An Invasion of Privacy: Jazz the Narrator, In Toni Morrison’s Jazz
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In her sixth novel Jazz, Toni Morrison “makes use of an unusual storytelling device: an unnamed, intrusive, and unreliable narrator” (“Toni Morrison” 13). From the onset of the novel, many readers question the reliability of the narrator due to the fact that this “person” seems to know too many intimate personal details, inner thoughts, and the history of so many characters. Although as readers we understand an omniscient narrator to be someone intimately close with the character(s), the narrator of Jazz is intrusive, moving in and out of far too many of the characters’ lives to be reliable. No one person could possibly know and give as much information as this narrator does. But, as readers of Morrison novels, we must remember that Morrison is a gifted and talented writer whose style of writing, as Village Voice essayist Susan Lydon observes, “carries you like a river, sweeping doubt and disbelief away, and it is only gradually that one realizes her deadly serious intent” (“Toni Morrison” 6). Therefore, when we consider the narration of the novel, we must examine every possibility of Morrison’s intent. One possibility appears with the novel’s title—Jazz. The title, which encompasses the pervasive sound, its musical timbre of the decade in which the story is set, resonates throughout the novel as a character in its own right. Just as “New York is presented as the City throughout the novel to designate it as an active character” (Kubitschek 143), so is jazz. Like the improvisation of jazz, the storytelling technique of the narrator “improvises” as it moves in and out of the characters’ lives where it would be least expected. Therefore, jazz must be considered an active participant, a character, who, because of its non-entity existence, would spiritually be able to surround and enter characters lives at will and, as a result, narrate the story.

The structure of the novel mirrors the characteristics of a jazz music piece. Although exceptions occur, “most jazz is based on the principle that an infinite number of melodies can fit the chord progressions of any song. The musician improvises new melodies that fit the chord progression [. . .]” (“Jazz”2). With this characteristic in mind, we can see this kind of improvisation when looking at the different sections of the novel:

The sections are often subdivided, with extra blank spaces providing a visual gap between parts of the text. Completely blank pages separate the larger sections. This typography accents the large number of sections and subsections to create a sense of disconnection between the novel’s segments. (Kubitschek 142)

Each blank space mirrors the improvisation technique of jazz music. When a musician plays the same jazz piece over and over he improvises, changing the music’s direction and creating a disconnection from the original piece. Each of the ten sections of the novel relates a different tale about a different character’s life, inner thoughts, and history. Throughout the novel, like in a jazz piece, the narrator changes (with each section) the “melody” to fit the “chord” progression of the story. Because the nature of the structure resembles a jazz piece, it helps readers to understand that the “unreliable”
narrator is relating a story in the only way it knows—disjointed and by improvising, which then helps us to understand that the narrator is jazz disguised as a character. Although the narrator often provides hints as to “its” identity, those clues, which are not easily discernible, become clear in the last section of the novel. The voice of jazz becomes audible in the first paragraph:

Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it. Bolts of lightning, little rivulets of thunder. And I the eye 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. (Morrison 219)

The affection for pain emphasizes jazz’s performance, the playing of a piece and its dependence on the blues. One important element in jazz is its dependency on creating mood:
To various listeners, jazz expresses sexuality, anger, a threat, or self-assertion. This variety of interpretations comes not only from the diverse temperaments of the listeners but from the nature of jazz. (Kubitschek 157)

The fundamental nature of jazz comes from the weary lament of the blues, but the improvising, the variation of riffs—“Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff” (Morrison 7)—is what creates the transition from blues to jazz. The temperament of the listener then determines whether or not there will be a redemption, a “mending” of the mood that has been created. In essence, the narrator is saying, I am Jazz. I am the storm that creates a mood. I feed on it, feel it, relate it, and then mend it because that’s what I am all about.

The narrator then reveals its improvisational side by shifting the mood at the end of the paragraph: “But it’s 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). Just like a jazz piece, the mood of the narrator switches, pondering, moving its feelings toward a new syncopated direction. Like the unreliability of jazz, the narrator goes on to say, “It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human” (220). Here, the narrator concedes its unreliability, but again, a jazz piece is unreliable. The narrator also admits it is not human, and that its voice speaks from the ideas, the stories, the tune of the city, which of course is what jazz does—its voice emerges from its surroundings. After reading this last section of the novel, we realize that jazz is the narrator; as a result, to further reinforce the authenticity of its voice, readers are then forced to look back in to the novel for other clues.

