration of blacks from country to city and from south to north, and the emancipation, have contributed to the variation of expression and style of the traditional song.²⁰ However, the song remained a fixture of the oral tradition (193).

The freed slaves were subject to musical influences more than ever before. Free trading of musical ideas and forms became more prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as black and white southerners shared many folk songs (194-195). Classic

²⁰ While the slaves felt they could most easily articulate their longing for freedom by projecting it into the future, the blacks living in the repressive atmosphere of the South at the turn of the century vented their complaints about whites and the social system by projecting them back into the past, giving them appearance of nostalgia instead of complaint (Levine 194). This illustrates that the end of slavery required its own set of survival strategies.

blues singers, such as Ma Rainey, did not confine themselves to one song form. Their repertoire became a combination of minstrel, popular vaudeville, folk tunes and traditional blues (195).

In spite of all of its exposure to white influences, African American music remained distinctive. One reason was that black Americans always refashioned the music they picked up to “fit their own aesthetic priorities and social needs” (196). So, there is a clear tendency of the folk singer to borrow material from any source, then change it or combine it with other materials to make the song distinctively his or hers. The materials used were not merely taken from white culture, but also from the variation of styles within African American culture (199). The transformation of song tradition continued throughout the twentieth century (198). I believe that a more detailed historical explanation of the development of African American song gives advantage to both the analysis of characters and structure in *Jazz*.

Early Secular Song

For African Americans, music is a participatory activity. Levine notes that “In freedom as in slavery, this folk quality of black music is precisely what makes it such an important medium for getting at the thought, spirit and history of the very segment of Negro community” (203). The importance of song in everyday life is probably the primary reason why it has remained an integral part of the black community and its culture. Early secular songs were rarely formalized. They were either handed down from generation to generation, or wholly spontaneous, but either way they were products of a communal re-creation (205). The work songs allowed individual and communal spontaneity, and slaves often improvised new words to fit their surroundings and their mood. Levine claims that these songs “retained a high degree of redundancy in both its musical structure and its stock of poetic forms” (206) because they remained closer to folk roots.

Black music is creatively dynamic and the stock of musical imagery was free for anybody within the community to use as they liked. Improvisation upon the shared experience that this allowed made it possible for song to become a “personal reflector” for the same experience (207). Songs, then, were both sung within a communal context, as well as expressing the emotions of the individual.

Call-and-Response in Song

The clearest example of communal spirit in secular songs is found in the work songs. These songs were built upon call-and-response (even though there are examples of song with just the call and no response²¹) where the workers respond to the call of the song leader with their own words (Levine 208-209). Missy Dehn Kubitschek explains that “One slave organized the energies of other by issuing a verbal call to which the rest might respond” (23). Call-and-response was an apt device for keeping up work rhythm, and therefore it was very suitable for collective work. Giving directions and work cues through singing, the song leader bore great responsibility towards his fellow slaves. However, he remained one with them.

Levine adds that interaction between workers and song leader was not confined to the work fields, but was brought into church where “blacks would punctuate the song with shouted exclamations”²² (209), as also noted in relation to “cuts.”

Call-and-response was, and still is, an important element of sermons in black church communities whose focus is more on song than preaching.

Work Songs and the Communal Spirit

Supplying work rhythm was, however, only one of the functions of secular song. Work songs also accompanied labor that did not require timing of movements, such as cotton picking and corn husking, because it provided psychic benefit as well as physical stabilization (Levine 212). Singing made time pass, relieved tension and kept the workers spirit up in the midst of their dehumanizing situation, as well as enabling them to work in harmony with each other. Work songs had endless rhythmic and verbal repetition that transported slaves beyond time, thus making them oblivious to their immediate surroundings (213). One might say that the work song helped them survive the conditions under which they worked, both physically

²¹Two chief forms of black solo music in the nineteenth century was lullabies and field hollers, both which arose because of physical or social distance (Levine 218). Lullabies were directed at infants too young to reply, and field hollers often consisted of the isolated statement of one individual, too far from anybody who could respond. Field hollers tended to stay in the fields, but blacks who left plantations to go to the cities soon chanted similar calls (220).

²²For example: the minister might call out: “Praise the Lord!” to which the communion responds: “Hallelujah!”

and mentally. Since they were denied expressing themselves verbally, least of all in their mother tongue, singing became their main form of personal expression.

Another important element of the work songs is the comfort a shared remedy brought. Slaves comforted themselves and others by “memories of the past or projections of the future” (213) and together they escaped the present for however short the moment. But more frequently the work song was a realistic depiction of the slaves’ situation. Singing provided relief by emphasizing that none of them were alone. Since they all shared the same experience, they also understood each others problems and could comfortably and frankly articulate them (214).

Black workers also used song to depict the weaknesses they found in whites, since it was impossible for them to express this in any other form. By signifying upon meaning, slaves could “make comments, articulate complaints, and issue warnings,” (215) and thus get a small revenge through song.

In summary, the work song was a communal instrument in both form and function, that allowed workers to share the physical movements and psychic needs with each other, and it provided outlets for communication and expression (215). Due to the creative use of call-and-response, the African American oral expression survived slavery and could develop into other creative forms of expression, like blues and jazz.

The Blues as both Individual and Communal Expression

When plantation communities dissolved after the abolition of slavery, the work song was no longer an adequate response to the changed situation of African Americans (Birch 29). Their expectations of a better life were crushed when they realized they would still be exploited and exposed to enormous racial pressure. In the decades that followed they had to use their creativity to transform their experiences in slavery and their cultural traditions into a more suitable mode.

During the twentieth century, the blues became the dominant of black song forms. It was forged out of the musical repertory and tradition of spirituals, work songs and hollers, but with new forms of self-conception. The communal context of song began to fade into the background and was replaced by the individual blues singer expressing his or her private

emotions without the necessity of an audience. The distinctive features of the secular song were, however, still there, only more adjusted to their new situation. The call-and-response remained, but now the blues singer responded to him or herself either verbally or with an accompanying instrument (Levine 221). Levine states that in these respects “blues was the most typical American music Afro-Americans had yet created and represented a major degree of acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society” (221). By the end of the nineteenth century blues songs were increasingly common.

At this point, songs rooted in African American tradition were probably more important than ever. Entering a new and larger world where blacks would still be extensively exposed to enormous racial pressure demanded some form of release, as well as a device for maintaining their identity in the decades that followed. Williams writes:

The particularized, individual experiences rooted in a common reality is the primary thematic characteristic of all blues songs [...] the thematic relationship between individual and group experience which is implied in these evocations of social and political reality (183).

Levine states that the blues was solo music in performance and in content. The song centered upon the performers “feelings, experiences, fears, dreams, acquaintances, idiosyncrasies” (222). He also notes that the personalized elements of the blues style may indicate a decisive move into the twentieth century American consciousness, but that its musical style indicates a holding onto its roots in a time when the dispersion of blacks throughout the country and the rise of radio and phonograph “could have spelled the demise of a distinctive Afro-American musical style” (223).

The blues, with its improvisations, retention of call-and-response, polyrhythmic effect and methods of vocal production, including slides, slurs, vocal leaps and falsetto, was a definite assertion of the central elements of communal music style (Levine 223-224). In the same manner as earlier black music, the blues drew upon a large reservoir of musical phrases and expressions which were free for anybody to use and build upon. Consequently, even though the blues quickly became part of the commercial world and recording industry, songs still remained communal property and vehicles for individual and communal expression (229). Using folk phrases in blues songs kept the music tied to tradition (230).

The blues was participatory music in the sense that people came to listen to it being performed. Levine writes that within African American culture “the relationship of performers to their audience retained many of the traditional participatory elements, the give-and-take that was so familiar to nineteenth century black storytellers and their audience” (234). Although blues songs were individual expressions, they were meant to be shared and to evoke experiences common to the group. They were meant to provide relief and release for all involved (237). One might say that black performers had no “audience,” just participants. Blues, like nineteenth century folktales, had no beginning and no end. Levine explains that one blues song took up where another left off. This constant repetition expressed the permanence of the forces that beset the individual and the group (237).

More than any African American form, the blues allowed greater freedom for individual voices while still keeping them members of the group and in touch with their roots. Even though blues is a form of personal expression, the African American blues singers generally assumed the role as the collective voice of the black people. Because blues is considered to be a truthful art form, their “mission” was to tell the truth about their situation and their feelings about being black in a white-dominated society, an issue that concerned most African Americans. Opinions about social and political conditions that otherwise would not be evoked by blacks, were given voice in blues songs, and later in the African American novel which adopted many of the blues’ forms and function.

Jazz – Music for the Community

Jazz represented much of the same phenomena as the blues in that it “manifested the simultaneous acculturation to the outside society and inward-looking, group orientation that was so characteristic of black culture in the twentieth century” (Levine 238).

Blacks were still fleeing from dispossession and racism. Migration to the North, however, merely gave oppression a wider geographical location and more concentrated outbreaks of race riots in the cities (Birch 191). Due to this, the song began to return to the community. The delight of blacks who gathered in the northern cities was in them being together rather than in gaining an increased share in white Americans good and economically stable life. In Harlem for example, the racism migrated blacks thought they had left behind in

the South was very much present, and jazz was their common escape from, and a device to deal with, the harsh conditions they met. The new generation learned strategies of survival from the elders. Such teaching proved effective in the “call to life” that the emergence of jazz signaled (Birch 191). Jazz music was both about living in the present and remembering the past.

Jazz emerged from the music blacks brought with them to the cities. Birch claims that jazz music differs from the distinctive blues of southern rural blacks, in it being a synthesis of the individualistic lament and the new consciousness of a dispossessed community. But she also stresses that it still had the blues’ “sense of extemporaneity yet with a more sophisticated structure, depending as it does upon the complex harmonizing of a variety of single expressions” (189).²³

Even though jazz would seem to owe little to white cultural models, according to many historians, it is a hybrid influenced by many genres, such as white popular songs and dances from the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Shipton 7). Jazz, as well as being the artistic expression of a black experience and a response to white associations in social, economic and political contexts is, according to Shipton, a “syncretic” music form with a wider range of sources than traditionally explored (7).

The Interrelationship between Music and African American Writing

African American music, speech and lifestyle have furthermore influenced the form and structure of African American writing. Music is intended to be heard, not read, and therefore it might seem that its structures and techniques would prove problematic to transfer directly onto literature, but since many patterns of African American music derives from the oral tradition, it is easily transferable into written work. Structural devices in African American literature with clear reference to blues and jazz music are call-and-response, repetition, use of multiple voices and improvisation.

²³Some say that jazz, both the term and the musical style, was “born” in New Orleans. For further reading see the introduction in Alyn Shipton. *A New History of Jazz* (6).

