

**“Blues man. Black and bluesman”: Blues Matrix and Toni Morrison’s Jazz
Signifyin(g) Revisions of the New Negro, *Home to Harlem*, *The Street*,
Corregidora, and Other Writings of the Harlem Renaissance in Jazz**

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Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man—Toni Morrison, *Jazz*.

Following *Beloved*’s focus on mother-love, I intended to examine couple-love--the reconfiguration of the “self” in such relationships; the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another. Romantic love seemed to me one of the fingerprints of the twenties, and jazz its engine--Toni Morrison, Foreword to *Jazz*.

The “Jazz criticism” of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* has mainly “focused on two aspects of her novel, narrative structure and language, in order to assess the aesthetic at work” (Grandt 305). Critics have concluded that Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* is a jazz text, albeit it may not be “strictly about speaking, about jazz” (304). Toni Morrison has herself revealed that the stories and voices that permeate *Jazz* via the unnamed narrator emulate “a jazz performance in which the musicians are on on stage,” rehearsing but aware that “the performance is open to change” (qtd in Grandt 304). While critics have noted cogently that *Jazz* is set during the Harlem Renaissance, they have overlooked the textual relations between *Jazz* and some writings produced during this period by the Harlem Renaissance writers. My aim in this essay is twofold: First, I focus on the Blues

Matrix (Houston Baker's term) and argue that in addition to being a jazz text in narrative structure and language, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is a blues text in theme and character. Not only are there references to blues throughout *Jazz*, but Joe Trace, Violet Trace, Dorcas, and even the unnamed narrator all embody elements of the blues. By shooting Dorcas, after trailing her through Harlem, which echoes Jake looking for Felice in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, Joe moves from a "black wholeness"—Dorcas fills his emptiness created by a wife (Violet) who sleeps with a doll—to a "black hole"—when Dorcas stops seeing him and goes to a dance party with Acton, a younger lover. Ironically, Joe becomes whole again through music, when he learns from Felice that Dorcas killed herself by refusing to both identify her attacker and go to the emergency room. More important, Felice informs Joe that he was the last thing on Dorcas's mind, "There's only one apple! Sounded like 'apple.' Just one. Tell Joe." (213)—a response to Joe in an earlier scene. At the end of *Jazz*, even the unnamed narrator is bluesy, claiming to have "an affection, a kind of sweettooth for [pain].Bolts of lightning, little rivulets of thunder. And I the eye of the storm. Mourning the split trees, hens starving on rooftops." The narrator delights in "aching words that set, then miss, the mark" (219). Overall, the characters in *Jazz* exude the elements of the blues which, according to Ralph Ellison, embody "the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness" (104). Not only are they lonely when they are not supposed to be--Violet and Joe--but their lives are perturbed by abandonment, disappointment, and racial prejudice. To use Ralph Ellison's words, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is a blues text that keeps "the painful details and episodes" of Joe's and Violet's "brutal experience[s] alive" in their "aching consciousness" (90).

Second, I focus on Toni Morrison's Jazz Signifyin(g) revisions of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926)—Joe Trace shoots Dorcas in 1926, and the latter is a leitmotif in the novel—and Zora Neale Hurston's short story "The Book of Harlem" and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (from Joe Starks to Joe Trace). There are also echoes of Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). To borrow from Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* "alters fundamentally the way we read" the Harlem Renaissance tradition "by defining the relation of the text at hand [*Jazz*] to the tradition." (124). Commenting on "the so-called Jazz Age" and some of its characteristics, especially invention-- "Improvisation, originality, change"--in her foreword to *Jazz*, Toni Morrison remarked that instead of being about these characteristics, *Jazz* "would seek to become them." (Kindle).

Romare Bearden's *Of the Blues* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

In *Jazz*, the blues is established on the cover (Plume/Penguin edition) through *At the Savoy*, a painting from Romare Bearden's *Of the Blues* series. In the painting, a black woman and a black man seem to be dancing in the air above the band--a piano in the left corner, a bass almost in the middle, and what looks like a guitar on the right--While the lady looks like a human, with braided hair combed backwards, arms stretched forward, albeit the right hand seems cut off, thin waist, and spread enough for the dance, the man looks monstrous--his left ear can barely be seen, and his right is almost cut off from above the knee, upper body bigger than the rest of the body--According to Brooklyn Museum, not only was music important to Romare Bearden's art, but Romare Bearden 'loved jazz' and partially drew "his method as a visual art" from "what he had learned from jazz musicians about improvisation. As in jazz, the

unpredictable repetitions and juxtapositions of shapes, textures, and colors in his art create startling, unexpected visual rhythms.” Furthermore, Bearden is quoted as saying that as an artist,

