

Narration and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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“I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.”

(“The Thunder, Perfect Mind”, *The Nag Hammadi*)

“The persona of the novel is mysterious, and it is not always apparent whether it is the narrator/ persona talking or remembering events, or whether it is one of the characters.”

(Ward Welty 226)

Jazz is told by contradictory, multiple narrative voices. Instead of giving the reader one omniscient narrator, Toni Morrison chooses to use two narrators: One gossipy, overtly hostile voice which presents itself as omniscient; admitting only towards the end of the text to have based all of its' conclusions on what it can observe (*Jazz* 220-1); And another narrative voice which often follows closely on the heels of the first, makes no claims to complete knowledge, involves no insults to the characters, yet is involved in framing most of their conversations, thoughts and feelings. Both the open 'flourish' of the first narrator on the one hand, and the “complicated and inaccessible” insights of the second narrator, on the other hand, concurrently comprise the jazz music of *Jazz* (1). To create an omniscient narrator who is both first-person and third-person omniscient is jazz-like because this combination “symbolize an incredible kind of improvisation” (Micucci 275). We can say that Morrison draws upon jazz music as “the structuring principle” for *Jazz*. The novel is told as if it were playing a jazz composition. “A disembodied narrator slips easily and guilelessly from third-person all-knowingness to first-person lyricism, without ever relaxing its grip upon our imagination” (Gates 53-54). The narrator behaves like a jazz musician. In an interview with Lynn Neary of WNPR, Morrison herself declares that she does not want her reader to “get any comfort or safety in knowing the personality of the narrator or whether the narrator is indeed a man or a woman or black or white or is a person at all...” In fact, she manipulates gender coding in speech patterns and in style.

The first narrator merely describes the lives of the characters and assumes their thoughts and feelings (*Jazz* 220). It mistakenly speculates about the predictability of the characters while they were in fact “busy being original, complicated and changeable” (220). As Charlie Parker is quoted as saying, “music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live

it, it won't come out of your horn" (Cone 5). The silence, then of the marchers, and the second layer of narrative in *Jazz*, comes "out of the horn" of the characters of the text more than does the first (5). While employing a similar form, the content and tenor of the first narrator betrays its admitted position as an observer. Paula Gallant Eckhard identifies the music itself as the novel's narrator:

Like a jazz performance, [the narrator] creates a montage effect in its storytelling. It improvises on itself, utilizes the language of music and syncopated rhythms, and sings classic blues themes of love and loss [...] Music, language, and narrative come together in *Jazz*, and their interplay provides the real dynamics of the text. (11)

Carolyn M. Jones argues that *Jazz* is "a site of multiple voices" (494). Yet the implications of such multiplicity have been largely unexamined. The novel begins with the voice of this 'narrating I': "Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too" (*Jazz* 3). When readers encounter this first sentence, they accept it as the voice of the narrator. The knowledge of Violet, 'that woman' to whom it refers, and of her husband, Joe, whom it also claims to 'know,' proves to be cosmetic and in fact erroneous (3). The narrator knows neither Violet nor Joe. Yet, its' layout of the basic story does provide the motif for the novel and open the opportunity for the improvisational additions of the rest of the band.

Caroline Rody says that in *Jazz* Morrison plays "with the convention of the omniscient speaker" (621). In most literature, the omniscient narrator is a naturalized convention. But, in *Jazz*, the omniscient narrator's knowledge and power are undermined by the "force of desire, specifically, the desire for human relationship" (622). *Jazz* humanizes and therefore problematizes the all-knowing omniscient narrator. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out in his review of *Jazz*, the multiple and self-contradictory omniscient narrative voice is "indeterminate: it is neither male nor female; neither young nor old; neither rich nor poor" (54). The narrator collaborates with the writer, as Rody states, it is "[a] voice that evokes its partnership with a writer—who may fall asleep after supper though she had promised to get back to the writing—is one that insists on its separate identity, even its personality, while indicating too its dependence on a relationship with a creative counterpart" (626).

