Chapter III

Music and Storytelling

Me, I want to explain myself so bad. I want to have myself understood. And the music, it can do that. The music, it's my whole story.

Sidney Bechet•

What ya think music is, whatchu think the blues be, & them happy church musics is all about, but talking wit the unreal what's mo’ real than most folks ever gonna know.

Ntozake Shange••

All of Morrison’s novels draw on African-American oral tradition and in listening to the language and stories of her people, she hears the music through which her ancestors expressed their emotions. Morrison has often discussed the power of music and the way it functions in culture while talking about her craft. She argues that traditionally, music has been the primary art form of healing for black people, but because of the changing place of black music in white American culture, it can no longer do this work alone:

There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization....The music kept us alive, but it’s not enough anymore. My people are being devoured.¹

She sees the novel as another form that can mirror what happens with black music and perhaps take that work further. Thus, she aligns her fictional craft with that of the musician:
I don’t want them (the novels) to be unsatisfying, and some people do find it wholly unsatisfying, but I think that’s the habit, the literary habit, of having certain kinds of endings. Although we don’t expect a poem to end that way, you know, or even music doesn’t end that way, certain kinds of music. There’s always something tasty in your mouth when you hear blues, there’s always something left over with jazz, because it’s on edge, and you’re never satisfied, you’re always a little hungry.  

Morrison’s equation of novel writing with both music and storytelling suggests that readers must approach her work with some information based on forms arising from the oral tradition, in which song and story link together and are often inseparable. Her appreciation of the oral tradition is indicated in a variety of ways in her work, and she has often recognized the centrality of black music to her whole body of work:

...a novel written a certain way can do precisely what the spirituals used to do. It can do exactly what the blues or jazz or gossip or stories or myths or folklore did— that stuff which was a common wellspring of ideas.

Morrison draws upon black music as a structuring and symbolic principle for her narrative, and her complex prose style combining the oral with the written, make for a polyphonic narrative style. Music as a critical tool can illuminate some of the elements of her fiction viewed by some readers as critical problems, such as her ambiguity, her loose, “fragmented” narrative structure, her endless repetition of themes, images, and whole stories. Viewing Morrison’s fiction through the
contexts of spirituals, gospels, blues, and jazz in combination with the precepts of the oral tradition of performance from which they derive would be rewarding. In creating her works, Morrison attends to the participatory nature of music— the way it makes listeners respond through singing or dancing. She aims for her fiction to touch those same nerves, to make readers not only speak back to the text, but also recognize their responses as part of the text. Considering the discipline it takes to make improvisational music appear to be effortless, Morrison aims to mirror in her writing this seamless stitching together of information.

Morrison’s concern for the need now to make fiction do what the music used to do, will be the basis of discussing how her novels do not just narrate but also sing the folklore and traditions of blacks in America. The intention is to demonstrate how this music is woven into the fabric of her fiction, both in content and in structure, and how it serves to clarify old and new values as well as indicate emotional states. The following section deals with the transfer of musical properties to the novels as thematic and structural devices. The technique Morrison uses to achieve this fusion of the musical and literary forms is a composite articulation of the infinite variety of the oral tradition. Hence, the important elements of the African-American vernacular, such as call and response, witnessing and testifying, and signifying is discussed in conjunction with rhythmical
and musical patterns, such as themes, variations and recurrent riffs as they occur in the novels. The purpose is to show how Morrison attempts an improvisory piece on aspects of African-American history and experience, and how in encoding aurality and orality in her writing she paves the way for the novel to replace the music (now largely appropriated by white culture) in its function of encouraging black communication.

The intertwining of music and storytelling in symbiotic unity make for a unique cultural style that has been utilized by many black authors from Gayl Jones, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker to Toni Morrison. Understanding the relationship between slave spirituals, blues, and jazz, would help in better appreciating Morrison’s appropriation of their techniques into their narrative equivalents. The history and cultural breadth of black music illustrate how slave spirituals were the earliest forms of artistic self-expressions available to African-Americans. “They were not sung solely or even primarily in churches or praise houses but were used as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs.”5 They provided the birthing ground for the blues, which according to Lawrence Levine is “the most highly personalized” genre of African-American music.6 Blues evolved in the United States in the communities of former African slaves, from spirituals, praise songs, field hollers,
shouts, and chants into a wide variety of styles and genres, with regional variations across the United States and, later, Europe and Africa. By the early 20th century, the blues had emerged as a dynamic and powerful addition to black American music. Jazz too, developed among African slaves and Negro freedmen in the United States, from sacred spirituals, and from secular work songs and "field hollers."

As Paul Oliver comments, "the influence of the blues on jazz was a musical one, eventually to be developed in a purely musical non-vocal form of expression." If the blues emphasized vocal content, jazz stresses on the instrumental. This reflects the different character of their environment for, as Inger-Anne Softing notes, "Jazz is an urban mode of expression and it is harder and crueler than blues." We can say that the fundamental nature of jazz comes from the weary lament of the blues, but the improvising, and the variation of riffs, creates the transition from blues to jazz.

The relevance of these genres in a discussion of folk modes of narration in Toni Morrison's fiction is to illustrate how Morrison uses all these musical elements to shape her storytelling style. Although all her novels reveal the deployment of musical properties to tell stories, not all illustrate equally her narrative intentions of fusing these two disparate
forms. Hence, the following analysis is limited to only *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon, Beloved, Jazz*, and *Paradise*.

**The Transfer of Musical Properties to Structure and Theme**

*The Bluest Eye: The Bluest 'I'*

*The Bluest Eye* is similar to the structure and feel of blues music. In fact, it is Morrison’s earliest effort “to do what the music did for blacks.” Although Pecola is the focus of the story’s tragic outcome, she herself does not tell her story, does not sing her blues. Claudia who delves into the painful misfortunes of her friend’s life and in the process tells her own story as well, does this. In giving voice to Pecola’s blues, Claudia becomes the blues singer whose storytelling mode corresponds to Ralph Ellison’s definition of the ‘blues impulse.’ Ellison famously defines the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.” Through Claudia, we come to know Pecola’s story, as well as the McTeer and Breedlove families, and the community of the past and present. The story that is told brings tragedy, comedy and a host of feelings that combine to create a blues feeling in the novel. Like the blues, the narrative structure of *The Bluest Eye* follows a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a sense of
resolution. Despite the depressing feeling of the text as a whole, there are moments of comedy and laughter as well as beauty that are squeezed from hardship. Whereas the blues provides an outlet for the musician to deal with adversity and tragedy, Morrison's novel also attempts to find a way of coping with the "why" of Pecola's tragedy, and the damaging effects of racism.

The musical quality of Morrison's writing is present in her applying the forms of black music to the novel. The cipher epithet: 'HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREEN' (BE, p.24) and its variations, at the beginning of each narrative section, evokes the call and response pattern fundamental to black music. This is the Dick-and-Jane story at the beginning of the novel, which captures another aspect of blues music and jazz. We can also term this kind of structure as a "counterpoint narrative." This means that each of the sections overlaps with and repeats characters, actions and ideas present in the other sections as though there is one larger theme at work. From a musical viewpoint, particularly that of jazz, each section, like the instruments in a jazz band, has its own story to tell and its own way of doing it. The narrative could then be described as a kind of long, complicated jazz piece coming from the swirling counterpoints between the 'words' of the cipher and the instrument's interpretation of the meaning of these 'words'. The contrast between the
ideal white world and the reality of the black experience is presented by breaking the story into several head notes for the sections. Each section of the narrative functions, in call and response manner, both as a means of furthering the story and as a counterpoint to some other section. At the same time, it is also synonymous to blues musicians repeating a familiar phrase in a song. Just as a blues musician, repeating a phrase or line throughout the song will remind the audience of the root of his blues, so also, the reader is reminded of the contrast between the ideal white world and actual black world conveyed in the chapter.

The transformation of the Dick-and-Jane text is also comparable to the steady increase of intensity and feeling in a blues song, where the singer may sing his lyrics with abandoned wildness and rawness that displays his depth of feelings. In the sections containing the cipher epithets, the text, which becomes increasingly inarticulate and unintelligent, corresponds to the confusion and ambiguity of young blacks who are subjected to the concept of a white ideal life that is foreign and inaccessible to them. In addition, the novel reveals the destructive potential of a standard of beauty that places value on the way people look rather than on their intrinsic worth. This condition is manifested in the character of Pecola Breedlove, who longs for blue eyes in pursuit of the white ideal of beauty and love. "Blue" is a metaphor for
the anguish that the musician is feeling due to the adversities of life. Blues music has created numerous connotations for the word “blue,” but its essential meaning as W. C. Handy says, comes “from farthest down. The blues come from nothingness, from want, from desire.” It is a stroke of genius on Morrison’s part to show that what Pecola yearns for most, the bluest of eyes, is the source of her most painful blues, her ‘bluest I’. Her desire for the impossible is exacerbated by her mother’s own belief in the ugliness of her family, while her drunken father’s twisted attempts at loving his daughter turns to rape. The community watches but does nothing even as Pecola lapses into an insanity, which is the direct outcome of her pursuit of the bluest eyes.