“You must become a blues singer—only you sing on the canvas. You *improvise*—you find the rhythm and catch it good, and structure as you go along—then the song is you. Music has always been important for me the way it has been important for many Blacks. Blacks have made their own sound, their own musical language like jazz. It is theirs and they identify with it. In a world of constantly changing identities, certain forms of music represent a solid identity for Blacks.”

All this applies to Morrison’s *Jazz* insofar as blues and jazz affect the characters, the mood, the structure, the narrative technique, and the language. Blues becomes the matrix through which all the contradictions or conflicts among Violet, Joe, and Dorcas on the one hand, and the narrator on the other, must be resolved.

According to Houston A. Baker, African American culture “finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix” or a womb, “a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network” (3-4). Conceived as code and force, the “blues, therefore, comprise a mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding” (6). For black individuals or characters to move from the black hole or from being “‘squeezed’ to zero volume” (145) or “encounter with the ‘zero image’” (152) to a black whole, the individuals must renew the desire to live and tap into mythic “images of experiences internalized by active black culture bearers” (153). It looks like only Violet and Joe are able to recover some kind of black wholeness (to the detriment of Dorcas), whereas the narrator’s fate remains indeterminate at the end of *Jazz*.

The Narrator Sings the Blues from a Hole

I have been teaching *Jazz* for almost each semester for the last fifteen years, and each semester my students cannot locate the vantage point from where the disguised I narrator tells the stories of the characters. Each semester I delight in being the only one who knows how the narrator gets his stories, “I ought to get out of this place. Avoid the window, leave the hole I cut through the door to get in lives instead of having one of my own. It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human. I missed the people altogether” (220). After reading the passage, I invite students to realize that they might have read the wrong stories, because the “I” narrator is not only spatially limited in its narration, but there is no way the narrator can know all characters’ stories by just peeping through a hole cut through the door or by looking at the window. This is unsettling, to say the least. Yet, this is Toni Morrison having the last laugh at classic novelistic traditions by expanding them through improvisation.

To appreciate the trickster blues narrator in *Jazz*, one may have to listen how Toni Morrison feels about storytelling and narrative techniques. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison reveals that in her fiction she aims at making “the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken--to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book--is what’s important. What is left out is as important as what is there” (59). In “The Site of Memory,” an essay which suddenly turns into a self-interview à la Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison specifically addresses the question of point of view,

As for point of view, there should be the illusion that it's the character's point of view, when in fact it isn't; it's really the narrator who is there but who doesn't make herself (in my case) known in that role. I like the feeling of *told* story, where you hear a voice but you can't identify it, and you think it's your own voice. It's a comfortable voice, and it's a guiding voice, and it's alarmed by the same things that the reader is alarmed by, and it doesn't know what's going to happen next either. So you have this sort of guide. But that guide can't have a personality; it can only have a sound, and you have to feel comfortable with this voice, and then this voice can easily abandon itself and reveal the interior dialogue of a character. So it's a combination of using the point of view of various characters but still retaining the power to slide in and out, provided that when I'm "out" the reader doesn't see little fingers pointing to what's in the text. (78)

In *Jazz*, the illusion that is the characters' point of view occurs in those moments usually called flashbacks, but since we are talking about a blues/jazz text, I simply call them solos. In these solos, characters tell their own stories before coming to the City. Sometimes, however, there seems to be a call and response between the characters and the narrator. For example, when the narrator wonders about Joe and speculates that things might have ended differently, if Joe had stopped trailing Dorcas throughout the City and told the affair to Stuck and Gistan, his friends, or a neighbor, there is a break after which Joe says, "It's not a thing you tell to another man. I know most men can't wait to tell each other what they got going on the side. Put all their business on the street" (121). Joe claims that Gistan would have laughed and tried not to listen to the story, whereas Stuck would have told him find "high john," because he has been hexed. Additionally, just as the narrator is alarmed by Joe's behavior and explanation thereof, so is the reader, wondering why an old man would trail an eighteen-year old young woman all over the

City. At the same time, it can be inferred that there are “little fingers pointing to what’s in the text.” As a matter of fact, the narrator sometimes sounds and functions like Chorus in Greek tragedy. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison talks about the “real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at large., commenting on the action as it goes ahead” (60).

