Kinds of Blue

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“there are,” says Nathaniel Mackey’s N., “musics which haunt us like a phantom limb” (Bedouin 1). Clearly, Hughes’s “Bop,” Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé,” and Baraka’s “Answers in Progress” are haunted, and violently so, by jazz. The crossroads these stories traverse are a figurative place where, Mackey explains, “[i]mmanence and transcendence meet, making the music social as well as cosmic, political and metaphysical”—violent and spiritual (Discrepant 235). The violence in these stories is also part and parcel of the “double paradox,” or crossroads, Walter Göbel discerns in the uses of music by the contemporary African American novel: “thematically it fuses engagement with escapism, formally the revolution of poetic language with the devaluation and transcendence of linguistic expression. . . . The interpretations of the music thus oscillate between syncretic utopia, subversion of the dominant culture, and nostalgic projection, three elements which . . . can coexist” (Göbel 80–81). The tenor of this critical discourse of literary jazz is, again, the negotiation of binary pairs that the jazz aesthetic in fact thrives on, engaging seemingly disparate, opposite elements. Jazz is, after all, a decidedly hybrid music, but its very hybridity therefore also raises the question of how viable a tool a literary-critical jazz aesthetic can be for the examination of a distinct African American literary tradition. For the history of literature written by blacks in America has always consisted of the struggle to establish an ‘authentic’ voice against
a dominant culture that has sought to silence, distort, or ignore that voice.

In 1951, James Baldwin wrote that “[i]t is only in his music . . . that the Negro of America has been able to tell his story” (*Notes* 24). But that same year, British jazz critic Leonard Feather published in the pages of *Down Beat* magazine a blindfold test with jazz trumpeter Roy Eldridge. Throughout his distinguished career, Eldridge had repeatedly expressed his firm belief that white and black jazz musicians had distinctly different styles and that he could easily distinguish between them. When Feather took him at his word and administered the test, the results were somewhat astonishing: the musician, nicknamed “Little Jazz” by his peers, was either noncommittal or wrong much more often than he was right (Feather, *Book* 47). Listening to Billy Taylor’s recording of, ironically, “All Ears,” the seventh of ten selections, Eldridge’s irritation mounted: “I liked the pianist. Couldn’t tell who was colored and who was white. They could be Eskimos for all I know,” he admitted and had to concede defeat in the end (Feather, “Little” 12).1 Eldridge’s blindfold test again raises the old yet still provocative question: can white folks play the blues? If, indeed, the end product of a jazz performance transcends what W. E. B. Du Bois called “the problem of the color-line,” can jazz itself still provide a useful critical framework for the study of black American cultural expressions (v)? To be sure, music, instrumental music at least, is a much more abstract art form than literature, but the contemporary critic still faces the same dilemma that confronted Roy Eldridge: the apparent paradox that jazz music is at once a distinctly black American art form as well as a cultural hybrid.

Some of the ways in which the literary jazz aesthetic negotiates this tension between authenticity and hybridity may be clarified by the comparison of two novels, both of which bear the title *Jazz.* The first one, published in 1992, is Toni Morrison’s *Jazz,* set during the Harlem Renaissance. The second one was originally published in 1927, a year after Morrison’s *Violet Trace* mutilates the face of a dead girl at a Harlem funeral. Also entitled *Jazz,* that novel’s plot is set in London and Paris, does not contain any major characters who are black, and was written by Hans Janowitz, a German-speaking Jew born in southern Bohemia.2 Despite the obvious and enormous differences between Morrison and Janowitz and their books, both employ virtually identical techniques to achieve “the translation of the world into jazz music,” as Janowitz puts it (24).3 In theme, cast of characters, and setting, the two novels diverge dramatically: Morrison’s grand, epic sweep interrogating the meanings of history and identity contrasts sharply with Janowitz’s short, light-
hearted comedy of errors. It is therefore all the more significant that both texts, in striving to forge an aesthetic of literary jazz, employ the same narrative strategies of style and structure. This suggests the need for a critical practice that is not predicated solely on form and language, as most contemporary jazz critiques are. The tendency of structuralist approaches to privilege literary text at the expense of historico-cultural context is not really in tune with the jazz aesthetic.

Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz* is not, strictly speaking, about jazz at all. Its very first paragraph sounds the basic theme: a woman named Violet went to a funeral to mutilate the face of a dead eighteen-year-old girl, who had been shot by Violet’s husband in a desperate act of misguided love. This, then, is the melody on which the disembodied first-person narrative voice improvises a story, or several stories, constantly adding, revising, inventing, shifting back and forth between various characters, going back in time as far as antebellum Virginia. The various stories and voices the narrator evokes are, as Morrison explains, designed to reflect “a jazz performance in which the musicians are on stage. And they know what they are doing, they rehearse, but the performance is open to change, and the other musicians have to respond quickly to that change. Somebody takes off from a basic pattern, then the others have to accommodate themselves. That’s the excitement, the razor’s edge of a live performance of jazz” (“Toni” 41). How important jazz is for her writing she underscored already in 1983, when she described her style as “hanging on to whatever that ineffable quality is that is curiously black. The only analogy that I have for it is music. John Coltrane does not sound like Louis Armstrong, and no one ever confuses one for the other, and no one questions if they are black. That is what I am trying to get at . . .” (“Interview” 153).

Hans Janowitz’s *Jazz*, on the other hand, sprang from a completely different cultural environment. Janowitz was born in the Czech town of Podebrady in 1890. Studying in Prague, the bilingual Janowitz—he was fluent in Czech and German—associated with the Prague Poetry Circle, where he met Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Karl Kraus, and others, and began to publish essays and poetry. After the war, he eventually settled in Berlin, where he co-wrote the script for the German silent movie classic *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and became an overnight celebrity, finding ample work in the movies and the theater. It was in the cabarets of Berlin where he encountered this new, exciting music from America that appeared to furnish the perfect soundtrack for life in the chaotic Weimar Republic. Thus inspired, he began to write a novella entitled *Jazz*, which was published in 1927 to great critical acclaim (Brady 468–70; Kracauer...
Much like Morrison’s novel, Janowitz’s book is not strictly about jazz either, although the narrative voice consciously and overtly emulates jazz music. Like the former, the latter, too, tells a love story that turns out differently than anticipated. Its basic theme or melody is the chance encounter on a train from Liverpool to London between Lord Henry, a young English playboy and would-be jazzzer, and Madame Mae R., a beautiful aristocrat and flapper. Henry and Mae are smitten with each other but are separated before they learn the other’s identity. For the rest of the book, the first-person narrator traces Lord Henry’s rise to fame in Paris as the leader of the hugely successful “Lord Punch’s Jazz Band” and Madame Mae’s efforts to track down Henry. In the process Janowitz’s narrator also adds, speculates, invents, improvises, moving back and forth between Paris and London, the past and the present, introducing new characters and musing about their motives. And in order to make his world jazz, a world so different from Morrison’s, Janowitz nevertheless deploys the same structural and stylistic devices.