Contemporary Black Women Writers and the Challenging of Stereotypes

African Americans have throughout time had to deal with the concept of “otherness.” But, as touched upon in the first chapter, black women have struggled with a double otherness (because of their race, and their sex). According to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, the complex situatedness of the black woman as not only “other” of the same, but also the “other” of the others implies a relationship of difference, but also of identification with the “other” (349). In literature, dialogue with the “otherness” within the self is a distinguishing factor in black women’s writing.²⁴

Birch stresses that black women’s writing demands an awareness of the cultural as well as historical forces that shaped it (4). The reason why women, of any color, may find literature by black women engaging is because it usually tells them something about the realities of being female. White women in particular might feel closer to these works in spirit because they speak of and from a position of marginalization (7). Morrison says that black women are interested in each other and “write from another place” where their physical and spiritual beauty was denied and their sexuality exploitation and economic displacement suffered (Birch 149). Issues of racial and sexual oppression cross the bound of any race and the socially constructed constraints to gender. African American women are concerned with establishing a self-definition in which their beauty, strength and individuality is recognized.²⁵ Racial prejudice is examined by exposing social and cultural constraints of class, gender and religion and, in the opinion of Barbara Smith, it is easier for white women to move towards an understanding of their own cultural prejudice through literature expressing this reality.²⁶

²⁴Black women have been exposed to the external manifestations of racism and sexism and the result of those distortions internalizes within the consciousness of our selves and others. Consciousness becomes an inner speech reflecting the outer world in a process that links the psyche, language and social interactions. Black women’s writing then becomes both a dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche.

²⁵Comparative studies of the writing of African and African American women show an over-all female aesthetic that relates to French feminist theory. Similar to African American women writers they insist upon the need to transform language and writing. The similarity also applies to American feminists, who were more post-modern in their expression. Claudine Raynaud writes that Morrison says her novel *Beloved* bears marks of post-modernism, which stems from the coincidence between slavery and the modern period. She explains that “from a woman’s point of view, in terms of confronting where the world is now, black women had to deal with ‘post-modern’ problems in the nineteenth century and earlier.” The post-modern novel bears many similarities to Morrison’s writing. Examples are: the breaking of linear time structure, blending of fictionality and reality, fragmented characters, looking at events from several different views, and the unreliable narrator (Gysin 139). Also, some forms of realist writing are considered post-modern, such as Magic Realism (which Morrison has been connected to by critics), and certain new generic developments, such as the jazz and blues novel (Gysin 143).

²⁶ From Birch (7).

As noted, African American women's writing has contributed to a distinct black expression in the intersections between voice, language and gender.²⁷ During the sixties the need for an awareness of an ancestral legacy became significantly important for blacks in America. Black (and also white) women were now demanding that their contribution to the culture of their society was given recognition and several black women academics' effort gave coherence to a black female literary tradition.

Ownership of the creative word means, as Holloway puts it, making these words work in cultural and gendered ways that undermine the hegemony of the West (332). If black women were to engage the Standard English language into a text, revision is required (because of the socio-cultural history of the words). If not revised, English words would repress the creativity of the text. The spoken language is the vehicle of creative power for African Americans. Silence is an external construct brought upon them during slavery.

The writing of Toni Morrison depicts, as do oral narratives and traditional songs, the black woman as nurturer for family and community, but also as a worker. From the time of slavery, the dual role of the African American woman was a stabilizing force that ensured the continued social and economical survival of the community. This fact often threatened the masculinity of black men who were unable to assert themselves in the society and this resulted in the growth of negative stereotypes of black women. The tragic mulatta figure²⁸ that reoccurs as a subject in narratives (by both white and black writers) from this period may be seen as the indication of American attitude to race. In a sentimental novel, such a figure will allow the reader to confront the consequences of racism.

To combat these stereotypes and to give added voice to women of all races, black women began to write. The need for identity and wholeness, which is a paramount issue in contemporary black female literature, may be seen as an attempt to challenge the idea of stereotypes. In their writing, African American women such as Toni Morrison have dedicated themselves to the celebration of black womanhood and their creativity.

²⁷This was, however, also an important issue in the writing of white women during the nineteenth century.

²⁸The tragic mulatta figure is often an attractive young woman of mixed heritage. Her tragedy lies in her marginalization. She is the ultimate other who does not belong in either the black or the white community, but is sexually objectified in both.

The Traditional, Spiritual Black Woman and the Legacy of Voice

In the writing of black women, motherhood and nurturing are often central issues. However, in African American tradition, motherhood does not simply mean the ability to create life, but it is also central to feminine potential elsewhere, such as in religion, politics economics and social spheres (Holloway 333). In Morrison's novels, the black mother's main function is to hand down folk tradition to her children and, thus, give them a voice to survive with. This relates to what I have mentioned earlier about black women being a source of strength for their families and their communities.

Morrison puts emphasis on female spirituality in her stories. As mentioned, the ancestral figure (often female) is an important presence in her novels. Ancestors are timeless figures (part of the spiritual power) who provide a certain kind of wisdom for other characters. Many characterizations in black women's writing are based on African values, the older woman in particular. These women are portrayed as magical and spiritual because they are the embodiment of African mythology and wisdom. Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* is such a character. She is the ancestral singer of songs who is present from the beginning of her children's lives, ensuring their identity by granting them a voice.²⁹ Demetrakopoulos describes Pilate as an embodiment of "goddess strength in a foremother" (*New Dimensions...* 161). As for most of Morrison's heroic women, it is Pilate's responsibility to assure the legacy of the clan through mothering them.³⁰ These women are as important for the identity of individuals and black communities, as in a text. It is of great importance to regard one's own conscious historical connections, because if one does not keep in contact with ancestors, one is lost in life.

According to Karla Holloway, Morrison's female characters gain control over their lives through their voices. The legacy of voice is collective wisdom that may determine the

²⁹ One example of Pilate's role as an ancestral power is her singing at the end of one life (Robert Smith's) and the beginning of another (Milkman's), in the beginning of *Song of Solomon*.

³⁰ Pilate and Circe are traditional figures in *Song of Solomon* who possess powers that enable her to send Milkman on a journey of discovery to find his family's legacy and his true identity. These two traditional characters are magical in several ways. Being embodiments of the African mythology and wisdom, they both possess physical qualities that are beyond human (for example Circe's appearance before Milkman and Pilate's lack of a belly button (94)) and they have the will to survive and ensure the survival of others. African Americans use art to keep sources of past strength alive. Pilate and Circe have the qualities of ancestors in being benevolent, instructive, protective, and provide a certain kind of wisdom. These are all qualities that Milkman's biological mother, Ruth, does not have because she has embraced "white" values and, by doing so, blurred her connection to black ancestors. All the qualities discussed here require the ability to speak.

survival of their children (*New Dimensions...* 22). This is emphasised through the relationships between female characters in particular. In Morrison's novels, black women seem to share a special bond. These bonds are intimate and spiritual, as well as being symbolic of ancestors and the female voice. Women "alliances" awaken the creative potential of female bonding. Women who made it out of slavery might have been more aware of their responsibility to assure the legacy of the clan. Children represented the continuity of life in conditions where life itself was constantly threatened. Demetrakopoulos notes that the mother-role "grew to encompass a kind of parenting that was able to survive socio-economic depression, nutritional deficiencies and political repression" (*New Dimensions...* 162). Also, the articulation of pain transforms women from being voiceless victims into individuals with a sense of self. (This also relates to the challenging of stereotypes). The "silenced subject" is to seek healing in memories, not flee from them (as in "a story not to pass on" at the end of Morrison's *Beloved*).

A trend throughout *Jazz* is that the power of having a voice makes women less victimized. In my analysis I will elaborate on the role of, and the relationships between, black women and how this is connected to regaining and maintaining a distinct African American voice.

Orality as a Carrier of Culture

Alma J. Billingslea-Brown uses Paule Marshall's words when explaining that the African tradition of storytelling is as ancient as the African continent and therefore helps African Americans maintain a deeper connection to their African roots. It carries culture, history and the wisdom of race.³¹ Storytelling is an improvisational form, just like blues and jazz, and therefore African Americans may use and challenge their creativity by using this mode, at the same time that it helps them strengthen their tradition. Black Americans' need for folklore is evident. As Billingslea-Brown points out: "Articulating the values, beliefs, and ethos sustained and re-created in diaspora, the African American folk matrix enabled displaced African people to establish differential identity, affirm group solidarity, resist dominance, and 'recall home'" (2). Bringing folklore into their new environment in the

³¹ Freely translated from a quote in Billingslea-Brown (15).

northern cities, transforming it to fit their present situation has been crucial for the maintenance of the “displaced African people,” their culture and has strengthened their ability to sustain the difficult conditions they were offered in America.

Importance of Song in Writing

Coming together in a communal sharing of personal experiences, often through the medium of music, is, as mentioned, healing for both the black individual and the black community. Morrison has said: “The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again” (Caldwell 241), and transforming their pasts into music, or a folktale, or gossip, was their way of preventing the past to grow into a burden too hard to bear.

Ever since slavery, song has probably been the most powerful form of personal expression for blacks in America. Through song, slaves could articulate their innermost feelings and concerns. Song was also in many ways the black mother’s gift to her children. Songs heard in ones childhood is often remembered, and reminds the listener of family ties and identity. Morrison’s singing characters functions as reminders of certain memories that need to surface. Song gives body and soul to memory.³² By actively using oral tradition, blacks in America preserve the African heritage which reflects the collective spirit of the race.

Morrison writes that she believes that the novel is of strong cultural importance for African Americans because it in many ways replaces the traditional music which is no longer exclusively black (“Rootedness...” 199). This may be one reason why music, as well as other elements of black tradition, is prominent in her work.

³² There is a network of song-metaphors in *Song of Solomon* that connects it to universal childhood memories and to specific racial mythologizing as well. For example, the song of Milkman’s ancestor Solomon accompanies his birth and is once again established in his memory with the help of Pilate. Towards the end of the novel, this song becomes an essential part of Milkman’s life. The reason for this is that song imports cultural wisdom that affirms pasts and promises future. If Milkman had not gone on his quest for the past, he would probably be forever discomforted by both the myth of his ancestor and its song.

The Importance of Memory (and Myth)

In “A Figurative Theory...” Holloway notes that black women valued the intimacy between myth and cultural memory. Memory is their path toward cultural recovery, and myth is a creative source and “a point of genesis of original meanings” (331). She adds that myth and memory acknowledge a linguistic and cultural community as the source of the imaginative text of recovered meaning. In texts written by black women myth is often used to dissolve temporal and spatial bridges between past and present. Myth is a dynamic entity that complicates both language and imagery, and takes the text up to a new level of consciousness. The textual voice of black writers is “layered within the narrative and linguistic structures of both the text itself and characterization within the text” (Holloway, 332). This is peculiar to black women’s literary tradition since it creates a ritualized structure, like repetition and reflexivity, which identifies imagery and language.

Music is related to both memory and myth, as it is part of the black identity and consciousness. Some of this black identity is buried within folk tradition and Morrison describes memory as the “spoken library” of black culture that involve “children’s tales my family told, spirituals, the ghost stories, the blues, and folktales and myth, and the everyday [...] instruction and advice for my own people.” She aims to write out of “the matrix of memory”³³ which is why all these components of the “spoken library” are central in her writing. This is a central issue in my analysis of *Jazz*, which is the story of black migrating southerners hoping to find a comfortable life in the future, and who end up finding their identity within their pasts, in their memory, rather than in their new environment. Metaphorically speaking they go through a transformation through re-memory.

