‘The swing’s the thing’: Literary Legacies of 1920s Jazz

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This chapter will explore the early relationship between jazz and literature as reflected in the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Langston Hughes, before considering, in more depth and detail, four later prose works in which jazz music and dance play a fundamental role. These works — by Jean Rhys, Toni Morrison and Zadie Smith — illustrate how words and sounds can combine powerfully within seminal narratives about racial conflict, exclusion, injustice, desire — and, of course, the transformative influence of jazz.

In the ‘Foreword’ to her novel, *Jazz* (1992), Morrison defines the ‘Jazz Age’ as follows:

> The moment when an African American art form defined, influenced, reflected a nation’s culture in so many ways: the bourgeoning [*sic*] of sexual license, a burst of political, economic, and artistic power; the ethical conflicts between the sacred and the secular; the hand of the past being crushed by the present.[1]

**Commented [R P1]:** Editorial Note for MHRA: see this note and n.18, from which point to the end of that particular section, location refs to this Kindle edition are given in-text as simple figures, so without a preceding ‘location’ or ‘loc.’ Please add if you think necessary.

The ‘artistic power’ identified here was reflected during the 1920s in the innovatory works of influential modernists such as Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, Ezra Pound, James Joyce,

[1] Toni Morrison, ‘Foreword’ to *Jazz* (London: Vintage, 2005), Kindle edition, location 85–87 of 2933.

Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Gertrude Stein. In their rejection of conventional modes and methods, these key figures arguably crushed 'the hand of the past', although T. S. Eliot and others also asserted the significance and relevance of tradition. In America, a controversial art form was emerging that responded to, reflected and shaped aspects of modern urban life. Jazz music evolved from ragtime and blues. The latter 'ultimately derived from plantation songs, and may be considered a secular counterpart of the Spirituals popularized in the black church at around the same time'.[2] These work songs or 'field hollers' sung by African American slaves usually involved a single vocal line with call-and-response patterns. Improvisation was also a fundamental component and has remained one of the defining features of jazz performance to this day. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed a concentration of freed slaves in New Orleans while Chicago and New York also became crucial epicentres for the dissemination of jazz. In Dixieland jazz (also known as 'New Orleans', 'traditional' or 'hot' jazz), emerging in the early 1910s, instrumentalists took turns in playing the melody, while others in the group wove improvised counter-melodies around the tune. Typical orchestras combined 'horns' (brass instruments and saxophones), banjo, piano, keyboard, double bass, drums, guitar, and often vocals. Big bands emerged during the 1920s, dominating throughout the 'swing era' of the 1930s and 1940s: these musicians played from (or memorized) written arrangements, with some improvisation occurring within the framework of the song.

Kathy J. Ogden writes that 'Jazz was indeed a powerful new music, characterized by syncopation, polyrhythms, improvisation, blue tonalities, and a strong beat. It rose to popularity among strident criticism and extravagant praise.'[3] Significantly, too, jazz evolved

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[2] Mervyn Cooke. *The Chronicle of Jazz* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 27.

[3] Kathy J. Odgen, *The Jazz Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 7.

in dialogue with literature, as was recognized by F. Scott Fitzgerald with his epoch-defining title, *Tales of the Jazz Age*, chosen for a collection of his short stories published in 1922. This year was, in fact, a crucial one in literature, witnessing the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, D. H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* and Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. In jazz, too, 1922 proved an important landmark. Chicago and New York had become the key centres for jazz performance and Paul Whiteman managed multiple jazz dance bands on the east coast. The band of trombonist Kid Ory, based in Los Angeles, made the first recordings of New Orleans jazz played by a black ensemble, while the pianists Fats Waller and William 'Count' Basie made their first recordings. Louis Armstrong moved to Chicago to play with Joe 'King' Oliver's Creole Jazz Band while Duke Ellington arrived in New York, meeting James P. Johnson, Fats Waller and Willie 'The Lion' Smith. The popular blues singer Mamie Smith recorded many songs with her Jazz Hounds, recruiting saxophonist Coleman Hawkins to play with the band. This was also the year in which race records were created, categorizing recordings by the racial origin of the performers. Nonetheless, a number of bands, created by prominent bandleaders such as clarinettist Benny Goodman, included both black and white musicians, impacting positively on race relations at this time.[4]

Langston Hughes (arguably the creator of 'jazz poetry') poignantly reveals the racial tensions and conflicts underlying jazz. Evoking and addressing 'The South' in the poem with

[4] See Nat Hentoff, 'How Jazz Helped Hasten the Civil Rights Movement', *The Wall Street Journal* (January 2009).

this title, he writes: ‘And I, who am black, would love her | But she spits in my face.’[5] This sense of rejection and deep-rooted sadness resonates through his poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), and is clearly evident in the following stanza:

> O Blues!
> Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
> He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
> Sweet Blues!
> Coming from a black man's soul.[6]

In the lines that follow, the tune is described as ‘melancholy’ while the ‘old piano moan[s]’. The pianist’s swaying paradoxically expresses real feeling while also conveying absurdity (‘fool’). Equally, ‘raggy’ hints at a ragtime style while also complementing ‘rickety’ and suggesting weariness. Yet this ‘bluesy’ writing is balanced by more ‘jazzy’ poems within the collection, one example being ‘Jazzonia’:

> In a Harlem cabaret
> Six long-headed jazzers play.