I. Jazzing Up the World: From Harlem to Paris

Toni Morrison’s jazz critics have primarily focused on two aspects of her novel in order to assess the aesthetic at work, namely narrative structure and language. Perhaps the most jazz-like aspect of the novel’s technique of storytelling is its narrative voice, and Paula Gallant Eckard goes so far as to claim that “[t]hough unnamed, jazz is the essential narrator of the novel” (13). Critics have correctly pointed out that the narrator resembles a jazz soloist who improvises on a basic theme—the novel’s first paragraph—and in the course of the solo constantly invents, re-harmonizes, elaborates, digresses, and explores. Significantly, it is a narrative voice engaged in the creative process of storytelling, reacting against and responding to other voices, other sounds, picking up new motifs on the way, correcting itself, even contradicting itself:

Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me—curious, inventive, and well-informed. Joe acts like he knew all about what the old folks did to keep on going, but he couldn’t have known much about True Belle, for example, because I doubt Violet ever talked to him about her grandmother—and never about her mother. So he didn’t know. Neither do I, although it’s not hard to imagine what it must have been like. (137)
The narrator’s storytelling is truly improvisational: “I watched them through windows and doors, took every opportunity I had to follow them, to gossip about them and fill in their lives” (220).

Janowitz’s narrative voice, like Morrison’s, is not only gossipy and judgmental, but also forgoes linear narration by switching back and forth in time and place, invoking new voices, finding and elaborating new motifs, improvising scenes and dialogue—in short, it too is a narrative voice engaged in the creative process of storytelling: it revels in interrupting its own storyline “because it brings me delight to disrupt syncopationally the so-called course of the action once again and always again. For do not forget, ladies and gentlemen: it is a jazz novel that is developing here. After all, the jazz character must finally erupt somewhere. And because much has been ruptured in this chapter already, it shall therefore erupt in the next one” (19). Where Morrison’s narrator improvises and leaves the basic melody of the storyline behind to elaborate on the beauties of the city sky or explain the significance of Thursdays (35–36, 49–51), Janowitz’s narrator improvises as well, elaborating on the characteristics of Hungarian aristocrats in exile or explaining the history of a hotel room mirror, for instance (19–22, 32). And like Morrison’s narrator, Janowitz’s too remains unnamed, disembodied, running the same risks the jazz soloist runs in the act of creation, correcting itself when necessary in order to maintain a connection between the melodic line of the solo and the underlying chord progression of the song, contradicting itself when that connection ruptures, and, also typical of jazz according to Morrison’s critics, eschewing closure:

A jazz-novel has the right to fade softly in the middle of a motif’s repetition and simply come to an end. To safeguard this inalienable right in the first jazz-novel having unfolded according to the laws of jazz music—well, this should naturally be granted to me. If I still take the liberty to afford, say, the saxophone a coda, softly accompanied by violin, piano, and drum, then you may be displeased with this or not: I have to leave it at that. The jazz-instrument is difficult to control, it likes to go its own soundways, and so I let it speak here once again, although I cannot entirely suppress the fear it could pull a prank on the jazz-character, its own innate character, you see. But I cannot avail anything against this either; for I am, after all, fully and completely at the mercy of my instruments, in the scope of this narrative. (Maybe I should rather be doing chamber music next time?) (112)
Thus, the narrative voice in Janowitz’s jazz is also, in a way, jazz music itself, creating and reinventing itself in the moment.7

But it is not only in terms of narrative structure and technique that Toni Morrison’s jazz is jazz, but also on the level of language itself, as many critics have pointed out.8 Eusebio Rodrigues has put forth perhaps the most detailed stylistic analysis of Morrison’s language, as for example with the following passage:

Dorcas lay on a chenille bedspread, 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. (60)

Rodrigues argues that in its use of onomatopoeia, repetition, and punctuation, this passage enacts the sounds and the structure of jazz music:

The syllables “ick” and “ing” act in counterpoint. The “ick,” first sounded in “tickled,” continues to sound, like a pair of drumsticks clicking, in licking, licorice, stick, ticking . . . The participal “-ing” (set up by the first “knowing”) is repeated to maintain a continuous flow of movement: licking, tickling, beating, blowing, knowing, going. Internal echo-rhymes (“where,” “somewhere”) and balanced repetition (“somewhere,” “somebody”) quicken the tempo. The tiny riff (“where somewhere, close by, somewhere”) with its deliberate commas, placed to compel the voice to pause, enacts a slow shimmy. The three song titles, unpunctuated, are made to run on together . . . The whole passage ends with a period that is no period, for the voice does not drop but continues to sound. “Or else” is indefinite, incomplete, it is a warning, or else a promise. It resonates, and how does one punctuate a resonance? (735)

It is to be added here that towards the end of the passage, the language is not only polyvocal—we hear, in fact, two voices, the narrator’s and the singer’s, at one and the same time—but the quickened tempo is also reminiscent of what jazz musicians call double-time, an apparent increase in tempo creating a polyrhythmic effect.

Eusebio’s analysis of Morrison’s jazz style, however, fits Janowitz’s
own style almost perfectly. For instance, the second half of the novel’s opening paragraph, a tour de force describing the jazz age in Europe, uses the same stylistic devices:

... es war die Zeit der historischen Dissonanzen zwischen Ost und West: das erste Jahrzehnt des Kommunismus in Russland war bald überstanden, eine neue Menschheit war unter den Sowjets in der einen Welthälfte herangewachsen, streng abgegrenzt vom bürgerlichen Westen des verarmten, zwieträchtig gespaltenen Europa, vom West-Westen des über und über vergoldeten Amerika, eine Kluft von noch nie erlebter Tiefe war aufgerissen zwischen den beiden Hälften der Menschheit, mitten durch die einstige Zivilisation der Demokratie ging jetzt ihr roter Grenzstrich, hinter dem die proletarische Kultur ihr Zukunftsreich baute; diese Dissonanz zwischen Ost und West klang grell durch alles Leben der Erde, ja, es war die Zeit eben dieser grellen Dissonanz, aufgewühlter Kontraste, es war die Zeit der wilden Kindereien, Schattenwürfe nur der tragischen Verwilderungen, die noch bevorstanden, es war die Zeit der wilden Freude an wilder Lausbüberei, an wildem Unfug im Ordnungsbereich, kurz: das wahre Programm der Zeit hiess:

Jazz,

und Jazz ist es natürlich auch, womit wir uns hier beschäftigen wollen. (6–7)

... it was the time of historic dissonances between East and West: the first decade of Communism in Russia was soon survived, a new mankind had grown up under the Soviets in one half of the world, strictly demarcated from the bourgeois West of the impoverished, discordantly split Europe, from the West-West of the all over overgilded America, a chasm of heretofore unprecedented depth was ripped open between the two halves of mankind, straight through the former civilization of democracy its red borderline went, behind which the proletarian culture built its future empire; this dissonance between East and West sounded shrilly through all life on earth, yes, it was the time of just this shrill dissonance, of stirred-up contrasts, it was the time of wild kiddie games, only shadowshapes of the tragic wilderness yet to come, it was the time of the wild joy in wild tricksterishness, in wild mischief in
the area of law and order, in short: the real program of the time was:

Jazz,

and it’s of course jazz that we shall be dealing with here.