Morrison writes from a historical perspective that may help people unfamiliar with the consequences of slavery and its aftermath understand the magnitude of the struggle for blacks in America. Rewriting the past is a way of preserving the collective memory of African Americans. In *History and Memory* Jaques Le Goff writes: "Memory, on which history draws and which it nourishes in return, seek to save the past in order to serve the present and the future. Let us act in such a way that collective memory may serve the liberation and not the enslavement of human beings" (99). I believe this applies very well to Morrison's revisions. Even though she is highly concerned with the pain of blacks throughout

³³ Quoted in *New Dimensions of Spirituality* (104).

time, she does not seek to alienate her white readers. In her portrayal of black individuals who share memories of the past, she speaks first and foremost about the survival of these individuals and their search for identity. Remembering and coming to terms with the past is a step in the right direction towards individual and collective healing. Neither characters nor authors seek revenge, only consolation.

Several examples illustrate the ways in which memory is central to Morrison's novels. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman needs to remember his ancestry in order to find his own voice. Sethe and Paul D. are haunted by their memories in *Beloved*, Sethe by the memory of the infanticide she committed on her own child to prevent her from being brought into slavery, and Paul D. by his experiences at the slave camp in Alfred, Georgia. In *Jazz* Joe Trace struggles with the lack of memory of his mother, Wild.

Since music is as sensory and concrete as memory, music deriving from African culture is an important device in the search for identity and survival for several reasons. As mentioned, traditional music has had therapeutic effect on black people. It provides strength and the will to go on, no matter how hard life is.

The Black Female Expression in Toni Morrison's Novels

The second Black Renaissance (in the 1960's) brought an explosion of talented black writers to the attention of the public. When Toni Morrison started to write, she was building on, and adding to, a then unrecognized tradition and she was determined to reclaim and find her place within black cultural history. This is translated into her fiction.³⁴ Morrison, as opposed to many African Americans throughout time, has a place to speak from, a supportive community of readers and writers and an established black literary tradition. Birch notes that Morrison confronts the Diaspora of her enslaved ancestors without diminishing its enormity and affirms the positives of black life and culture that enabled survival (150).

The distinct black and female voice of her first novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, gathers strength in her later work which deals with female friendship, different aspects of love and the succor afforded by community, among other things. Her use of voice is a part of her

³⁴ One example is *Beloved* where she deals with slavery, the unspeakable source of her people's oppression. Here, she emphasizes the healthy impulse in a moving away from slavery without blocking out the entire experience.

questioning the perpetuation of masculine power in the literary canon. Morrison felt that recognized black male writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were not speaking to or for her as a black woman. They could articulate the experience of being black, but were unable to express “the interior life of the female” (Birch 149) in an adequate way. Because of black women’s mentioned “otherness” they are able to do this in a way that is more recognizable to women of all races.

Birch writes that Morrison identifies the “place” where the female voice originates as “the site of struggle for a self-definition and self-love whose nourishment comes from reclamation of ancestry.” She continues: “The need to reclaim the past in order to define the female self in terms of inherited culture, is both a feminist and a racial urge” (150). This view relates to myth and orality.

In my analysis of *Jazz* I will expand on how Morrison uses her background creatively to translate meaning into her narratives. Among the issues I will analyze are: how she manipulates narrative timeline in making past, present and future interact, how she makes use of call-and-response, and most importantly, the ways in which she includes the blues and jazz form in her narrative.

Conclusion

Black woman writers have given literature a distinctive female voice. However, the black female voice is not just a constant unity, but includes a number of nuances. Birch says they have found new ways of translating the distinct female experience into fiction (244). She also mentions that these various literary voices, though having their own “distinctive tone, manner or modulation,” reveal “unity in their efforts to speak about, to and for, women” (241). In the writing of black women, Morrison’s included, the improvisation, repetition and variation that is so characteristic of jazz music is easily traced.

The historical and cultural issues discussed in this chapter will help me better explain several of the areas I cover in the analysis of *Jazz*. These issues are at the core of Morrison’s novel, in terms of structure, characterization, imagery and themes. I concentrate on the musical involvement of these elements in my analysis of her text in the next chapter.

Characterization - From Fragmentation to Wholeness with Music

The characters I will deal with in this chapter are haunted by the memories of traumatic past experiences, and are unable to function in the present because of them. Such memories are often connected to slavery, experiences of racial abuse, or parental rejection and abandonment. Either way, such memories, or in some cases the lack of them, cause loss of an identity that is supposed to secure their survival. Resolution for these characters, individual as well as collective, involves confronting the past by evoking its painful memories and thus coming to terms with them. Also, remembering their African ancestors' legacy and using their heritage creatively (for example through storytelling, dance and music) as well as the collective sharing of experiences, are all steps in a healing-process for them. One common theme for the characters in *Jazz* is the search for wholeness in their fragmented lives, and in this chapter I will explore the ways in which they are traumatized. I investigate the role music plays in their past, present and future identities. I also explore the interrelationships between characters and their importance for individual and collective survival.

The Interplay between Voices in Music and Literature

As mentioned, the structure of *Jazz* contains many elements connected to black musical genres, such as jazz and blues. The novel and a piece of music are both constructions put together by several elements, and in *Jazz* these elements are the individual stories of the different characters. Each individual story functions much like a solo in a musical piece. As in the blues, these solos tell us tragic stories about the pain of love, loss, and past memories. The multiple voices in the novel are woven together like the different musical instruments of an ensemble. The interplay between these solos becomes a work of art, which is the novel. At the end of the novel the fragmented pieces are collected, and brought together into a unity, creating a textual whole that is comprehensible to the reader. As with any ensemble, the novel

Jazz needs a conductor. At first this role seems to be filled by the secret narrator who tries to collect and put together the various stories. One may discuss whether or not she³⁵ succeeds at this task. The narrator's judgmental behaviour, including the accusations she makes about several characters, work against the idea of unity (which is crucial in an ensemble) and might seem to be deconstructive to the story as a whole. Good jazz music or a good story often depends on the interplay between several instruments or voices.

The narrator may also be seen as playing the role of a gossiping woman,³⁶ telling the whole story from her point of view. This view reveals the positive, as well as the negative aspects of gossip. However, it is fair to argue that she, as a narrator, is unreliable. According to the characteristics identified by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan the most evident signs of unreliability in a narrator include personal involvement, limited knowledge and a problematic value-scheme (100). The narrator's expression reveals all these characteristics. At first she is so caught up in her own telling and representation of the story that she misreads both people and situations. The narrator seems to be omniscient almost throughout the story, but reveals that it is not so in realizing her own failure as a storyteller: "I overreached and missed the obvious" (220).

As opposed to a classical symphony where every note and each instrument is in well-structured harmony, a jazz piece is more off-balance and unpredictable because of these individual "voices," but functions no less as a whole. As long as the narrator is determined to control the story, its reliability and structure is fragile. Other participants are required to make it harmonious. Therefore, the reader is brought into the piece at the end to create a sense of wholeness.³⁷

As author, Morrison herself may be seen as the conductor who brings harmony and wholeness to the text when the narrator fails. This is done in cooperation with the reader who, as discussed in the theoretical sections, participates by interpreting and collecting the bits and

³⁵ I choose to interpret the narrator as female, even though it is never revealed in the novel whether "she" is male or female. I do this because of my focus in this thesis is on the black female voice rather than the male.

³⁶ In African American tradition, gossip is about sharing stories and spending time with each other and thus keeping the community together. This is also central in the writing of African American women. The verbal interplay among members of black communities (the songs and stories they share), defines their cultural identity.

³⁷ The manner in which Morrison's story ends reminds us of folktales. *Jazz*' story does not end, even though it stops. Because the narrator has urged the readers to interpret for them selves, the story evolves and lives on in our imagination. It is remembered and passed on. We might say that, as an African American woman, Morrison takes the responsibility for passing on the heritage of her people to the generations to come. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison explains that the richness of a story is what the readers get and bring of themselves to their reading (Taylor-Guthrie 253), and the mistakes of *Jazz*'s narrator allow for various readings to take place.

pieces of the story to make it their own. Our own signature is added to the text, enabling us to participate at the same level as the audience of a jazz performance.

Reader as Musician

Morrison offers a productive kind of invitation to her readers, who in a way become the second narrator of the story and takes part in the process of remaking the text. With each page we turn, we use our own voices, backgrounds and identities in our interpretation of the story and its characters. As Veronique Lesoinne points out, it is the “slipperiness of the narrator’s identity and personality” that mainly opens up this possibility for us (151). The uncertainty about the narrator’s gender, background and reliability encourages us to recreate the story for ourselves. The final sentences of the novel: “Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229), calls us to improvise upon this text, like any jazz piece is improvised upon by different musicians, regardless of gender, race or background. While reading, we respond to Morrison’s call by making the story our own.

We might compare readers to musicians in that we use our imagination when reinventing the text. The various interpretations each jazz musician bring to a musical piece give it new life. This seems to be the reader’s assignment while reading *Jazz* as well, to make the story live on in one’s own imagination. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison says that folktales are told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and may shape and figure it out. The story is not over because it stops, it lingers and it is passed on (Taylor-Guthrie 253). As we realize at the end of the novel, the story does not reach a final conclusion but is supposed to live and linger on in each of us, just like folktales in the African American tradition. (I will elaborate on the novels connection to folktales in the next chapter). Thus Morrison, as a black woman, takes responsibility for passing on some of the traditional heritage of her people, storytelling and music.

One might say that there are three levels of dialogue in *Jazz*, first between the narrator and the story, then between the narrator and the author, and then between the narrator and the reader. This is similar to jazz music where different instruments have dialogues with each other. The solo of one instrument may be interpreted by another which joins in and creates a

new harmony. This pattern has close relation to the slaves' call-and-response. The harmony may vary, depending on the different kinds of instruments and the people who are playing them, which also relates to the audience interacting with music or a text.

Music as Healer

The jazz tradition becomes an important artifact in the characters' struggle for survival for several reasons. I argue that African American music is an important participant in the healing process of the characters. By creating a land of improvisation in her fictional world, Morrison is able to provide for the survival of her characters. Like jazz musicians, the characters are allowed to improvise. Through improvisation they are able to find new, different ways of enduring life and coping with reality. The ways in which they adjust themselves to the future and new environments help them to move away from the haunting and destructive memories of the past.

Birch suggests that by using a non-linear narrative time, Morrison stresses the inescapability of the past. As the story unfolds she emphasizes that actions are subconsciously motivated by past events beyond individual human control. She adds: "The past is a particular stream of events upon which each human participant puts her/his own gloss, just as musicians will take up and reinterpret a melodic strain" (193).

The characters in *Jazz* each bring their personal stories of emotional separation and racial violence that have not been resolved in their present. I argue that it is music that becomes their salvation, enabling a renewing of contact with ancestral vitality. The interrelationships that develop allow for an identifying of troubling memories. The stories behind the characters are, as jazz music, marked by the past. Jazz derives from the slave-songs, the spirituals and the blues and is marked by this fact musically and thematically. Just as jazz music carries its past, so the characters bring their pasts with them. One might say that Toni Morrison lets her characters develop and improvise along with jazz music.

A Couple of Traces

Jazz's characters are situated in Harlem in the 1920's. Joe and Violet Trace have joined the many African Americans who left the poor conditions in the rural South and migrated to the big cities in the North. In the South, work was hard, wages low and blacks were still treated as slaves even though slavery had been abolished for about sixty years. Tales of racial equality, economic opportunity and personal freedom lured southern blacks to the North. However, conditions in the cities were not as ideal as in these tales.

