

THE JAZZ MUSIC IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE CONTEXT: A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S JAZZ

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Abstract

After centuries of slavery, the non free Blacks have had to find their ways through the American society. But the difficult attempts of integration and mixture with the Whites has urged them to refer to their identity as Blacks and former slaves as a strong tool for fighting the Whites' resistance and rejection. The Harlem Renaissance has appeared as a dedicated opportunity; it was viewed primarily as a literary movement asserting Blacks' intellectual and artistic capabilities; but music as part and parcel of the Harlem Renaissance was also seen as providing inspiration for poetry, local color for fiction, and identity expressing. Toni Morrison's novel Jazz, while unveiling the newly emancipated Blacks positive and negative expression of identity, has then sought to present the jazz music as a weapon for Blacks' effective emancipation and integration in America. The present research work aims at recalling the importance of the Jazz music in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, and its meaning to the Blacks' fight for effective emancipation and integration in America; it also intends to give global hints for solving cultural and identity-based issues in a context of heterogeneous mixture. Two literary theories have been found appropriate for the present research; they are: the psychoanalytic criticism which examines possible impulsive behaviors, their motives and impact on the society, and the New Historicism which analyzes works in the context they were created and evaluated.

Keywords: black American, Harlem Renaissance, jazz, integration

Résumé

Après des siècles de vie d'esclave, les noirs américains avaient désormais pour défi de se frayer le chemin dans la société américaine comme nouveaux citoyens. Mais face aux difficultés d'intégration due à la résistance des Blancs, ces nouveaux citoyens américains ont recouru à l'affirmation de leur identité et leur culture comme moyen d'affirmation de leur existence dans cette société si hostile à leur épanouissement en tant qu'êtres humains. Le Harlem Renaissance apparaît ainsi comme une période d'affirmation de la race noire dans la société américaine. Bien que plus perçu comme une expression de l'aptitude littéraire des noirs américains, la music et le Jazz en particulier fut l'une des caractéristiques de la renaissance du Harlem de 1920 à 1940. Le roman Jazz de l'écrivaine noire américaine Toni Morrison, qui se situe dans le contexte de la renaissance du Harlem, présente-la music Jazz comme un puissant outil d'affirmation identitaire et d'émancipation des Noirs en Amérique aux lendemain de l'abolition de l'esclavage, tout en dévoilant les aspects positives et négatives de cette expression identitaire. Le présent article vise à revisiter le rôle et l'importance de la music Jazz pour la communauté noire américaine dans

le contexte du Harlem Renaissance ; il tente également à apporter des réponses globales aux difficultés d'intégration et d'affirmation culturelles et identitaires dans un contexte de communautés hétérogènes. La présente recherche a été menée sur la base de deux théories littéraires que sont la critique psycho-analytique qui examine les éventuels états d'esprit motivant les attitudes des personnes et leur impact sur la société, puis le néo-historicisme qui analyse les textes littéraires en se basant sur le contexte ayant inspiré leurs auteurs.