The vowels o and e in the words “Ost” and “West” at the beginning act in counterpoint, and they continue to sound, for example, in the accentuated middle syllable of “Europa” and “Amerika” respectively; the contrast in sound is linked twice to the historical dissonance of the time. The consonant cluster st, reminiscent of the sound of a hi-hat, continues to sound as well, in “erste,” then again in “einstige” and “Kontraste,” thus repeated to create a flowing rhythm that quickens (as when “West-Westen” is complemented by “über und über,” rhythmically constituting double-time) or relaxes (as after “eine Kluft”). The sequencing of the root wild has the same effect. Moreover, the consonant cluster st of the hi-hat is complemented by the voiceless alveolar fricative ss of the sizzle cymbal accentuating the flow of the language: the fricative in “Dissonanzen” recurs in “Russland,” “aufgerissen,” “hiess,” and finally in “Jazz” toward the end. Here, the fricative resonates across the physical boundaries of pagination and spacing as well as the grammatical boundaries of punctuation: “. . . hiess: Jazz, und Jazz . . .,” a combination of syncopation, semantics, grammar, syntax, and spacing, which has a polyrhythmic effect. Because the opening paragraph does not really deal with the music itself, jazz functions, much like in Rodrigues’s analysis, as both a warning (of the ostensibly chaotic nature of these jazzy times) and a promise (jazz as the “program” that can make sense of these “wild” times). The passage also contains two riffs, the recurring phrase “es war die Zeit” and “Dissonanzen zwischen Ost und West.” Moreover, a call and response pattern emerges, with “es war die Zeit” the call, the historical elaborations the response. Lastly, the word “Jazz” is polyvocal too, as it is both the narrator’s voice we hear and the voice of the time declaring itself the Jazz Age, another instance of call and response. Clearly, then, what Rodrigues says of Morrison’s jazz also pertains to Janowitz’s jazz: “What we experience is language trying to become music as it tries to capture the flow of human time” (751).

Thus, if we are to adopt the theoretical framework of literary jazz put forth by Morrison’s jazz critics, we must also concede that Janowitz’s novel is, in fact, a jazz novel—and perhaps it very well is. But what is more, many of Morrison’s jazz critics reference jazz as a marker of
authentic blackness: for example, Alan J. Rice concludes that “Morris-
on’s jazzy prose style is . . . an aesthetic device to foreground her black-
ness,” while Robin Small-McCarthy emotes that “[i]n her consistent use
of selected conventions of the jazz aesthetic, and in concert with our
African ancestors, Morrison seems to sing out that ‘The [holy] spirit will
not descend without song’” (A. Rice, “Jazzing” 432; Small-McCarthy
295). Both of these statements are emblematic of the fact that “[i]f we
think of ‘jazz’ not only as a music but as a relatively self-contained and
identifiable culture, we are unlikely to discover other cultures as con-
sumed with the idea of authenticity,” as E. Taylor Atkins points out (23).
This, then, forces the provocative question: since Janowitz’s *Jazz* fits so
neatly into the critical framework demarcated by Morrison’s jazz critics,
is it also a ‘black’ novel? Obviously, it is not. And yet, the challenge that
the preceding comparative analysis poses is this: if indeed the literary
jazz aesthetic transcends culture, race, and even language itself, how can
a critical aesthetic of jazz still be useful for the study of African American
literature? Part of the problem is the theoretical template that Morrison’s
jazz critics use in their efforts to make *Jazz* jazz, as most of their interpre-
tations avail themselves of a primarily structuralist approach. That is,
they argue that because the text’s structure and style contain certain ele-
ments derived from jazz music—improvisation, the riff, call and
response, et cetera—Morrison’s novel becomes, thus, jazz literature.
What these critics either misrepresent or ignore altogether is how the
novel’s aesthetic gesture connects with jazz history. Clearly, the critical
investigation of a literary jazz aesthetic must hence be grounded much
more firmly in the history of jazz music and cannot rely on an analysis of
form and structure only. A more fruitful approach, perhaps, may be initi-
ated by examining how Toni Morrison’s novel—a novel in which the
word *jazz* occurs only once: on the title page—is grounded in the history
of the music, specifically the aesthetic of the jam session and the cutting
contest.

II. Cutting to the Chase: Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray,
Morrisonian Cracks and Ellingtonian Breaks

The jam session was, as Ralph Ellison called it, “the jazzman’s true acad-
emy” (*Shadow* 245). In an art form that for the first half-century of its exis-
tence knew no formal schooling and was not represented in academia,
informal gatherings of musicians improvising with each other free from
the demands of producers, agents, promoters and club owners provided
both the training ground and the experimental laboratory for jazz musicians. The cutting contest is a particularly competitive variety of this jazz tradition and arose out of early New Orleans jazz. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there were roughly thirty bands active in the Crescent City. As a form of advertising, bands would routinely ride through the streets of Storyville on horse-drawn wagons promoting various events and products. When a chance meeting between two rival orchestras occurred, quite often a so-called “bucking contest” would ensue: their wagons were tied together by a rope to prevent escape, and each band would try to outplay the other in a contest of skill, endurance, and volume. Later, in the heyday of the swing era, the so-called battle of the bands pitted two orchestras against each other in a similar fashion; the victory of Chick Webb’s orchestra over the “King of Swing,” Bennie Goodman, at the Savoy Ballroom in 1936 is perhaps the most famous such battle (Bechet 63–68; Berendt 22–24; “Cutting”; Polillo 72–73, 127–28, 146–48). Unlike the bucking contest or the battle of the bands, the cutting contest is waged between individual musicians. In a cutting contest, two or more soloists alternately improvise on the same tune with the ultimate goal of “cutting” or outplaying the opponent by countering, subverting, expanding, and ultimately topping the opponent’s musical ideas. Solo space is allotted in accordance with the success or failure of the improviser as adjudicated on the spot by both the musicians on the bandstand and the listeners in the audience. Often, the formula for such a competition will pit two musicians who play the same instrument against each other, according one chorus to each player at the beginning before steadily decreasing solo space to four measures each (hence the term “trading fours”), occasionally even to two or one. The cutting contest thus constitutes the musical variety of African American oral traditions like signifying, playing the dozens, or other call and response patterns (DeVeaux, *Birth* 210–12; Townsend 56–60). While the informal jam session had always been a vital ritual in musicians’ circles, the cutting contest began to acquire even more significance with the demise of the swing big bands starting in the late 1930s: as job opportunities in larger orchestras steadily decreased, jazz musicians were forced to compete for jobs in small combos or found their own band. Thus, although held mostly in a congenial atmosphere, the purpose of cutting contests was to establish and maintain a hierarchy of professional ability and competence. As such, they constituted not only the breeding ground of what would become the bebop revolution, but they also carried potentially wide-ranging economic implications for all involved: newcomers just might land a gig with a big name in the business or even
secure a recording contract if they managed to “cut” their opponents, whereas arrived players had to protect their reputation as well as their market value and, if possible, enhance it by cutting particularly tenacious upstarts or well-established rivals (DeVeaux, Birth 208–10). On this “musical dueling ground,” Ellison, himself a trumpeter, noted that “even the greatest can never rest on past accomplishments, for, as with the fast guns of the Old West, there is always someone waiting in a jam session to blow him literally, not only down, but into shame and discouragement” (Shadow 246). Trombonist Dicky Wells remembers some of the cutting contests at the countless basement clubs in Harlem in the early 1940s:

Anyone could go, but mostly performers went, mostly musicians. . . . All the musicians would be sitting around the walls, all around the dance floor. Maybe there would be forty guys sitting around there. The floor was for dancers only, and they would be cutting each other, too, while we were cutting each other on the instruments. Everybody would be blowing—maybe six trombones. Now Hawk [tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins] would always come by the session . . . “I just happened to stop by and had my horn,” he would say. You knew he’d come to carve somebody. (24)

Coleman Hawkins was one of the most feared opponents in cutting contests, and tenor saxophonists proved to be particularly combative; some of these battles have acquired near-mythical status in jazz lore. The bartender at the legendary Minton’s Playhouse remembers the frequent bouts fought between Ben Webster, a tenorist in the swing tradition, and Lester Young, whose style became the model for many emerging beboppers: “Lester Young and Ben Webster used to tie up in battle like dogs in the road. They’d fight on those saxophones until they were tired out; then they’d put in long-distance calls to their mothers, both of whom lived in Kansas City, and tell them about it” (qtd. in Ellison, Shadow 246–47).