The novel is a multifaceted narrative evolving from the early-twentieth-century migration to New York of a seemingly uncomplicated southern couple. They appear to join the hundreds of thousands of black people who left rural areas for urban areas, the South for the North, between 1890 and 1930; that migration led in part to the Harlem Renaissance. Violet and Joe Trace are thus expecting to improve their economic condition just as other migrants so hoped. The unexpected stresses of the city, however, complicate their lives.

The narrator's voice introduces the three main characters, Violet, Joe and Dorcas and establishes the City in 1926 as the setting that determines the course of events in much the same way that the harmonic structure of a tonal musical composition proscribes the possibilities for melodic variation:

Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. And what goes on its blocks and lots and side streets is anything the strong can think of and the weak will admire. All you have to do is heed the design—the way it's laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow. (*Jazz* 8)

Although it is obvious that Violet, Joe and Dorcas bring altogether unique elements into the story, the narrator exercises unrelenting control over how much of their personal stories will be revealed. The result is a blend of interacting voices:

Paradoxically, the jazz narrator reflects both a single entity and multiple ones. It speaks in varying tones and rhythms that convey the presence of different voices in much the same way that a jazz performance is rendered through multiple instruments. The voices play off one another and individual differences are sometimes apparent. At the same time, the voices are blended within the text to give the impression of a single entity. (Eckhard 13)

The opening section for the second narrator begins at the bottom of page nine. While the majority of the correctives to the initial presentation of Joe and Violet occur throughout the text, the presentation of their response to the presence of Dorcas, the dead girl's photograph in their home, is corrected by the second narrator without reference or attention pointed to the erroneous conclusion of the first. The first narrator claims that "both [Violet] and Joe looked at [the picture] in bewilderment" (*Jazz* 6). The second narrator, however, provides both Joe and Violet's differing perspectives of the photo, and the setting and motives for their viewing of it. "If the tiptoeer is Joe Trace [...] then the face stares at him without hope or regret [...] Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tiptoeer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy" (12). It is significant that one of the earliest indications of the questionable reliability of the first narrator centers on Violet and Joe's perspectives and responses to the photograph of Dorcas, Joe's murdered mistress. Whereas the first narrator assumes that both Joe and Violet share the same response to it, 'bewilderment,' the reality of their varied interpretations of her face, Joe's reading of the photograph as "calm, generous and sweet," and Violet's view of it as "greedy, haughty and very lazy," indicate the misunderstandings possible in the interpretation of a photographic image (12).

Each voice in the book, including the narrator's, gives readers a different perspective of Dorcas. Violet, "who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she invented for her based on careful investigations," see Dorcas as both a rival and a daughter (*Jazz* 28). For Joe,

Dorcas is his lover, “his necessary thing for three months of nights. He remembers his memories of her. [...] he minds her death, is so sorry about it, but minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness” (28). The narrator describes Dorcas as having a questionable reputation: “I’ve always believed that girl was a pack of lies. I could tell by her walk her underclothes were beyond her years, even if her dress wasn’t” (72). But in contrast and complement to these readings, Dorcas’ own words give readers a picture of a immature but typical young woman, who is concerned with relatively superficial things: “Joe didn’t care what kind of woman I was. He should have. I cared. I wanted to have a personality and with Acton I’m getting one. I have a look now. What pencil-thin eyebrows do for my face is a dream” (190). Her peer Felice describes Dorcas as a brave person who was willing to stand up her friend: “When some nasty mouth hollered [...] we stuck our tongues out and put our fingers in our noses to shut them up. But if that didn’t work we’d lay into them. [...] it felt good fighting those girls with Dorcas. She was never afraid and we had the best times” (201). Each one of these excerpts, and there are many more, tells readers more about Dorcas. She is a much more complicated person than the narrator would have readers believe, and she means something different to each of the characters. Rather than being presented with an ‘accurate’ picture of the character by a narrator, readers learn more about Dorcas from the other characters and the most when all of the voices are considered.