Mots clés : *noirs américains, Harlem Renaissance, jazz, intégration*

Introduction

Morrison's novel *Jazz* is set in Harlem, in the 1920s and the narrator's lush descriptions evoke the setting as unlike any other place on earth. Harlem has been a refuge and a symbol for Blacks' fight and resistance, following emancipation. Answering a question about the novel's presentation, Morrison says that she "was very deliberately trying to rest on what could be called generally agreed upon characteristics of jazz" (Jessica Johnson, 2015: 47). She then mentions five distinct characteristics of the jazz music, the fourth of which is concerned with the connection between Jazz and Blacks' search of identity, the focus of the present study. Jazz as a music, according to Morrison, is located in a historical framework; the author suggests that jazz should function as an embodiment of the ethos of the African-American experience during the 1920s, the time in which the novel's story takes place. Jazz, in this way, acts as a continuation, so to speak, of Morrison's other novel, *Beloved*, a novel that, according to Morrison, reverberates with "classical, spiritual gospel" undertones. Finally, Morrison claims that jazz music is full of romanticism, and this appears in the novel most poignantly through the plot of love story. Speaking to this notion of romance, Morrison talks about the true-to-life story upon which her novel is based, a story in which an eighteen year old girl (Dorcas in the novel) has insisted on allowing the ex-lover (Joe Trace in the novel) who shoots on her; Morrison comments on her initial reactions to this story as follows: "That seemed to me, when I first heard it, since she was only eighteen years old, so romantic and so silly, but young, so young. It is that quality of romance, misguided but certainly intense, that seems to feed into the music of that period" (Jessica Johnson, 2015: 53). She even adds that she "was convinced that reckless romantic emotion was part and parcel of an opportunity snatched to erase the past in which one really didn't have all

those choices, certainly not the choices of love". Finally, referring to the character of Dorcas, Morrison says, she has "wanted this young girl to hear all that music, and to be young and in the city and alive and daring and rebellious" (Jessica Johnson, 2015: 53).

Many other authors and novelists have written about the Harlem Renaissance era. The deepest issue is the clear exhibition of all the detours of the period. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston who argues that: "there are years that ask questions and years that answer" (Hurston, 1937: 13). We clearly find out the main idea of Zora Neale Hurston which is the need for action. Black people needed to act for their emancipation and years of answers came after their flights. In the same context, Nikki Grimes has affirmed:

When I think of the Harlem Renaissance, I think of bright colors, and bold, and dynamic art. African American. Artists of the period were, in large measure, breaking out of the constrictions white society had set for them... They were claiming and remaking their own images and doing so in bold and striking ways (Nikki Grimes, 2019: 44)

Another point of view is Asa Philip Randolph's: "Freedom is never given; it is won" (Randolph, P.9). This comes to support the idea of freedom through fighting. The big idea comes from Aberjhani: "The best of humanity's recorded history is creative balance between horrors endured and victories achieved, and so it was during the Harlem renaissance" (Aberjhani, 2016: 31). despite the horrors black people experienced, they have victories as well. It then clearly appears that Morrison's *Jazz* has focused on the rebirth of black people's culture and emancipation but also on the role that music has played in this process. All this is a vindication that shows the newly emancipated Black people's fight for the rebirth of their cultural identity, necessary for their effective integration in America.

1. The Harlem renaissance era: a symbol of rebirth

1.1. Disorders and insecurity before the Harlem Renaissance

In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison describes the pre-renaissance Harlem as a city where people think they can do whatever they want and run away without any punishment. To cope with the negative aspects of that period, it can clearly be observed that Harlem was the true scene of disorder and insecurity. It's also said that one was pleased by the spectacle of other, just to mean that black Americans as a community were simply accomplices that were pleased with this disastrous situation.

Also, the then Harlem was marked with hypocrisy, with fellows loving only those attending the same church or living in the same compound. This idea is clearly exposed on pages 28 and 29: "Hospitality is gold in this City; you have to be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time" (Morrison, 1970: 87). In fact, Morrison's *Jazz*, although fictional, is a clear testimony of the black American's moral and psychological status around the Harlem Renaissance period. Had Morrison's novel been a mere fictional work, James Baldwin would not have described the post emancipation Black with almost similar words, in his essay *The Fire Next Time*:

What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; my friends were now downtown, busy, as they put it, "fighting the man". They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping; lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man", the white man... But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the avenue had become a personal menace.... My friends began to drink and smoke, and embarked – at

first avid, then groaning – on their sexual careers. Girls, only slightly older than I was, who sang in choir or taught Sunday school, the children of holy parents, underwent, before my eyes, their incredible metamorphosis, of which the most bewildering aspect was not their budding breasts or their rounding behinds but something deeper and more subtle, in their eyes, their heat, their odor, and the inflection of their voices. (Baldwin, 1963: 16 -19)

By saying that African Americans were no more themselves, Morrison points out the fact that they have lost their identity, not due the centuries of enslavement, but because of a lack compasses and good references. The idea of insecurity is clearly stated on page 186, in the third paragraph: "Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose." In every human community, it is expected that insecurity if any, should be the acts of men, with women as first line victims, and the self-defensive pretext does not come as an acceptable excuse. Now when women are reported as actors of insecurity, the whole community is then in collapse.