Among the many young players sowing the seeds of bebop and challenging the older, established generation of Hawkins and Webster was a tenor saxophonist from California, Dexter Gordon. Gordon, an inveterate jammer, had been a member of Lionel Hampton’s and Billy Eckstine’s big bands, but after he left Eckstine in 1945, his reputation grew when he immersed himself in New York City’s after hours jazz scene, honing his craft alongside the likes of Lester Young and Charlie Parker (Gitler, Jazz 202–3; Britt 63–68). When he returned to his native Los Angeles a year
later, he quickly became the star on the local jam session circuit. Known for his extraordinary harmonic awareness, his big, gutsy sound, and his uncanny ability to weave fragments from campy pop tunes into his solos, he was the perennial winner in cutting contests. Only one other tenorist could hold his own next to Gordon, and that was Wardell Gray. Born in Ralph Ellison’s hometown of Oklahoma City, Gray came to the West Coast in 1946—the same year as Gordon, and the same year Charlie Parker collapsed during a recording session and spent six months recuperating in Camarillo State Hospital. Parker’s presence was giving the jazz scene around Central Avenue a tremendous boost, and the inconspicuous, soft-spoken Gray, “who couldn’t have weighed more than a hundred pounds and wouldn’t hurt a flea,” who “[r]ead French philosophers and talked about Henry Wallace,” as fellow West Coast bopper Hampton Hawes remembered, soon became known as the only saxophonist in town who could make Bird turn his head on the bandstand in disbelief (Hawes and Asher 80; Morgan, liner notes; Gitler, liner notes). As Gordon recalled,

... the jam-session thing was going on very heavily at that time, at several different clubs. At all the sessions, they would hire a rhythm section along with, say, a couple of horns. But there would always be about ten horns up on the stand. Various tenors, altos, trumpets and an occasional trombone. But it seemed that in the wee small hours of the morning—always—there would be only Wardell and myself. It became a kind of traditional thing. Spontaneous? Yeah! Nothing was really worked out. It was a natural thing. (qtd. in Britt 18)

While the two tenorists established a relationship of mutual professional respect and personal friendship, their musical battles were nonetheless a very serious business indeed, as Gordon was quick to point out: “It wasn’t somebody would say, ‘I can play better than you man,’ but actually... that’s what it was. It was serious—shit, dead serious. You’d think, damn, what the fuck was he playing? You’d try to figure it out, what was going on. To a degree, that was one of the things, to be the fastest, the hippest. The tenor player with the biggest tone—that takes balls, that takes strength” (qtd. in Gioia 35). Thus, cutting contests are not simply won or lost on sheer power and stamina alone; they also entail the vital attempt “to figure it out,” to decode, transform, and extend meaning. The competitive juxtaposition of two different interpretations of the same song paradoxically also presupposes a collaborative interface of
meaning. The cutting contest, in other words, constitutes a framework in which different meanings both compete and collaborate, where competition and collectivity are interdependent.

Gordon’s cutting contests with Gray quickly accrued so much fame that they caught the interest of record producer Ross Russell, owner of the Dial record label. Russell put Gordon and Gray into the studio in the summer of 1947 and accorded them the then uncommon luxury of a six-and-a-half minute recording—so long in fact that it would take up both sides of a 78 rpm disc when it was released—with the express intent of recreating the fire and excitement of a cutting contest. The tune selected, aptly entitled “The Chase” and penned by Gordon, had evolved out of the spontaneous battles between Gordon and Gray. The title was chosen as a reference to the two chasing the competition off the bandstand as well as subsequently chasing each other (Gitler, Jazz 209–10; Wiggins 315–16). “The Chase” is a standard thirty-two bar song with an AABA structure and derives from the time-honored New Orleans vehicle “High Society.” After stating the introduction and theme in unison, Gordon leads off with one full chorus of improvisation and is followed by Gray, then another chorus by Gordon, then back to Gray again. After Jimmy Bunn’s piano solo of one chorus, it is Gray who leads off, this time for sixteen measures, followed by Gordon’s half. The next chorus is subdivided even further, Gray and Gordon alternating every eight bars before “trading fours”—alternating solos of four measures—in the final chorus of improvisation. This is followed by a riff section in which Gordon and Gray, switching the sequence once again, continue to trade fours. The steadily decreasing solo space accorded to the soloists as well as their alternating order heightens the intensity of the improvisations and has Gordon and Gray literally chase each other.

This was not only the first studio recording that sought to put the cutting contest into a commercially viable format, it also became Dial’s best-selling record, outpacing by far the sides Charlie Parker had cut for the label. The sales figures were so encouraging that Russell called Gordon back into the studio a mere six months later to pair him with another tenorist, Teddy Edwards, on a tune entitled “The Duel” in an (unsuccessful) attempt to capitalize on the commercial success of “The Chase.” It was the success of this recording, too, which helped in no small measure to popularize the two-tenor-battles, which just around that time evolved into the ritualistic centerpiece of impresario Norman Granz’s highly profitable Jazz At The Philharmonic concert series (Britt 16–21; Gitler, Jazz 209–10). But as one of the veterans of the early days of the cutting contests recalled, it was Gordon’s commanding presence on the
West Coast jam session scene that paved the way: “he did a lot of beautiful things. Like he and Wardell Gray—‘The Chase.’ . . . They actually started the two-tenor thing” (qtd. in Britt 26). In fact, the term chase made its way into the jazz lexicon and has become synonymous with cutting contest (“Chase”).

One of these unrehearsed chases was captured on record in July of 1947 at the Elk’s Club on Central Avenue, and the tune showcasing the vaunted battle between the two tenor saxophonists is appropriately enough entitled “The Hunt.” It opens with solos by trumpeter Howard McGhee and alto saxophonist Sonny Criss, each followed by polite applause. Next is trombonist Trummy Young, a veteran of the Earl Hines and Jimmy Lunceford orchestras and the only representative here of the older generation of the swing era. It is probably Wardell Gray who starts the spontaneous riff behind Young, signaling the other musicians’ encouragement as well as respect (4:59–5:32). Young is followed by another up-and-coming bebopper, guitarist Barney Kessel. First the audience, then his fellow musicians react favorably to his solo, spurring him on—“go, go!” (7:09–7:10)—by shouting and clapping (6:37–6:38, 7:55, 8:16–8:20). Consequently, Kessel’s solo is the longest to that point. Then, however, the concluding duel between Gray and Gordon turns what has heretofore been a congenial jam session into a no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners cutting contest over a total of seventeen choruses. Gray’s initially somewhat hesitant opening chorus—it sounds as if he is walking up to the front of the stage as he begins to play—is followed by Gordon, who is encouraged by rhythmic clapping (9:22–9:26). He responds by tapping into his encyclopedic knowledge of popular song and weaves a brief quote from “The Wedding March” into his improvisation, only the first of many such quotations (9:33–34). Gray not only answers in kind, but raises the bar as if to taunt Gordon by firing off one of his signature licks, derived from the Oscar-winning Bing Crosby hit “Swinging on a Star” from the musical Going My Way (9:56–9:59), and building much of his chorus on that motif, seemingly determined to beat the master of musical quotations at his own game. No wonder that Gordon in turn seems overeager to initiate hand-to-hand combat as he cuts into the solo of Gray’s third full chorus, creating a brief moment of confusion that is resolved when Gordon, in a gesture of chivalry, quickly retreats and lets his opponent finish his turn (11:10–11:12). However, Gordon starts his next turn by ‘signifying’ at the beginning of his improvisation on the concluding phrase of Gray’s, the musical equivalent of throwing down his gauntlet (11:34–11:42). Gray, not to be outdone and probably out to avenge Gordon’s disruption in his own solo chorus, first
plays a quick flurry of notes behind Gordon (11:44–11:46) and then signifies on the concluding motif of Gordon’s solo when he opens the eighth total chorus of the battle (12:05–12:13). This begins the reduction of the exchanges from one full chorus each to eight measures, then later to four in the ninth chorus. As each tenorist tries to outdo the other in an intense and prolonged call and response section of trading fours that whips the audience into a frenzy, Gordon is clearly at a loss twice as to how to respond to Gray’s ceaseless, zigzagging lines of eighth-notes in unusual intervals (14:02–14:06, 14:18–14:22) before he finally resorts to a stock blues riff (14:26–14:31) and subsequently recovers. Still, Gray seems to come out of this particular bout slightly ahead—this time. As Ross Russell remembers, these battles were like a “contest between evenly matched boxers of contrasting skills, a Dempsey against a Joe Louis, a Marciano against a Muhammad Ali” (liner notes).