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[5] Langston Hughes, ‘The South’, in *The Complete Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1995), pp. 26–27, in *Literature Online* <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 29 August 2019].

[6] Hughes, ‘The Weary Blues’, *Complete Poems*, p. 50, in *Literature Online* <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 29 August 2019].

A dancing girl whose eyes are bold

Lifts high a dress of silken gold.[7]

This poem employs 'variation on a theme' and chorus effects, as well as verbal modulations which could be considered to emulate transitions from one key to another. The first two lines quoted here are repeated later but made subject to a subtle alteration. 'In a Harlem cabaret' becomes 'In a whirling cabaret', emphasizing breathless motion — the energy and dynamism of the modernist vortex. The joy associated with this unleashing of vital energy is reflected in the exclamatory couplet: 'Oh, silver tree! | Oh, shining rivers of the soul!' The dance is thus associated both with nature and spirituality, though again the images modulate as they return, chorus-like, at later points in the poem. The 'silver tree' becomes a 'singing tree' then finally a 'shining' tree. The shifting phrases echo the fluidity of the rivers, while the term 'long-headed' describes how wind or brass instruments literally extend from their players' mouths as vital parts of them. The 'silken gold' dress lends the dancer an air of exoticism and luxury.

Many early jazz musicians (including Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton) performed in cabaret venues, bars, brothels or 'speakeasies'. This contributed to the association of jazz with decadence, sexual licence, rebellion, transgression and excess. The pejorative connotations of the term 'jazz' at this time are discussed at length by John Lucas: he describes the labelling of this new and controversial form of expression as 'jungle music', 'nigger music' and even 'the devil's music'.[8] Such terms highlight the widespread suspicion

[7] Hughes, 'Jazzonia', *Complete Poems*, p. 34, in *Literature Online* <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 29 August 2019].

[8] John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1997), pp. 126–28).

arising from jazz's so-called 'primitive' origins. Paradoxically, however, others saw jazz as a means for black advancement, facilitating unfettered self-expression within a prejudicial and repressive social context. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of jazz highlight its 'Energy, excitement, "pep"; restlessness; animation [and] excitability': qualities evident, for instance, in Jay Gatsby's vibrant and extravagant parties in Fitzgerald's 'jazz novel', *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The post-war generation sought distraction in the strong, rhythmic drive of Dixieland jazz. The musical liberation associated with improvisatory soloing reflected other freedoms to be found in urban dancing and drinking clubs. In addition, the *OED*'s fourth definition of jazz as 'sexual intercourse' in American slang (a usage dating back to 1918) accounts for the correlation again emphasized by Lucas: 'Sex, drugs, dance music. Signs of the times, elements in the vortex of beastliness.'[9] There was a strong sense among the puritanical that jazz could corrupt and undermine morality. The iconic bandleader, pianist and composer, Duke Ellington, associated the commitment required to perform jazz with extreme forms of risk and even violence: 'Art is dangerous. It is one of the attractions: when it ceases to be dangerous, you don't want it' and 'It's like an act of murder; you play with intent to commit something.'[10] The plot of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* itself illustrates the way in which both manslaughter and murder can be triggered by sexual intrigue within the fast-paced lifestyle of the 'roaring twenties'.

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[9] Lucas, *The Radical Twenties*, p. 117.

[10] According to David Berger, the first of these quotations 'is widely attributed to Ellington, but its source is unclear': see *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*, ed. by Edward Green (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 31 and p. 41, n.1. The source of the second quotation is 'On Jazz', *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 July 1961. I am very grateful to Mervyn Cooke for providing source material and for commenting on a draft of this chapter.

This novel reflects a society yearning for excess and hedonism. The party-goers experience instant gratification but are shown ultimately to be superficial, without genuine affection for their host. Gatsby is a means to an end for them: at his house they have the opportunity to dance, socialize, drink, eat and swim. Yet despite this surface glamour the actual experience of his guests in responding to the music provided seems merely sordid:

> There was dancing now on the canvas in the garden, old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably and keeping in the corners—and a great number of single girls dancing individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo or the traps.[11]

There is a striking contrast here with Hughes's lone dancer in 'Danse Africaine' who 'Whirls softly into a | Circle of light' and whose movements are profoundly natural, 'Like a wisp of smoke around the fire — '.[12] In Fitzgerald's lines above, there is a hint of brutality, or at least clumsiness, in the way in which 'old men' push back the much younger girls, while terms like 'graceless' and 'tortuous' stress the *un*natural, strained quality of this formulaic dance routine. Even the playing of instruments is depicted as burdensome and while 'traps' literally denotes an early drum kit, it still harbours connotations of painful (perhaps disfiguring) restraint. This negative perception is echoed in Fitzgerald's short story, 'Bernice Bobs Her

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[11] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 38–39.

[12] Hughes, 'Danse Africaine', *Complete Poems*, p. 28, in *Literature Online* <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 29 August 2019].

Hair' (1920), in which the superficiality of dancing (and all that it symbolizes) is illustrated through scathing irony and delightful humour. The overriding impression we are given is that 'youth in this jazz-nourished generation is temperamentally restless'.[13]

*Losing a Song: The Jazz Stories of Jean Rhys*

> Don't trouble me now
> You without honour,
> Don't walk in my footstep
> You without shame.
>
> Dinah,
> With her Dixie eyes blazin',
> How I love to sit and gaze in
> To the eyes of Dinah Lee!