1.2. Criminality in Harlem

The Assassination of Dorcas is one of the symbols of Harlem, both a scene for free crime in the one hand, and a hope for positive image and change, in the other hand. First, how could it be understood that a lady be killed by her lover for no motive, and how could such a murder just be seen as something usual, then go unpunished both by the law and by the society?

Toward the end of March, Alice Manfred put her needles aside to think again of what she called the impunity of the man who killed her niece just because he could. It had not been hard to do; it had not even made him think twice about what danger he was putting

himself in. He just did it. One man, One
defenseless girl. (Morrison, 1970: 176)

Harlem was described as a no man's land, with the Blacks abandoned both by the law and justice, but also by the American community at large. James Baldwin's testimony of Harlem's condition through his *The Fire Next Time* is very expressive:

What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; My friends were now downtown, busy, as they put it, "fighting the man". They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping; lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man", the white man... But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the avenue had become a personal menace.... My friends began to drink and smoke, and embarked – at first avid, then groaning – on their sexual careers. Girls, only slightly older than I was, who sang in choir or taught Sunday school, the children of holy parents, underwent, before my eyes, their incredible metamorphosis, of which the most bewildering aspect was not their budding breasts or their rounding behinds but something deeper and more subtle, in their eyes, their heat, their odor, and the inflection of their voices. (Morrison? 1970: 16 -19)

Face with this, and as a counterpart, Elijah Muhammad has sought to to protect the black women in Harlem, with his Muslim, not only by urging black women to veil their body, but also by keeping them indoors.

What was happening in Harlem was not a concern for the Whites in American either; as long as the crimes and murders there was among the Blacks, the newspapers just report killing and bad news within the city of Harlem. But as long as the case was among the colored people, this bears little interest to the global American community, and since Whites did not see these acts as reprehensible, why should the victims themselves care, until they are closely concerned. The atrocities in Harlem would matter to the Blacks only when a Black was victim from a White, and the case would draw Whites attention only when a White was victim from a Black. Then, there would be a spontaneous and circumstantial solidarity from the community of the victim to condemn the act. Death committing or witnessing in Harlem was then so usual to the Blacks that it finally became part of their daily life

1.3. Conceitedness with the black American

When changes in man's status or social condition must impact on others' position, this usually provokes clashes; this is what occurs with Whites in America who have had to adapt to the new status of their former slaves. How could it be possible for the white man to accept that his former slaves suddenly would become his fellow citizens? How could those white men conceive a society where there would enjoy the same rights with those people they have enslaved and dominated for centuries? The real issue resides there. This can be seen as a fear of possible retaliation from the former slaves, but also as a mark of pride.

Many of them (the whites), indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the mind of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one

morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. (Baldwin, 1963: 9)