Joe and Violet fall victim to their new environment. They follow "the steady stream" to the city (*Jazz* 33) in search of the "Promised Land." The City³⁸ is described as pulsating and full of music, and even before they arrive, Joe and Violet are dancing to its seductive beat: "The train shivered with them [...] and the trembling became the dancing under their feet" (30). The train metaphor suggests an emotional, as well as economic pull towards the city. The train is a symbol of progress and the industrialization, which again is connected to an economic lift for people in the city. Also, the steady beat of the train, the sound and trembling of it that feels almost like dancing to music to Joe and Violet, may represent the seductive call of desire also inherent in promises of the City. This is a call that especially Joe falls victim to because he does not know how to respond to it. I return to this in discussing his relationship to Dorcas.

Even though New York seems full of promise, Joe and Violet are deceived. Critic Denise Heinze suggests that the City is "paradoxically both an escape from oppression and an entrapment into private hells" (118) for them. But I think this is not so much caused by the City itself as it is by trauma inherent in the characters, trauma they have to resolve before they can be content with their new situation. The desire to escape their personal tragedies, which have left deep traces in them, is so intense that they fail to see that the movement in place and the promises of New York cannot erase memories of the past. The only thing this city seems to provide them at this point is distraction, not consolation. The Traces continue to drift further apart from both each other and their sense of self, while the internal traces of their pasts grow stronger.

³⁸ I use upper case here because that is what is used by the narrator in the novel, and which suggest that New York is more than a city in the text, it is almost its own character with human qualities.

Joe – The Blues Man

Just as jazz music is heavily marked by its past (work-songs, spirituals, blues), Joe Trace is equally marked by his. First he suffers from his mother's abandonment. Not knowing about his past, or his identity, provokes the feeling of incompleteness and he wanders inconsistently around in his own despair, seeking resolution from something he cannot define. On several occasions this leads him to act on impulse.

Considering the historical context, it is clear why this removal of a child from his or her mother would have damaging consequences. Children born on plantations or other slave-camps were considered the property of white patrons. They were taken away from their mothers and often sold to other slave owners or brought up in white households. Separation from their original and biological environment often caused a distorted consciousness. This is translated into Joe's experience of restlessness and despair.

A good example of Joe's despair is his affair with Dorcas Manfred and his eventual killing of her. I propose that this affair is triggered by the absence of a mother, and that Joe tries to fill this empty space by having a sexual relationship outside his, at this point, rather cold marriage. Joe's need for parental compensation is evident when Dorcas eventually rejects him. He begins to track her in the same way he tracks the traces of his mother, Wild. There are places in the text where the reader cannot be completely sure if he is searching for his mother, or Dorcas. For example, when one chapter, where Joe is in the woods looking for Wild, ends with: "But where is *she*?" and the following chapter, beginning with: "There she is" (184 - 187), refers to his search for Dorcas. When he eventually realizes that Dorcas cannot fill the emptiness in his life, he eliminates her. Perhaps he does not want to be abandoned once more, or perhaps he just wants to erase her, like he wants to erase Wild from his memory. Whatever his motive, Joe's involvement with Dorcas is a distortion in his search for self and the coming to terms with his past.

The narrator, however, blames the City for Joe's obsession with Dorcas: "Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record, Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you... You can't get off the track the City lays for you" (120). This is an accurate description of Joe's situation, dominated by the obsessive hunt for his mother. The spinning describes his growing confusion in the City. The City complicates his search in providing more scenery for him to

cover, and leads him farther from Wild than before. The narrator may feel that the tempting groove of the City has “tricked” him and guided him too quickly in the wrong direction, and until he confronts his past, the jazz of the City will continue to “spin” him and he will find neither resolution nor love that is not possessive or destined to disappoint.

Reconciliation involves remembering, and Joe’s dilemma is problematic since he does not remember his mother. All he knows is that she “disappeared without a trace” (124). His failure in reconciling with the past, as the tragic consequences of his affair with Dorcas show, causes him to succumb to the temptations of the city which he thinks provides him with “a measure of autonomy and self-worth” (Heinze 120). Thus, he falls victim to the fallacy of his own freedom.

Since Joe’s and Dorcas’ relationship is sexual, this issue also has an oedipal dimension to it. Joe believes he has to “return” to his mother in order to regain his male potency. Because his search for Wild “transforms” into a sexual relationship, his view of mother may be seen as erotic. But, as Barbara Hill Rigney points out, even though the issue of returning to the mother is often related to castration, death and oblivion in Morrison’s novels, it is also connected to enlightenment, revelation and transcendence (94). Similarly Joe experiences some kind of revelation after having eliminated Dorcas and Wild from his life. He returns to his wife and begins what seems to be a healthier and more stable existence.

Re-memory and Identity

If Morrison’s characters are developed and improvised along with music itself, this too is part of the historical context. One example is Joe, whose journey takes him from the blues tradition of the south and into the jazz tradition of the northern cities. (I will expand on this later.) In several of Morrison’s novels she seems to suggest that the sufferings of the black people may be eased, and even healed, by recognizing and remembering their African American heritage. Remembering is the first step in a healing process which relates in a broad sense to her character palette. Joe is the “Blues man” in the novel. Blues is at the center of the jazz tradition and both musical branches are firmly rooted in the African American oral tradition. Joe’s story, like the blues expression, has deep personal and emotional qualities. He

lacks something essential in his life which causes him to feel uneasy and restless without being able to pinpoint what he is seeking or why he is unhappy.

Joe has a fundamental need for something or someone who can secure his identity. Even though he lives in the midst of the jazz age in the city, he is still stuck in the blues past. He is characterized as the “Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man [...] Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man” (119). His only association with being black is the suffering, a state of mind which again distracts him from seeing the positive and creative aspects of blackness. Joe has not been brought up to see the African American heritage as a source of strength, still, perhaps unconsciously, he turns to black tradition (in improvising upon, and transforming his life) in order to restore a sense of self. Although Joe has been raised outside his biological environment, the memory of this identity is still within him.

Transformation of Culture and Identity

Some critics argue that music solves the problem of pain that is irresolvable through other methods. As noted in the first chapter, blues is the perfect idiom for articulating personal feelings. The contents and general mood of blues and jazz is, as mentioned, colored by personal tragedies, but also by hope for change. The blues follows and improvises upon the slave song, and similarly, jazz follows and improvises upon the blues. This transformation is evident in Morrison’s characters. Paul D in *Beloved* moves into the blues tradition after having accepted his past and transformed his experiences as a slave to fit his new reality and environment. In *Jazz*, after having killed Dorcas and thereby being released from his obsession with Wild, Joe improvises upon the blues of his past and enters the jazz of his future. In other words, he has to recognize and redesign his past, and in this process, add it to his future. Pieces of the past within a person’s identity are always present and recognizable, just as we will always recognize elements of the slave song in blues, and of the blues in jazz music.

Both blues and jazz may be categorized as “freedom music.” As jazz was emerging in the 1920’s, its musical form seemed to promise African Americans greater freedom of expression, both personally and artistically (Levine 439). Morrison comments: “My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African American woman writer in my

genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized worlds.”³⁹ This may be one important reason why she includes African American “freedom music” in her works to the extent she does. Her characters are placed in such genderized, sexualized and racialized environments, and through these characters she might express a wish to free her people from this entrapping situation. Joe’s search for freedom may symbolize Morrison’s longing for the African American people to be free from the legacy of slavery.

It seems that all *Jazz*’s characters are more confused and farther from their roots than some of Morrison’s earlier characters (for example in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*). Removed from their original environment, they are disillusioned by the promises of a better life and are struggling with their past, present and future identities. However, it seems that jazz music is an appropriate medium for their needs, being the music of the future. They need transformation to free themselves from the past, and jazz is all about transformation.

Also, the characters in *Jazz* seem to expect too much comfort in the city. For them the city is a utopia where no problems or struggles exist. Joe expects a new start, even though it turns out differently than he may have imagined. He has not defined what changes he expects, but one might be freedom to make his own choices in life. After all, it was Violet who “had chosen Joe and refused to go back home once she’d seen him taking shape in early light” (23). This may explain why he rushes into choosing a young lover and a career that involves smooth-talking women. The characters’ expectancy may be an indication of the need to want something they have not been able to imagine before, since slavery expected and took much from them.

Joe’s Fragmented Identity and the Healing and Transforming Qualities of Music

As opposed to the seductive music of the city, Joe discovers another kind of music when he searches for Wild in the woods: “the music the world makes.” Joe is startled by “what he first believed was some combination of running water and wind in high trees” (176). The sound of nature is far more soothing and completely different from the intense and pulsating sound of the urban city. It

³⁹ Quoted in Heinze (183).

[...] hypnotizes mammals. Bucks raise their head and gophers freeze. Attentive woodsmen smile and close their eyes. Joe thought that was it, and simply listened with pleasure until a word or two seemed to glide into the sound. Knowing the music the world makes has no words, he stood rock still and scanned his surroundings (176-177).

However, the harmony Joe feels for one short moment is interrupted by the urge to find his mother. He can almost feel her presence. Wild, like his surroundings in the woods, is not socialized. She is more a “force of nature” as Missy Dehn Kubitschek notes (148) and that may be why Joe feels close to her in the woods. Also, we may see nature itself as ancestor, and Joe’s presence in it revives a sense of belonging. On the other hand, this scene emphasizes the impact of his past and the trauma it has caused him. Instead of embracing this feeling, creatively using the “voice” of nature to deal with his trauma, Joe continues to spin the same track of obsessive hunt for truth and knowledge convinced that the only way he may be healed is by unfolding the mystery of his origin. This section also emphasizes Joe’s need for individual choice and his confusion about how to develop a sense of agency. Joe’s inability to stop, listen to, and recognize, the message in the “jazz of nature,” is connected to his lack of identity. Since Joe does not know his *own* nature (his roots), he fails to recognize its fundamental importance. Both his inability to act at this point, and his relationship with Dorcas, indicate how his hunt conflicts with his ability to love. It almost seems as if he wishes to capture his mother like an animal. He wants to possess her more than to feel her love and love her back.

The fragmentation of Joe’s identity is emphasized by the seven transformations⁴⁰ he goes through in order to survive in an environment hostile to his color, as well as to produce a sense of agency. These transformations might be compared to both the historical musical development in African American tradition, from blues to jazz, as well as to a piece of jazz music which transforms itself through the improvisations of each musician. Morrison uses improvisation to create movement and emphasize development in both the text and the characters. As proposed above, Joe as a character is an improviser motivated by passion and one might say that his spontaneous and improvised actions, though morally wrong, become fundamentally important for his recovery. Due to these improvisations Joe, like Morrison’s other characters, eventually has the opportunity to find freedom from his past.

⁴⁰The first change was him naming himself, and the last was killing Dorcas.

Some of the purposes of black traditional music are to secure the identity of African Americans, give them a form of expression to replace the language that was denied them during slavery, offer them consolation in the apparent hopelessness of their situation and unite them as people. As long as Joe disregards this or does not listen to his heart (where blues comes from and his identity lies) rather than seeking answers elsewhere, he will not be able to overcome his trauma.