This early concentration on the distinction between the two narrators’ readings of the Trace’s responses to Dorcas’ photograph, evokes the import of another photograph; the photograph of the young lady “shot by her sweetheart at a party” the sight of which inspired Morrison to write the book, *Jazz* (Van Der Zee 84). Viewed in the manuscript for *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, “Morrison protected the seedling of this story line” of a young lady who would not reveal the identity of her assailant; “Tomorrow, yes, I’ll tell you tomorrow she said” (Gates 53). The character of Dorcas in the text parallels that of the anonymous young lady. Although knowingly wounded by Joe’s silent weapon, Dorcas refuses to reveal his identity or to be taken to the hospital: “They need me to say his name so they can go after him. Take away his sample case with Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye inside. I know his name but Mama won’t tell” (*Jazz* 193).

The narrator of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* describes the plot of the character Joe Trace’s life. Similar to the superficial reading of the first narrator, both Joe and Violet are initially consumed with their physical attraction to each other. While their libidinous response is typical for new lovers, they never seem to mature past that point into a deeper knowing of each other or to an emotional intimacy which matches their physical ardor. Hence, Violet is ignorant of the reasons for Joe’s eventual migration to the City after fourteen years of refusal and resistance to its lure. “Violet never knew what it was that fired him up and made him want...to move to the City” (*Jazz* 107). Joe, in turn, is unaware of what causes Violet’s eventual silence and sexual withdrawal. “Over time her silences annoy [him], then puzzle him and finally depress him” (24).

Morrison chooses to depict both Violet and Joe as wounded souls with, “sadness at [their] center [...] the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home” (*Beloved* 140). The “desolation [...] at [their] center” (140) stems from the impact of a central trauma, an incident which occurred in childhood when they were “too young to say No thank you” (*Jazz* 211). All the other episodes that stem from the pain of this trauma, or somehow remind Joe and Violet of it, continually serve to debilitate them until they choose to confront it and talk it through. “Joe’s murder of his young girlfriend and Violet’s stabbing of the corpse as it awaits burial indicate the powerful eruption of their unresolved pasts into the present” (Matus 122). The darkness at the center of this trauma has no sound; it is silent, like the marchers. It therefore, constitutes the foundational rhythm, if you will the core layer of rhythm of the complexity of *Jazz*. “It lays underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm” (*Jazz* 60). Morrison calls this central trauma, “inside nothing” (38). Joe, unaware of Violet’s *inside nothing* believes that he alone carries an inner void, never sharing with Violet his own story. Thus, both Joe and Violet are in need of healing.

Abandoned at birth by his mother, Joe is adopted by the Williams family in response to the plea on his behalf for “one of the women to come...and take [him]” (*Jazz* 170). Although Joe is loved and well treated by the Williams, his stepmother “never pretend[s] that [Joe] is her natural child” (124). When he realizes, at a young age, the distinction that she makes between him and the other children, he asks about the whereabouts of his parents; she replies that his parents “disappeared without a trace” (125). However, when Henry Lestroy, a man known for his hunting skills, selects Joe and his stepbrother Victory, to be his apprentices, Joe is indirectly told the truth. His mother had not “disappeared without a trace;” she was, in fact, the local wild woman whom Joe and Victory “were speculating on what it would take to kill [...] if they happened on her” (*Jazz* 175). Henry Lestroy ended their banter with “low fire galvaniz [ing] his stare [...] then he looked right at Joe (not Victory) [...] You know, that woman is *somebody’s* mother and *somebody* ought to take care” (175).

Silent, lurking, present but absent, with a baby-girl laugh yet a woman, Wild is the personification of contradictions. Although Joe makes three attempts to connect with his mother, each one results in frustration due to her silent response. He only smells her presence during his first accidental encounter with his mother. Whereas Wild continues to remain hidden, the nearness of her breathing, during his second deliberate attempt encourages his request, “Is it you? Just say it [...] You my mother?” (178). Wild’s response, “indecent speechless lurking insanity,” infuriates Joe, driving his maniacal work habits (179). During Joe’s third and final attempt to connect with Wild, when he locates and enters her burrow, he finds her things all “mixed up” with Golden Gray’s solidifying in Joe the *inside nothing* he carries from then on (182). It is Wild’s “rejection of him [...] that marks Joe for life” (Mbalia 626).