As underscored by various Chorus-like commentaries on characters and by the last part of *Jazz*, not only does the guiding voice have a personality, but it seems to also have a gender. Indeed, the narrator acknowledges that she was wrong in assuming that the characters did know her, as they watched her all the time and tried to prove the stories told about them wrong,

And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew how little I could be counted on, how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them--and doing it seemed to me so fine--I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy. I thought I’d hidden myself so well as I watched them through windows and doors, took every opportunity I had to follow them, to gossip about and fill in their lives, and all the while they were watching me. Sometimes they even felt sorry for me and just thinking about their pity I want to die. (221).

What readers to do, upon learning that the narrator is so unreliable and so self-absorbed that she missed everything about the characters? While she assumed that Violet and Joe would kill each other, thus predictable, she was “the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only that mattered. I got so aroused while meddling, while finger-shaping, I overreached and missed the obvious” (220). Clearly, the narrator fails to realize that she was dealing with blues characters. In *Shadow & Act*, Ralph Ellison states that the

attraction of the blues “lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self” (104).

Regarding the narrator’s gender, the words and the tone of the lament (blues) used confirm that the “I” narrator is she, particularly in the last two paragraphs of *Jazz*, in which the narrator confesses that she envies Violet and Joe or other couples for publicly displaying their love. After describing how couples feel under the covers, the narrator says,

I envy them for their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it--to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all. *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer--that’s the kick.* (229).

By the time one is about to qualify what is said above a case of “my-baby’s-gone-from-me blues” (*Not Without Laughter* 103), one immediately learns that the “I” narrator has never had a lover, whom she has been waiting for all her life. Otherwise, she would tell her lover, “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). This is the ultimate blues moment.

“Blues man. Black and bluesman”: Joe’s Blues

In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison defines Blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger the jagged

grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (90). In the second sentence of the opening paragraph in *Jazz*, we learn that Joe Trace “fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” (3). In the second paragraph, Dorcas’s aunt decides not to tell the police, because crying all day “is as bad as jail” (4). This is repeated later in the novel when Violet complains that Joe thinks about Dorcas all the time, ““Nothing on his mind but her. Won’t work. Can’t sleep. Grieves all day, all night”” (15). Even before Joe shoots Dorcas, he is already in a bluesy situation, as Dorcas “both blesses his life and makes him wish he had never been born” (40). This predicament seems to echo the lyrics from Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue,” in which the blues man laments about an empty old bed and wishes he was dead. In *Jazz*, there is a scene where blind men are thrumming and humming while “old uncles” are playing a six-string guitar in the middle of the block. A singer sings a blues man’s song that almost resembles Armstrong’s song, “Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man./Everybody knows your name?/Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die/Man./Everybody knows your name. (119)

The narrator comments that Joe “probably thinks that the song is about him” (119). Roberta Rubenstein has suggested that the “peg leg” blues guitar man alludes to “the famous blues singer, Peg Leg” (2). Rubenstein is referring to the Country Blues singer Joshua Barnes Howell, also known as Joshua “Peg Leg” Howell. According to Terry Currier, Howell moved from Eaton, Georgia, to Atlanta in 1923 and played blues with other musicians, whose group later became “Peg Leg” Howell and His Gang. When the group took a break in 1925, Howell got involved in bootlegging and was sent to prison. “Columbia Records heard him playing on the streets and took him into the studio on November 8, 1926. He cut four sides including ‘New

Prison Blues” which he heard while serving time.” Thus, it is clear that Toni Morrison fictionalized a real blues moment in the life of a blues singer to capture Joe’s blues. As aforementioned, 1926 is repeated several times throughout *Jazz*. According to Toni Morrison, however, 1926 is also a tribute to her mother, who was twenty years old and her dad nineteen in 1926 and seemed to have inspired the music for *Jazz*, “Like the music that came to be known as Jazz, she took from everywhere, knew everything--gospel, classic, blues, hymns--and make it her own.” What is more, and like Joe and Violet, they “had both left the South as children, chock full of scary stories coupled with a curious nostalgia. They played the records, sand the songs, read the press, wore the clothes, spoke the language of the twenties; debating endlessly the status of the Negro.” (Foreword, Kindle).