In her short stories, 'Let Them Call it Jazz' (1962) and 'Tigers are Better-Looking' (1962),[14] the Dominican/Welsh writer Jean Rhys echoes the melancholy of Langston Hughes's poems

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[13] F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'Bernice Bobs Her Hair', in *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 55.

[14] These stories can be found in Jean Rhys, *The Collected Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1987; repr. 2017), pp. 158–175 and pp. 176–188 respectively, and all page references given here are to this collection. Of the two songs quoted above, the first (unidentified) features in 'Let Them Call it Jazz' and the second, 'Dinah', in 'Tigers are Better-Looking': see

within *The Weary Blues*. In these tales the protagonists drink, listen to music, sing, dance and write — yet the pleasure latent in these activities is tainted by loneliness, prejudice and a sense of loss. If the Creole narrator of 'Let Them Call it Jazz' ever experienced eager anticipation on arriving in London, this has long dissipated as a consequence of poverty and cynicism. Selina's savings have been stolen from her lodgings and she has been evicted by a landlord who is 'drunk already at that early hour' (p. 158). She is subsequently offered a place to stay by a man named Sims who appears to have housed a succession of young vulnerable women in his London flat. Left alone, Selina allows herself to become thin through lack of food but acquires the habit of buying a bottle of wine most evenings.

Racial prejudice permeates this story. When attempting to reclaim her stolen savings, Selina overhears her landlady saying to the policeman: 'These people terrible liars' (p. 163). Such injustice extends to Selina's victimization by a neighbouring white couple. Her polite conversational overtures are rejected and the husband 'stare as if I'm wild animal let loose' (p. 161). The same attitude is reflected by the wife who persistently repeats phrases like '*Must* you stay? *Can't* you go?' in a sweet, sugary voice (p. 164). Selina's bewilderment at their unfounded hostility is reflected in the question 'why these people have to be like that?' (p. 161).

In this story, singing provides release and an outlet for self-expression; singing is also used at times as a weapon of defiance levelled against the abusive and bigoted neighbours. Often, the impetus for original composition requires alcohol as a catalyst: 'After I drink a glass

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Harry Akst, Sam Lewis and Joe Young, 'Dinah', at Lyrics, Stands4 Network LLC, 2001–2019, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/6077002/Harry+Akst/Dinah> [accessed 29 August 2019].

or two I can sing and when I sing all the misery goes from my heart. Sometimes I make up songs but next morning I forget them, so other times I sing the old ones like "Tantalizin'" or "Don't Trouble Me Now"' (p. 160). Alcohol not only fuels the singing and dancing that take place within the confines of her room but also impacts on Selina's perception of the performance. After taking a number of sleeping pills (though not an intentionally harmful overdose) with two glasses of gin and Vermouth, she believes that the emerging song is 'the best tune that has ever come to me in all my life' (p. 167). Problematically, however, the drugs and drink curtail inhibition and induce a feeling of claustrophobic confinement. The decision to move outside, still singing and dancing, provokes an altercation with the hostile neighbours in which Selina is made subject to racial and sexual slurs by the enraged wife: 'At least the other tarts that crook installed here were *white* girls' (p. 167). Her inebriation spurs Selina on to uncharacteristic verbal retaliation and, ultimately, the act of throwing a brick through the neighbours' irreplaceable stained-glass window. At this dramatic moment in the story, song, dance, racism and violence converge. At this moment, too, Selina follows an insult hurled at the retreating, 'shameless' neighbours with the song, 'Don't Trouble Me Now' (quoted at the opening of this subsection). The lines 'You without honour' and 'You without shame' have obvious relevance to her situation. The story underlying the song's lyrics is conveyed to us and Selina (associating the song with her grandmother) comments that it 'sound good in Martinique patois too: "*Sans honte*"' (p. 168). The conjured music thus serves the purpose of evoking memories of the person Selina has most loved and trusted in the past, alongside the familiar language of her Martinique upbringing. Poignantly, however, she abandons singing as her voice sounds 'wrong' and — the following morning — discovers that her own, invented song has flown from her mind.

It is in the last section of the tale that Rhys most explicitly foregrounds jazz. In Holloway prison, Selina feels numb and hardened. There is also a dissociative element to her

condition: looking into the mirror she sees a ‘strange new person’ (p. 172) while other things and people seem oddly distanced. But if music is absurdly the cause of her incarceration — ‘I’m here because I wanted to sing’ (p. 172) — it also shakes her out of listlessness and depression. Walking through the jail, Selina hears

> a smoky kind of voice, and a bit rough sometimes, as if those old dark walls theyselves are complaining, because they see too much misery — too much. But it don’t fall down and die in the courtyard; seems to me it could jump the gates of the jail easy and travel far, and nobody could stop it. (p. 173)

Her initial reaction — one of incredulity — stems from the sense of inertia, nihilism and hopelessness she has come to associate with the jail. It is the pointlessness of the song that astonishes and then inspires her. The tune (she cannot decipher the words) epitomizes her own world-weariness yet represents the ability to transcend it. The song emanates from the punishment block and signifies an attempt to ‘tell the girls cheerio and never say die’ (p. 173): it is thus a musical gesture of defiant hope and the will to survive. Selina subsequently conjures up a musical arrangement of this tune in her head — ‘One day I hear that song on trumpets and these walls will fall and rest’ (p. 163) — the chosen instrument signifying a revelatory moment of triumph and liberation. Yet the term ‘rest’ suggests a paradoxically peaceful cataclysm from which the incarcerated women can walk quietly away. The listlessness of despair is replaced by a sense that ‘anything can happen’; that remaining locked up could result in missed opportunities beyond the prison walls. Selina takes the positive steps necessary to regain her freedom.