Music is part of the characters' identity, whether they are aware of it or not. Metaphorically speaking, Joe has to overcome the "blues" of his past and enter the "jazz" of his future. As I touched upon earlier, Paul D. in *Beloved* faces a similar dilemma. In order to develop, he too has to leave his past and the work-song of the slave camp and enter the world of blues and freedom. Blues follows and improvises upon spirituals and work-songs, just as jazz follows and improvises upon blues. *Jazz* is the second novel in a trilogy where Morrison wishes to tell the story of black people passing through their American experience, from slavery and to the present (Carmean 100).⁴¹ *Jazz* begins where *Beloved* ends, and Joe's story begins where Paul D's left off, a development which implies a similarity to the movement from the work-songs and spirituals into the blues and then jazz.

Golden Gray and the Problem of Blackness

Another character confused by his identity, but in a slightly different way than the other characters in *Jazz*, is Golden Gray who learns at eighteen that he is of mixed race. He becomes traumatized by the knowledge of his ancestry, rather than by its absence. His mother, Vera Louise, has been hiding the truth about his origin his whole life, letting him believe that he is white. His upbringing has made Golden Gray spoiled and self-centred and taught him to consider black people as something to possess alongside fancy clothes and other "white" advantages. Caroline Brown suggests that because Golden Gray is of mixed race, both black and white, he feels "unable to go forward or back."⁴² In the same manner as the other characters he feels trapped in the present. He cannot face the future or the past. The new knowledge of who he is seems to frighten him severely. He is used to seeing blacks (such as

⁴¹ Morrison intended to write a three-part novel, but her writing developed into three separate novels: *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

⁴² *Jazz* (162). Quoted in Brown's "Golden Gray and the Talking Book..."

True Belle) as inferior beings who is supposed to tend to his needs, and who are not worthy of his respect. Being something he has looked down upon as long as he can remember seems to be difficult for him, and the only solution he can think of is destroying the source of his blackness, his father.

Golden goes on a search for his father, Henry Lestory or Hunter's Hunter, with intention to kill him for degrading him and his mother and: "[...] to insult not his father but his race" (*Jazz* 143). His search relates to Joe's since they are both seeking to eliminate what they believe is the cause of their trauma. However, Golden Gray is interrupted by a black, naked and pregnant woman (Wild) in the woods. This woman becomes a burden to him, just like his own blackness. Her black naked body is as unappealing to him as the idea of coming to terms with his own African heritage. When she knocks herself out he does not want to help her, but something drives him to it anyway. This act forces him to face his black ancestry, even though he is reluctant to do so. It is not quite clear if Golden finds resolution or not, but the narrator's sudden change of perspective, seeing Golden and his situation in a different, more understanding way, as well as the fact that he is not able to kill when he finally faces his father, indicate that there is room for transformation. Morrison makes use of musical imagery to suggest that there is room for recovery. The section where Golden compares the absence of a father to having lost one arm also emphasizes that he believes searching for the past may heal wounds:

I will locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement. Perhaps then the arm will no longer be a phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade. Amen (159).

This kind of imagery is not found earlier in the story about Golden, maybe because he was then unaware of his heritage, as well as reluctant to find peace with the truth about his origin. It seems that, when faced with his darkest issues, he instinctively finds a way to resolve his dilemma through music, which now is a part of his ancestry. One might say that the search for his father ended with Golden finding himself.

Violent Violet

In the beginning of *Jazz*, Violet has similar hopes and dreams for their new life as her husband Joe. But while Joe only wishes for a new start for himself, it seems that she longs for a new start for herself that includes Joe, even though she acts rather egotistical. Violet becomes more introverted and fragmented after they migrate north. She used to be a “snappy, determined girl and a hard-working young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician” (23) but changes dramatically after the move. Violet is tormented and acts out in several ways. Her desperate longing for a baby (which may be symbolic of the longing for a new beginning) causes her to sleep with dolls and, at one point, to steal a baby off the streets. Her inability to express herself to Joe is evident in the way she becomes more and more silent and in how she only talks to her birds, from whom she gets the reply: “I love you” (24). In consequence, Joe eventually disappears more or less out of her life and into the arms of another woman. Violet’s behavior appears increasingly irrational. When she learns about Joe’s affair she shows up at Dorcas’s wake with a knife and begins cutting the face of the young girl’s corpse. After this incident, she is referred to as “Violent” by herself and others.

There are several other reasons for Violet’s behavior. She is a split person unable to define herself. Violet’s childhood is, like Joe’s (and Golden’s), marked by abandonment and uncertainty about race. When Violet’s father leaves the family, her mother, Rose Dear, is no longer able to care for the children by herself. Violet’s grandmother True Belle comes to the rescue. This elder woman is, according to the image of a traditional African mother, more capable of nurturing the family, but she is not able to prevent Rose’s suicide. However well-intentioned her nurturing is, True Belle is colored by her close relation to the white family she has been working for. She tells Violet, and her siblings, stories about the perfection of Golden Gray, the mulatto child of Vera Louise Gray for whom she worked, and therefore they, too, learn to see light skin as the ideal. As for anybody who is taught to believe that they are inferior to other people, Violet’s identity loses substance and eventually is torn into pieces that will prove hard to put back together.

Violet and Alice - Healing through Sisterhood

Violet's self-awareness becomes seriously damaged after the disfiguring of Dorcas' corpse. In order for her to restore herself she turns to another woman. As mentioned earlier, black women may be as much a source of strength to each other as to their families. This seems to be what Morrison wants to emphasize in Violet's visits to Alice Manfred, Dorcas' aunt and guardian. In order to find answers to why she is so uncomfortable in an environment that previously seemed to promise a simple and comfortable life, she seeks resolution, and maybe guidance, in another African American woman. Morrison emphasizes just how strong the bonds between black women are with this unusual friendship between Alice and Violet.

Dorcas' death allows Violet and Alice to slowly develop a relationship that eventually will free them from their frustrations and allow them to recover some sense of stability and joy. Alice realizes her own violent potential when hearing Violet's story. "[...] What came flooding back to her now – was also true: every day and every night for seven months she, Alice Manfred, was starving for blood" (86), and Violet learns a valuable lesson of loving what she already has: "'You want a real thing?' asked Alice. 'I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it'" (112). Together the two middle-aged women learn to laugh again, something Violet had not remembered how to do since True Belle came back into their lives. She remembers: "[...] that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears" (113). Laughter has a more complex function than tears, in that it can, in all cultures, be the expression of much more than joy and happiness. To the contrary, relief, love and even fright and nervousness can bring out laughter in every one of us. One can either suppress painful feelings with laughter or even use humor creatively to deal with these emotions. It takes strength to be able to laugh at things that are tragic. It is a matter of improvising with one feeling and transforming it into another. And maybe, if you gain enough strength to do this, you can sustain more pain. This manner of improvising is recognizable in jazz music as well, where the musician puts his own feeling and creativity into an already existing piece.

For Morrison's characters, laughter is a valuable improvisational tool in their struggle to survive life's difficulties. By regaining laughter Violet and Alice also regain their voices. The two women transform their anger and frustration into more positive and less destructive feelings. This is exactly what blues and jazz do. Music provides difficult feelings with voice

and sound that transform them, without denying or forgetting. Having a voice and being able to use it produces a sense of relief. This related to what I have said about the functions of the slave song and the blues. At this point, when Violet thinks about what she did in her state of insanity, she “[...] laughed till she coughed and Alice had to make them a cup of settling tea” (114). Thus, she develops insight and a stronger sense of self through her conversations with Alice. She moves away from “*that* Violet” and now refers to herself as “me” (209).

Alice too, changes through her talks with Violet. She abandons her self-righteousness and regrets trying to control Dorcas’ sexuality. (Eventually she might feel ready to recover her own sexuality as well.) Morrison might suggest that if Alice, like Violet, could recognize her own potential for violence, which is the “other” in her, maybe her readers, no matter what race, can also see what we all have in common. Violet explains to Felice (Dorcas’ best friend) that her healing involved some insanity. To get rid of her “other” (Violent) she had to improvise. She says she “Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her.” The only thing left then is “Me,” or what she defines as her true identity (209). This might be compared to Joe’s moment of insanity. He kills the memory of his mother by shooting what he has replaced her with, Dorcas. At the same time he kills his “other,” which is his fragmented identity. The result is that he is only left with one identifiable part of himself.

The relationship between Violet and Alice relates to larger human needs. The storytelling and gossip, the laughter and crying between the two are indicative of their realization of this basic need. These elements are also important in the collective sharing that secures the racial memory for individual and community.

Both women contribute in making each other’s painful stories surface so that they may be confronted. As Morrison has said, the past keeps coming back in other forms, until you confront it.⁴³ In this statement she explains the dilemma of most of her characters. The answer for Alice and Violet is female friendship. Through the process of communicating, these two women are able to define their traumas and in turn move towards a healing of their fragmented selves. Their role is specific to black culture, but may also show a potential for all humans if we are willing to develop it.

⁴³ From Caldwell (241). Also quoted on page 44 of this thesis.

Feminine Potential

Nevertheless, Morrison emphasizes the specific ways in which African American women are bound together in their ethnic heritage and have historically relied on each other for support. As mentioned, female bonds run deep, beyond biological (meaning relationships between biological family members) and spousal relationships. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos argues that such bonds seem to underlie the progression of women from one life stage to another. When these women acknowledge their love for each other, affirmation and loss chime together (*New Dimensions*... 162). Female households in *Song of Solomon* (Pilate, Reba and Hagar) and *Beloved* (Sethe, Denver and Beloved) are good examples of the importance of female bonding. The household in *Song of Solomon* contrasts the home of the Deads where the women, especially Ruth, are repressed by the man of the house, Macon Dead. Pilate's household is affectionate and nurturing and the three women have "substance and sustenance" (*New Dimensions*... 111). Because they are (almost) removed from males they are able to awaken their female potential (unlike Ruth). In this household Milkman finds a stable environment where his identity can develop and his linkage to the feminine also gives him right to the family voice. The unity and communication between black women bring out a feeling of relief that is crucial for maintaining the mental and physical health of both individual and community.

More on Alice

Before her encounter with Violet, Alice Manfred is a rather emotionally repressed woman who fears the sexual energies of the City. This is seemingly caused by concealed anger towards her husband's infidelity and the sexual fear her parents conveyed to her. Alice blames the music of the City for her anger, as well as Dorcas' disobedience: "It was the music. The dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild [...] It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law" (58). What Alice hates most about jazz is "its appetite" (59) which might reflect her anger towards her husband's appetite for other women.

Alice's hurt and trauma is emphasized by the image of drums "underneath" (60). In contrast, Paul D in *Beloved* might have the complete opposite association to drums because they, and the work song, were almost symbolic of his survival under slavery. The reason for this might be that Paul D, living in the rural South, is more closely connected to ancestors and music than Alice, confused as she is by the distractions of the city. Much like Joe and Violet, she seems to expect too much comfort, and that is why the sounds of the city-life bother her so much. Paul D and his fellow slaves creatively uses the slave song to get through the harshness their experiences, while Alice believes that it is the music itself that creates the uneasiness in her. She does not recognize the call of her traditional cultural heritage.