“The Trombone Blues”: Violet’s Caged Birds’ Blues

The opening paragraph of *Jazz* suggests that Violet, Joe’s wife, is also a blues character. When at the funeral they prevent her from cutting Dorcas’s dead face and throw her out of the church, Violet returns home feeling so bluesy that she empties the bird cage and throws the birds out of “the window to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, ‘I love you’” (3). The imagery of the caged bird is repeated several times in the novel, including when the narrator points out that covering the birdcage at night has become a necessity or one of those “things that help you sleep all the way through it” (27). In the absence of the birds, only the picture of Dorcas and the memory she gleaned from investigations help Violet sleep through the night. As a matter of fact, she and Joe take turns throughout the night tiptoeing to look at Dorcas’s picture. That “something” that helps someone “sleep all the way through it” is similar to how Ma Rainey defines the blues in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, “The blues helps you get out of

bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something" (83). Interestingly, Violet and Joe recover their black wholeness through a bird and music. Toward the end of *Jazz*, Violet buys another bird, albeit a sickly one. Realizing that the bird's sadness did not stem from being lonely, because it was already sad when she bought it, Violet decided that only music could heal the bird. So, they took it to the roof from where they could hear musicians billow out, "the bird was a pleasure to itself and to them" (7).

The image of caged birds comes out of Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, "Sympathy," just as it refers to Maya Angelou's *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In Dunbar's poem, the caged bird bruises its wings trying to break free from the cage. Trapped in the cage, the bird sings as a plea to Heaven to be free. Nikki Giovanni reminds us that flying is an old trope in African American culture and that "the bird beats his wings against the bar until they are bloody and even at that he finds a way to sing, but everybody does whatever he can to be free." It should be noted that flying is one of the most potent tropes in African American writing, as it is synonymous with freedom. Noteworthy is the fact that Morrison first explored flight as a metaphor for freedom in *Song of Solomon*, in which Robert Smith and Milkman Dead spend their time attempting to fly--Solomon, Milkman Dead's great-grandfather, is believed to have flown like a bird back to Africa--The importance of Robert Smith's suggested flight (from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior) is encoded in a song that a woman sings while she is looking at Robert Smith, "'O Sugarman done fly away/Sugarman done gone/Sugarman cut across the sky/Sugarman gone home....'" (Kindle) In *Jazz*, there is no indication that Violet's caged birds can sing, albeit they

are as trapped in the cage as the singing caged bird in Dunbar's "Sympathy." The fact that Violet releases the birds in the freezing snow does not augur well for them.

Another blues moment occurs at the funeral. When Violet fumbles the knife trying to cut the dead Dorcas, the narrator comments that she was attempting "to do something bluesy" (114). Even before Violet goes to the funeral, she is already leading a bluesy life or undergoing an emptiness created by the fact that she wants children at forty. Before they migrated from the South to Harlem, Joe did not want babies to such extent that he considered three miscarriages "were more inconvenience than loss" (107). All this changed when they arrived to the City in 1906 and saw women with little children. Violet started longing for children:

By and by longing became heavier than sex: a panting, unmanageable craving. She was limp in its thrall or rigid in an effort to dismiss it. That was when she bought herself a present; hid it under the bed to take out in secret when it couldn't be helped. She began to imagine how old that last miscarriage child would be now. A girl, probably. Certainly a girl. Who would she favor? What would her speaking voice sound like? After weaning time, Violet would blow her breath on the babygirl's food, cooling it down for the tender mouth. Later on, they would sing together, Violet taking the alto line, the girl a honeyed soprano. (108)

Physically, Violet's breasts have flattened and her nipples are no longer pointed. This is an emptiness, a black hole, that, according to Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Violet can fill with the blues (83). In *Jazz*, Violet's black hole is portrayed as a crack. After being rumored that Violet was about to steal a baby, the narrator comments that holding the baby in her arms brought some light that "skipped through her veins" when the police showed up. When she

remembered the light later, “she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well” (22).

Toni Morrison directly connects Violet’s “black bottom” to the blues through Duke Ellington’s tune “Trombone Blues,” off *Mr. Clinkscale to the Cotton Club Vol. 1*, an album released in 1926—1926 is a leitmotif in the novel. When the baby’s sister informs Violet that the Dumfrey women, whose hair she wanted to do, are not at home, Violet decides to wait for them. But when the baby’s sister goes into a store to buy the “Trombone Blues” record, Violet walks away with the baby, leaving on the steps her bag of hairdressing tools, which she later shows to prove her innocence. Then one observer comments that the baby’s sister will ““know more about blues than any trombone when her mama gets home”” (21). Judylyn S. Ryan and Estella Conwill Májozohave noted that Toni Morrison also samples John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” and Nina Simone’s “Four Women” (140).