Although some readers still might not recognize jazz as the narrator, subtle hints throughout the novel become very telling. When the narrator makes the statement, “I’m crazy about this City” (7), thinking back to the contents of the last section and the elements of jazz music, it becomes easier to comprehend the reason why the narrator would love the city. Of course jazz would be crazy about the city, for the city provides the “chords” and “melodies” for its improvisation. Jazz thrives on people, places and things in order to “sing” about them. The city allows the narrator to “dream tall and feel in on things” (7); in other words, the city allows jazz, because of its spirituality, to move in and out of the characters lives at will. The narrator also tells us, “[.] and I am strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible [.]” (7), which reiterates the fact that the narrator is not human—no man is indestructible, but the spirit of music has the power to endure.

Midway through the novel there is further implication of jazz as the narrator. The narrator states, “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” (137). As a non-human entity, jazz has the ability to be everywhere. Jazz’s spirit, its pervasive sound, filled the air of New York City,
invaded and took up residence in the honky-tonks, speak-easies, homes, and lives of black people during the Harlem Renaissance; therefore, feasibility for it to be well-informed exists. Its omnipresence in their lives gave jazz not only the freedom, but also the opportunity to be creative and inventive with the stories it repeated about them. The narrator admits the risk in trying to figure out their minds; but, considering the improvisational nature of jazz, we can accept the narrator’s risky point of view.

The ability of readers to fully understand jazz’s omnipresence, its capability to be everywhere, to see all, again, can be viewed in the last section of the novel. Jazz, as the narrator, confesses its intrusiveness and its failure to speak about the characters’ lives precisely and accurately. However, this acknowledgment emphasizes its non-human existence, while at the same time confessing to the reader its identity as the narrator.

I watched them [the characters] through windows and doors, took every opportunity I had to follow them, to gossip about and fill their lives, and all the while they were watching me[. . .] they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable—human, I’d guess you’d say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking [. . .] my view was the only one that was or mattered. (220)

Jazz, the predominant music of the era, like a prying, gossipy, neighbor, invaded the private lives and wrapped its “chords” around the characters’ lives so completely that each character had to, as a result, invent new, impromptu, and complicated steps in order to fit into the emerging popular culture of Harlem. Jazz music, because it took up residence in the characters’ lives, would be able to view those steps, and because of its access to their lives, would be able to provide a commentary of sorts about each move the characters made. However, as fallible as the characters’ moves were, so were the narrator’s. Just as jazz watched their every move so it could “sing” about them, the characters watched jazz hoping for a clue as to what their next step should be. The characters, “believe they know before the music does what their hands, their feet are to do, but that illusion is the music’s secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates” (65). Because of the improvising of the narrator and the characters’ anticipation, each became confused about the other one, leaving them, especially the narrator, in their own private solitude to ponder their existence. The narrator (jazz), who thought wrong about Joe and Violet Trace’s next move, “I was sure one would kill the other” (220), suddenly realized its own predictability because its nature is improvisation, thus, predictable. The characters, realizing then the predictability of jazz became used to its meddling variation and began to ignore its presence, which allowed them to mend their lives. Meanwhile, for readers, the identity of the narrator is confirmed.

Any doubt or disbelief about the narrator’s identity and its unreliability disintegrates once readers consider the variation, the improvisational nature, of jazz music. Knowing jazz is predictable, in that we know the formula is based on variation, yet unreliable because of that variation, and knowing that “jazz isn’t merely music, it is a spirit that can express itself in almost anything” (Rogers1), guides readers to comprehend Morrison’s true intent. Morrison intended jazz to be the narrator not because she wanted to create an unreliable narrator, but to create a narrator who could relate a story that would echo the sound of the heart and soul of the African American during the era of reconstruction after World War I. In part, jazz music helped the African American community create an identity all their own. This struggle for personal identity, which is an intentional reoccurring theme throughout all of Morrison’s novels, serves as the catalyst for jazz to narrate the story. Jazz, because of its storytelling ability, its omnipresence in the lives of the African American community, would not only be the most likely “person” to narrate the story, but also the best one.

Works Cited