The Bluest Eye is full of characters whose humanity is diminished because of their blackness, a signifier of lack to white society, their own community, and even to themselves. Most troubling in the novel are the light-skinned blacks who distance themselves from their black heritage. But Morrison also presents ways of surviving in a world suffused with psychic pain and suffering. The counterpoint to the story of Pecola and her family is the MacTeer family who, in a similar situation has not abandoned its humanity. Mrs. MacTeer’s life is marked by poverty, which sometimes lead her to treat her children harshly; her ‘misery [is] ‘colored by the greens and blues in [her] voice’ (BE, p.18). But love, not
money, is the motivating force in this household, and it is that which sustains them. We see this counterpoint at work in some of the songs she sings. Her “fussing soliloquies” in which she vents her frustrations and anxieties and indirectly insults the world and everyone in it, are “extremely painful” to the listening Claudia and her sister. However, her “singing moods” comprised of singing about “hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-and-left-me-times” (BE, pp.17-18). An adult Claudia recalls the sad, melancholy of the thing her mother sings about:

But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-me to my name.” I looked forward to the delicious time when “my man” would leave me, when I would “hate to see that evening sun go down…” ‘cause then I would know “my man has left this town.” Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.(BE, p.18)

The dual nature of blues/jazz is evident here: on the one hand, the music counterpoints and drains the words of their grief thereby making life endurable by making the pain sweet; on the other, there is also the suggestion of “longing” for pain. Or at least its “sweet” after-taste, which goes along with enjoying the status of being a victim, of refusing to find ways out of situations which render one a victim, of refusing to take responsibility for oneself.
This double counterpoint is apparent in most of the characters in the novel who suffer different degrees of victimization at the hands of a society that confuses whiteness with virtue. The prime example of the tendency of blacks to identify against themselves is Polly and Cholly Breedlove. The narrator describes this tendency in terms of the "ugliness" of the people who live in abject poverty. Cholly's ugliness is the "result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people" (BE, p.28); Pauline uses hers as a "prop", for the "articulation of character, for the support of a role she frequently imagined was hers- martyrdom" (BE, p.29). The narrator suggests that they are more than complicit in their own fate: that they wore their "cloak of ugliness "with the same desire for melancholy that Claudia's mother sings into her songs. The violent arguments they engage in reveals this willingness to embrace their desperate situation. This shows that their own belief that they are "ugly" produces a sweet pain of its own, one that is difficult to let go. What breaks this counterpoint-prevents it from singing the pain into sweet melancholy and relief- is the "incest-rape" of Pecola by Cholly. No song will account for this, and everyone, including her mother, casts out the victim. Because Pecola cannot sing this pain away, cannot articulate her grief, she goes mad, and finishes up wandering in the dumps at the edge of town.
The structure, lyrics and chords of blues music often combine to form a cycle in which the end echoes the beginning through the repetition of a musical lick. This circular motion is also present in *The Bluest Eye* where the end mimics the beginning in Morrison’s use of the adult Claudia who echoes the nine-year old Claudia, creating the image of a flashback. The adult Claudia has the insight that a child could never have, and thus tries to articulate this insight at the end of her narrative. Her conclusion that love is a prison for the beloved, that love sings sweetness into its pain, that love is a mask behind which hides wickedness, violence and stupidity, is a story already told in the “preface,” the section that immediately follows the triple-epithets, which counterpoint each other. It is told in Claudia’s adult voice to which she returns at the end of the narrative. By telling us this story, Claudia is, in a sense, doing what her mother does—singing the sweet pain of melancholy into her experiences.

As in her other novels, here too, Morrison deliberately structures the story to ensure an interactive and creative relationship between author and reader. This relationship is similar to the one between the musician and the audience in the blues or jazz. The interaction that is deliberately inculcated within Morrison’s style is not readily apparent, it requires some thinking, or perhaps even experiences in one’s life that can parallel
or relate in some way to the events of the novel. On the subject of the blues, Bernard Bell says:

When performed for nonmembers of the ethnic group or those with little or no intimacy with the music, it is generally considered mere entertainment; but when performed among black Americans, especially members of the working class, it is a social ritual: a ceremonial residual oral form whose recurring performance reinforces a sense of order in life and preserves the shared wisdom of the group. 13

Just as the blues can be interpreted in different ways by different people, so can Morrison’s novel. Just as the blues is obviously, more meaningful and crucial to African-American culture than to any other culture, the meaning of The Bluest Eye is most valid and applicable to black Americans. Karla Holloway argues that this novel “is a journey into Black memory” where the memories belong to “Black readers.” 14

The novel itself puts forward the idea that the characters should seek alternative forms of cultural knowledge and wisdom that are embodied in the community traditions which include music. For instance, Pecola is not privy to the “shared wisdom of the group” (which would have included warnings against unsavoury members of the community, such as Soaphead Church and the three whores), and therefore she becomes Soaphead’s victim. The system of folk values and knowledge that Claudia absorbs because of listening to her mother’s blues singing eases her entry into adulthood in a way denied to Pecola.
As a novel that portrays the blues about growing up poor, black and female in a male dominated society, one that equates whiteness with beauty, *The Bluest Eye* will obviously evoke a different response from someone who has experienced the injustices of institutionalized and societal racism and prejudice than from someone who has not. Thus, both the blues and *The Bluest Eye* contain some profound connection with the African-American sensibility that in some ways can never be experienced outside of the community or culture. Still, there are many aspects of the novel that every reader can respond to, particularly, Morrison’s emphasis on resiliency, assertion of ownership and control of one’s bodies, and the call to be brutally honest regarding one’s dealings with others and with one’s community that are all central tenets of traditional blues wisdom.

*Song of Solomon: The Song in Story, the Story in the Song*

An overriding theme in *Song of Solomon* is that of music—particularly, blues, spirituals, and gospel songs—as an integral force in the creation and survival of African-American culture. Solomon’s song introduces us to the intrinsic role that religious and secular songs, in the form of spirituals and the blues play in defining and transmitting African-American culture.

The motif of music - with its emphasis on the blues- resonates throughout *Song of Solomon*. Joyce Wegs says, “Morrison provides
several clues that the black music she emulates in this novel is the blues and not, for instance, jazz.”

Although no writer has written a blues novel that can provide an unequivocal example of how the blues in written form should mimic the blues in oral form, still, elements of the blues can be taken and transposed into the novel form in various ways. An examination of the motif of music in Song of Solomon reveals how Morrison, by using linguistic patterns that are characteristic of the blues, relates the blues to structure, theme and character. The elements of call-and response, repetition and variation, redundancy, as well as the improvisational nature of the blues that have been implemented within the novel, pave the way for a discussion of Morrison’s text as a blues tale.

Readers of Song of Solomon will not fail to notice the numerous references and allusions to music, particularly, blues music, including references to musical instruments (drums, guitars, trumpets, pianos), and to musical terms (notes, keys, scales). As pointed out by Wegs, “Morrison’s naming often contains clear links to the blues. For instance, her protagonist’s best friend, his “main man” is named Guitar, which is a principal blues instrument” (SoS, p.212). The references to several great names in blues and jazz such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Fats Waller, B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Jelly Roll Morton, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, T-Bone Walker, Son House, Tampa Red and others, underscores the relationship
of the blues with its cultural associations and draws attention to the interweaving of blues and storytelling in the novel. The blues genre thus offers the reader a way in which to approach his/her participation in the text.

The first chapter of *Song of Solomon* introduces us to the main characters and the novel's unique structure, in which Morrison intermixes the past, present and future and presents numerous stories from various characters' perspectives. In the novel, because the narrator functions often as a detached observer who simply reports things as they happen, the characters tell their own stories and the community comments on or respond to these characters' actions. In music, a call and response is a succession of two distinct phrases usually played by different musicians, where the second phrase is heard as a direct commentary on or response to the first. It corresponds to the call-and-response pattern in human communication. This call-and-response pattern between the characters' individual voices and the community's collective voice resonates throughout Morrison's novel. The structure of the novel itself reflects the pattern of the blues call-and-response pattern. Part I corresponds to the "call" given to Milkman to find his own identity in relation to his own community. So far, he has been alienated from himself and estranged from his family, his community, and his historical and cultural roots. Part
II then corresponds to his “response,” as he embarks on a physical and spiritual journey with the help of Pilate and Guitar that enables him to reconnect with his past and realize his self-worth.

Early in the novel, the twin themes of flying and singing are prefigured in the attempted suicide flight of Robert Smith, which takes place in the presence of Ruth Dead who is pregnant with the protagonist, Milkman Dead, and “a singing woman who introduces the blues leitmotif of the novel.” The singing woman is Pilate, Milkman’s aunt (and later, his spiritual advisor) who foresees that “a little bird will be here with the morning” (SoS, p.9). By referring to Milkman as a bird, Morrison already situates him as being the only one in his family who has the potential to fly, an act that symbolizes movement from the material world to a better, more spiritual and free existence. Pilate’s words also imply that eventually Milkman will transcend the arbitrary limits placed on black people. However, that time is long in coming, for when four-year-old Milkman realizes that “only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself” (SoS, p.9). This awareness of social reality illustrates the dilemma of many blacks in white America, who learn that opportunities for social, economic and political successes are limited for coloured people.
The connection between blues and storytelling is emphasized in the “Sugarman” blues song often sung by Pilate, which serves as the model for Solomon’s “song,” the song that will reveal Milkman’s past and cultural heritage:

O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Buckra’s arms to yoke me…
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (SoS, p.49)

As Robert Skerrett comments, “the song itself is a verse and chorus with a classic blues feeling.” The blues song and the atmosphere connected to its singing, unify the novel. Pilate sings this song to Robert Smith as he prepares to fly off the hospital roof: apparently, she is the only one among the spectators to decode the meaning of his bizarre gesture, and therefore, no one sings in response to her. Her song is a kind of serenade sung in support of him because she can read the signifying relationship between Robert Smith’s “flight” and the legendary Solomon (Sugarman) who flew to escape slavery.