Drums have negative associations in Dorcas' inner life, as they do in Alice's. Since the sound of drums is connected to, and a reminder of, the riots that killed her parents (the St. Louis race riot of 1917). However, they may also symbolize "a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete" (60). According to Andrew Scheiber, this "something" is "the call of desire, an impulse toward self-immolation that Dorcas carries within herself as the traumatic legacy of racial violence." It is the type of destructive pumping desire Alice fears, and which lures and tempts Dorcas to be impulsive and drives her into Joe's arms.

Drums accompany jazz as pain accompanies the black experience. Thus, the pain these characters feel also, paradoxically, reminds them that that they have survived their difficult experiences.

Dilemmas of Female Identity

Alice raises Dorcas after the tragedy of the riots. She tries to control the girl by bringing her up with strict moral boundaries in what she considers a wicked and sinful society. Alice's strictness might also be a way of controlling her own fears and sadness about the death of Dorcas' parents. She "[...] had worked hard to privatize her niece, but she was no match for a City seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day. 'Come,' it said. 'Come and do wrong'" (*Jazz* 67). Instead of listening to this music and letting it heal her pain and fear, Alice is determined to shut it out, and is constantly blaming it for her troubles. This is part of her problem. She doesn't know how to improvise upon her life because she is too caught up in her own conformed principles. Her fear of the temptations in the midst of the

Jazz Age, as well as her own experiences, influence her upbringing of Dorcas, as she keeps trying to protect the young girl from them. However, she fails when she welcomes Joe into her apartment. It is easy to understand Alice's mistake considering Joe's charming salesman tricks, sweet-talking the women into buying his merchandise and convincing them that he is trustworthy. Like any teenager, Dorcas is probably more tempted to disobey Alice's moral demands, and her involvement with Joe could be a result of wanting to both make fun of and reject her aunt's old-fashioned beliefs.

In some ways, Dorcas may be compared to Rose Dear. Just as Dorcas was deprived of her parents because of racial violence, likewise Rose lost her husband. They are both vulnerable souls seeking some kind of replacement for their losses. Even if some critics say that Dorcas' interest in Joe is shallow (Kubitschek 150), I think that there is more substance to this interest than first apparent. It is possible that she is seeking a father figure in him, just as he seeks a replacement for a mother in her. Both Rose Dear and Dorcas have lost identities they are never able to restore. Whereas Rose throws herself down a well in order to escape her misery, Dorcas allows Acton, her new romantic interest, to define who she should be. Never able to establish a healthy self-awareness, Dorcas lets herself die when she is shot by Joe, saying: "Don't let them call nobody...No ambulance; no police, no nobody" (209).

Dorcas receives almost no nurturing or guidance, her parents being dead and her aunt too afraid and overprotecting to nurture and tend to her real needs. Dorcas' situation reflects that of Hagar in *Song of Solomon* who is also well protected in the household of Pilate. This overprotection may be the indirect reason for her obsession with Milkman, as well as her suicide. Like Dorcas' aunt, Pilate and Reba fail to tend to Hagar's needs because they do not recognize them:

Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her – and the humor with which to live it (307).

It could be that Hagar's world becomes too small for her to grow in, with only two women to guide her when she needs a "chorus." Pilate somehow fails to see that her granddaughter needs a voice of her own, just as much as Milkman, who is Pilate's primary focus at this

point. Pilate might have taken for granted that Hagar, having grown up in a female household, should have absorbed the creativity and spirituality that were there all along. Dorcas' and Alice's relationship is somewhat different in Alice being overprotective, while Pilate ignores Hagar. However, the results are similar.

Evidence of Humanity

Because the characters in *Jazz*, such as the narrator, Joe and Violet, are generally more ordinary and less heroic than characters in Morrison's other novels, readers might recognize the same characteristics in themselves. We recognize their daily struggles, failures and personal victories as similar to our own, whereas we see our ideal selves in the more spiritual characters, such as Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Baby Suggs in *Beloved*. However, this recognition seems to complicate the lines between good and evil. The readers have to trust their own judgment about what is considered good and what is evil. The killing of Dorcas is probably difficult to categorize as "good", but its outcome seems to have enabled the two characters involved to develop and in this sense it might be considered "good". For Dorcas, it means that in her desire for self-sacrifice (as Scheiber proposes), she also escapes the shallowness of her surroundings (as exemplified by the party and her relationship to Acton). For Joe, it means that he finally finds some kind of resolution for the loss of his mother, and in turn is reunited with his wife.

Also, the result of Violet's disfiguring is positive in that it leads her to make friends with Alice, a friendship that also provides Alice with support. It is made clearer in this novel that human beings are never purely good or plainly evil than in any of Morrison's earlier work. Rather, she portrays confused characters in a world that is not simply black and white. She might be stating that one should not, like the narrator, jump to conclusions about people or their actions before knowing their whole story. Nor are the categories of "good and evil" enough to explain actions. It might be more productive to think in terms of the different uses of power to support or weaken life, because the forces of what seem like good and evil keep changing, like jazz. We might say that Morrison here establishes a textual connection to music through theme and variation.

The Female Power as Ancestor

As established, Morrison's women are portrayed as much more than inferior in terms of race and gender. Even though black women have suffered both because they are black and because they are female, she emphasizes the enormous effort they put into their community and how much their female creativity contribute to the survival of others and themselves. Through her female characters, Morrison shows the importance of linkage and maintaining connection in the midst of a destructive white culture. Ancestral figures are especially important in emphasizing the role of women. One example is Pilate in *Song of Solomon* who reflects and enlarges tradition. Pilate's responsibility is to assure the legacy of her clan through nurture. The love and spirituality she possesses eventually ensures Milkman's survival. She grants him a voice and urges him to use it. Being a singer of song, the bearer of tradition, she has the power to hand this ability down to her children, giving them an important survival tool.

Most importantly in this connection is that Pilate surrounds herself with music. As Macon passes the house one night, he hears the women sing and is drawn to it. "They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on...pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet" (29). The singing makes him remember things about his childhood, as well as feeling "the irritability of the day drain from him" (29). Macon feels himself "softening under the weight of memory and music" (30), which emphasize the healing qualities of Pilate's music as well as its connection to his roots.

It is harder to find a woman of Pilate's calibre in *Jazz*. But the nurturing qualities of a mother are found in True Belle and eventually in Violet as well when Felice enters her and Joe's life. In realizing True Belle's mistakes, Violet is able to teach Felice to avoid similar influences in her life, and thus establish a stronger sense of self. This relates to what I discussed earlier about the characters in *Jazz* being ordinary people instead of sacralized images. They need jazz to connect them to their selves and their ancestors, while the characters in *Song of Solomon* are closer to ancestors in both time and place. There is music present in the city. The problem is that the characters in *Jazz* are too distracted to listen.

Conclusion

Morrison's characters work their way toward healing by creatively using principles and values in African American tradition (transformation through improvising upon the past). Focusing on the part traditional music plays in this defining and healing process has proved productive in analyzing several of the central characters. The novel tells us about their quest for voice and identity, which resemble the quest that African Americans have been on for decades. Further, this focus helps me to confirm the importance of music in the construction of the novel.

In these characters dialogues/monologues, their behaviour and actions, call-and-response, repetition and variation, improvisation etc. is expressed. All these elements are also part of Morrison's structural technique, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

Music and Text: Structural Connections

Both literature and music need to be constructed in a certain way to appear progressive and rhythmic and in order to keep the audience's attention at all times. By looking at the formal and structural elements of jazz music and *Jazz*, as well as Morrison's "musical" imagery, I will explore the structural connections between these two artistic forms. Both structure and imagery in the novel resemble jazz music in several ways and serve a variety of purposes. Even though the musical connection to characters is prominent in several of her novels, it seems that Morrison is more sophisticated in her use of music in narrative structure and imagery in *Jazz* than in her earlier work.

Chapter Structure – Variation and Improvisation

Several of the structural elements and images I will discuss in this chapter integrate more or less in the creation of musical and textual movement. Music demands a certain beat to keep moving forward, and by transferring the beat-principle into her novels, as well as improvising upon standard textual structure, Morrison revives black musical tradition.

In *Jazz*, the chapter structure is equally important for the movement of the story. What strikes me about Morrison's "chapters" is that she seems to be avoiding breaks or full stops between them. Breaks (if any at all) are simply put there in order for a new solo, of another voice to take place. This assimilates musical movement and tension. As with jazz music, allowing longer breaks in the middle of a piece may fracture it. Avoiding them, however, will create continuation as well as wholeness. However, the "breaks" or "cuts" that Kouwenhoven and Snead discuss are part of the polyrhythm of jazz and different from the breaks I refer to here. They serve to strengthen the rhythm of jazz instead of dissolving it. The first sentence of each chapter in *Jazz* continues where the last sentence in the previous left off. The plot, however, may shift in time and place or allow another voice/instrument to continue. One example, which I also mentioned in connection to characterization, is when Joe Trace is

searching for his mother in the woods.⁴⁴ The shift in time and place from one chapter to another appears so smooth and swift that the audience, even though probably challenged by this, will move along into the rhythm of the “new” story. Also, due to the jump from past to present, this sequence with Joe appears as a shift from a dream-sequence-like memory and into reality, or maybe as a shift from the slow blues beat of his past, into the fast, unpredictable rhythm of improvisational city jazz. Another similar interpretation is that the shift from Wild to Dorcas is also a shift from nature to city. Ron David points out that “blues is country music and jazz is city music [...] Blues is individual music, jazz is ensemble” (148), and considering this, it is possible to compare the development in Joe’s character to the musical development from blues to jazz, as I did in the previous chapter. The various interpretations of this single shift between chapters, supports my argument that Morrison takes the musical structure a bit further than in her earlier novels.

As exemplified above, the chapter structure in *Jazz* takes us on a journey through musical history. We accompany Joe in his movement from blues to jazz. Thus, Morrison’s chapter structure moves both readers and characters in time and place, in the fiction itself and in history. One might also say that she mirrors the migration of blacks from the South to the North, and how they managed to adjust to the new society.

Morrison’s Narrative as Historical and Musical Document

Jazz offers insight into an important period in African American history, the Harlem Renaissance. The title of the novel embodies both the structure and the significance of jazz music as an expression of black experience. The novel resembles a musical piece in which various voices work together to produce a lament for a past. The structural shape of Morrison’s novels is a manipulation of narrative time in which she replaces linear progression with a series of moments in which past, present and future exist together.

Gurleen Grewal writes:

Jazz, like the music it is named for, is a complex emotional and cognitive performance aimed to at the collective heart of its

⁴⁴ At the end of this chapter Joe asks: “But where is *she*?” (184). The following chapter begins with: “There she is” (187), but this sentence refers to his young mistress, Dorcas, instead of his mother.

audience. It is narrated from the site of trauma – the place of the stuck record. But in order to release the present grip of the past, the characters and the reader are compelled to collectively audition the dissonance, to acknowledge the past (119).

The purpose of jazz, then, is to offer consolation for individual and collective trauma. Birch writes that music speaks simultaneously of the passion, tragedy and hopes in Harlem life and is a therapeutic release for blacks into a beauty, which is their own (190). She also says that in listening to the language and the stories of her people, Morrison also hears the music into which her ancestors had “poured their souls” (188). Music is often indicative of emotional states and is therefore woven into both content and structure of her fiction.⁴⁵ She adds that in *Jazz*, Toni Morrison [and her narrator] “questions the adequacy of language alone to conjure up the past of those long dead, and bows to the power of music as metaphor for their lives” (189-190).