The parallels between the cutting contest, “The Chase,” and “The Hunt” on the one hand and Toni Morrison’s Jazz on the other are numerous. First of all, motifs of cutting, hunting, and chasing permeate the novel. The very first paragraph, the paragraph whose content furnishes the basis for the narrative voice’s improvisations, mentions that Violet “went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face,” which is in a sense a cutting contest, albeit a tragicomic one, between Violet and her rival and challenger, the girl who had stolen her husband away (3). Later on, the narrative voice provides a more detailed account of the funeral, ascribing Violet’s inexplicable deed to the aggressive, violent half of her split consciousness, “that Violet”: “She had been looking for that knife for a month. Couldn’t for the life of her think what she’d done with it. But that Violet knew and went right to it. Knew too where the funeral was going on . . .” (90). Although “the blade she had not seen for a month at least and was surprised to see now aimed at the girl’s haughty, secret face” does not do much damage at all, Violet struggles against the young, brawny ushers trying to restrain her because “[m]aybe she had more than one cutting in mind,” as the narrative voice surmises (91).

Violet’s split consciousness that leads to her cutting her rival foreshadows Joe’s hunt for his mother and his chase after his lover, Dorcas. The novel’s Golden Gray section ends with alternating parallel plot lines: in the first, Joe is hunting after the mysterious woman the locals in rural Vesper County, Virginia, have dubbed Wild, whom he believes to be his mother. Joe has been trained in woodsmanship by Henry Lestory, also known as Hunters Hunter. Not only is Wild the sort of woman who “made men sharpen her knives,” her presence is usually announced by a flock of “redwings, those blue-black birds with the bolt
of red on their wings”—surely no coincidence in a novel that early on alludes to Charlie “Bird” Parker in the figure of a “colored man” who “floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone” (178, 176, 8). Even though Joe makes three attempts to find Wild and comes very close once, he is unable to ascertain whether she is in fact his mother. The second of these two parallel plot lines finds Joe in New York City three decades later chasing his girlfriend, who has just left him for a man her own age, and his search for Dorcas reminds Joe of his past:

Joe is wondering about all this on an icy day in January. He is a long way from Virginia, and even longer from Eden. As he puts on his coat and cap he can practically feel [his childhood friend] Victory at his side when he sets out, armed, to find Dorcas. He isn’t thinking of harming her, or, as Hunter had cautioned, killing something tender. She is female. And she is not prey. So he never thinks of that. He is hunting for her though, and while hunting a gun is as natural a companion as Victory. (180)

Joe follows Dorcas and two girlfriends to a jazz party where Joe, out of misguided love, shoots her fatally. Not only do both of these plot lines tell the story of a chase, they alternate in such a way that they resemble the structure of “The Chase,” or any cutting contest: the narrator’s voice, narrating the rural chase after Wild, alternates with Joe’s own voice, narrating the urban hunt for Dorcas, in passages that progressively decrease in length. The next section is structured according to the same principle, only here the narrator’s voice alternates with Dorcas’s interior monologue. Not only is the narrative strategy here reminiscent of the jazz term double-time in that the text literally moves back and forth between two ‘times,’ the past and the present; in terms of the dialogic structure of these passages, the narrative voice, in that sense, is the Dexter Gordon to the characters’ Wardell Gray or Teddy Edwards. Just as in a cutting contest where the opponents improvise over the same chord changes, so are the two parallel plot lines based on the same theme: the chase after a loved one. And just as in a serious cutting contest, someone is left for dead at the end. Furthermore, Joe’s hunt for his mother and later for Dorcas is paralleled by Golden Gray’s chase after his biological father, Hunters Hunter. Golden Gray likens his own chase to the search for an amputated arm: “I will locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement. Perhaps then the arm will no longer be a phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the
purpose of its serenade” (159). Here again, the narrative voice in its improvisation links the motif of cutting to identity, meaning, and music. Yet the narrative voice itself concedes defeat toward the end of the story; in a novel filled like a jam session with contesting, contrasting, and competing voices, the narrator appears to be the loser of this particular cutting contest:

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable—human, I guess you’d say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. (220)

However, the novel does not end there—the narrator in effect pulls off a musical save (Berliner 210–16, 379–83; Grewal 135–36). As a music created in the moment, all jazz, the jam session and the cutting contest in particular, relies on the interplay between the musicians themselves and between the performers and their audience. Like jazz, Jazz too depends on that interplay between voice and listener, narrator and reader, more so than any of Morrison’s other novels. It ends with a plea for our response to the narrator’s call: “If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229). We are asked to participate in the performance of the narrator’s story; after all, as Violet points out toward the end, “[w]hat’s the world for if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” (208). Thus, the narrator’s improvisation is a failure only if we fail to answer its call and refuse, in Dexter Gordon’s words, to “try and figure it out,” if we decline to participate in what is a process of creating meaning collectively. Jazz without a reader is like “The Chase” without Dexter Gordon, or “The Hunt” without Wardell Gray.” As jazz critic Ajay Heble observes, “improvisation teaches us by example that identity is a dialogic construction, that the self is always a subject-in-process” (95).