Dorcas’s East “St. Louis Blues”: Blues and Sexuality

Dorcas, to use W.C. Handy’s song, is a “St. Louis Blues Woman.” In fact, one can read her story while listening to Bessie Smith’s lamenting voice in “St. Louis Blues” over Louis Armstrong’s wailing cornet. The fact that Dorcas is from East St. Louis is not gratuitous: Her story is a story of pain and through her Toni Morrison historicizes the history of the Blues, as St. Louis is one of the birthplaces of Blues music. The narrator surmises that Dorcas developed her love for sensual music back in East St. Louis, where, while sitting on the porch, she might have swallowed a burning wood chip that “traveled down her throat because it smoked and glowed there still.” Dorcas naively thought that “it would leave her, or she would lose it through her mouth.” But when she arrived in Harlem, “the bright wood chip sank further and further down

until it lodged comfortably somewhere below her navel” (60-61). Before going to Harlem to live with Alice Manfred, her mother’s sister, Dorcas lost her mother and father to racism. While on the streetcar, Dorcas’s father was “pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death.” When her mother went home to deal with her husband’s death, her house was set afire, and she died in it. Dorcas survived only because she was sleeping across the street at her friend’s parents’ house. Although everybody on the street was shouting about the flames, Dorcas never uttered a word (57). This is why she is drawn to drums, blues, and jazz music.

In *Jazz*, no character comments on blues and jazz music (or the Jazz Age) better than Alice Manfred, and no one is drawn to it better than Dorcas--Joe shoots her at a blues/jazz party. In the third section of *Jazz*, the one that starts with “Like that day in July”—*Jazz* does not have chapters—we listen with Alice Manfred to drums conveying the message that the protesting black men and women cannot utter while marching on Fifth Avenue. In this section, the drum becomes a leitmotif, probably Toni Morrison’s way to remind us of the concept of the “Talking Drum,” one of the characteristics of African music whereby instruments emulate human voices. Examples of this concept abound in Langston Hughes’s jazz novel *Not Without Laughter*. As in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, in *Jazz* drums speak out in sounds what the banners are expressing about the promises made in The Declaration of Independence, including life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. It is said that although the marching black protesters could not speak, “what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T” (54). Partially dominated by the desire to protect Dorcas, Alice fails to appreciate the African rhythm of blues and jazz brought about by the drums.

In *What Is Life? Reclaiming the Black Blues Life*, Kalamu ya Salaam asserts that “sensual and erotic elements of life” are part of the blues aesthetic, which, though it possesses “an abstract philosophical underpinning,” is “celebratory in the here and now, body and soul. This [sic] is why the blues aesthetic emphasizes and enjoys the sensual and erotic elements of life.” Kalamu ya Salaam adds that it has taken centuries “to get repressed puritanical peoples to accept that it really is okay to enjoy both the sensual and erotic sides of life” (17). In *Jazz*, Alice fails to accept the sensual and erotic nature of Blues/Jazz and more or less calls the music she hears on the street “the devils’ music, “She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn’t real music—just colored folks’ stuff; harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious” (59). Further, she calls it “The dirty-get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild.” This “lowdown music” “made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law” (58). The following passage is more eloquent:

They did not know for sure, but they suspected that the dances were beyond nasty because the music was getting worse and worse with each passing season the Lord waited to make Himself known. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled belts. Lower and lower, until the music was so lowdown you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirtsleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives playing the lowdown stuff that signaled Imminent Demise. Or when a woman with a baby on her shoulder and a skillet in her hand sang “Turn to my pillow where my sweet-man used to be...how long, how long, how long.” Because you could hear it everywhere. (56)

This is the music that Dorcas is attracted to. Here, “How long” could be an allusion to “How Long,” a 1920s blues song by Frank Stokes from Tennessee. Additionally, Alice here resembles the black clubwoman that Langston Hughes describes in his “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” who would rather pay “eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller sing Andalusian popular songs” than listen to Clara Smith, a Blues singer of the 1920s, “sing Negro folk songs.” On the other hand, Dorcas seems to exemplify those “common people who are not afraid of spirituals” (1312). Interestingly, Alice also resembles Tempy and Siles, her husband, in Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter*, who hate blues and Spirituals and consider them “too Negro. In their house, Sandy dared not sing a word of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* [sic] for what had darky slave songs to do with respectable people? And rag-timer belonged in the Bottoms with the sinners” (239)—Arna Bontemps has noted that Hughes’s novel could have been published as early as 1927, close to the time period of the story in *Jazz*.