The story is arguably one of betterment, given that Selina finds a place to live, a decent job, a friend and a new life. Yet there is a twist towards the end that ironically turns

the story against jazz — or at least 'jazz' as understood and interpreted in a certain way. This is not simply because she 'never sing[s] now' (p. 175): instead it is catalysed by Selina whistling the 'Holloway song' at a party given by her friend, Clarice. A man there asks to hear the tune again and plays it on an old piano, 'jazzing it up' (p. 175). Selina's immediate reaction is to tell him not to play it like that (though the other party guests are impressed): the jazzy version does not match up with the arrangement of the tune she has conjured up in her head. When she receives five pounds as a 'thank you' once the man has sold this song, Selina experiences only a sense of loss and desolation: 'that song was all I had' (p. 175). She articulates this further through the idea of 'belonging', which she has never instinctively felt or been able to pay for, 'But when that girl sing, she sing to me and she sing for me. I was there because I was *meant* to be there. It was *meant* I should hear it — this I *know*' (p. 175). The certainty inherent in the italicized words is stripped from Selina when the song is played 'wrong' — perhaps through transforming it from rough and smoky blues to upbeat, embellished, 'hot' jazz. Yet it is also arguable that Selina's objection is not to jazz *per se*, especially given that in her own imagined rendition, the tune is played on trumpets: instruments fundamental to many forms of jazz. Instead, her objection might be to a showy, tame or soulless imitation of 'real' jazz, signalling the misappropriation of black-derived music which (in this case) has its roots directly in pain and suffering.

The tainting of this song leaves Selina with the sense that there is '[n]othing left for me at all'. As with Antoinette in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) who is divested of her name, image and flamboyant personality when she is moved to England, life in London deprives Selina of her independence, pride and music. Yet interestingly the tale concludes with pragmatism — Selina buys a pink dress with her money — and a recognition that even her own version of the Holloway tune could not topple the walls of oppression 'so soon'. The story's title is cleverly brought into play almost at the very last: '"So let them call it jazz," I

think, and let them play it wrong. That won't make no difference to the song I heard' (p. 175). The titular phrase can be read with emphasis on 'Let', 'them', 'call' or indeed 'jazz' according to interpretation, highlighting defiance, racial otherness, false labelling or questions of musical genre. A key suggestion seems to be that (white) performers may adapt black-derived music to their own styles, but the tunes still 'belong' to the people and places associated with their origin.

'Tigers are Better-Looking' is partly set in a performance venue attended by Mr Severn and two younger female companions, Maidie and Heather. The only specified orchestra member is 'the mulatto who was playing the saxophone' (p. 179), hinting at a jazz big band with mixed-race musicians. This instrumentalist 'whoops' and 'titters' at the threesome at various stages of the proceedings whilst they are ignored by the other musicians Maidie's comment on the orchestra is that they 'play so rotten' while Heather's attitude is both more accepting and more cynical: 'The place is packed every night. Besides, why should they play well. What's the difference?' Severn's tailpiece to this dialogue passes judgement through dismissing the music and the debate surrounding it as '[a]ll an illusion' (pp. 179–80). As he becomes increasingly drunk and uninhibited, Severn repeatedly and brazenly demands that the orchestra 'play Dinah!'. This popular song, with music by Harry M. Akst and lyrics by Sam M. Lewis and Joe Young, was first published in 1925 and introduced at the Plantation Club on Broadway. Ethel Waters, The Revelers, Cliff Edwards, Clarence Williams and Fletcher Henderson (with Coleman Hawkins) produced hit versions in 1926, while Josephine Baker also recorded the song during that year. The number of subsequent performances and recordings by high profile bandleaders testifies to the widespread appeal of

the song.[15] The lyrics of this tune suggest a southern-belle, Tin Pan Alley style and its performance history illustrates how a jazz standard can resonate through the ages.

The disruptive clamouring to hear this song, coupled with the graffiti doodled on his tablecloth, results in Severn's forcible eviction from the club and a violent *fracas.* The following journey in a police van and attendance at a magistrate's court indicate links with the story by Rhys discussed above. Like Selina, Severn attends to a tune heard in captivity: this time 'Londonderry Air' (with its inherent French punning on London *derrière*) whistled in a 'sexy' (rather than 'smoky') voice. There is also an allusion to escape from restraint: this female singer thinks of growing wings and flying away (although the vision is deflated by a policeman suggesting that she might be shot in the process). However, Severn's auditory response lacks the epiphanic significance of Selina's appreciation of the Holloway song.