Significantly, Violet and Joe’s fragmented lives become meaningful and whole again when jazz is reintroduced into their home—literally in the form of the Okeh records Felice brings with her, and figuratively in the form of the bird they purchase, a bird for whom “nothing was left to
love or need but music” (224). Thus, jazz propels the novel’s happy end—rather unusual in the Morrison canon. Joe and Violet, together with the appropriately named Felice, indeed arrive at, in Sidney Bechet’s memorable phrase, “a place where they can be people, a place where they can stand up and be a part of that place, just being natural to the place without worrying how someone may be coming along to take that place away from them” (203). The couple’s journeys (if not the narrative voice’s) from fragmentation to wholeness are prefigured by the only jazz composition referenced explicitly, the “Trombone Blues.” It is this record which, at the beginning of the novel, affords Violet the opportunity to kidnap a little baby boy in a misguided if unconscious effort to atone for her own inability to bear children and to win Joe back. When the baby’s older sister leaves him in his stroller on the sidewalk so that she can procure a copy of said record, Violet seizes the moment. Fortunately, she is apprehended right away, but part of the onlookers’ ire is also directed against the irresponsibility of the sister:

“Will you just look at what she has left that baby for.”
“What is it?”
“‘The Trombone Blues.’”
“Have mercy.”
“She’ll know more about blues than any trombone when her mama gets home.” (21)

The “Trombone Blues” was recorded by Duke Ellington’s Washingtonians in early September of 1925 in the Pathé Studios on East 53rd Street in New York City, released as Pathé 3633. The other side contained a tune recorded on that same session, significantly entitled “I’m Gonna Hang Around My Sugar” (M. Tucker 263). Thus, the symbolic placement of the record in the baby carriage foreshadows the trajectory of the book’s narrative arc: just as the onlookers are focused on the blues, so the narrator in the beginning can see only a tale of loss and violence and a “scandalizing threesome” in the Trace household (6). The theme of familial and personal fragmentation is reversed in the end when, to the narrative voice’s own great astonishment, Violet decides to hang around her sugar, as it were. The irony of this prolepsis is deepened by the fact that the “Trombone Blues” is not, strictly speaking, a blues. This also points to a salient narrative strategy in Morrison’s fiction: as Trudier Harris has shown, one of the primary techniques Morrison employs is one of “reversal, where outcomes consistently fall short of expectations” (11).
The strategic positioning of the “Trombone Blues” serves to strengthen the connection between the novel and the music even further. Jazz historians agree that this particular session for Pathé does not exemplify the Washingtonians’ best work (Schuller, Early 320; M. Tucker 153–55). The main shortcoming, especially of the “Trombone Blues,” is the inordinate number of breaks—brief suspensions of the accompaniment for one or two measures, during which only one instrument (sometimes two) carries on the melodic or rhythmic line. The eighteen breaks during a total of a little over three minutes of music result in a somewhat strained and choppy performance. However, these recurrent musical breaks in the arrangement of the “Trombone Blues” reappear as psychological breaks, “private cracks,” when the narrative voice seeks to explain the “public craziness” of Violet snatching the baby out of the buggy: “I call them cracks because that’s what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. . . . Sometimes when Violet isn’t paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street” (22–23). Furthermore, the aural breaks of the “Trombone Blues” are also mirrored by the visual breaks of blank pages dividing Jazz into different sections.

And finally, Mark Tucker’s analysis of the breaks in “Trombone Blues” also pertains to the narrative voice’s storytelling: “Frequent breaks were characteristic of dance tunes of the time, but the best players—say, a Louis Armstrong or Sidney Bechet—could seize the moment of rhythmic suspension, spin out a phrase or two, then set up the band’s entrance in such a way as to make the interruption dramatic . . . The breaks on ‘Trombone Blues’ do not serve this function. Instead they make an already fragmented structure even choppier” (154). In addition to the narrative voice’s weaving together fragmented storylines, its (ostensible) improvisational failure to bridge convincingly the gap between the tales of loss and violence that comprise the majority of the narrative and the image of domestic bliss at the end is emblematic of the fact that as an improviser, the voice is a Pike Davis rather than a Louis Armstrong, a Prince Robinson rather than a Sidney Bechet—a Toby Hardwick rather than a Dexter Gordon or a Wardell Gray.

Nevertheless, the narrator’s fragmented story ultimately becomes Jazz—and thus also jazz by default—only in the collective interplay with the reader. Hence, the aesthetic gesture of Morrison’s novel is identical with the aesthetic gesture of jazz music to such an extent that Ellison’s description of the jam session is essentially a description of Jazz too:
The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization. I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition, and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form. (Shadow 229)

The lives that Morrison’s narrator witnesses, narrates, and invents are also harsh, sometimes loud, and sometimes wrong. But from the first word to the last, and even beyond, the narrative voice is engaged in this very struggle, to reduce the chaos of living to form with a fluid style.

III. Octopi and Phantom Limbs: Jazz and Intertext

Thus, the aesthetic gesture in Morrison’s novel is explicitly inventive, just like African American jazz has always been. At the same time, the jam session and the cutting contest, as well as the Washingtonians’ “Trombone Blues,” provide the reference points that ground her literary jazz firmly in the history of jazz music. Here, then, is also the difference to Janowitz’s Jazz. The aesthetic gesture in his novel is, ultimately, imitative: “You will allow me to use the circumstance that I am writing a jazz-novel as an excuse, because this book is not going to be a novel of the usual stripe. Other laws, I think, govern this book, just like other laws govern a jazz piece instead of a sonata for piano and violin” (25). Janowitz’s jazz narrator copies the “laws” of jazz music, just like European jazz musicians of the 1920s and later copied African American jazz. Friedrich Hollaender for instance, pianist of the Weimar Republic’s best jazz combo, the Weintraub Syncopators, remembers the youthful enthusiasm this new, exciting music elicited: “Yass! Yass! everybody shouts, as if someone had forgotten to turn off the faucet. It’s ‘Jazz’ they mean, and everyone wants it and no one can play it. You run and buy yourself the new discs from America, schlep them home, bang them onto the turntable as if to fry eggs and then let them spin, ten times, twenty times, until they get so hot that the needle gets stuck in the melting wax” (qtd. in Rotthaler 135). In other words, Janowitz and Hollaender emulate;
Morrison and Gordon innovate. Janowitz’s narrator seeks to transpose the rhythms and sounds of jazz onto the written page, sounding what Jessie B. Simple would call rebop, whereas Morrison’s narrator, truly a storyteller of bebop, strives in the end to escape the fixed boundaries of the page (or, in musical terms, the notation of the staff). But the difference between Janowitz’s and Morrison’s jazz is not one of ‘racial’ essence, nor is it one of calculated reasoning (musical “laws”) versus mere feeling (the popular cliché of jazz improvisation): the difference lies in following the “laws” of jazz—or, for that matter, those of a violin sonata—and creating or writing them. While almost nothing is known about Janowitz’s exposure to jazz in the Weimar Republic, his novel clearly evinces an appreciation for and understanding of the music as an aesthetic construct. Unlike Morrison half a century later, though, Janowitz simply did not have access to a jazz tradition because that tradition was only beginning to be forged on the other side of the Atlantic. Hence, the difference between his literary jazz and that of Morrison is that their aesthetics arise out of very different socio-historical contexts. European jazz remained basically an imitation of the American model, and it was not until the 1960s that it arguably began to speak with a voice of its own. For example, pianist Michael Naura, a pioneer of German modern jazz, remembers that

[w]hat the regularly employed dance bands played after 1945 were juvenile, really heartwarming and pitiful attempts to copy certain things. I was listening to Flying Home played by a radio orchestra . . . that was a wonderful try, but rhythmically it’s totally off. . . . We [Naura and vibist Wolfgang Schlüter] formed a quintet with bass, drums, piano, guitar and vibes. We were basically just aping back then, you know. We were like a piece of blotting paper that had to somehow soak up the American ink first. (qtd. in Knauer 160–62)

Because European jazz musicians developed their craft in a completely different economic and cultural context and practiced it within a different social network, cutting contests were a rarity. And even when musicians did participate in informal jam sessions, this setting was always already by necessity an imitation of the American model. As Amiri Baraka explains, “[m]usic, as paradoxical as it might seem, is the result of thought. It is the result of thought perfected at its most empirical, i.e. as attitude, or stance. Thought is largely conditioned by reference; it is the result of consideration or speculation against reference, which is
largely arbitrary. There is no one way of thinking since reference (hence value) is as scattered and dissimilar as men themselves” (Blues 152–53). Literature surely is as much a product of thought as music is, and so the two novels discussed here differ in their “stance.” Janowitz’s Jazz refers to the same art form as Morrison’s, but its aesthetic gesture, its stance, is by default imitative, lacking a grounding in musical traditions that simply did not exist in Europe. Consequently, the jazz aesthetic demands attention not just to literary and musical form, but, equally important, also to the history of the (predominantly) African American musicians who invented, shaped, and innovated it.