The music that Alice describes is a music that helps her not to “snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it.” It is a “juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house music” (59). The term “juke joint” is a significant clue here. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Zora Neale Hurston explains that “Jook is the word for a Negro pleasure house,” a place “where the men and women dance, drink and gamble. Often it is a combination of all these.” Hurston further explains the importance of the Jook as follows: “Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz. The singing and playing in the true Negro style is called ‘jooking’” (63). Describing the dance as “slow and sensuous,” Hurston notes that a “tremendous sex stimulation is gained from this” and that neither the man nor the woman is attempting to avoid it (63). In *Jazz*, what worries Alice is the fact that the music on Fifth Avenue and other

streets makes people do wild things. Regarding Alice's definition of "the juke joint" music, Elizabeth Cannon has commented that the "emotion connected to the juke joint music" spurs "the desire to be someone not molded by the world as she is, and this desire instigates a violence to do something to this world that so obstructs her" (236). Despite calling it "the low down music," Alice is aware that the music is linked to "the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. So many whites killed killed the papers would not print the number" (57).

In stark contrast to her aunt, Dorcas is drawn to the drums and strongly enjoys the music that her aunt considers "dirty music. While Alice worries "about how to keep the heart ignorant of the hips and the head in charge of both," Dorcas lies in bed, musing on the fact that there is not any place close by where "somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else." Dorcas's tragic flaw seems to be to regard the "life-below-the-sash as all there was" (60) and to watch "the unblinking men" and be assured by the drums "the glow would never leave her, that it would be waiting for and with her whenever she wanted to be touched by it. And whenever she wanted to let it loose to leap into fire again, whatever happened would be quick. Like the dolls" (61).

Motivated Signifyin(g) Revisions of the New Negro and the Harlem Renaissance

"Signifyin(g) revision is a rhetorical transfer that can be motivated or unmotivated. Motivated Signifyin(g) is the sort in which the Monkey delights; it functions to address an

imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically.” More specifically, “Writers Signify upon each other’s texts by rewriting the received tradition. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text a hand *to* the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience” (Gates 124).. In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison Signifies upon the Harlem Renaissance, especially the fact that most of the writings from this period tend to glorify Harlem, referred in the novel as the City, as “a Mecca” for black Americans migrating from the South. *Jazz* comes close to Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* and Ann Petry’s *The Street* in its critique of Harlem insofar as these novels portray Harlem as a city full of challenges, not just a city of refuge for everybody. There is ample evidence that *Jazz* also samples *The Street* in its portrayal of the City. As characters in both *Jazz* and *The Blacker the Berry* demonstrate, Harlem can also act as an antagonist. What befalls Joe, Violet, and Dorcas is attributed to the City. Like other millions of other black Americans who left the South in the 1900s, Joe and Violet left Vesper County, Virginia, because of “want and violence” that plagued the South since the 1870s. “Like others, they were country people, but how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is like forever” (33). In 1906, Joe and Violet “train-danced on into the City” (36) , and the City was already “speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for 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). After twenty years in the City, Joe and Violet are still together “but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dancing floor.” Joe has rented a

room to meet his lover. As aforementioned, it is the City that changes Dorcas., with its music which, according to Alice, begs people to ““Come and do wrong.”” (68)