Folktales and Imagery in *Jazz*

Richard Wright notes that through folklore molded out of the inhuman conditions of life, black men and women achieved their most indigenous and complete expression. “Blues, spirituals and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth [...and] formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed” (84).

Music and folktales are both closely connected to the oral tradition and serve many of the same purposes. Often the two interweave, and this is evident in Morrison’s use of imagery.

In Morrison’s novels, folktales are often connected to the images of freedom, recalling home, and the quest for cultural identity. Her use of flight motives, evident in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, are often connected to folklore. In *Jazz*, Violet sets her birds free “to freeze or fly” after the incident at the wake (3), and act which might be indicative of a change in her character. Violet’s improvising, the dismembering of Dorcas and the symbolic freeing of the birds seems to be her way of “recalling home,” both in the sense that she restores the home of

⁴⁵ In *The Bluest Eye* music is a sign of family happiness. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate Dead brings music and identity into Milkman’s life, thus enabling his survival. In *Beloved* music is woven into a narrative fabric (Birch 188-189).

her and Joe, and that she returns to her former self. This notion is strengthened by the liberating feeling her actions produce, and the following visits to a fellow black female.

“People Who Could Fly” is a folktale that could be seen as the grounding for Morrison’s flight image. The tale is about slaves who are mistreated and exploited like animals by whites in slave camps. A young African witch doctor, carrying with him the secrets and powers of the generations of Africa, saves a pregnant slave woman from the beatings of slave masters by whispering a strange word in her ear. She is then able to leap into the air and fly. He repeats the word to the other slaves, and “[...] all of the Africans dropped their hoes, stretched out their arms, and flew away, back to their homes, back to Africa” (Lester, *Black Folktales* 152). The tale is probably supposed to give hope to all African Americans who need to believe that someday they will be released from the pain they have suffered due to slavery and racism. They need to believe in the last sentence of this folktale: “[...] we will all stretch out our arms and take to the air, leaving these blood-drenched fields of our misery behind” (152).

There is connection between Violet’s release of the birds and this folktale in how flight is connected to freedom. The birdcages may represent the entrapment of slavery. It does not matter if the birds freeze to death in the cold New York winter air or fly away to a better place as long as they are free. The folktale also tells us that many of the enslaved Africans tried to escape and walk back home. When they came to the ocean “they would walk into the water, and no one knows if they did walk to Africa through the water or if they drowned. It didn’t matter. At least they were no longer slaves” (148).

We find the same motifs in the traditional music embedded in Morrison’s novels. At the beginning of *Song of Solomon* a man (Robert Smith) leaps off a ceiling in an attempt to fly. As he throws himself into the air, Pilate sings:

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home... (6)*

The way in which the event transforms into traditional song gives us the feeling that it is the attempt in itself that it is important here, not if it is successful or not. Either way, it will mean release for him, like for the slaves in the folktale and for Violet’s birds. This is an example of Morrison transforming the apparently tragic in her writing. Another example is through the unlikely friendship between Alice and Violet. Her novels are, similar to blues and

jazz songs, as heartbreaking, as they are joyous and pleasing. The next section will be moving us from images in song, to music in images.

Jazz Images

In the second chapter of *Jazz* there are several images that serve the purpose of creating visual movement. One example is the train on which Joe and Violet arrive to New York: “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” (30). The train functions so well as an image in *Jazz* because the railroad is the very symbol of the progression and modernization of the twenties. A train in motion has tempo, it drives forward in its own steady beat and it does not make unnecessary breaks in between stations. All these characteristics resemble jazz music. Station-breaks are made simply to allow new “passengers” to take the place of others, like improvising musicians. The stations may also resemble “bridges” in popular music. In a musical piece a bridge may appear as a contrasting section, often set in a contrasting key to the original melody, which prepares for the return of the original material. The train stops at the station only to carry people from one destination to another, resembling music moving from the verse, to chorus and back again.

The City

Another image of movement that is introduced almost simultaneously with the train is the City. There are several additional reasons why the City functions so well as an image of movement. There is constant pulse and motion connected to the sound of the city. The day-and-nightlife, with the ever-present “humming” created by people and traffic, contributes to the movement image because the city never sleeps and its noise never stops, it simply changes into new beats at different hours of the day.

In *Jazz*, the City is described as almost a living creature. It dances, speaks, and grows along with its inhabitants:

They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for the first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back (32).

Before the visual movement of the train lets go, this new image of movement appears, merging with its pulse before it takes over. The interplay between the two creates an overwhelming opening similar to a musical piece, building up momentum. The train may function as an overture before the city-jazz takes over the leading role as well as the lives of Joe and Violet. "[...] the minute their leather of their soles hit the pavement – there was no turning around [...] they stayed to [...] hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did" (32-33). The Traces become the City's new audience, trying to mingle into the pace of other city people. The "love"-relationship between the City and its inhabitants might resemble that between jazz music/musicians and the audience. However, Joe and Violet, like many other blacks who migrated from the South, had other reasons as well for loving the City: "Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind" (33). What they left behind was the dehumanizing conditions blacks suffered under slavery, the racism and segregation that followed and most importantly, the memory of these experiences. "Like the others, they were country people, but how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever" (33). As they have left country life in the South behind, they have also left the sad and slow blues-life and entered the more progressive jazz-life that pervades the city. Moving into another stage involves change, be it in life or in musical history. Following the development from blues to jazz seems necessary for Joe and Violet if they are to survive in the city. To bring to life some of the promises of city, they have to develop as individuals. They have to change the beat of their lives and pick up the pace to become jazz-people.

Skyscrapers and Music

The New York skyline is dominated by the tall, upward-moving skyscrapers. Beneath them the city streets are moving in all directions, and these are streets packed with noisy and

impatient cars, and people are constantly moving back and forth on the pavement. The skyscraper, like the railroad, is a symbol of the progressive twenties. The invention of steel frames made it possible for buildings to grow higher and higher. Ann Douglas writes that the skyscrapers, as a part of the technological growth and national development at this point in time, expressed the nation's need for self-expression. She adds that these tall buildings became a "self-portrait in stone" (199). The same need for development is reflected in the music of the twenties. For jazz musicians this need was emphasized by an urge to find new expressions that complemented both the time and city life. As a consequence, jazz became increasingly faster and more progressive. It also involved a larger amount of musicians and instruments. Jazz was also, as opposed to the rather sad, personal and slow blues, supposed to bring the black community together and celebrate the "good life." The upward and outward extension of the big cities during the twenties, may resemble jazz's ramification into the many, and different, forms that exist today.

Considering Kouwenhoven's commentary about the Manhattan skyline, we see yet another resemblance between jazz music and big-city architecture:

[...] "the Manhattan skyline" is made up of almost innumerable buildings, each in competition [...] with all the others. Each goes its own way [...] in a carnival of rugged architectural individualism. And yet – as witness the universal feeling of exaltation and aspiration which the skyline as a whole evokes – out of this irrational, unplanned and often infuriating chaos, an unforeseen unity has evolved (125).

Similar to the skyscrapers, the individual musician in a jazz band goes his or her own way. They are more or less irrational in their improvisations, which at times might seem to create chaos instead of wholeness to a musical piece. But the individual improviser always manages to unify his "escapades" with the rest of the band, due to the steady beat functioning as his base as well as a springboard for improvisation. The expression of one single skyscraper also resembles jazz music since its construction, similar to the skyline, is a composition of "simple and infinitely repeatable units" (Kouwenhoven 127). Jazz is based on a pattern of repetition which holds the musical piece together and prevents it from turning into a complete chaos of improvisations. Kouwenhoven uses Louis Armstrong's words when explaining that the reason chaos does not occur, is due to each musician knowing "by ear and sheer musical instinct" when to leave the underlying beat and when to get back on it (128). The basic

construction is what makes music solid. It goes without saying that skyscrapers demand the same composition.

Call-and-Response in *Jazz*

Call-and-response provides for much of the basic rhythm in African American music. Since I have already discussed how it relates to the characters and their ancestors, I will mainly deal with call-and-response at two levels here: the author's (or musicians') way of addressing the audience and how the audience responds, and also Morrison's response to the call of her own or others' earlier texts.

Call-and-response is transferred into African American literature in several ways. We might say that by using this traditional pattern, Morrison is responding to her ancestors call by maintaining and developing black cultural traditions. Her work, then, becomes a call to the audience who may respond to it. Thus, relationships between text structure and characters, as well as between the narrator/text/author and the audience, are established. One example from *Jazz* is the unnamed narrator's call to her audience at the very end of the novel.⁴⁶ This call urges the reader to respond to the narrative with his or her own interpretations, since she realizes her own failure in doing so. The readers' hands are holding the text and are now, by this final call, free to evaluate the story for them selves. One may interpret what lies behind the written words. As Morrison puts it: "What is left out is as important as what is there" ("Rootedness..." 200).

By examining Morrison's texts, it is possible to find many examples where she responds to the call of her earlier novels. As I mentioned in connection to Signifying, characters seem to speak to each other between novels (Baby Suggs to Pilate, and Wild to Beloved). Also, the texts speak to other texts (*Beloved* to the slave narrative and *Jazz* to the hard-boiled crime novel). The relationship to one's past is another example of call-and-response between Morrison's texts. *Jazz*, the novel, seems to be strongly connected to the past on the level of character and historical context. As I discussed in the previous chapter, several of the characters have powerful connection and problematic memories of the past. The text as a

⁴⁶ "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (229)

whole (its structure and imagery) depends on its past, as jazz music depends on its roots, and communicates with it on several occasions. A relevant example is that *Jazz* responds to *Beloved*'s call to continue and develop the story that eventually will come together in a trilogy. *Jazz* improvises upon what is established in *Beloved*, and thus transforms alongside the musical tradition.

Repetition as Tradition

Since repetition is a structural device connected to both writing and music, it is reasonable to look at its historical aspects, and why its various functions and uses in black literature and music help to establish and maintain black cultural tradition.

Repetition pervades black culture, and is an established pattern in music, dance and rituals, in cyclic world view, and of course also in literature. James A. Snead argues at one point that repetition keeps cultural traditions alive in the present, especially in black culture (63). Maintenance of cultural traditions is important to prevent self-dissolution, loss of identity, assimilation and repression (64). As discussed in the first chapter, black culture was for some time viewed as “the ultimate otherness” and that this concept was created merely to show the counterpart of sophisticated Western culture. More importantly however, Snead discusses how repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in music, dance and language. He writes:

Repetitive words and rhythms have long been recognized as a focal constituent of African music and its American descendants — slave-songs, blues, spirituals and jazz. African music normally emphasizes dynamic rhythm, organizing melody within juxtaposed lines of beats grouped into different meters (215).

With regard to jazz as mode and as metaphor, we might say that without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, and without improvisation there would be no true jazz music. An improviser relies upon a recurring beat. Without it he or she would have no point to return to after improvising. Snead points out that in black culture repetition means circulation (69). We might see repetition, from a black cultural perspective, as a circle. No matter where you start out from, you will always return to the beginning in some

way. This is evident in *Jazz*'s characters. They return to the life they had before the City confused them. Joe returns to his wife. Violet leaves "Violent" behind and returns to herself, and thus, the text also return to where it began.