Pilate also sings the same song with Reba and Hagar to a hidden, but listening Macon. This time, not only do the three women call and respond to each other, but also their song elicits a response from him in spite of himself: it “…pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of
a magnet (SoS, p.29). The song serves to underline his disconnection with the nurturing, oral culture of the South that he left behind when he moved North. Pilate sings this song for the third time, again with Reba and Hagar, to the visiting Milkman and Guitar. This time it is sung in response to Hagar’s confession of a “hunger” her mothers cannot alleviate: “...When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too” (SoS, p.49). Skerret says, “It thus functions as the blues, allowing Reba, and Hagar to finger the jagged edge of their unhappiness as a way of mastering it.”

Similarly, at Hagar’s funeral, Reba joins Pilate in her mournful plea for mercy, singing “I hear you.” (SoS, p.317) Together they perform a call-and-response, through which they articulate their grief and pain of loss. Their performance compels a response from the congregation, who with the readers, become the witnesses to the two women’s testimony of love. Morrison’s use of antiphony forms a part of blues music. For the blues also mean a progression from loss to resolution. As accomplished blues singers, Pilate and Reba blend the two oral forms of testifying and witnessing and resolve their inner grief, their blues, through a shared communal experience.

However, as Marilyn Mobley points out, the song in the story is not the only significant aspect of Song of Solomon; there is also a story in
Embedded in the song is the story of Solomon, which is also the story of an entire race. Understanding the significance of this song is a key to understanding the novel since it holds the secrets of Milkman’s past. In order for Milkman to fulfill his mission and decode the meaning of Solomon’s song, he must first learn to listen and to relinquish his sole reliance on external cues such as road maps and written records as the primary sources of information. In short, Milkman must learn to focus on orality rather than literacy. For instance, listening to the children of Shalimar singing their song, “Jay the only son of Solomon,” he at first, does not understand its significance to his own heritage. Only later, as he becomes aware of the importance of orality, does he realize that Pilate’s old blues song is a variant of the children’s game song. As he listens to the children singing Solomon’s song, Milkman comes to understand his mother’s blues, her “sad sad song (SoS, p.165), and can now sympathize with her forced twenty-year celibacy. Similarly, he gains an insight into his father’s materialism seeing it now as “homage” to Macon’s own father Jake. More importantly, he is now ashamed of his treatment of Pilate and Hagar.

Nevertheless, even at this stage of his spiritual growth, Milkman is not still aware of the cost of his quest, nor does he understand the meaning behind Sweet’s question after he tells her the story of his
ancestor Solomon’s flight back to Africa—“Who’d he leave behind?” (SoS, p.328). A common subject of blues songs was the theme of women’s desertion by the men in their lives: while men are given agency and movement, women are contained, confined, or left behind. A repeated theme in Song of Solomon is that of men’s abandonment of women, and the image of men who “fly away and leave their women to sing the blues.”

Milkman experiences a yearning to escape—at least temporarily—the demands placed on him by his family and friends. Thus, Milkman flees the confines of his dull existence in Michigan leaving Hagar to die of unrequited love. Morrison links this subject to another of the main themes of blues lyrics: the conflict that occurs because of the different ways in which men and women cope with crisis. A blues song called “Victim of the Blues” sung by “Ma” Rainey makes the point clear:

My man left this morning, jest about half past four, (twice)
He left a note on his pillow, sayin’ he couldn’t use me no more

This almost exactly replicates Milkman’s treatment of Hagar when he wrote her a cold and cruel letter informing her of his intentions to end their relationship.

On Morrison’s treatment of the subject of women’s blues with regard to mobility, an examination of Pilate’s life offers another aspect. Pilate, unlike most of the other women in the novel, is widely traveled:
she “had been from one end of the country to another.” (SoS, p.139) She is representative of women blues singers with whom freedom of mobility is often associated. And like these women who, although they have greater participation in movement, struggle to negotiate the various exploitative conditions they encountered, Pilate experiences alienation and struggles to find acceptance. Her “traveling blues” tell of how she is hounded out of each place because people fear her navel-less belly. However, this empowers her and enables her to channel her blues into a more creative, constructive outlet—namely, living.

Pilate demonstrates the characteristics of the blues singer who, like the poet, turned his eyes on the inner soul within and recorded his impressions and reactions to the world without. His art was introverted... As if aware of the dangers implicit in these declarations of his inner self, the blues singer was as brutally self-examining as the true philosopher, recounting his desires, acknowledging his faults, stating his thoughts with almost frightening honesty.25

She is like the blues singer who takes a hard look at herself and “when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero” (SoS, p.149). In naming her blues, and acknowledging however painful, her limitations, Pilate becomes a blues subject who shows a resiliency that enables her to ameliorate her blues and reclaim ownership of herself.
Like the blues, which functioned not merely as a mechanism for individual catharsis but also as a vehicle for passing on group knowledge, personal relationships are important to Pilate and she always responds to other people’s problems with unconditional support:

She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships, [...] She was a natural healer, and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own. (SoS, p.150)

Moreover, like the blues artist who in singing for himself, also sang for others, Pilate “means her stories- and her life- to benefit those around her, the people she loves.” By telling her story to Ruth, Pilate offers her an alternative, a way to get over her own blues. Her storytelling mode is a blues mode in its honesty, lack of sentimentality, and communicability. Moreover, it is an oral performance in the tradition of the African griot, and includes a strong spiritual and ethical dimension. Here, it is not so much the product or content that counts as the performance itself. Not only is her song of Sugarman the key to Milkman’s quest, it is also a remnant of an oral culture which illustrates the function of the African woman in transmitting existing messages of culture to the children. The song ensures that the “fathers may soar/And the children may know their names.” (SoS, epigraph) Pilate’s blues resonates throughout the novel
demonstrating both the power of song and the ability of the blues singer to be mediators of cultural legacy.

Not until he returns home and learns his final lesson of love from Pilate is Milkman able to understand that his freedom (like Solomon’s) has come at the expense of the people he left behind—namely, Hagar. Now he understands Pilate’s adherence to her father’s philosophy: “You just can’t fly on off and leave a body” (SoS, p.208). Consequently, his challenge is not only to reclaim the gift of flight but also to break the legacy established by Solomon and followed by Macon and other men who abandon those who love them. Thus, Milkman learns from Pilate, valuable lessons of folk wisdom and cultural values that have always been central to the blues. He finally realizes, “that a genuine bluesman does not fly solo since he is connected musically to the other musicians, to their shared pasts; only as each bluesman adds his personal history to that shared past may he be said to launch into a solo flight.”

The dying Pilate asks him to sing for her; he speaks, rather than sings, the song he has learnt from her, the only one that he knows—her Sugarman blues. By following a pattern closer to a rhythmic talk than to a melody, Milkman is still being true to the original lyrical form of the “talking blues” and in adding his own improvisational twist, he becomes a true bluesman.
The ending of *Song of Solomon* "reiterates the themes of flight, song, community, heritage, and the blues." The two expressions of flight, at the beginning and the end signify on each other by repeating and revising the myth of flight. Robert Smith’s “flight” parallels Solomon’s mythical flight from bondage as well as Milkman’s leap, but the message signified by each flight is different. Milkman’s role is to decode his Aunt Pilate’s “Sugarman” blues song and his own ancestry in order to gain an understanding of his own identity. For Morrison, this identity is “a collective rather than an individual construct.” By learning the names and putting the pieces of his ancestry back together Milkman begins to understand his own place in the world. But in Morrison’s revision of the myth of Solomon, it is Pilate’s rendition of this myth, which helps Milkman grow. For when the fathers soar off, there must be someone left to teach the children their names: these are the women left behind to sing the blues but also to tell the tale to the children for posterity. Thus, it is evident, as Wilentz argues that it is the children’s song, turned into women’s blues by Pilate, is what leads Milkman to the legacy of his great-grandfather and the Flying Africans.

Just as there is no closure in the blues, there is no resolution in *Song of Solomon* in the usual sense, and the novel’s ending is finally ambiguous. The improvisational nature of the blues is illustrated in the
way Morrison creates gaps and spaces in the narrative to be filled in by the reader. Consequently, it is up to each reader to fill the spaces of the narrative concerning Milkman’s fate. Given that, Milkman has inherited Pilate’s and Solomon’s gift of flight, perhaps his ultimate fate is secondary to the fate of those who are left behind to sing the tale. Thus, like blues lyrics, *Song of Solomon* as a blues narrative, does not end on a closed note but allows Morrison to create an improvisational piece with endless possibilities. By virtue of the fact that “folklore can also contain myths that reactivate themselves endlessly through providers—the people who repeat, reshape, reconstitute and interpret them,” the reader, together with the author, can become a part of a transformative mode that makes the past meaningful for the future. In writing this novel, Morrison, as blues singer, adds her own song to the blues singers before her. As an individual artist who gives creative expression to the history of her people through the sound of the blues as a mode of storytelling, she helps to articulate and strengthen their collective cultural identity as well.

*Beloved: Slave Song, Redemption Song*

Musically, different critics have read *Beloved* in different ways. For instance, Eusebio Rodriguez calls the novel a blues-song and states that Morrison’s musical style introduces “blue notes of loneliness and injustice and despair, generating, at the end, meanings that hit her
listeners in the heart, that region below the intellect where knowledge deepens into understanding." 34 Paul D, for example, clearly embodies the tradition of the blues. On the other hand, Alan J. Rice prefers to examine the musical elements in *Beloved* from a jazz vantage point noting particularly, Morrison’s use of the musical device of “cutting back” through which “characters continually cut back to the pivotal incident, the central riff, and sing their own song of it.” 35 Besides blues and jazz, we can identify other genres of the black musical tradition in this novel such as folksongs in the form of slave songs and spirituals, which are woven seamlessly into a narrative fabric, proving thereby its efficacy as a vehicle for projecting the humanity of the slaves.