The abrupt change here is the idea of having blacks as free and equal human beings, in an environment formally entirely controlled by the whites. But as Baldwin puts it, the main problem with the blacks is not the refusal of the whites to accept their new condition; it is rather the refusal of the Blacks to take control of their new condition. That is their refusal to become their own masters. For centuries, Blacks had received orders and toiled hard under constraint. But as long as they continue kowtowing to and looking up to the white man as a superior being, this attitude will give the white men good reasons for continuing to maintain them in this new form of slavery. In his letter to little James, Baldwin warns the latter (and through him the whole black American community) that the most destructive thing is to believe what people think or say of you. Baldwin addresses his nephew in these words: *“Please, try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear”* (Baldwin, 1963: 8). Baldwin then reminds the Blacks about the terms *‘Acceptance’* and *‘Integration’* respectively from Booker T. Washington and WEB DuBois, which imply forgiveness, love and responsibility, but never submission and conceit. However, to me, the best message of Baldwin to the black community, one hundred years after emancipation, lie in the following: “Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go” (Baldwin, 1963: 8). These words might seem to emphasize on the origin; but where you come from, here, has little to do with the (African) origin of the black Americans. The idea here is rather what those Blacks have been able to accomplish until then. In effect, the huge contributions of the Blacks, either as slaves or as citizens, into what the United States looked like a century after emancipation, are undeniable. Their contributions in the plantations, in the households and the overall increase of the whole nation's living conditions are most obvious, and this is what accounts for the rejection of any idea of a true

emancipation for them. Calling on Blacks to remember where they come from, is then urging them for a huge contribution to the building of American. It won't then be admitted that blacks willingly exclude themselves from the enjoyment of the fruits of those efforts of theirs. That is why, integrating the American society is essential for their survival. This contradicts the philosophy of separation advocated by Marcus Garvey, and which claims that blacks did not choose to be in America, and since they were now free, they had better go back home. There is no other place for the black Americans than American; and to live there, they must join hands, weigh their potentials, reject the idea of being inferior and worthless, and make their way through the American society.

2. Morrison's novel in connection with the Harlem renaissance

2.1. The meaning of Jazz to the Harlem Renaissance and to Morrison

Music was a prominent feature of African American culture during the Harlem Renaissance. The term "Jazz Age" was used by many who saw African American music, especially the blues and jazz, as the defining features of the Renaissance. However, both jazz and the blues were imports to Harlem. They emerged out of the African American experience around the turn of the century in southern towns and cities, like New Orleans, Memphis, and St. Louis. From these origins these musical forms spread across the country, north to Chicago before arriving in New York a few years before World War I.

Following the war, black music, especially the blues and jazz, became increasingly popular with both black and white audiences. Ma Rainey and other jazz artists and blues singers of the period began to sign recording contracts, initially with African American record companies like Black Swan Records, but very quickly with Paramount, Columbia, and other mainstream recording outlets. In Harlem, one club opened after another, each featuring jazz orchestras or blues singers. Noble Sissle, of course, was one of the team behind the production of *Shuffle Along*, which opened Broadway up to *Chocolate Dandies* and a series of other black musical comedies, featuring these new musical styles.

In much the same way, Morrison takes the music's aesthetic hybridity to stimulate the American cultural and historical memory and, at the same time, to accent the cultural hybridity of African American identity. In

Morrison's oeuvre, African Americans are part and parcel of the national cultural make-up. In a conversation with Angels Carabi, for example, she explains that the period of the 1920s, which witnessed dramatic social, economic, political and cultural change, particularly in respect to African Americans, was somehow partially defined by mainstream hegemony. The era that came to be known in American cultural and literary history as the Jazz Age excluded, Morrison argues, "the people who enabled the core and the shape of the period and whose culture was evolving different things and being constantly invented and improvised" (Jessica Johnson, 2015: 71). Morrison revises and recovers the period of the 1920s, which constitutes the central temporal setting of the novel, to claim cultural recognition. In the same conversation, she clarifies that: Black music's always called something (spiritual, gospel, jazz, boogies-woogie, bop, bebop, rap) but it's never called music, for example twentieth century music, modern music. White critics, in general, claim black music as American, which is true, but it's almost as though it was made with their culture, and so black people have no part in it, except marginally, to provide the music. By this token, Morrison seems to deploy a black aesthetic essentialism, not in affiliation with the Afrocentric project, but in challenge to willful cultural marginalization and forgetfulness. The 1920s, she believes, "began to be the moment when black culture, rather than American culture, began to alter the whole country and eventually the western world" (Jessica Johnson, 2015:73). However, it is important to argue that Morrison's return to a black tradition is not a fall into essentialism, but a strategic maneuver towards the potential advantages of cultural diversity and plural aesthetic participation. If the meaning of jazz lies in the process of improvisation upon tradition, it is reasonable to assert that Morrison's appropriation of jazz for the recuperation of black tradition is legitimately creative. First, in the sense she recovers the African American cultural identity and history; second, in the sense she incorporates the black art of jazz into the white art of fiction, contributing both to the black and white literary culture; and third, ensuing from the two previous elements, in the sense she suggests that jazz cannot be restricted within a closed tradition for it opens up onto a larger web of receptions, understandings and experiences. The musical characteristic of open-endedness is a most proper embodiment of the tradition's openness and open-endedness. When Morrison explores jazz music in terms of literary appropriation,