Toni Morrison further critiques the Harlem Renaissance by reexamining the concept of the New Negro through Joe, who seems to mock the concept by transforming his self seven times before meeting Dorcas. In his essay “The New Negro,” Alain Locke lists the following as some of the characteristics of the New Negro: self-dependence, self-respect (4), group expression, self-determination, and race-pride (7), to name a few. The first time Joe made himself “new” was when he named his “own self,” when no one else had named him (123). The second time was when they chose him to be “trained to be a man” via hunting (125). The third change occurred in 1893, when the Ku Klux Klan burned down Vienna. In 1906, he changed again when he took his wife to Rome, where they boarded a train for Harlem. The fifth self happened when they “left the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa, then the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third and moved uptown” (127). In the meantime, Joe witnessed Harlem grow and fought successfully “the light-skinned renters” who wanted to keep them out of Lenox Avenue. The sixth transformation occurred during the 1917 riots when Joe was nearly killed. In 1919, he changed again when he marched with the 369 African American Infantry. Instead of blaming Violet for ruining his “New Negro” image, Joe takes responsibility for it by acknowledging that he changed too many times, which unfortunately did not prepare him for Dorcas, “I’ll never get over what I did to that girl. Never. I changed once too many. Made myself new one time too many. You could say that I’ve been a new Negro all my life”(129). Toni Morrison’s ultimate reassessment of the concept of the New Negro occurs at the end of Joe’s solo performance, which is disguised as a confession to Dorcas, when Joe acknowledges that to claim to be a colored, one “had to to

be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped,” which “was more than a state of mind” (135).

Signifyin(g) on Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*

1926 is repeated throughout *Jazz* for several possible reasons, including the publication of Langston Hughes’s *Weary Blues*, Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, and Hans Janowitz’s *Jazz* in 1927. Regarding Janowitz’s *Jazz*, Jürgen E Grandt has eloquently written about it and its textual relation to Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* in *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative*. After writing in his essays that African American writers were not writing about life in Harlem, Vechten published *Nigger Heaven* amid controversy. Although many people were offended by the title, Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, and James Weldon Johnson read the manuscript and encouraged Vechten to publish his novel under the controversial title. Langston Hughes even composed some of the blues songs/poems in *Nigger Heaven*, just as Rudolph Fisher and James Weldon Johnson suggested the brutal ending. As illustrated by Aaron Douglass’s art on the cover of Vechten’s novel and as Byron Kasson defines it, “Nigger Heaven” refers to Harlem and a segregated theatre in New York City:

Nigger Heaven! Byron moaned. Nigger Heaven! That’s what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn’t another seat, that something has to be done. It doesn’t seem to occur to them either, he went on fiercely, that we sit above them, that we can drop things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down

from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No, they have no fear of that! Harlem! The Mecca of the New Negro! My God! (149)

Compare this passage to a passage at the beginning of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, where the narrator confesses that he/she loves the City:

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinet and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrow women. A city like this makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it...Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible--like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another. The people down in the shadow are happy about that. (7).

Clearly, the narrator reverses Byron Kasson's "Nigger Heaven" insofar as the people in the shadow not only enjoy jazz and lovemaking, but they are also happy about the "new" that is coming. Additionally, Toni Morrison seems to rewrite the love triangle (Byron Kasson-Lasca Sartoris-Randolph Petijohn) in *Nigger Heaven*. Throughout Vehten's novel, Mary Love, a librarian, is in love with Byron Kasson, an aspiring black writer. Instead of reciprocating Mary's love, Byron runs after Lasca Sartoris, who is rich and does not hide his appetite for sex. When Lasca leaves Byron, the latter vows to either woo her back or shoot her. When he returns to her apartment, however, Lasca pulls out a revolver and throws him out of the house. While coming out of the house, Byron sees Randolph's limousine and concludes that the rich black man has upstaged him. Byron goes home, packs a revolver, and heads to Black Venus club to find Lasca. When Randolph enters the club, the Creeper greets him with bullets and runs away. While Randolph is down bleeding, Byron gets emotional, stomps him, draws his revolver, and shoots

him “once, twice into the ugly black mass.” Unable to realize what he has just done, Byron pleads with Mary, “Mary, he cried out, I din’t do it! I didn’t do it” (284). In *Jazz*, both Joe and Violet reenact the scene, albeit no one else but Joe shoots Dorcas and Violet is prevented from cutting Dorcas’s face at the funeral. At one point in *Nigger Heaven*, Mary Love considers shooting Lasca, but she gives up the idea when when she realizes that Byron is blindly in love with Lasca.