The African-American slave song is just one of many forms, which offers a distinctive cultural voice to their oral tradition. Since the composers of these folk songs were unknown, they can be considered as genuine folk music. Often, slaves would find it more bearable to sing their beliefs and sorrows in order to escape the ordeals of slavery, and the spiritual offered a medium for this. These spirituals reflected essentially Christian ideals and beliefs in the form of a bittersweet harmony. Sacred music or spirituals often dealt with Biblical themes and conveyed double meanings of the wish to escape slavery. Moreover, using spirituals to name the dynamics of escape has a long African-American history, and
songs were significantly used as mediums of passing on encoded messages.\textsuperscript{36} In \textit{Beloved}, prior to the botched attempt to escape Sweet Home, Halle announces to the others the “sign” for their departure by transforming it into a song: “Hush, hush. Somebody’s calling my name. O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?” (B, p.224).

Morrison associates Baby Suggs with the precepts of the oral tradition of performance as is illustrated in the physicality and expressiveness of her call, which evokes the call-and-response patterns of black American singing and preaching. Baby Suggs’s sermonizing could perhaps be termed a kind of spiritual, which was an important aspect of the slave song. Blacks taken as slaves from Africa and brought on the slave ships to America were soon converted to Christianity and forced to abandon their African religions; yet, they managed to merge African beliefs and customs with their newfound religion. The slaves incorporated dance movements involving traditional African moves with strong beats with the spirituals they sang. Because they were often not allowed to sing these spirituals on the plantations, slaves were often forced to find a place where they could seek solace and sing of freedom and deliverance.

Similar aspects of these conditions can be seen in \textit{Beloved} in the example of Baby Suggs’s meetings in the Clearing, where she also “danced in the sunlight” (B, pp.86-89). Her song-sermon follows the oral
aesthetic aspects of antiphony, improvisation and audience related performances, and incorporate singing, shouting, crying and dancing. Thus, it is a dramatized and concretized improvisation of traditional Christian sermonizing, a form that black congregation would recognize as stemming primarily from their oral tradition in which the transition from verbal to musical expression is a fluid one. Her “Call” as she calls it, is a call to freedom, which is reminiscent of Bob Marley’s plaintive spiritual “Redemption Song.” In this song, Marley sings in the first person, taking on the role of a slave “singing the songs of freedom”:

Old Pirates yes they rob I Sold I to the merchant ships Minutes after they took I from the Bottomless pit But my hand was made strong By the hand of the Almighty We forward in this generation triumphantly All I ever had was songs of freedom Won’t you help sing these songs of freedom ...Emancipate yourself from mental slavery None but ourselves can free our mind...

Baby Suggs says as much to her audience:

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (B, p.88).

Baby Suggs uses the language of the African -American oral tradition- Black English, in which meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture acquire added meaning and expression using a rhythmic structure and sounds that are closely allied to music:

[I]n this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Yonder they do not
love your flesh. They despise it... No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flat it. And O my people they do not love your hands....Love your hands! Love them....Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! (B, p.88)

This ‘performance talk’ as it were, fuses with dance and music in the most natural way as Baby Suggs stands up to dance to the singing of her congregation as they participate and interact with each other. Mbiti describes the function of music and dance during communal worship as a way of dissolving barriers between each person's mind, body, and spirit: "Through music, singing, and dancing, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in the act of worship. The music and dancing penetrate into the very being of the worshipping individuals." This is illustrated clearly in the dance Baby Suggs initiates, which becomes a religious ritual, a communal celebration of each individual’s lovableness.

Morrison establishes song as imperative to her characters’ survival in Beloved. A telling example which shows the power of song to combat even the most dehumanizing despair is conveyed in the telling of Paul D’s experiences at prison camp in Alfred, Georgia. As one of the forty-six men who worked in a chain gang, Paul D uses song to defend his humanity when it was most denied. The men did not speak to each other, at least, not with words; they learnt alternative ways of speaking. They read each other’s eyes; spoke to each other through songs. During the
day, they worked together, singing as they swung their sledge hammers. The importance of music as an expression of emotions is summed up by Morrison’s evocation of the chain gangs. Their songs are encoded so only they understand the import of what they sing: “They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings” (B, p.108). Their sledge hammers keep time to beat out their anguish and their helplessness. The interactive rhythm of the collective that is intrinsic to black music is harnessed to provide an alternative text. The men communicate via the chain itself, thus transforming what imprisons them into a vehicle for communication: “They talked through the chain like Sam Morse...” (B, p.110). The rhythmic hammering of the chains and sledge hammers, evoke the elements of call and response, communal improvisation, witnessing and testifying, and Signifying. 40

Of all the characters in Beloved, Paul D is most representative of the singing, traveling bluesman. Paul Oliver makes the observation that folk music generally “reflects the environment of the people who create it, and when their background is a constantly varying one it is scarcely surprising that the images that are mirrored in the blues have much to do with the movement of the black worker.” 41 This is certainly true of Paul D. His experiences in the Civil War, travel to the North, time spent at the
prison camp, and also with a weaver woman in Delaware, all speak of the restless wandering typical of the blues character. The tunes he sings, hums or improvises upon, are "old pieces of songs he'd learned on the prison farm or in the War afterward. Nothing like what they sang at Sweet Home, where yearning fashioned every note" (B, p.40). In the compelling rhythms of the work songs that he sings that evoke the physical hardships enforced in reconstruction, we can also hear a blues lament of the sense of roots denied by the system of slavery:

Lay my head on the railroad line,
Train come along, pacify my mind. (B, p.40)

Moreover, Paul D is also representative of the blues character who bridges a paradoxical state of existence. Even when he is no longer enslaved, he lived in a world that still bound him with social, psychological and political oppression. It was a world of arrested transition in which he was freed but not free:

After Delaware and before that Alfred, Georgia, where he slept underground and crawled into sunlight for the sole purpose of breaking rock, walking off when he got ready was he only way he could convince himself that he would no longer have to sleep, pee, eat or swing a sledge hammer in chains. (B, p.40)

More significantly, it is only in his blues that Paul D is able to express his traumatic past. His dehumanizing experiences with Schoolteacher is so gruesome, he has "never have talked about it. Not to a soul." (B, p.71).
Paul D never told another human being about his brutal experiences, but he “sang it sometimes” (B, p.71). Morrison emphasizes here, the significance of song and its empowering qualities. Despite his dreadful experiences, Paul D can make meaning of them.

However, musical expression is not the only privilege given to blacks in Beloved. The text makes space for the song of Amy Denver, the white girl who aids Sethe in childbirth and during her flight. Their transcultural encounter is epitomised by Amy’s three stanza song, which is a quotation of the first, second and fourth stanzas of a poem called “Lady Button Eyes” by Eugene Field, a white American poet. Amy’s song is totally different from the other examples of music already referred to, particularly in language and musical rhythm. The stylized Standard English of Amy’s song-poem obviously collides with the Black Vernacular English of the blues and work songs sung by Paul D, for example. But Morrison, is perhaps symbolically acknowledging that the black musical arts manifested in the Afro-Christian traditions of sermonizing and singing and in the blues and field hollers have always negotiated with European musical traditions, and with the English language as well. By acknowledging the fact that the black musical tradition adapted and adjusted western forms to serve its own ends,
Morrison paves the way for a discussion of *Beloved* from a jazz vantage point of view, since jazz music is the outcome of transcultural influences.

Alan J. Rice in his essay, “Jazzing it Up A Storm: The Execution and meaning of Toni Morrison’s Jazzy Prose Style” also cautions against isolating Jazz as Morrison’s only jazz-influenced work as “all her works have been informed by the rhythms and cadences of a black musical tradition.” Clearly marked references to jazz musical material and styles abound in *Beloved* and this is reflected in Morrison’s play with repetition, both as a literary and musical device, by repeating memories and images recreating the thought processes of her characters. Alan J. Rice comments on how Morrison applies the technique of the riff to construct a “jazzthetic” narrative style. Conversations are thus arranged like a piece of music, such as the one between Paul D and Sethe on the subject of Halle having witnessed schoolteacher’s nephews stealing her milk. Their questions and answers, repeated in their entirety, or varied only by a pronoun or a negative, form a counterpoint. The repetitions of “Slowly” slowly” and “carefully, carefully” are in contrast to Sethe’s frantic questioning, “He saw? He saw? He saw?” (*B*, p.61)

Similarly, another illustration of Morrison’s technique of repetition to foreground the musicality of her text is provided in the section in which Sethe recollects her first sexual encounter with Halle, in a
cornfield. The voyeurism in which the other men engage while watching
the moving corn, is reflected by a lingering and repetitive description of
the way they prepare the damaged corn to eat that evening. Here, as Paul
D lies beside her in bed, Sethe and Paul D’s memories blend and fuse
together. No speech is reported, yet their thoughts coincide and overlap,
and emphasized by the choral repetitions of a key-phrase – “How loose
the silk” (B, p.27), which is repeated four times with only one variation.
Here, Sethe and Paul D display a combination of self-absorption and
awareness of each other that is the trademark of jazz musicians. This is
seen in the way they take thematic and imagistic cues from one another
and in how they repeat motifs- eyes, faces, corn- on different
instruments.\footnote{45} Thus, a close examination of this passage reveals a process
of interchange that takes place that is very musical in form, the theme-and
-variation sort of movement so central to the art of jazz.

The technique of cutting back to the central riff, referred to by Rice
is used by Morrison to return to an earlier event just as the black musician
returns again and again to an old theme. The narrative sequence regarding
Sethe’s killing of her baby is told through the flashbacks of many
characters, who “play on what they discover, in their own ways with their
own voices, creating jazzy solos which contain…repetition and rifting.”\footnote{46}
In this way, different versions of the same event are created much like the
jazz musicians who improvise on the original tune to bring something of their individual selves into it.