Tenor saxophonist Benny Golson makes a related point that echoes Baraka’s notion of different stances: “People talk about music. ‘Music is ethnic,’ they say. Music in and of itself is not ethnic. Notes are merely servants. They only do what we tell them to do. If we know how to write something that’s ethnic, then it becomes ethnic. Music in and of itself is not ethnic. Notes are only tonal documentations of pitch, that’s all. But what we do with them, now, that’s something else” (78).21 In other words, it is the stance from which these otherwise neutral words are sounded which imbues them with relevance. Yes, jazz is indeed “the great octopus” that will do and use anything, to adduce Dexter Gordon’s memorable image once more (qtd. in Gerard 37). At the same time, the octopus’s tentacles, however far they may reach, all protrude from the animal’s head; that is, the tentacular prey—Golson’s “tonal documentations of pitch”—is sought out by the octopus’s head—Baraka’s concept of stance or attitude. Morrison’s Jazz is just such an octopus, whose tentacles nab a vast variety of literary cross-references. Its cryptic epigraph already foreshadows the eclectic range of intertextual connections that follow: it is taken from “Thunder, Perfect Mind,” considered by scholars to be the most enigmatic of the large body of fourth-century Gnostic texts discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt (H. Rice 133–35). Octopus-like, the novel itself points to, among others, Dante, Kate Chopin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.22 And yet, two crucial elements of Jazz, the narrative voice and the seemingly minor character of Wild, align it not only firmly with jazz music, but also situate it clearly within the greater context of the black experience in America—that is, the octopus’s head.

Jazz’s narrative voice harks back most clearly to two literary ancestors, Ralph Ellison and Ann Petry. Morrison’s unidentified, disembodied narrator recalls Ralph Ellison’s observation that
There is . . . a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself, for true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvasses of a painter) a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. . . . (Shadow 267)

As tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, one of the most uncompromising improvisers in jazz, confirms: “I want to get into my own world and create my music,” but getting there also has the opposite effect, “[b]ecause when I really concentrate while I am playing, I lose myself” (qtd. in Nisenson, Open 12–13). The narrative voice, too, is losing its identity even as it invents, amends, and mingles with all the other voices in the book, and sometimes even corrects its own. Furthermore, the voice’s solo flight, rising out of a choir of other contentious voices, echoes both the tradition of jazz music and the African American literary tradition and becomes itself one of its links.

In fact, Ellison’s and Rollins’s observation concerning the musician’s lost-and-found identity and the simultaneity of severance and unity is taken one step further by Nathaniel Mackey, whose concept of black music as a “phantom limb” extends the notion of fragmentation to figurative amputation. To Mackey, the “meeting of transcendence and immanence” in African American musics effects a constant tradeoff between the extant and the imagined, the factual and the fictional: “the phantom limb is a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality, that is a feeling for what is not there that reaches beyond as it calls into question what is” (Discrepant 235). This confluence of observation and projection, doubt and revelation, is expressed in the narrative voice’s self-reflectivity:

Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweet tooth for it. Bolts of lightning, little rivulets of thunder. And I in the middle of the storm. Mourning the split trees, hens starving on rooftops. Figuring out what can be done to save them since they cannot save themselves without me because—well, it’s my storm, isn’t it? I break lives to prove I can mend them back again. And
although the pain is theirs, I share it, don’t I? Of course. Of course.
I wouldn’t have it any other way. But it is another way. I am
uneasy now. Feeling a bit false. What, I wonder, what would I be
without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder? Without aching
words that set, then miss, the mark? (219)

Suffused with images of violence, the narrative voice’s uneasiness stems
from the realization that the reason for the voice’s existence are its own
words, and yet those words are also “false.” Not only do the (specula-
tive) events the narrative voice describes constitute Mackey’s phantom
limb, but so does the voice itself: the voice is unquestionably there,
oberving events from the window, and yet the voice is immaterial,
beyond the grasp of the characters—and ultimately beyond our grasp,
too. The union with the other characters’ lives the narrative voice accen-
tuates here is offset by its admission of alienation: “I ought to get out of
this place. Avoid the window; leave the hole I cut through the door to get
in lives instead of having one of my own” (220). The severance from the
other characters the voice laments is in turn mirrored in them. They all
suffer some form of figurative amputation, be it cultural, familial, politi-
cal, or social. For example, Golden Gray explicitly uses the analogy of
amputation—couched in a terminology virtually identical to Mackey’s—
after he discovers that Hunters Hunter was his biological father:

Only now, he thought, now that I know I have a father, do I feel
his absence: the place where he should have been and was not.
Before, I thought everybody was one-armed, like me. Now I feel
the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered, the sliced
flesh and the tubes of blood cut through, shocking the bloodrun
and disturbing the nerves. The dangle and writhe. Singing pain.
Waking me with the sound of itself, thrumming when I sleep so
depthly it strangles my dreams away. There is nothing for it but to
go away from where he is not to where he used to be and might
be still. Let the dangle and the writhe see what it is missing; let the
pain sing to the dirt where he stepped in the place where he used
to be and might be still. . . . This arm that never held itself out to
give me balance as I walked thin rails or logs, round and slippery
with danger. When I find it, will it wave to me? Gesture, beckon
to me to come along? Or will it even know who or what I am? It
doesn’t matter. I will locate it so the severed part can remember
the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement. Perhaps then the arm will
no longer be a phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own
muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade. (158–59)

Golden Gray’s analogy of the amputated phantom arm not only echoes the various quests of all the other characters—Joe in search of his mother and Dorcas, Violet in search of an explanation, Dorcas in search of love, Felice in search of her ring—it contains the related theme of orphanhood as well. “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,” the famous spiritual mourns, and so Jazz’s phantom limbs are also singing a serenade of the plight of the African diaspora. The novel’s ending with its impassioned, sensual plea to the reader indicates that the narrative voice itself is just another one of the many orphans, literal and figurative, that people the narration; without a reader, the book itself and its voice are orphans.

The motif of the phantom limb in turn mutates into a tentacle that points back in the direction of The Street. There, the pain of Golden Gray’s amputated arm that chokes off his dreams is foreshadowed by Lutie’s nightmare. Instead of dreaming of a lucrative singing career with Boots’s band after being invited to audition, she has a horrific nightmare of Super Jones snapping at her with “wolfish mouth”:

She reached out her hand toward the padlock and the long white fangs closed on her hand. Her hand and part of her arm were swallowed up inside his wolfish mouth. She watched in horror as more and more of her arm disappeared until there was only the shoulder left and then his jaws closed and she felt the sharp teeth sink in and in through her shoulder. The arm was gone and blood poured out. She screamed and screamed and windows opened and the people poured out of the buildings—thousands of them, millions of them. She saw that they had turned to rats. The street was so full of them that she could hardly walk. They swarmed around her, jumping up and down. Each one had a building chained to its back, and they were all crying, “Unloose me! Unloose me!” (192–93)

Unlike Violet, Joe, or Felice, Lutie will not be able to mediate the terror of the nightmarish phantom arm; its serenade will drown out her own song of escape, independence, and self-determination. For her, there is no transcendence after the murder of Boots and the severance from Bub, just a train ticket to Chicago—quite an ironic unloosening.