From Claude McKay’s Felice in *Home to Harlem* to Toni Morrison’s Felice in *Jazz*

Toni Morrison’s Felice, the woman who tells the story of what happened to Dorcas at the party, comes directly from Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, which itself writes back to *Nigger Heaven*. First, consider the textual relation of the following passage from *Home to Harlem* to the two passages from *Jazz* and *Nigger Heaven*, ‘They [Jake and Felice] bought tickets for the nigger heaven of a theatre, whence they watched high-class people make luxurious love on the screen. They enjoyed the exhibition. There is no better angle from one can look down on a motion picture than that of the nigger heaven” (315). When Jake arrives in Harlem after deserting the army in Europe, because they did not allow him to fight, the first woman he sleeps with is Felice. Unlike other prostitutes, Felice leaves in the morning while Jake is sleeping and leaves the fifty-dollar bill with a note, “Just a little gift from a baby girl to a honey boy” (16). Not knowing her name, Jake spends his entire time looking for Felice throughout Harlem until almost the end of *Home to Harlem*, when he finally finds her at Sheba Palace. It turns out that Felice has been looking for him, too. Jake uses the term “hunt,” which is the same term Toni Morrison uses to describe Joe’s hunting animals in the South and Dorcas throughout Harlem.

Knowing that African American writers revise one another's tropes and characters, one can speculate that Felice seems to echo Phoeby in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. After the death of Tea Cake—Janie shoots him in self-defense, which recalls Joe shooting Dorcas in *Jazz*—Janie recounts the story of what happened to Phoeby so that the latter would recount it to the men on the porch who have already condemned her. In *Jazz*, Felice recounts Dorcas's story of what happened when Joe showed up at the party. She is the one who informs Joe that Dorcas refused to name him as the shooter. Toni Morrison further samples *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through Joe, who echoes Jody (Joe) Starks and the twenty years he spends with Janie before he dies, after Janie recovers her voice and talks back through the dozens. Additionally, there is a striking resemblance between Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Book of Harlem" and *Jazz*. Hurston's short story appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1927, a date mentioned in *Jazz*. In "Book of Harlem," a man migrates from the South to look for a woman in Harlem.

The Photograph from Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

In 1975, Toni Morrison wrote "Toni Morrison on a Book She Loves: Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," a review in which she proclaimed that "no novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this. This girl has changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise". Equally important, Gayl Jones "had described the relationship between a black woman and black man as no one else had with precision, ruthlessness and wisdom" (109-110). Indeed, most of the post-1975 novels by African American women novelists that explore the black woman-black man relationships bear some traces from *Corregidora*. Obviously, Joe-Violet's relationship bears resemblance to Mutt-Ursa relationship with a difference: the

seemingly absent love triangle in *Corregidora*--Mutt Thomas is jealous of Ursa, a blues singer, because he thinks that men at Happy's Café are messing with her with their eyes (2)--takes center stage in *Jazz*. Another example of Signifyin(g) revision is a photograph that appears in *Corregidora* and reappears in *Jazz* as the photograph of Dorcas. Just as Ursa becomes barren after losing her baby and undergoing hysterectomy, all stemming from Mutt accidentally pushing her down the steps outside Happy's Café, so does Violet become barren after miscarriages. In a conversation to Tadpole McCormick, Ursa reveals her great grandmother smuggled a photograph of Old Man Corregidora out of Brazil so that generations after generations know who "to hate," because in addition to pimping Ursa's great grandmother, grandmother, and mother, but he also fathered her grandmother and mother under slavery. "I take it out every now and then so I won't forget what he looks like" (). Since Ursa cannot maintain collective and private memories of what the Portuguese "whoremonger" did to them, as he burned the papers after emancipation, the photograph becomes almost as important as the blues in which Ursa must encode those memories. What is more, Toni Morrison retrieves the hole, physical and metaphorical from *Corregidora*, into *Jazz* as a physical hole cut in the door by the narrator to look at characters and tell us their stories.

In *Jazz*, the photograph of dead Dorcas" seems like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold, unsmiling girl staring from the mantelpiece." More importantly, the "dead girl's face has become a necessary thing for" Violet and Joe at night, both taking turns to go to the parlor to look at Dorcas's face (11-12). At least two times at night, Violet and Joe take turns going to the living room to look at the face of the dead girl, and "one of them will say her name Dorcas? Dorcas" (13). Being emphasized that looking at the photograph evokes different sentiments to the tiptoe. When it is Joe, whom loneliness drives away from his

wife, Dorcas's "face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from his sleep hungry for her company." In stark contrast, Dorcas's is not "calm, generous and sweet." Instead, Violet finds it "greedy,, haughty and very lazy." It evokes the image of someone who would pick up clothes from people's dressers without being embarrassed by it until they catch her (13).

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