In *Beloved*, the ‘poetic’ section revealing the thoughts of the three main female protagonists exemplifies Morison’s attempts to do what jazz musicians achieve in music. The opening lines of each section pursue a fundamental riff or theme: “Beloved. She is mine.” This core theme is varied, rephrased and explored in the solo flights of Sethe, Denver and Beloved, each woman improvising on the same theme. After this, the voices integrate once again and the same variations are revisited, this time in call-and-response fashion.

The three female voices join in a polyphonic, collective chorus. The use of a chorus, a musical device, is a tribute to the importance of music for black heritage. The chorus here is beautifully constructed and the interaction of the speakers/singers is very similar to that of jazz musicians in a jam session in which the individual soloists draw on the performances that precede theirs. The session usually culminates in an ensemble performance with the musicians meshing their solo efforts in a complex convergence of sound, yet even within the collective chorus, the individual voices retain their distinctive qualities: “Beloved/You are my sister/You are my daughter/You are my face; you are me.../You are mine/You are mine.” (*B*, p.216, p.217)
Morrison also demonstrates what happens in the absence of song in the novel. Song functions differently in expressing Sethe’s alienation from the community. Whereas Paul D, and even Sixo, uses song to express their personhood under slavery, with Sethe, it defines her isolation from her own people. After killing her daughter, she walks through “a throng of black faces” but without “the cape of sound to hold and steady her on her way.” The crucial absence of song is significant. It highlights how Sethe’s own people believe her to be inhuman, a fact that is not helped by her own proud silence and apparent aloofness. It also signifies her formal banishment from the community. Further, her unrepentant condition is expressed by her refusal to join “in the hymns the others sang with all their hearts” (B, p.171) at Baby Suggs’s funeral.

On the other hand, Morrison uses the prevalence of song at the end of the novel to re-establish Sethe’s humanity. A significant “musical” moment is found when after a twenty-year policy of banishment from the community, the women, inspired by Ella, undergo a change in their attitude towards Sethe. Morrison reinstates song here to reflect the change as the community’s women gather at 124 Bluestone Road to rescue Sethe from the haunting child-woman Beloved. In a revision of the Scripture, the women go back to the beginning of sound:
In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like. *(B, p.259)*

"Building voice upon voice upon voice," the sound they create is so harmonious and powerful that it "br[eaks] the back of words." *(B, p.261)*

Musically speaking, this passage refers to the significance of music and musical expression, sound, in the African-American world. The sound that exists before language refers to the sound patterns of music that originated in African culture, and thus, is older than the English word. For Morrison, African-American writing fundamentally relies on the sounds and rhythms of black music and her own aesthetic shows an awareness of the musicality of black language and speech.

The musical quality of Morrison’s text is apparent through her appropriation of the rhythms of blues, spirituals and jazz, which are firmly rooted in the oral tradition. Her musical texts (particularly spirituals, song-sermons and blues) not only create a distinctive folk-based genre, but through the participatory nature of this music, Morrison invites the reader to take part in the creative process and thereby, in the oral tradition itself.

**Jazz (Part 1): Storytelling and the jazz paradigm**

Jazz music pervades the whole of Morrison’s Jazz and provides not only the subject and theme but also the literary technique for the novel.
The relation between music and storytelling is exemplified through the fact that just as in jazz, the music, the musician and the performance are one, so also in Jazz, theme, structure, style and language blend together to highlight the problems confronting African-Americans and to suggest solutions that are needed for their survival in an era of discord and fragmentation. Consequently, Jazz is a novel not only set in the jazz-era but also one that develops a jazz aesthetic of its own. In Jazz, Morrison incorporates many elements of jazz, leading her readers to explore the extent to which it manifests itself in this novel and to speculate about its overall significance.

The title of Morrison’s novel draws attention to the particular type of music created by African-Americans in the 1920s as well as to the book’s jazz-like narrative structure and themes. Jazz is the best-known artistic creation of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, also called the Jazz Age by Scott Fitzgerald. Considering Morrison’s concern throughout her fiction with notions of loss resulting from Black Americans’ historical, cultural, and aesthetic dislocation and its ramifications, Jazz is a novel in which she attempts to reclaim a uniquely African-American tradition and to reconceptualize the Jazz Age, in black terms. She does this by undercutting Fitzgerald’s popularized version about this age in the glamorous and lavish lifestyle and settings of the rich as portrayed in, for
instance, *The Great Gatsby*, as well as the postwar euphoria that is found in white history. In contrast, Morrison’s focus is on the places and the lived reality of the people that made jazz possible—“the poor black ghetto in the Harlem.” The music of the 1920s thus situate the narrative in a specific cultural and historical moment, when a black aesthetic style was gaining ground in cities like New Orleans and New York. Harlem, during the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro era, is a setting that produced notable 1920s jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, and Duke Ellington. However, Morrison does not mention any of these famous names—instead, she foregrounds the more ‘anonymous’ street musicians of the City and their music which fill the streets, day and night.

Thus, firstly and most crucially, Morrison affirms and acknowledges the African American heritage of *Jazz*, by putting the focus on ordinary people, who collectively create and reflect community. By shifting the emphasis to the black community of the New York of this age, Morrison calls attention to the indigenous original context of jazz music and to the evolutionary changes that represents more than mere matters of fashion. She traces the emergence of the era of the “New Negro” culture through the stories of characters like Joe Trace, a member of the working class whose status is very different from the glamorous
position of writers and musicians patronized by the whites, and through
the music that expressed this culture. The novel explores how blacks
struggled to reconcile the conflicting experiences of hope and
dissillusionment, excitement and boredom, novelty and misery that they
found in the cities of the North. Through a textual record of Joe and
Violet Trace’s migratory experiences, Morrison reveals the course of
evolving cultural and personal identities as they undergo the
transformation that accompanies migration. The change that confronted
these migrants forced them to reformulate their values and way of life.
This change is embodied by the sounds of jazz which, by virtue of its
defining characteristics as a fast-paced, chaotic, unpredictable music well
reflects the “uncertainty and unpredictability of people’s lives in the
1920s.”

Thus, in Jazz, Morrison uses jazz as a metaphor for emerging
cultural values of the city.

The fact that the novel has grown out of an oral tradition of
storytelling means that it does not have a linear plot. Instead, as a
collection of story segments, which go backward and forward in time, it
unfolds in a manner that is not chronological. Using the meandering
technique she often employs, Morrison allows the story to develop
through several digressions and sub-plots. Such a pattern of storytelling,
while having its roots in the oral communicative tradition, also fits in
with the structural composition of a piece of jazz music. In jazz music too, the initial melody introduced is subsequently unraveled, commented upon, and further embellished. The jazzman improvises on the same piece by changing the music’s direction and even creating a disconnection from the original piece.

In Morrison’s novel, we can see this kind of improvisation in the way she establishes the narrative line with an oral recapitulation of a love story, a triangular one involving a middle-aged couple Joe and Violet Trace and Joe’s 18-year-old lover, Dorcas. The very first paragraph of the novel reveals how Joe kills Dorcas and how Violet “went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face” (J, p.4). Thereafter, like the performers in a jazz band who take turns to improvise upon the musical theme, the rest of the novel replays this initial ‘basic theme’ in different ways, with varying explanations and versions told by the characters. Each time a new player repeats a jazz riff, a new surprising and distinct rendering of the theme emerges. Likewise, a new story segment in the novel will unfold an unexpected outcome of the Violet-Joe-Dorcas theme.

Fragmented storytelling is a characteristic of the oral narrative used by Morrison to redefine the structure of her novels. Each of these episodic fragments shed more light on the main theme since they are in fact, extensions of it, and connected to it, in jazz terminology, by the
same connected riff. The link between some of these episodes with the main theme is not difficult to recognize, such as, for example, the story of Dorcas and her troubled childhood in New York, or Joe Trace’s past in Vienna, Virginia. Others, however, present initial difficulties, as they seem to take off in a completely different direction. A significant example is the telling of the story of Golden Gray, which at first seems unrelated to the main plotlines. In between these versions are the solo statements by the unnamed narrator.

Fragmentation is seen as an aspect of jazz music, which Morrison applies to Jazz with regard to the blank spaces between the untitled, subdivided portions of the sections. Each blank space can be seen to mirror the improvisation technique of jazz music: each narrative monologue (chapter) functions as instrumental solos, a different tale about a different character linked by the riff of the narrative voice. The breaks between the chapters (like the blank spaces and pages) punctuate the structure, and like the improvising musician who alters the music, Morrison pushes the narrative in a slightly different direction. In both cases, this creates a disjunction from the original piece/theme. In Jazz, each of the sections of the novel relates a different tale about a different character’s life and thoughts. Consequently, each chapter can be read as a solo played by a different instrument. Each time that Morrison hands the narrative over to
a character, it is as though she is giving him or her a solo over the background form of the story, as if the novel were itself a piece of jazz music. However, the first sentence of the next chapter picks up on an idea, word, or phrase from the last sentence of the preceding chapter providing a continuing link between them. We observe, for example, that section four ends with "...in a hat in the morning" (J, p.87) and the next section starts with "...the hat pushed back" (J, p.89). By employing such a linkage between her chapters, Morrison, as Rodriguez points out, also provides the reader with a "rhythmic flow" or "transitional slurs" that urge the reader to read the book without a pause after finishing a chapter.