In addition, Morrison’s narrative strategy constitutes a logical extension of Petry’s experiments with point of view, as Jazz’s disembodied
narrative voice bears some resemblance to *The Street’s* Mrs. Hedges. Although she rarely leaves her apartment, Mrs. Hedges is the undisputed patroness of 116th Street who knows everyone and everything. “Early in the morning she was there in that window like she’d been glued to it,” remarks a resentful Super Jones (288). Perched at the open window of her apartment, nothing escapes her scrutiny, and her detailed knowledge about the street and its denizens, even more than her partnership with Junto, makes her the single most influential person on the block with the power to route the course of people’s lives. Mrs. Hedges is continuously “staring out of the window, brooding over the street like she thought, if she stopped looking at it for as much as a minute, the whole thing would collapse” (121). Even though both are stationary, reclusive and seemingly all-knowing and employ this as a defense-mechanism, *Jazz’s* narrative voice is in some ways Mrs. Hedges’s foil: Where Morrison’s disembodied narrator occasionally contemplates the possibility that leaving her window and actually venturing into the outside world would alleviate the loneliness, Petry’s Mrs. Hedges, monstrously obese as well as bald and scarred from incurring severe burn wounds in an apartment fire, is determined “never to expose herself to the prying, curious eyes of the world” and is quite content with running a brothel in her apartment (247).

And lastly, *Jazz’s* phantom limbs also have a precursor in Sidney Bechet’s *Treat It Gentle*. “Omar,” asserts Bechet at the very outset, “he’d have these dreams about things. There was one time he had a dream about his right arm, about losing it at the elbow. After that, he’d only practice shooting with his left hand” (6). The dream’s message is realized much later, during the first confrontation between Omar and Marie’s master, when the latter “fired at my grandfather. And that ball, it hit in the arm my grandfather had had that dream about. Maybe you won’t believe it, but that’s how it happened” (16). To be sure, this is but one minor detail with which Bechet spices up his tall tale. At the same time though, the fictional Omar and his equally fictional story—a story about slavery and freedom, love and hate, death and redemption, transcendence and tragedy—become themselves a phantom limb: Omar never really existed, but his figure haunts the entire autobiography. Even *Treat It Gentle’s* narrative voice points, tentacle-like, to Mrs. Hedges in *The Street* and to Morrison’s narrator in *Jazz*, for it contains also the phantom limbs of the various narrative voices of Bechet’s collaborators—voices that we know are there, but cannot differentiate from Bechet’s own. In a sense, then, Omar floats through all of these narratives; in fact, the phantom-like Omar is, perhaps, himself the head of the octopus. Bechet’s
words are worth quoting again here: “I met many a musician in many a place after I struck out from New Orleans, but it was always the same: if they was any good, it was Omar’s song they were singing. It was the long song, and the good musicianers, they all heard it behind them. They all had an Omar, somebody like an Omar, somebody that was their Omar” (202). Without a doubt, the jazz narratives of Ann Petry, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison all have their own “Omar” behind them, the black experience in the New World and the struggle to transcend the pain and suffering of history. Like the musicians on Congo Square Bechet describes, these jazz narratives, too, are “climbing up in the music like it was a tree and they wanting to shake it down and talk to the moon” (11).

Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* actually has its very specific Omar in Wild. Just as Omar stands at the beginning of the events chronicled in *Treat It Gentle*, so the phantom-like Wild stands at the beginning of the events narrated in *Jazz*. Amiri Baraka points out that blues and jazz “could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives,” and likewise, *Jazz* could not exist if it were not for Wild (*Blues* 17). Wild, mysterious, elusive, and silent, is a pregnant “naked berry-black woman” who “is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair[,]” huddling beside the road in the night rain when Golden Gray first sees her (Morrison, *Jazz* 144). She in fact embodies what Morrison elsewhere calls “the dark, abiding, singing Africanist presence” in America (*Playing* 5). And while she never actually sings, Wild figures very much as that Africanist presence in the novel, the embodiment of the ‘blackness’ Morrison seeks to capture in her language, a blackness that is mysterious, elusive, and yet unmistakably ‘there,’ and that lies at the core of the maze of stories which make up the book: Wild is “[e]verywhere and nowhere” because she is “not a story of a used-to-be-long-ago-crazy girl whose neck cane cutters liked to imagine under the blade, or a quick and early stop for hardheaded children. She was still out there—and real” (179, 167). Perhaps, then, Wild is the embodiment, too, of that most enigmatic problem confounding musicologists: how to describe and define that similarly mysterious, elusive quality called “swing.” The novel really don’t mean a thing without Wild’s swing, and, reminiscent of the narrative sequencing of *The Street*, swing’s combination of circular and linear movement is echoed by a structural evolution in *Jazz* where the further the narrative voice progresses with its story, the further back into the past it has to delve.

In fact, *Jazz* also delves into Morrison’s own literary past: Wild may very well be the metamorphosed title character of *Beloved* finally having
emerged from the woods behind 124 Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati—not coincidentally, a road indeed reverberating with blues tones, just like Bechet’s bend in the road, Petry’s 116th Street, the street in front of Jessie B. Simple’s stoop, Lee Willie Minifiees’s highway, or Baraka’s Newark avenues. Beloved is pregnant and naked when she escapes at the end of the novel, leaving behind only footprints in the sandy bed of the creek behind Sethe’s house. Wild, too, is naked and pregnant on the rainy night Golden Gray sees her for the first time. The timeline, geography, and characterization strongly suggest that Beloved, who is among many other things also the Middle Passage turned flesh, has transformed into Wild (Aguiar 12; Kubitscheck 159–60). And like the story of Wild, which is more than just a story, the story of Beloved is much more than itself as well in that it is inspired by the infamous case of Margaret Garner, the fugitive Kentucky slave who killed her daughter rather than seeing her returned to slavery.

The figures of Omar and his relatives Wild and Beloved signal one important stipulation for the analysis of jazz narrative: literary-critical practice cannot be divorced from the history and histories of black people in America, and it therefore cannot be reduced to mere linguistic or structural elements. For even if Omar, as his inventor describes him, did not in fact exist, Bechet is still correct because “somebody like an Omar” surely did. Yet Omar, any Omar, could be conceived only in the New World—not in the Weimar Republic of Hans Janowitz. To be sure, Janowitz’s book has its own tentacles, too—tentacles nabbing references to Sturm und Drang, Cubism, or Jugendstil. But there is no Omar, no Wild, that propels his Jazz. For Hans Janowitz, jazz is an exciting, novel music, music that offers fresh ways of writing, that inspires a literary game of structure and sound; to him, as to the rest of the European avant-garde, jazz functions as what Jed Rasula terms a “decal” (14–15). But for Toni Morrison—as for Bechet, Petry, Hughes, Ellison, and Baraka—jazz is a way to negotiate the meanings of history and to probe what it means to be black in America. The fictional character Omar is, in a way, the historical conscience behind all of these texts. Thus, Benny Golson is correct: in and of themselves, Morrison’s and Janowitz’s jazz variations are indeed mere literary translations of “tonal documentations of pitch”; but what each does with the available notes is “something else” after all. And so one question remains: clearly, Hans Janowitz’s Jazz is not a ‘black’ novel—but is it a ‘jazz’ novel? Perhaps, the jazz of Hans Janowitz and the jazz of Toni Morrison are merely two different kinds of blue.