she works, in fact, within two aesthetically distinct traditions: the tradition of black music and the tradition of black/white literature(s), which, eventually, merge through what can be termed, in respect to fiction, as the musical turn of the novel. The examples abound in modern American literature in its black and white parts. Arguably, Morrison speaks of her deliberate attempt “to rest on what could be generally agreed-upon as characteristics of jazz” to impart in the novel the paraphernalia of jazz music, namely improvisation, call-and-response, repetition with revision, syncopation, polyrhythmicality, and open-endedness. In a conversation with Nellie McKay in 1983, Morrison spoke of her project to “recreate something out of an old art form in her books (that something which defines what makes a book ‘black’”, adding that “that has nothing to do with whether the people in the books are black or not”. It appears, in this respect, that Morrison has not been seeking an essentialist conception of African American literature, but involved herself in a search for a personal style “that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music” (Jessica Johnson, 2015: 79). When talking about the influences upon her writing, Morrison talks of black music. In several interviews, she repeats how in her own family “music was everywhere and all around” and how “they played music in the house all the time.” Her maternal grandfather was a violinist, her mother played piano in silent-movie theatre and sang opera and jazz, and her elder son is a flutist, guitar player, and sound engineer. Music, then, has always been a pervasive presence in her familial surroundings.

2.2. Jazz as a call for Blacks’ integration in America

Music as a whole, and Jazz in particular, played a crucial role during the fight for emancipation. Jazz in the context of the Harlem Renaissance had a specific message to convey: freedom, romance, equality. The fact is that black people wanted to show their cultural background to the white so that they can be accepted. Many blacks involved in the fighting, artists especially. One of the tools they used was music. Toni Morrison says jazz music is "like the music that came to be known as Jazz, she took from everywhere, knew everything (gospel, classic, blues, hymns) and made it her own" (Morrison, 1970: 13). Music like Jazz, that embraces every aspect of Blacks lives and living was well indicated to the fighting. Another aspect is the influence of black culture on the nation's culture.

The moment when an African-American art form defined, influenced, reflected a nation's culture in so many ways: the burgeoning 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. (Morrison, 1970: 10)

Jazz is considered a musical language of communication and was the first indigenous American style to affect music in the rest of the world. During this period, the music style of blacks became more and more attractive to whites. Black musicians began to merge with white musicians in the classical world of musical composition. Its popularity soon spread throughout the country and was consequently at an all-time high during the Renaissance. The musicians of the Harlem Renaissance were very talented and competitive and were considered to have laid the foundation for future musicians of their genre. The Harlem Renaissance was successful because it gave a new identity to African Americans. Through their music, white people recognized the abilities and skills of blacks.

In *Jazz* by Toni Morrison, the idea of the drum beating came several times. The question raised is what does it mean? On page 125, the first paragraph: "Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not." The author talks about the drum beating which expressed what women and men couldn't say. These drums had a special message, that's what, stimulated hope in African Americans. On the same page, the passage: "But what was meant came from the drums" shows that what they wanted to say was printed on newspaper but what they really meant was through the drum. On page 128, the passage: "speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T." It was impossible to prevent the Fifth Avenue from the drum beating.