In *Jazz*, "the central characters take part in telling the story, even the dead girl Dorcas." Besides the human protagonists in the story, there are also non-human characters, such as the City, which is frequently personified. In addition, there is the narrative Voice her/him/itself- a hybrid, androgynous creature, half artifact, and half-human whose point of view is as important as those of the other characters, for a single musician never "dominates the whole performance." Thus, the novel is filled with contesting, complementary, and competing voices that is similar to what takes place in a jam session. The various stories and voices that the narrator evokes reflect this kind of performance in which each musician adds his own attitude, perspective, and tone. In this way,
Jazz becomes a text with a polyphonic narrative structure similar to the telling of the same story from different perspectives or the cross connecting of different storylines found in Morrison’s previous novels. As a result, the relation between music and storytelling becomes clearer when we equate jazz improvisations to storytelling.

Jazz also manifests itself in Morrison’s novel through stylistic techniques such as repetition, which according to Alan Rice “foregrounds the musicality of her novels and makes them resemble the involved, convoluted, non-linear, and improvisatory solos of the African-American musicians she values so much.” \(^55\) Through the technique of the riff, Morrison uses repeated words, phrases, and motifs in the novel to create the effect of riffs, which provide a stable infrastructure within an otherwise meandering narrative. A sophisticated system of repeated motifs is at work in all her novels, some motifs functioning merely as ornaments—while others carry thematic content.

The characteristic riffs of repeated phrases and repetition of even whole sentences are found throughout the novel. The moments before Joe Trace shoots Dorcas at a party illustrates this technique. Even while dancing with Acton, her new boyfriend, Dorcas knows at the back of her mind that Joe is coming for her. Her repeated words “He is coming for me” fulfill her role as the “prey” that Joe Trace is stalking. Other phrases
such as “I know,” Maybe tonight” and “I know the words by heart,”
sound like riffs which support a solo. This element of repetition that
appears in jazz is utilized to draw attention to a line, phrase, or particular
chord that drives the song and serves to underline the importance of the
song that is being played. For instance, in Jazz, the oft-repeated theme of
orphaned children, of familial and personal fragmentation is the driving
force that causes each of the characters, Violet, Joe, Dorcas, to act and
interact as they do.

Like a jazz pianist who can, in the deftest, most subtle ways, give a
new theme, new harmonies or a different ambience, Morrison
incorporates the illusion of one of jazz’s most characteristic elements,
improvisation. The most important aspect of Morrison’s storytelling style
that is particularly jazz-like is the narrative voice she employs. Several
critics have pointed out that the narrator is a jazz soloist who improvises
on the basic theme and thereafter invents, elaborates and explores new
motifs and ideas. Moreover, the oral and aural quality of Morrison’s
writing is manifested in the use of ‘whispering’ and gossipy narrators to
tell the Violet-Joe-Dorcas story. The conversational tone of their
storytelling gives the story not only the quality of hearsay but also
indicates the cultural context of her novel. The opening word/sound
“Sth” read as the sound of sucking teeth, often made in judgment on
some person or event in African-American communities, sets off the narrative of an impatient and familiar storyteller:

Sth, I know that woman. [...] I know her husband, too. He 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. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. (J, p.3)

Morrison, commenting on the improvisational nature of jazz, says that in jazz “the performance is open to change and the other musicians have to respond quickly to that change.” Consequently, in Jazz, she creates a narrator who is not sure where the story is going. She recreates the unpredictability of jazz with the use of an unreliable narrator who constantly sends the reader on false tracks. Just like the melody in jazz compositions, which tends to dissolve away before returning, Morrison’s narrator cannot foresee the development of the action in the novel. It does have expectations, however. It expects the outcome of the Felice-Joe-Violet triangle to be the same as the earlier triangle of Dorcas-Joe-Violet. When the story is set up in the same way, however, the song plays differently. Joe, Violet, and Felice “put their lives together” in ways that the speaking voice of the text does not anticipate:

It infuriates me to discover again how unreliable I am. [...] I had thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. (J, p.220)
As Morrison says, "when the question becomes whether the narrator was right in his or her expectations of exactly what the story was, that is the 'melody' being taken away." She suggests here that the direction of the book does not depend only on her own will, but that the characters themselves, as well as external factors play a role in the story's unpredictability.

Moreover, since the narrative voice is engaged in the creative process of storytelling, it reacts against and responds to other voices, picks up new motifs on the way, corrects and even contradicts itself. A telling example of this is seen in the structural revision of the narrator’s presentation of the Golden Gray story in the manner of revising involved in jazz improvisation. The narrator, who gives two versions of Golden Gray’s arrival at the cabin of the man he believes to be his father, improvises on this recounting. The second recounting that begins with "I like to think of him that way," soon changes to "What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly?" (J, p.178, p.190) Thereafter, a third version of the same story reveals a more understanding and accommodating narrator.

Hence, Morrison’s challenging concept of an unreliable narrator, who, like jazz, changes its position and face so often forces the reader to come into the text to make judgments or draw conclusions for
him/herself. The implied meaning is that instead of relying on such an unreliable narrator for a true and accurate account, readers must create their own meanings from what they have understood is the story. As an art form that arises from the oral African-American tradition, Morrison makes provision here for the presentation of multiple voices, each one distinctive and original, needed to assemble the entire story. Similarly, as an improvised creation, jazz relies on the interaction between the members of the band themselves, as also between the performers and the audiences. Morrison’s novel, structurally replete with sequences of call-and-response patterns throughout, makes the final call to the reader:

If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.” (J, p.229)

The calls-and-responses, which echo throughout Jazz, in the storyline, in the telling of the story, in the characters, and in the music, culminate in the novel’s final call to the reader/ listener to participate in the “performance,” an integral element not only in jazz but also in Morrison’s own storytelling style. Morrison’s insistence upon the reader as “part of the creative process” is one more link to the oral tradition and its manifestation in jazz. Just as a jazz audience may influence the performance by its response, so are our readings of her works shaped by what we bring to it. Thus, its plea for a response to its call: “If I were able
I'd say it. Say make me, remake me” (J, p.229), demands that the reader be active, in the same way that jazz music demands its listeners to be active.

In Jazz, “we are listening to the voice of Toni Morrison as the griot, the storyteller of the African Diaspora, whose function is to act as a skilled mediator of his/her community’s (hi) story, as the voice of the blues men and women or of the jazz horn players. It is the voice of the whole African-African American community.” Yet, the spaces opened up by the narrator calls to all readers, whatever their ethnic background, to participate in the making of the story. Since jazz is about the people who play it, it is therefore, a music of, for, and by the people. In this way, the jazz paradigm that Morrison appropriates generates a unique model of democracy, demonstrating its capacity to be inclusive and interactive while at the same time respecting difference.

Thus, particularly, for dispossessed people and communities struggling for self-repossession, the call to ‘make and remake’ themselves through improvisation, represents “a healing act of self-repossession, which heals the pain, chases the blues away.” The greatest contribution jazz, can make to such an act is its intimacy, its personal scale. For, not only does it happen to be the toughest music around, jazz is also the most human. By implication, the same could be said of novel writing, and the
risks Morrison takes with language, narrative construction, and most of the contrivances of literary convention in order to communicate the most profound secrets of the human heart:

“That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I wanted 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. (J, p.229)

*Jazz* (Part 2): *Singing a Blues theme*

Although, most critics of *Jazz* have accounted for the role of jazz in the novel, few have commented on Morrison’s complex interweaving of the tropes of the blues, jazz and Harlem itself. In considering this aspect, Roberta Rubenstein in her essay, “Singing the blues/reclaiming jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning,” calls attention to the ways in which Morrison thematically “sings the blues” of black experience while using a literary technique that is blues based and a narrative structure that mirrors the characteristics of a jazz performance.\(^6^2\) Thus, although *Jazz* is set in an era of emerging cultural optimism for African Americans and this optimism is sounded early on in the narrator’s celebrations of city life, beneath the surface of the characters’ lives plays “a blues theme of “complicated anger”(59) interwoven with strands of
danger, sorrow, and loss.” In Jazz, Morrison captures these complex relationships between these two forms of the same music through a storytelling technique that uses the style and structure of blues and jazz including its emotional moods and contents.

In Jazz, as Inger-Anne Softing observes, “All the characters and episodes convey the blues and its medium is the ‘I.’ The blues is to the ‘I’ an almost gothic experience; dark, horrible, mysterious, and yet strangely sensual, and the story he tells is a tragic love story that ends in bloodshed.” In traditional blues songs, the singer is usually the subject, the “I” who tells her/his own story or experience. In Jazz, however, an unidentified narrator tells the story of each character in the story. It seems to thrive on pain and on the lyrical laments of all the voices telling their painful stories: “Pain. I seem to have affection, a kind of sweettooth for it” (J, p.219). And pain is, both a fundamental concern of Jazz and a vital theme of the blues. The interplay between music and storytelling is most apparent here, as music seems to function as a substitute for the narrative voice illustrating what Morrison calls “the voice of the talking book.”

Morrison underscores her representations of loss of memory through the related themes of motherhood and orphan hood in Jazz. When applying the concept of turning oral blues into written blues she formulates a complex strategy that is an adaptation of blues and jazz
techniques. Besides Call and Response patterns, she utilizes repetition and redundancy to draw attention to a line, phrase, or particular chord that drives the storyline. As such, the theme of motherless children is the driving force that causes Dorcas, Violet and Joe to interact with one another as they do. The destructive influence of racism and oppression on the black family is manifested in Jazz by the almost-total absence of the black family. Morrison’s mothers previously incomparable in their strength and endurance, succumb to the social, economic, and political forces of history in Jazz. Joe, Violet, and Dorcas lose their mothers to insanity, suicide, and murder. In the same way that each of these characters have lost their parents, Morrison makes the argument that the African-American community as a whole experienced a sort of “orphanhood” during this turbulent period.