'Tigers are Better-Looking' is also concerned with the process of writing. Significantly, musical terminology is chosen to express the kind of fluency Severn craves in his journalism: 'He couldn't get the swing of it. The swing's the thing, as everybody knows — otherwise the cadence of the sentence' (p. 177). In its more colloquial definition, swing in music suggests rhythmic propulsion and a foot-tapping, visceral response. More specifically, it entails the alternate lengthening and shortening of the pulse-divisions in a rhythm, creating syncopation. 'Cadence' has multiple connotations associated with a modulation of the voice — ebb and flow, rise and fall — as well as designating a certain beat, pulse or rhythm. In

[15] Notable versions were produced by Louis Armstrong (1930), Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers (1931), Duke Ellington (1932), Cab Calloway (1932; 1945; 1993), The Boswell Sisters (1934), Django Reinhardt (1934), Quintette du Hot Club de France (1934), Fats Waller (1935), the Benny Goodman Quartet (1936), Chet Baker (1952), Thelonius Monk (1964–65) and The Hot Sardines (2011).

music, it specifically means the sequence of chords that brings a musical phrase to a close. Throughout the story, Severn finds that a satisfactory rhythm eludes him, as ‘Words and meaningless phrases still whirled tormentingly round in his head’ (p. 184). The narrative emulates this process through accumulation. Words from a range of written sources — a letter from his companion, Hans, who has left him, graffiti on the walls of a police cell, the placard in front of the newspaper shop opposite his house — all echo in his mind and keep resurfacing in the narrative like riffs or refrains, gathering through a crescendo to this climax:

> ‘Who pays? Will you pay now, please? You don’t mind if I leave you, dear? I died waiting. I died waiting. (Or was it I died hating?) That was my father speaking. Pictures, pictures, pictures. You’ve got to be young. But tigers are better-looking, aren’t they? SOS, SOS, SOS. If I was a bird and had wings I could fly away, couldn’t I? Might get shot as you went. But tigers are better-looking, aren’t they? You’ve got to be younger than we are …’ (p. 188)

Here, the narrative achieves a layering effect as these fragments coalesce in stream-of-consciousness style. There is some resemblance to New Orleans jazz in which percussion beats, riffs, melodies, chords and improvised solos produce a richly textured sound. There is freedom in the liberation from strict grammatical structures and (through improvisation) from strictly prescribed sequences of notes. Yet improvised jazz of this kind operates within a strict harmonic framework while Rhys’s narrative is discordant — anarchic rather than harmonious. Equally, linear narrative cannot really emulate musical harmony as the effect is always sequential rather than simultaneous. Severn is ultimately freed from the chaos of burdensome echoes and gets into the groove, finding new phrases that are ‘suave and slick’.

Yet questions about his confidence and originality remain, while the ellipsis at the very end of the story creates the effect of an interrupted cadence (p. 188).

*Life Below the Sash: Urban Music and Prose Riffs in Toni Morrison's 'Jazz' (1992)*

> I got a new man honey, and he's so much better than you.
> He starts his loving right where yours used to get through.
> So I'm going to blow you a kiss as you leave my door,
> Cause that key ain't going to work in my lock no more
> You got the right key baby,
> But you're working on the wrong keyhole.[16]

The jazz tune above, written by Clarence Williams and Eddie Green, was recorded for Okey records by Virginia Liston in 1924. This song — and others like it — provoke desire, yearning and outrage in equal measure within the characters of Toni Morrison's *Jazz.* In this novel, set in Harlem during the 1920s, the excitement, allure and danger of jazz are highlighted through the experience of Dorcas Manfred, the eighteen-year-old orphan who embarks on an affair with Joe Trace — over thirty years her senior — and is later murdered by him with a silenced gun after she has broken off their relationship. Lying in bed at night, Dorcas processes the strains of music permeating the city:

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[16] Clarence Williams and Eddie Green, 'You've got the right key baby, but the wrong keyhole' (1924). Lyrics are available at <https://donniejoemusic.bandcamp.com/track/youve-got-the-right-key-baby-but-the-wrong-keyhole> and the first recording by Verginia can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qvpGbzuUl4> [accessed 25 August 2019].

> [she is] tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else.[17]

This passage highlights the way in which musical performance and sex are inextricably bound together through language in this novel. The very act of playing wind instruments such as clarinets ('licorice sticks'), saxophones, trumpets and trombones inevitably involves licking, blowing and fingering, while tickling (piano keys) and beating (drums) hint respectively at sensuality and violence. Coupled with the sexualization of instrumental technique is the citation of lyrics laced with *double entendre*. The Williams and Green song quoted above is about more than a man who returns to the wife he left only to find the locks have been changed — the phallic connotations of the key he pushes in and pulls out are clear. Equally, the Bessie Smith song, 'You got to keep it…', appears to be about more than just the dime the female narrator demands from her inadequate husband. The women in these songs are strong-willed and even coercive: they assert their independence and their dominance over subservient men, making demands and taking action if their demands are not met. These jazz tunes are associated with female emancipation as well as sexual freedom.