Wild is the avatar of the *inside nothing* that Joe and Violet carry. A living picture of the assault on African-Americans in general, and women in particular, Wild bears on her body the “traces of bad things; like tobacco juice, brine, and a craftsman’s sense of play” (*Jazz* 171).

Silent but saturated with experiences, present but ignored as if absent, larger than life but unable to be confronted, the impact of the *inside nothing* in both Violet and Joe's lives becomes wild. Joe seeks to suppress his "speechless, lurking insanity" by working manically after his second encounter with his mother (179); but he also "bust(s) out just for the hell of it" by "shooting his unloaded shotgun at the leaves" near to where his mother was (181).

Since during their first meeting Violet and Joe talk from evening into to the early morning, they each unwittingly help each other through the most difficult portions of their day. Although Joe's pain drives him to activity, Violet's response to her mother's suicide drives her gradually to increasing depression and withdrawal. Insomnia spurred by her seeking to resist the pull of the well was draining her emotional resources. Though surrounded by family support, only her grandmother, True Belle's, urgings to earn money picking cotton during an abundant harvest, shook her from her home. It is during her time in Palestine that she meets and latches unto Joe; she then becomes, literally overnight, the aggressive, vocal, determined woman that Joe believes he knows. However, just as Joe pours himself into work to distract him from the pain he carries, Violet pours all of her into Joe determined to do and bear anything to be with him.

Dealt with as adults, faced together and not in isolation, Joe and Violet are able to handle and overcome sharecropping, beatings, death threats, and even extreme poverty at the initial stage of their City life, the "flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third" (*Jazz* 127). Violet's silence and her "sleeping with a doll in her arms" has a far more significant impact on Joe than any other of his adult experiences and clearly demonstrates some tacit devastation in Violet (129).

After fourteen years of resisting all of the stories told them of the wonders of the City and why they should come, "abruptly, he changed his mind" (*Jazz* 106). He chooses to leave the area having, finally, abandoned all hope of ever connecting with his mother. On his third attempt to find her, he confronts the tangible reality of what he perceives as her rejection of him. She lives with someone else, the Golden Gray of True Belle's stories. "A green dress [...] a doll, a spindle, earrings [...] a pair of man's trousers with buttons of bone [...] a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy" (184). Rody points out that one of the purposes of Golden Gray's story is "to parody the absurd abstraction of narrative omniscience" (632). The story of Golden Gray is not only purely fictitious in its details, but one that is eventually revised by the narrator himself: "Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down. [...] I have to alter things" (*Jazz* 161). Jones supports the interpretation of Golden Gary's subplot: "the narrator is also consciously shaping the story, shaping it" (487).

Thus, Joe and Violet's departure from Virginia in 1906 marks his decision to bury any hope of the acquisition of his phantom dream. Giving away "every piece of his gear but one," his gun, Joe chose to lay aside the vestiges of his connection with the woods and place all of his hopes in the City, looking to it as his concrete hope (*Jazz* 107). Only after both Joe and Violet

have acquired some financial stability, through Violet's hairdressing and Joe's two jobs, Violet's personal cracks begin to appear. Joe did not know about Violet's "public craziness", but he is aware of her personal misery: her "mother-hunger" (108). "Violet was drowning in it, deep dreaming [...] just when her nipples had lost their point, mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out" (108). "Mother-hunger" drives Violet to begin sleeping with a doll, "a present [...] she bought herself" and "hid [...] under the bed to take out in secret when it couldn't be helped" (108). She refuses to allow Joe near her and stops speaking to him, unsure of when "the anything-at-all" might "begin in her mouth" (23). She mistakenly assumes that "the business going on inside [her] was none of [her] business and none of Joe's either" (97). Violet's silence, stillness, and sexual withdrawal, occurring after they had acquired their vision of the American Dream, eventually break through Joe's emotional barriers.