The absence of a strong parental presence in Jazz ties together many of Morrison’s characters and connect their shared sadness to one cause. Raised by aunts, grandparents and adoptive parents, Violet, Joe and Dorcas all experience feelings of displacement and loneliness, and their struggle to find solace from their blues is the central concern of the novel. For instance, Violet is the main character through whom Morrison articulates her negotiation of the concept of romantic love, jealousy, and community as well as domestic violence that was integral to the blues. As
an orphan deserted by her father during adolescence, and abandoned by her mother who commits suicide by jumping into a well, Violet grew up convinced that she never wanted children of her own. In 1906, Joe and Violet take a train to New York, joining a steady migration of black Southerners. Excited and challenged by the rigours of “citylife,” the couple decides that they did not want children and Violet’s three miscarriages “were more inconvenience than loss.” By the time she was forty, however, Violet’s “mother-hunger” had become “a panting, unmanageable craving.” Plainly, Violet “has the blues”: she is the silent, lonely woman craving the child she once aborted, who sleeps with dolls and even tries to steal a child. Her response to the news of her husband’s affair is a jealous rage that propels her to cut up the face of her husband’s dead girlfriend at her funeral.

Violet’s blues lament is clearly the stuff of the “classic blues,” the urban form popularized by African-American women blues singers like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith. Following the women’s classic blues tradition of identifying the relation between sexuality and violence, and the blues theme of violent revenge, women arming themselves with knives, is an important image in Jazz. In Jazz, as Alice Manfred considers the newspaper headlines detailing murders, betrayals, rapes and suicides, she thinks about the violence that seems to
characterize the era. She maligns Violet as “a brutal woman black as soot known to carry a knife... the star of her niece’s funeral.” (J, p.75)

“Women with knives” becomes a species of women in which Alice includes anonymous, historic women who attacked men and “left the razor where it lodged,” (J, p.77) and encoded in many a blues is the rage of women against male infidelity and desertion. In a passage that employs call-and-response techniques that is reminiscent of the blues as well as traditional congregational participatory practices, the narrator poses a series of questions and answers concerning the “unarmed women” who did not retaliate like the “armed” ones:

Who were the unarmed ones? Those who found protection in church and the judging, angry God whose wrath in their behalf was too terrible to bear contemplation. He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them. He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? Yes but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. (J, pp.77-78)

But despite herself, Alice, whose own husband had cheated on her with another woman, shares Violet’s desire for vengeance as her vision of a horse trampling her husband’s lover to death illustrates.

However, fundamental to the blues form is also the transmission of cultural knowledge and values. Embedded in traditional blues lyrics is a system of folk knowledge and cultural values that can lead to easing pain
or grief. Although blues verses are viewed from the personal angle of the singer, they also have within them, advice, and counsel for others that stem from the singer’s experience. Thus, when Violet wonders whether she should stay with Joe or leave him, Alice is able to advise Violet to reclaim herself: “Nobody’s asking you to take it. I’m sayin make it, make it!” (J, p.113)

When the two women talk in Alice’s apartment, “something opened up.” (J, p.83) This suggests the possibility of recognizing each other’s subjectivity. Violet must first see herself as a subject; she must have a consciousness of herself not as an appendage of the male but as a power in her own right. It follows then, that women must first recognize each other as subjects. Significantly, too, they share laughter. When Alice accidentally burns a hole in the shirt that she was ironing, the laughter they share is therapeutic. Violet is freed from the female blues narrative of revenge to which she had been clinging:

Crumpled over, shoulders shaking, Violet thought about how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The sight of herself trying to do something bluesy, something hep, fumbling with the knife, too late anyway…She laughed till she coughed […] (J, p.114)

Standing at the blues crossroads, she is able to achieve the necessary distance from the lack and loss expressed earlier in her blues narrative. This is nothing but assertion of ownership and control of one’s bodies,
that is the underlying tenet of blues wisdom, which stems from being able to be brutally and painfully honest with oneself.

In Jazz, while the “blues” of black experience reveals the painful realities of the divisions fracturing African-American society, Morrison restructures the blues into jazz, by transforming blues materials into something that can provide alternative possibilities. By grounding her novel in the traditions of jazz music Morrison seeks to use it as a vehicle to heal the characters in her novel that are afflicted with the blues. Hence, the reconciliation of Joe and Violet becomes possible. By the end of the novel, the healing triangle of Joe-Violet-Felice replaces the wounded love triangle of Joe-Violet-Dorcas. Felice’s entry into the Trace apartment reestablishes the exchange of stories that bring the Trace couple together again. In the end, one of their necessary rituals for the night is a whispered dialogue “under the covers” as they reach “for something beyond... underneath the tissue” (J, p.228). Felice also reestablishes laughter, sustenance and music in the Trace household. Her entrance with an “Okeh record” and a butcher’s parcel of “stewmeat” are followed by a Victrola, additional records and a bird.

They are eating again and dancing, and Felice becomes a witness and participant to the healing process of Joe and Violet, who overcome their pain and connect through the music on a level that changes the
situation, a change that is embodied by the protean sounds of jazz. This music represents an original African-American response to the need for community cohesion. Like storytelling, black music making is collective, improvisational and was a source of cultural unification. Morrison attempts to recreate the unity that jazz had once engendered and nourished, by transposing into fiction not only its techniques, but also the spirit of jazz itself. In that jazz consists in expressing and emphasizing difference in collectivity, or what Houston Baker terms, “identity within difference,” it is always open to response and change by the community. In this sense, the experience of reading *Jazz* will also at once be the same and different for every reader of Morrison’s reading community.

*Paradise: Salvatory Music*

Music in *Paradise* differs from that in Morrison’s other novels. One of the most obvious references to music in the novel is “radio music” or songs played on the radio. This music functions primarily as a means of escape, of pushing aside the past. Mavis fleeing from the fear of her family’s revenge after the accidental deaths of her two babies in the car, tries to escape her dreadful memories and guilty feelings by listening to the music droning on her car radio. Listening also to the voice of Bennie, one of the hitchhikers she picks up on the way carries her through the long journey. Bennie’s songs of “true love, false love, redemption; songs
of unreasonable joy” (P, p.35) help to channel her locked-up grief and ease the pain she feels:

Mile after mile rolled by urged and eased by the gorgeous ache in Bennie’s voice.” (P, p.35)

At the Convent where Mavis finds temporary refuge, the absence of a radio or any other means of music-making makes it difficult for her to concentrate on anything. Sitting in the Convent’s peaceful kitchen, Mavis finds it difficult to bear the silence without the sound of music to keep her going:

Now the radio was across the field, down one road, then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was…nothing. Just an absence, which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio. From the table where she sat admiring her busy hands, the radio absence spread out.” (P, p.42)

For Mavis, who is in a state of denial, music is the only way to drown the unbearable sounds of laughing and singing children, of “imagining baby’s singing.” (P, p.42) On the road, after Bennie has left her, she too sings along with the radio, “mourning” her own “inferior rendition” (P, p.35), rather than the deaths of her children.

Radio music also functions as means to effect reconciliation between the women at the Convent. The communal caring the women who land up there receives, does not homogenize them. They remain distinct from each other and at times even demonstrate unconcealed
dislike for each other, particularly Mavis and Gigi, who from the first, never got along. Their aversion for each other culminates in a brawl in which they exchange blows, “their bodies roiling in the dust and crushing weeds.” (P, p.168) However, music, in conjunction with food, offers a possibility for psychic healing to take place. The preparation and sharing of meals, described with concrete, sensual details, function in the novel as an instance of a kind of community that is firmly grounded in the material realm. After the physical fight between Mavis and Gigi, all of the women unite over food: “The fear, the bickering, the nausea, the awful dirt fight, the tears in the dark—all of the day’s unruly drama dissipated in the pleasure of chewing food” together. (P, p.179) And when Gigi finds the station she is looking for on her wide-band radio, and starts dancing to the soothing sounds of “Killing me Softly,” (the ironical title notwithstanding) the others “all followed suit. Even Mavis. First apart, imagining partners. Then partnered, imagining each other.” (P, p.179) Antagonisms and hierarchies dissipate through the process of caring for their bodies and psyches communally.

In many cultures, music and dance are often seen as empowering activities, offering a forum for individual self-expression, or acting like a religious ritual that binds the community and renews the individual spiritually. In African culture, inherent in the act of music and dancing
are, in varying degrees, self-affirmation, spiritual renewal, and communal bonding, suggesting music and dance's ability to heal the mind/body split. As John S. Mbiti indicates, music, singing, and dance together are used "in all activities of African life: in cultivating the fields, fishing, herding, performing ceremonies, praising rulers and warriors, hushing babies to sleep..." Mbiti testifies to dance celebrations as also dissolving barriers between individuals: "The dancing and rejoicing strengthen community solidarity and emphasize the corporateness of the whole group."

In *Paradise*, although the Convent women take an important step towards forming a caring communal space through the agencies of food, music, and dance, the relief they experience is only temporary. They have still not dealt with the root causes of their problems and the memories of their tortured pasts are but momentarily silenced. Morrison makes a distinction between passive listening to music and the active creation of music. The women's reactions to "radio music, record music—music already dead" (P, p.111) is not empowering enough for self-discovery, and self-acceptance, necessary to achieve the spiritual renewal and communal bonding they are each in quest of. Morrison suggests that they must first learn to create their own music, affective music that is therapeutic and life giving before they can be truly empowered. For, although the girls continue to listen to radio music, they remain detached
and isolated from each other, until Consolata tired of listening to their indulgent self-deceptive dreams, takes control to alter the situation.