For the young Dorcas, the music signifying 'life-below-the-sash' (817–18) is tantalizing and even comforting: a welcome distraction from the horrific deaths of both her

[17] Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (London: Vintage, 2005), Kindle edition, location 814–16 of 2933. All subsequent references will be to locations in the Kindle edition.

parents as well as a way of finding meaning in her new city life. By contrast, for her puritanical Aunt Alice, who becomes Dorcas's guardian, the music signifies a corruptive force responsible for the restlessness that fuels brutality and depravity in the lives of those around her. Her resistance is partly due to the way in which she is constantly having to repress her own instinctive urge to hear, respond to and interpret the music. While Dorcas revels in the lyrics about phallic keys and dimes, Alice closes windows in order the keep the music out. Ironically, however, lines such as 'When I was young and in my prime I could get my barbecue any old time' (with the association of meat with sex, common at that time) — words she considers greedy, loose, reckless and infuriating — constantly needle her (809–10). Alice also finds herself torn between two opposing sensations stimulated by musical rhythm. On the one hand, she associates the 'cold black faces' (725) of drummers parading on Fifth Avenue with solidarity and discipline: they provide her with the figurative 'rope' she clings to for support and reassurance in a shifting and immoral world. Yet she cannot completely dissociate this drumming from the percussive impetus underlying jazz tunes, and loses her sense of stability when observing the way 'men sat on windowsills fingering horns, and the women wondered "how long"': 'The rope broke then, disturbing her peace, making her aware of flesh and something so free she could smell its bloodsmell; made her aware of its life below the sash and its red lip rouge' (793–6).

Ultimately, the novel does align jazz-fuelled sexual licence with danger through the murder of Dorcas by her jilted lover. Searching for her on the night of the murder, Joe enacts a kind of primitive hunt modelled on the one undertaken many years ago when searching for his mother (referred to as 'Wild') in the bush. Yet musical rhythm is also shown to create, maintain and even rekindle lasting human bonds. On entering the vibrant city for the first time, Joe and Violet stand up to feel their train's pulse, dancing and 'tapping back at the tracks' (444). Much later — after their estrangement, Violet's despair over her childlessness,

Joe's affair and the murder of Dorcas — their shared response to music reflects a reconnection: 'Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing' (2688–90).

In her 'Foreword' to *Jazz*, Morrison highlights the paradoxical role of music in her novel, which aims to reflect 'the proud hopelessness of love mourned and championed in blues music, and, simultaneously, fired by the irresistible energy of jazz' (53). Yet she also wishes the work to be 'a manifestation of the music's intellect, sensuality, anarchy; its history, its range, and its modernity' (97–99). It is important, then, to consider the way in which novelistic technique emulates musical devices and achieves the kind of self-expression we may associate with improvisatory jazz. Arguably, this is achieved through verbal riffs, repetitions and strongly rhythmic prose: 'There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff' (159). Such phrases have a musical rather than semantic effect. When obsessed by imagining her husband's intimate interactions with his mistress, Violet conjures an image of Dorcas's hand under the table of a restaurant, 'drumming out the rhythm on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh' (1256), creating in words a strident, repetitive and percussive sequence of beats. Describing blues singer-guitarists taking up their positions on a block, Morrison writes: 'Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blackthereforeblue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man. Everybody knows your name' (1539–41). In places it is hard to distinguish quoted lyrics from the narrator's verbal play — the voice remains fluid, sliding in and out of jazz and blues riffs and lyrics as it slides in and out of multiple characters' perspectives. In this sense, the narrative emulates the way in which a musical motif or phrase can be altered and developed.

Musical terms — as well as references to instruments and the timbre of voices — permeate the novel. For many city women, sorrow slips 'into a beat of time' (285), while the 'artificial rhythm of the [seven-day] week' is broken up by the human body, 'preferring triplets, duets, quartets' (709–10).[18] The abundance of such references means that the reader can scarcely turn a page without being reminded of the pervasive soundscape of the novel. This creates a verbal equivalent of the sounds that unavoidably impact on the characters in their everyday lives. Passing a speakeasy one will hear a 'clarinet cough'; elsewhere a 'stride piano [is] pouring over the door saddle' while, in party halls, 'music soars to the ceiling and through the windows'; later it 'bends, falls to its knees to embrace [the dancers]' (861; 870; 2353). These sounds are animate and eclectic: they possess the status of minor characters who come and go, leaving their mark.

The fluidity of Morrison's narrative is also evident in the structure of the novel and in the stream-of-consciousness style redolent of 1920s modernism. Each chapter is designated simply by its opening words followed by an ellipsis, such as 'Sth, I know…', 'Or used to…' and 'Like that day…' (108; 402; 724). The phrase chosen to begin each chapter serves as connective tissue rather than signalling a clear break between sections. A particularly interesting example is a chapter ending 'But where is *she*?' while the next begins 'There she is…' (2342–3). Ostensibly the second phrase is a continuation of the first, yet on consideration of the context it becomes evident that the 'she' referred to is different in the two phrases; that the time and place have changed though the narrator is the same. The first phrase relates to Joe's search for his mother while the second accompanies his entry into the party venue where he sees his young mistress dancing intimately with a man of her own age.

[18] In this instance musical terminology is chosen rather oddly: while triplets are divisions of a beat and therefore of time, duets and quartets designate the number of players in a group.

This narrative strategy is symptomatic of the way the novel fluctuates between different scenes and time frames, just as a jazz musician modulates through different keys and moves through different time signatures with a fluency that covers the joins, making the transitions appear seamless. Within and across chapters, Morrison frequently uses modernist free association to convey the wanderings of memory, as exemplified by a description of Violet washing an old woman's sparse grey hair, 'soft and interesting as a baby's', immediately followed by: 'Not the kind of baby hair her grandmother had soaped…' (291). This progresses into reminiscences of True Belle (Violet's grandmother) and Golden Gray — the infant True Belle helped to raise along with the child's white, single mother. Again, the transition feels instinctive, spontaneous and improvisatory, rather than logical and sequential.