Driven from his wife's side, primarily by her silence, Joe sees in Dorcas, the concrete vision of his long suppressed phantom hope. During the brief affair Joe has with Dorcas, he tells her "things he never told his wife" about the details of his *inside nothing* (*Jazz* 36). Dorcas fills his *inside nothing*, "just as he filled it for her, because she had it too" (38). When Dorcas, therefore, seeks to break off their relationship for a "chance to have Acton," a young man her age, Joe becomes desperate (189). Violet became anxious at the thought of losing Joe due to her "craziness," similarly Joe panics at the prospect of Dorcas' abandonment (22). Violet's resulting silence effected Joe's withdrawal and his obsessive attempts to reconcile with Dorcas that produce his creation of a permanent schism: he hunts Dorcas and kills her. Joe's murder of Dorcas and its aftermath, Violet's attack on Dorcas' dead body, is the main Misery of the novel.

Violet reaches out to Dorcas' aunt, Alice Manfred, because she "had to sit down somewhere [...] and thought [she] could do it [t]here. That [Alice] would let [her] and [she] did" (*Jazz* 82). What develops between them is the type of relationship that they both need in order to heal the *inside nothing* that they both carry; spiritual connection of platonic intimacy. Alice at first refuses this dialogue claiming "I don't have a thing to say to you. Not one thing"; and that refusal is not surprising, given that Violet is seen as a meaning-changer, somehow in control of the signifying process. She has gone from being Violet to 'Violent'—as the women on Lenox Avenue put it after her attack on Dorcas' dead body—from violated to violator, and by interrupting the funeral, she had "changed the whole point and meaning of it" (75). Alice's expectation is that Violet will behave in some way which corresponds to her worldview, in which Violet has been 'othered': that she will either apologize or "deliver some of her own evil" (80), for "Alice Manfred knew the kind of Negro" (79). In fact Violet does neither, but becomes "the only visitor [Alice] looked forward to" (83). Both Violet and Alice provide a space for each other where they are able to be and to be loved. "When Violet [...] came to visit something opened up [...] the thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people [...] No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them" (83). Violet's relationship with Alice serves to move her to the place in her journey that Joe had reached with Dorcas before her death; speaking about and confronting the pain of their

respective central traumas. Joe and Violet together are able to move together to the final phase of healing, sharing.

Although the expression of and confrontation with their respective central traumas was an essential portion of their journey to healing, both Joe and Violet needed to work out the problems in their own relationship to provide for each other what they sought in others; relational intimacy. Since Joe killed the one who helped him emote some of the pain he felt concerning his *inside nothing* and Alice Manfred moves back home, Joe and Violet need to move to the place where they could support each other. Communal aid comes in the form of Felice (a name that means 'happy'), Dorcas' best friend. She provides the view of Dorcas that both Violet and Joe need to move forward, and she serves as a mediator between them. She introduces the topics of conversation and asks the questions which illicit the type of responses they both need to hear from each other. And it is also with Felice that Joe and Violet share their gifts. Violet shares her clarity: "She doesn't lie Mrs. Trace. Nothing she says is a lie the way it is with most older people" (*Jazz* 205). And Joe his 'light': she sees in him the something that makes "[you] feel deep—as though the things [you] feel and think are important and different and [...] interesting" (206).

Even though at the novel's end they cleave to each other, they cling, in part, as a means of coping with the ongoing grief of their respective traumas. Joe continues to grieve over his murder of Dorcas and his maternal rejection: "Lying next to [Violet] [...] he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing" (*Jazz* 225). Violet also continues to struggle with the pain of dual losses; her mother's suicide and her father's abandonment: "Violet rests her hand on [Joe's] chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts [...] to distribute to them all" (225).

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