Morrison's Improvising Repetition

As mentioned in the first chapter, Snead says the polymetry of black music means that there are two or more rhythms going alongside the listener's own rhythm. Similarly, the storyline of *Jazz* jumps between characters and in time, although all are parts that together shape the same story, that of Joe and Violet. We have to keep in mind the stories that have been told, just like we have to constantly feel the ground-beat of jazz to be able to grasp the whole piece. Due to repetition of the central material this is made easier for us both as listeners and readers.

Snead also argues that repetition in black literature derives from the "musical" prototypes in the sense that "repetition of words and phrases, rather than being overlooked, is exploited as a structural and rhythmic principle" (217). Morrison reveals a repetitive "jazz" structure by shortly introducing the main event, the dominant note, of the entire novel on the very first page. The rest of the narrative repeats the basic material, but breaks it into different parts by adding solos and improvisations, such as various stories, voices, motifs, and as I touched upon, the story returns to the main event towards the end. The repeated material functions as the narrative's foundation. It is remembered throughout the story and serves as a takeoff-point for improvisation. The repeated rhythm and melody keeps those who improvise on track.

Repetition with Variation in Morrison's Novels

In the introduction to *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates writes that black writers "read, repeated, imitated, and revised each other's texts to a remarkable extent" but that "black formal repetition always repeats with a difference" (xxii). He adds that "Repetition and

revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use” (xxiv).

As touched upon earlier, Morrison does not only repeat and signify upon other black texts, such as the slave narrative, but also some of her earlier novels. In *Beloved*, she imagines a way in which the past may be rewritten. One example that critic John N. Duvall gives is Sethe being given another chance to re-evaluate her actions when the infant she killed resurrects. Duvall proposes that *Beloved* emphasizes the maternal body, while *Jazz* focuses on the erotic female body (134). Even though Duvall does not point it out, this repetition also resembles the development from blues to jazz, the maternal and safe turning into the sexual and seductive. K. Sumara suggests that the very title of the novel, *Jazz*, “reiterates the black folk nature of Morrison’s inspiration,” simply because as we go through the novel we find what separates the blues from jazz; “old age versus youth, sterility versus sex, and the swamps versus the gaudy hubub of city” (129).

There are other examples of repetition in the novels of Toni Morrison. Themes, such as re-memory and the search for identity, are repeated in most of her texts. In *Jazz* she writes: “[...] the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle” (220). She may be expressing here the gravity of what blacks have experienced in America, and how this has stuck with them through generations.

History Repeated

Morrison also repeats historical events in her writing. She developed *Beloved* from the story about Margaret Garner, a black woman who committed infanticide in order to prevent her children from being brought into slavery. The story of *Jazz* is built upon a photograph taken by the African American photographer, James Van Der Zee, and the manuscript built upon it by Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. The picture shows the corps of a young woman who was shot by her boyfriend at a party. When her friends asked who did it, she replied: “I’ll tell you tomorrow, yes, I’ll tell you tomorrow” (K. Sumara 128-129), then she died. One motif Morrison might have had for repeating these events in her works is that it is connected to memory, an issue at the core of most of her novels.

Repeated historical events, emphasizing the importance of remembering in the African American community, are also recurring elements in jazz and blues songs. One example is the song that became Billie Holiday's opening number, "Strange Fruit." The man behind the lyric, Abel Meeropol,⁴⁷ wrote this poem after having seen a photograph of two black males being lynched. This image haunted him and inspired the lyric which at one point was denounced as a prime piece of musical propaganda for the NAACP.⁴⁸ The rather grotesque lyric goes:

*Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eye and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁴⁹*

Signifying upon, and repeating historical events, as the examples from Morrison's writing and "Strange Fruit," shows how important it is to remember the horror of slavery and the injustice brought upon blacks throughout their American experience. Turning pain into something creative reflects the core of southern slave songs. As mentioned earlier, music became a way for slaves to articulate the pain they were not allowed to express otherwise. As mentioned earlier, in *Beloved*, Morrison describes this through Paul D's memories of being a slave. Deprived of language, they had to turn to other expressive forms, such as the slave song, to achieve this. Rewriting the past is a way of re-experiencing the pain of being black and an important element in the individual and collective healing of black people. This relates to what Le Goff said about memory saving the past so that it may serve the future, and explains the emphasis on memory in most of Morrison novels.

⁴⁷ Abel Meeropol is also known under the pseudonym Lewis Allan.

⁴⁸ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

⁴⁹ Lyric taken from *Spartacus Educational*.

Structural “Cuts”

Another structural element Snead mentions in connection to repetition is the repeated spontaneous “cuts,” or the unmotivated breaks or interruptions in black music. As noted earlier, such a “cut” in church and gospel music could be the segregations spontaneous “hallelujah-” or “amen-” call, and in jazz music it could be the “unexpectedness with which the soloist will depart from the ‘head’ or theme and from its normal harmonic sequence” (71). These unexpected interruptions are, however, expected in jazz music. Black music draws attention to its own repetitions through these “cuts,” but on the level of sound only. In *Jazz*, these “cuts” are represented by what Morrison refers to as “cracks.” Violet is described as having such spontaneous “cracks.” Her private cracks, says the narrator, are “Not openings or 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 [...] but she does not see herself doing these things” (22). One reason she cannot see herself doing these “everyday things” might be because they are simply too regular, and she is not. She improvises in a world where improvising is expected: “[...] 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” (23). Metaphorically, this could mean that the world is jazz and Violet is the musician trying to play along, and desperately trying to keep her attention so that she won’t fall into any of her own, or the worlds, “cracks.” After learning about her husband’s affair, Violet speaks less and less, and when she does, the words are usually “uh” or “have mercy” (24) which might be compared to the “cuts” in black music (and church) which Snead talks about. Discussing Violet’s “cracks” makes a good “bridge,” to use a musical expression, to the next section dealing with improvisation.

Improvisation

Because the issue of improvisation has reoccurred in this thesis I will only repeat a few things about this element that relates to structure.

In both music and literature improvisation brings change, originality and unpredictability to an already recognized and established structure. Due to improvisation, no jazz performance is identical, even when played by the same musician. The same may be said for our individual reading of a text, hardly no one interprets it in exactly the same way. Improvisation in *Jazz* is found at several levels: in the spontaneous actions of characters, in the author's/narrator's innovative construction of the text (structural patterns, fusion of styles, multiple voices etc.) and in the intersection of these two. The examples above show first the similarities between literary and musical improvisations and second that improvisation is an important structural element in Morrison's novels.

In contemporary fiction there is often a transforming factor present in order for development to occur, be it in plot, characterization or structure. Similarly, black music has developed and sprung into many and various genres throughout history because of transforming factors such as change in environment, new social situations, increasing popularity, etc. Also, a particular musical piece changes and develops into something new every single time it is being performed due to the individual signature musicians apply to it. This relates to *Jazz* in the manner which Morrison improvises in the construction of the story, as well as establishing a personal signature which is both recognizable and new at the same time. And, as discussed earlier, Morrison encourages the reader to do the same. She hands the story over to us, so that we too may become improvisers.

There are different ways to improvise. One is by playing out of own imagination and musical knowledge at the spot and inventing new musical effects. This is referred to as free improvisation. Musicians usually invent different variations, melodic, rhythmic or harmonic, out of a given framework. In *Jazz*, such variations are introduced by the unexpected, improvised actions of the characters and narrator, whose framework is the city.

In the previous chapter I mentioned that Morrison's characters seem to (consciously or not) creatively use music, as well as other parts of African American tradition, in the process of healing internal wounds. Music allows them to improvise, and through improvisation they may find new, different ways of living their lives. In turn, they are able to move away from the past that is haunting and destroying them. The originality of improvisation attracts and inspires us, in literature as in jazz, and the fact that we are allowed to improvise upon the text ourselves, completes the illusion of the author, text, narrator, characters and reader coming together and creating an ensemble.

Conclusion

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Morrison applies music into her narrative structure at a different degree in *Jazz* than her earlier novels. The structure reveals use of the blues- and jazz-genre in both form and theme. Her technique connects the text to an African American historical and cultural context, one being their extensive use of call-and-response and repetition.

The issue of movement seems to pervade this chapter because, in the same way as music, most of the structural elements and some of the images I have discussed here create an illusion of movement in the text.

The themes and use of imagery reinforce Morrison's concerns. Especially by her repetition of certain themes and images, such as the flight image and the (re-) memory theme, we as readers are reminded again and again of her concern for the freedom, in every possible meaning of the word, of her people. However, the prominent theme, in connection to this project, is the power of having a voice. In Morrison's emphasis on music and the oral tradition in her work, she contributes to the regaining of the individual and the collective voice of black Americans.

Conclusion

As this project comes to an end, I still consider it a work in progress, as jazz music is. I feel I have more to learn, other areas to cover and a considerable amount of novels and articles left to read and enjoy. This feeling makes it difficult to conclude this thesis. The process of restricting the area of focus has been demanding. It has also been a humbling experience to search the large amount of writing on Morrison, as well as other black women writers, and their common literary tradition.

Having had to go deeper into the history of black people and their American experience has moved me in several ways. The inhumanity they have faced saddens and frustrates me, their persistence and ability to survive inspires me, their music exhilarates me, and their writing combines all these feelings.

My first intention was to only deal with jazz music. But, as noted in the introduction, I quickly discovered that this was impossible, due to jazz's close connection to its predecessors. The same may be said for the contemporary novel. All "modern" cultural genres owe a great deal to their roots. Although I am grateful for this discovery, it still bothers me some that I am not able to cover more than I have. For instance, if I were to continue this project I would include other writers, such as Alice Walker, who is concerned with many of the same issues as Morrison. She, too, is inspired by black history and culture to a great extent. This engagement surfaces in her novel *The Color Purple*. I would also have liked to dig deeper into other branches of African American culture, such as dance and folktales.

As I mentioned in the introduction, what I have tried to cover in this thesis is *Jazz's* reflection of a black musical (oral) tradition, and to sum up I would like to put emphasis on the communication this establishes between African American (women) writers and readers from a variety of backgrounds. Music has the ability to unite musicians and their audiences, and in the same way it connects the author/text/narrator to readers in an extraordinary way. We can only speculate about Morrison's intentions in using music. One might ask if she thought it was a clever way to communicate to a wider audience. Or did she consider it a necessity to emphasize tradition in order to strengthen it, given her African American background and experiences. I believe it is both. A novel is a medium for the individual to

speak to the community, but Morrison is also, as a true jazz musician, the voice of the community. Morrison's novels are fictional documents of a reality that more people need to recognize. Another prominent issue in this thesis has been the struggle for voice, and in bringing music into her narrative, Morrison grants her people, and her audience, a voice which they are free to use as they like.

Morrison says, "There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated [...] and the job of recovery is ours."⁵⁰ By this she means that it is her responsibility, as a black writer, to summon and acknowledge those who preceded her in order to reclaim black identities. Morrison also makes it our responsibility as readers to reclaim a common human identity. Receiving the Nobel Prize has made Morrison's work more accessible, and has broadened her audience immensely. She speaks of issues that, although being closely connected to the African American experience, are recognizable to all of us at a common human level.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Davis (413)

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