Often, Morrison provides only a partial account of an episode, then — later in the novel — the narrative loops back and describes the episode again in greater detail, or even from a different perspective (a method comparable with William's Faulkner's technique in the modernist classic *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)). One instance is the relatively early account of Joe asking Wild to extend her hand through dense foliage, as a sign to confirm his belief that she is his mother. This is not a scene we can fully understand until the episode is replayed later with further elaboration, once the reader's cumulative understanding of the characters' lives has broadened. Arguably, this strategy could be related to the musical 'variations on a theme' approach, or simply considered as improvisation around a repeated figure. This is one instance of Morrison's quirky and unique engagement with the jazzy style she wishes to emulate in the novel. For the characters, jazz and blues songs are part of the soundscape of the city: they might provoke revulsion or fear in some, but they also fascinate and compel, like a siren-call. For readers, musical tropes infiltrate many aspects of the narrative style, as though we are listening to — as well as reading — the novel.

*Dance, Race and the Rhythms of Jazz: Zadie Smith's 'Swing Time' (2016)*

> Like the beat, beat, beat of the tom tom
> When the jungle shadows fall …
> So a voice within me keeps repeating
> You, you, you …
> I think of you
> Night and day…[19]

Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* is steeped in the history, evolution and technique of dance. At the outset, we are presented with a mysterious situation in which the unnamed protagonist has been forced to remain concealed in a neutrally furnished 'luxury condo'.[20] She finally acquires permission to spend an evening outside and Smith provides the following description of her watching Fred Astaire dancing on-screen:

> my feet, in sympathy with the music, tapped at the seat in front of me. I felt a wonderful lightness in my body, a ridiculous happiness [...] I'd lost my job, a certain version of my life, my privacy, yet all these things felt small and petty next to this joyous sense I had watching the dance, and following its precise rhythms in my own body. (p. 4)

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[19] Cole Porter, 'Night and Day'. An audio-visual version of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers singing this tune for the 1934 film *Gay Divorce* is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h02OmcR-be4> [accessed 26 August 2019].

[20] Zadie Smith, *Swing Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton (Penguin Group), 2016), p. 1.

The clip turns out to be one of the dance routines from the movie also entitled *Swing Time*: a 1936 RKO American musical comedy, mostly set in New York, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. It is reputed to be one of the greatest dance musicals and one of the best films made by the celebrated pair of dancers. The story is woven around four dance routines, each considered to be a masterpiece in its own right. For Smith's protagonist, the clip derives its power partly from representing one of her favourite films, watched repeatedly during childhood.

While the auditory experience described above clearly provokes uplifting joy, the narrator's visual apprehension of the scene is flawed and partial, as indicated by her reappraisal when she watches it later on her laptop (discussed below). Her role in the novel is often that of an observer, living vicariously and disengaged from life. Much later in the novel (though earlier in chronological time), however, we witness the narrator experiencing comparably intense happiness through her own physical involvement in a tribal group dance. Aimee (the narrator's pop-star employer) has decided to set up a school for girls in an impoverished West African village. As the narrator heads for the river towards Aimee's hotel, her taxi is halted by an extraordinary apparition: a man-sized (though faceless) 'dancing tree' covered in orange leaves, followed by a gang of boys and swathes of dancing women. Conducting subsequent research, she discovers that this 'Kankurang' (a masked individual from the Mandinka ethnic group of West Africa, participating in ritual ceremonies or festivals), is sent to lead the village boys into the bush for circumcision and initiation into tribal rites. She describes this figure as the best dancer she has ever seen and is swept up in the restless writhing of bodies: 'only the present moment, only the dance' (p. 164). Rather like Morrison's Violet and Joe, jigged around by the motion of their train, the protagonist's dancing is initially involuntary: she moves because 'pressed up close to so many bodies' (p. 164). The wild energy of the dance subsequently intensifies and is shown by the narrative to

be potentially dangerous. With a local villager and teacher named Lamin, the narrator climbs onto a car to avoid the Kankurang's spinning machetes which whirr near to the boys who are daring each other to get nearer to the blades. As the protagonist climbs up onto the car, her sense of elation intensifies and sparks off a kind of epiphany — 'I thought: here is the joy I've been looking for all my life' (p. 165).

It is within the 'primitive' surroundings of the village, rather than the refined context of Miss Isobel's ballet school which the narrator attended as a child, that she is hailed as an admirable dancer: a crucial attribute for any character of importance and worth within this novel. At a tribal celebration, she achieves success through watching and emulating the extravagant performance of two tribeswomen 'who never lost the beat, who heard it through everything' (p. 417). The narrator's triumph stems from a careful act of attention in which she studies the movements of the women and listens to the 'multiple beats', thus acquiring confidence and self-belief: 'I […] knew that what they were doing I, too, could do. I stood between them and matched them step for step. The kids went crazy' (p. 417). The instinctive assimilation of the complex rhythms — one that the narrator associates with 'my people' and which transcends a European auditory response — is also reflected in the lines quoted at the beginning of this subsection: 'Like the beat, beat, beat of the tom tom | When the jungle shadows fall.' These lines derive from the Cole Porter song, 'Night and Day', written for the 1932 musical *Gay Divorce* and introduced on stage by Fred Astaire. While this song's assertion of sentimental and all-consuming love seems a far cry from the tangled web of transient, superficial or tainted relationships portrayed in the novel, its relevance is undeniable. When the narrator goes to her first ballet lesson, she encounters 'a very old white man in a trilby [who] sat playing an upright piano, "Night and Day", a song I loved and was proud to recognize' (p. 14). Later in the novel the title ironically highlights the unhealthy, obsessive way in which the narrator is required to be 'thinking of Aimee, day and night, night

and day' (p. 448). This phrase functions as a leitmotif and resurfaces intermittently within the novel.