Jazz is a kind of music in which improvisation is typically an important part. In most jazz performances, players play solos which they make up on the spot, which requires considerable skill. There is tremendous variety in jazz, but most jazz is very rhythmic, has a forward momentum called "swing," and uses "bent" or "blue" notes. You can often hear "call-and-response" patterns in jazz, in which one instrument, voice, or part of the band answers another. (You can hear Ella Fitzgerald and Roy Eldridge do "call and response" in Ella's Singing Class.) Jazz can express many different emotions, from pain to sheer joy. In jazz, you may hear the sounds of freedom, for the music has been a powerful voice for people suffering unfair treatment because of the color of the skin, or because they lived in a country run by a cruel dictator.

Jazz musicians place a high value on finding their own sound and style, and that means, for example, that trumpeter Miles Davis sounds very different from trumpeter Louis Armstrong (whose sound you can hear in Louis's Music Class.) Jazz musicians like to play their songs in their own distinct styles, and so you might listen to a dozen jazz recordings of the same song, but each will sound different. The musicians' playing styles make each version different, and so do the improvised solos. Jazz is about making something familiar, a familiar song, into something fresh, and about making something shared, a tune that everyone knows into something personal. Those are just some of the reasons that jazz is a great art form, and why some people consider it America's classical music. Jazz music overlaps with nearly every genre of music, from blues to rock to classical. This creates a wide array of jazz subgenres. A few central jazz elements unite nearly all forms of jazz, including swing music, big band, bebop, and cool jazz.

Discussion and conclusion

The main issue raised by this research work is the role that music in global and Jazz in particular played in the process of integration and emancipation of African American, in reference to the novel *Jazz*, by Toni Morrison. Undoubtedly, the Jazz music played a great role in the fight for Blacks' post emancipation survival and integration in America. In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, African American artists referred to Jazz music to signify protest, struggle, frustration, and fight for effective freedom. As a result of the success of black musicians, and due to the musical groundwork laid out by them in the past, Jazz music

has begun to be popular from the 1920s. This was the channel through which they could express their cultural background. The real positive result is that the Harlem Renaissance movement helped Blacks to be part of America, at least morally and psychologically, which clearly justifies the author's use of the psychoanalytic criticism through her novel. Despite negative impacts (killings, deprivation and other disorders) of the Harlem practices and conception, Harlem gave a boom to the black culture in America. Through Blacks' accomplishment with Jazz, the white people started to acknowledge their competence and intellectual capability of inventing, producing, and improvising, which is a typical characteristic of the Jazz music; the period also marked the starting point of consumption of the Blacks' cultural and artistic production by the Whites, which was a good starting point of Blacks' acceptance and integration in America. Morrison has tactfully made the Jazz music to play a positive role in her characters' lives, which transposes the global positive impact of the Jazz music in Black Americans' lives, with a clear connection between their former slave status and their new condition as free American citizens, based on Morrison's use New Historicism literary theory. When Joe and his wife Violet first migrate to the city, they see this as an opportunity to create new lives and better opportunities for themselves, which becomes effective through Jazz music; The Jazz music lies in the background of the novel's narration and shows how these two characters have experienced the city. The narrator mentions music when describing the city at almost every turn, and she also connects it to the sense of newly found freedom that Joe and Violet feel. Another positive individual experience in connection with the Jazz music is that made by Dorcas, who thinks of music as a way to express herself, a basis of her newly found identity and sexuality in the city. Dorcas connects the Jazz music to breaking free from the control that her aunt Alice has had on her, as well as escaping her unhealthy relationship with Joe. Jazz as a music then represents the newfound freedom of young black women living in the city. Unfortunately, the novel also portrays the Jazz music as a cause of Dorcas's death, which Jazz music is also pointed out by Aunt Alice as the general unacceptable scene that comes with black culture.

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