Music in Ruby consists mostly of religious hymns and choral pieces, as all other music in their eyes, is “filthy music” that is equivalent to “[w]ickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liqour for lunch and dope for dinner.” (P, p.274) The communal and individually affirming elements of song and dance for participants and spectators alike in most communities are not witnessed in Ruby’s dogmatic and puritanical society. Even at the wedding ceremony of K.D. and Arnette, what should have been an occasion for individual and communal rejoicing and strengthening of ties, becomes an event for airing individual world-views and denominational beliefs. What is revealed are the differences that exist between the most powerful men living in Ruby, focusing attention on a town and structure that privilege men and fathers as well as a religious structure that is itself deeply patriarchal. As hitherto hidden resentments and emotions build up and threaten to erupt, the music played by Kate Golightly, on the Church’s organ provides a much-needed emotional outlet for the tension generated. As the music begins, “Soane cried. Partly at the sad bright smiles of the bride and groom, partly in dread of the malice, set roaming now, and on its way to her house.” (P, p.155) Thereafter, the congregation takes
refuge in their members singing “duets” or choruses. Nevertheless, the original salvatory intentions of these sacred hymns are emptied of their significance and power, as they only serve to cover up awkwardness and tenseness of the situation.

Morrison provides for the seemingly peaceful religious music of Ruby to come into conflict with the “raucous music” blaring from the radio played by the young people near the site of the Oven. The screaming sound of Otis Redding “obliterate[ed] the hymns quiet plea. Inside, outside on down the road the beat and the heat were ruthless.” (P, p.157) The different types of music symbolize the gap between the generations in Ruby, evidenced in the disparity in musical tastes. The confrontation between the two generations and the conflict between the Convent women and the town’s inhabitants is figured in the contest between the loud modern music from the radio and traditional Church music. The patriarchs of Ruby regard the playing of this kind of music as open rebellion. Earlier, Deacon Morgan voices the older generation’s disapproval of their youths’ new tastes and habits, including the listening of radio music at the Oven’s site, which is profane in his opinion:

The Oven whose every brick had live chords praising His name was now subject to radio music—music already dead when it filtered through a black wire trailing from Anna’s store to the Oven like a snake.” (P, p.111)
The reference to “snake” obviously reflects his equation of this type of music to “devil music” often associated with blues and pop music. Just as the elders deny the younger generation a place in the town’s history by the silencing of their voices, so too are they denied the right to listen to or make music of their own choice. No wonder, they are a deadened and detached lot condemned to listening to “music already dead.” (P, p.111)

Through the metaphors of song and dance, Morrison depicts the Convent women’s quest for identity and self-expression and the results of this quest, including spiritual renewal, self-acceptance, and newly defined identities. Consolata initiates the communal healing ritual that will free the women to redefine and be themselves. She begins with ritualistic storytelling telling the women lying on the cold cellar floor of her experiences with Piedade and the magical Brazilian city of the same name, “a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children.[...] She told them of a woman who always sang but never said a word.” (P, p.263-264) Her narration unleashes the stories of the other women as through “loud dreaming” they each begin to recount their personal blues, testified to and witnessed by the others. The healing of the Convent women is accomplished through the cleansing ritual of water, dance, and music in symbiotic relationship. These women in quest of themselves can now understand and express
their multiple selves by letting go of their traumatic past. This is described through their dance in the rain. As the novel states:

There are great rivers in the world and on their banks and the edges of oceans children thrill to water. In places where the rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of the holy women dancing in hot sweet rain.” (P, p.283)

Mbiti states that the borderlands between the human world and the spirit world also merge in the dancing or religious mediums -- often women -- who communicate with spirits or are possessed by them. In *Paradise*, almost like a cathartic religious ritual, dance helps the women shake off despair and isolation by enabling them to communicate more effectively with each other and with their private selves. Through the language of music and dance, Morrison signifies her character's self-discoveries, self-expression, and self-endorsement. Thus, she poetically presents the women celebrating their kinship and support of each other as they dance the blues of race and gender:

Seneca embraced and finally let go of a dark morning in state housing. Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white that never should have been stained. Mavis moved in the shudder of Sharon petals tickling her skin. Pallas, delivered of a delicate son, held him close while the rain rinsed away a scary woman on an escalator and all fear of black water. Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden was the most furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant. Seneca and Grace danced together, then parted to skip through fresh mud. Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby's head, swayed like a frond. (P, p.283)
The women celebrate their newfound freedom by listening to more stories of “the singing woman who never spoke.” (P, p.285) Consolata’s storytelling is suffused with images of water, food, and song:

We walked on the shore walk. She bathed me in the emerald water. Her voice made proud women weep in the streets. Coins fell from the fingers of artists and policemen and the country’s greatest chefs begged us to eat their food. Piedade had songs that could still a wave, make it pause in its curl listening to language it had not heard since the sea opened. Shepherd with colored birds on their shoulders came down from mountains to remember their lives in her songs. Travelers refused to board homebound ships while she sang. At night she took stars out of her hair and wrapped me in its wool. Her breath smelled of pineapple and cashews. (P, p.284-285)

Soon after, the women at the Convent are killed, but the novel suggests that they have experienced the salvatory quality of music that is associated with the divine. Through their empowering renditions of their personal blues, they are able to create their own music and transform it into a song fit for paradise. Morrison ends the novel with a presentation of the hereafter in which “a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman’s lap.” (P, p.318) In this paradise, however, the “solace” of Piedade’s song can exist side by side with sound of the “small dead radio play[ing] the quiet surf.” (P, p.318)

As an African-American woman writer who has found her own voice, Toni Morrison uses themes and metaphors of storytelling, song and
dance, and evokes the African belief in the power of all three mediums to
dissipate boundaries. Moreover, the musical and dance rhythms that
pervade her prose, frees the text from traditional language, structures, and
genres. Through the combination of music and storytelling, she recreates
new means to fuse the written and oral words, incorporating them into a
hybrid form that transcends them both.

Epigraphs:
• Ntozake Shange, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo, (New York: St. Martin’s 1982), p.27.

Endnotes and References
1 Thomas Leclair, “The Language must not Sweat: A Conversation with
Toni Morrison,” in Gates and Appiah, eds., Toni Morrison: Critical
2 Kay Bonetti, Interview with Toni Morrison, (Columbia, MO:
American Audio Prose Library, 1983).
3 Qtd. in Bessie W. Jones, and Audrey L. Vinson, The World of Toni
Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism, (Dubuque:
4 Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as foundation,” Black Women
5 Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness
6 Ibid, p.221.


9 LeClair, p.371.


22 Wegs, p.212.


24 Ibid, p.278.

25 Levine, p.278.

26 Skerrett, p.198.

27 Wegs, p.219.
The Talking blues was a style of rhythmic speech or near-speech where the melody is free but the rhythm is strict. The music genre or technique developed in the blues in the early 20th century from influences including African music, British folk song, and the music-hall stage. (van der Merwe 1989:146–148).

Wegs, p.222.


Cf. Levine, pp.51-52.

Bob Marley, one of the greatest Reggae artists, who innovatively combined sounds and ideas from religious slave spirituals with his own unique Jamaican music to form a legendary musical genre.

www.lyricsfreak.com/bob+marley/redemption+song_20021829.html

In “trick[ing] the words so that their syllables yield up other meanings” (B, p.108), the prisoners also signify on their masters by manipulating meaning.

Paul Oliver, “Blues Fell,” pp.43-44.


Rice, p.423.


Rice, p.430.


The term “Harlem Renaissance” (1917-35), refers to the flowering of African-American cultural production that occurred in New York in the 1920s and early 1930s. It also marks the rise of the “New Negro” (a phrase coined by Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes scholar), an articulate, sophisticated bourgeois class of black intellectuals immersed in cultural and aesthetic pursuits. As Harlem Renaissance artists articulated individual and collective visions of black identity, they were plagued by conflicting demands that they use their art either to
distance themselves from or bind themselves to white American culture. The formation of subjectivity of the Negro and that of his identity was the dynamic force of the Jazz Age.


51 Repetition, both in jazz and in Morrison’s storytelling, occurs as riffs—short melodic or harmonic phrases repeated in given intervals throughout the song.


53 Softing, p.94.


55 Rice, p.424.

56 For instance, see Rubenstein “Singing the blues/reclaiming jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning,” *Mosaic*, (Winnipeg) 31.2 (1998), pp.152-55; Paquet-Deyris, “Toni Morrison’s Jazz and the City,” *African American Review*, 35.2 (Summer 2001), pp.221-23; Paula Gallant Eckard in “The inter-play of Music, Language, and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz.*” *CLA Journal* 38.1 (1994), contends that the novel’s narrative voice is that of jazz itself (pp.16-17); Jan Furman in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), reads the voice of the book as “the author incarnate[ed]” (p.100), Rodriguez identifies it with “the voice of the city” (p.148).

57 Rodriguez likens it to “the muted soundsplash of a brush against a snare drum” p.733; Pici recalls the sound of a ride cymbal—the principal cymbal of jazz drum rhythms. p.388]
The crossroads—and the decisions made and entities met there—are a common theme in literature, pushing readers to examine the choices and encounters that shape life experience. The theme has also been explored in blues music, most famously by Robert Johnson, who, according to bluesman Son House, must have “sold his soul to play like that.” Author Ed Morales has claimed that Yoruba mythology played a part in early blues, citing Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" as a "thinly veiled reference to Eleggua, the orisha in charge of the crossroads" ("The Latin Beat" 2003, p.277). The Crossroads is an important part of Congo and Yoruba theology and refers to the space
where the mundane and the sacred meet. Crossroads theology survived in southern mythology and folk knowledge and was recorded by the blues.

69 General Phonographic Corporation’s Okeh labels was among the pioneers to make early blues recordings of Mamie Smith and later, Bessie Smith, during the brief boom for the blues in the 20s and 30s, when the ‘race’ record, industry (discs specifically for sale to non-Caucasians) found a market for its ‘race’ labels.