The significance of the song also extends to the novel's structure, which is divided as follows: Prologue; Part One: Early Days; Part Two: Early and Late; Part Three: Intermission; Part Four: Middle Passage; Part Five: Night and Day; Part Six: Day and Night; Part Seven: Late Days; Epilogue. Both 'Intermission' (an interval between parts of a performance) and the quotations from Porter's song clearly have performative connotations, while 'Middle Passage' could signify a section within a song or orchestral work — perhaps even the bridge of a jazz tune. Yet 'Middle Passage' also carries obvious racial connotations relating to the transatlantic slave trade. In this context, the recurrence of Porter's lyrics arguably suggest the dichotomy of black and white in terms of skin colour and tribal affiliation. Throughout the novel, racial issues are intertwined with music, as indicated in the following passage where segregation in Harlem infiltrates the narrator's childhood dream:

> One night I dreamt of the Cotton Club: Cab Calloway was there, and Harold and Fayard, and I stood on a podium with a lily behind my ear. In my dream we were all elegant and none of us knew pain, we had never graced the sad pages of the history book my mother bought for me, never been called ugly or stupid, never entered theatres by the back door, drunk from separate water fountains or taken our seats at the back of any bus. None of our people ever swung by their necks from a tree, or found themselves suddenly thrown overboard, shackled, in dark water — no, in my dream we were golden! (p. 100)

In this dream, the eleven-year-old narrator attempts to sing but no sound emerges; on waking she finds she has wet the bed. The remedy her mother offers is the perusal of the history of

jazz-age landmarks and icons such as the Cotton Club, the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson. Yet the narrator finds more comfort and diversion in reading about the history of dance, while dance rhythms and movements provide a more physical, visceral way to overcome deep-rooted racial despair. As a result of her mixed-race origins (with a white father and Jamaican mother), the narrator admires the aristocratic Astaire and the proletarian Gene Kelly but feels more natural affinity with Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson who 'should really have been my dancer, because Bojangles danced for the Harlem dandy, for the ghetto kid, for the sharecropper — for all the descendants of slaves' (p. 24). Running counter to this argument, however, is the narrator's inherent feeling that a dancer is 'a man from nowhere', without a family or obligations. This sense fuels her love for movies such as *Swing Time*, though in retrospect she recognizes that there are problematic elements within this film. In the dance routine that fills the narrator (even as an adult) with intense and transcendent joy, Astaire has a blackened face and farcical rolling eyes.

The history of racial conflict is seen here as inseparable from the music that has sought to express it. The sadness of this legacy is evident in perhaps the most moving moment of the novel, in which the narrator abandons *her* obligations briefly and gives free reign to her own suffering through her 'lifting' voice:

> it was something I'd released that now rose up and away and escaped my reach. My hands were in the air. I was stamping my heels into the floor. I felt I had everyone in the room. I even had a sentimental vision of myself as one in a long line of gutsy brothers and sisters, music-makers, singers, musicians, dancers, for didn't I, too, have the gift so often ascribed to my people? I could turn time into musical phrases, into beats and notes, slowing it down and speeding it up, controlling the time of my life, finally, at last, here on a stage , if nowhere else. (p. 137)

This is a forthright moment of self-expression for someone who — nameless in the novel — is characterized by her own mother as the kind of person who feeds off the light of others, remaining herself in shadow. Like the ending of Rhys's 'Let Them Call it Jazz', this profoundly expressive moment entails the rejection of a label that is seen to debase African music. As she sings, the narrator thinks of Nina Simone's reference to 'Black Classical Music', rejecting 'jazz' as 'a white word for black people' (p. 137). Despite the ragged bathos of the performance's conclusion, it has been undeniably powerful, as indicated by the perennially selfish Aimee shedding tears and making uncharacteristic enquiries about the narrator's emotional condition. There are hints in the novel, then, that the narrator has a natural talent and ease in performance that Aimee — for all her flamboyance — evidently lacks.

Throughout the novel, the narrator identifies with the pulse of jazz whilst finding herself unable to relate to what Tracey (her closest childhood friend) calls 'white' (namely classical) music. Nonetheless, she is aware that there is something wrong with these clear-cut distinctions: perhaps this is one reason that Simone's hybridizing terminology appeals to her. Even as a child, the narrator speculates that there must be 'a world somewhere in which the two combined' (p. 25). She recollects films and photos with black girls singing alongside white men at the piano, and she yearns to be part of this vision of racial unity through music and dance. Like the other texts discussed in this chapter, Smith uses early jazz as a means to evoke and grapple with racial conflict, injustice, despair and hope, revealing the power and extent of its literary legacy.