White feminist blues: reading and teaching Toni Morrison's Jazz as part of the de-centered majority

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White feminist blues:
Reading and teaching Toni Morrison's *Jazz*
as part of the de-centered majority

by

Tracy Colleen Anderson

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1995
DEDICATION

In memory of
Dorothy Seward Anderson,
my grandmother
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INTRODUCTION

What is the value of white readings of black texts? In the first chapter of this essay, I will discuss the skepticism concerning white feminist readings of minority texts. For example, black feminist critics such as Hazel Carby have been described as firmly resisting interracial readings, "calling into question simultaneously the presumption of interracial sisterhood and the presumption of seamless continuity between racial experience, discourse, and interpretation" (Abel 489). Acknowledging the difficulties involved in reading across racial lines, I will address the need to continue diversifying the canon, specifically, the necessity of adding more African-American female texts to educational environments. As Paul Lauter, editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* has suggested, "We must be aware that no culture values all ebulliences equally and that our curricula...have validated certain experiences at the expense of others" (*Canons and Contexts* 102). Thus, it is necessary, when adding these diverse texts to the curriculum, to explore the uniqueness of the cultural context of the author's story as well as the reader's response to the text. The addition of multi-cultural texts to the curriculum is imperative to give minority cultures representation and voice, and also to provide non-minority students with the opportunity to learn about diverse cultures and perspectives. Hopefully, students will also begin to recognize their own interpretive strategies and codes which affect their responses to people of other cultures and to minority literature.

In the second chapter, I will be exploring in depth Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, discussing 1) critical responses to Morrison's text, emphasizing analysis of her style; 2) my claim that the style and themes of the text provide a valuable non-Western revisionary approach to history and fiction; 3) how Morrison's narrator
and text seem to call eagerly for reader-response to both this particular piece of fiction and to African-American female history. I will emphasize the necessity of adding feminist and, more specifically, black feminist thought to traditional reader-response techniques when encountering this literature. Morrison's novels are part of the female African American work which Ruth Frankenberg credits with actively transforming feminist analysis, "drawing attention to white-centeredness, and more generally the false universalizing claims, of much feminist discourse" (8).

In my final chapter, I will present and analyze the responses of several Caucasian female high school students to Morrison's Jazz. I begin by discussing the cultural/racial environment of the public school these students attend, for as black feminist critic Houston Baker suggests,

We must come to know our students realistically and to participate intellectually and effectively in the sounds of their everyday lives before we can meet them where they most decidedly are. And it is by meeting them where they are that we can begin instructive conversations about an infinite variety of possible heritages they share in a postmodern, resoundingly hybrid, and increasingly non-white era of study. (Baker 133)

I will then describe how the student volunteers have used various reader-response strategies during their interaction with Jazz. Because racial isolation "seems to feed misunderstanding and suspicions" (Feagin 140), I will also discuss the necessity of providing students, especially at schools with few minority representatives, with the opportunity to read and discuss minority texts and issues. In doing so, it will be important to acknowledge our position as white readers. We must also acknowledge the complexity of any reading position, for depending upon our individual experiences, as Patricia Hill Collins suggests, an "individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed" (225).

Why am I writing this paper on this topic and emphasizing this novel?
First of all, because like many feminist educators, I am interested in challenging traditionally privileged perspectives, I was especially intrigued by Morrison's *Jazz*. In this novel the narrator's perspective is challenged as he/she/it shares the storytelling "privilege" with several characters, who, due to their individual perspectives on the events which complicate their fictional lives, shed varying shades of light on the narrator's version of the basic plot. Secondly, the historical and cultural aspects of *Jazz* make it especially valuable as a cross-cultural reading experience for students. As will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, *Jazz* prompts Caucasian students to consider more closely Harlem and its African-American music of the 1920s. Thirdly, I have included information from my research of the critical reception of *Jazz* as well as information concerning critical perspectives on reading across racial lines. I have explored both aspects of criticism in an attempt to improve my own teaching of the novel and to assist future educators who offer *Jazz* or other examples of minority literature to predominately Caucasian literature classes.

I have also included a segment discussing the theories of reader-response criticism in relation to my educational encounters with *Jazz*. The interactive structure of *Jazz* makes it especially conducive to reader-response criticism, which I find to be an effective avenue for both preparing and then actually facilitating a discussion of a given text with high school students, especially one in which the students are encouraged to cross social lines. To help empower young readers I encourage them to recognize their reading strategies and positions. As critic Robert Scholes insists, we never "just" read, we must understand that "we always read from somewhere. The anti-essentialist 'where' is essential to the poststructuralist project of theorizing reading as a negotiation of socially constructed subject positions" (qtd. in Fuss 89). As mentioned earlier, I am highly committed to exploring critical responses to the literature that I use in the classroom. Moreover, when my students and I discuss a novel like *Jazz*, we are joining an already progressing, larger discussion among critics. Because of
this, insights that I can bring to the students concerning my own and other critical interpretations may help them to define their own reader-response interpretations, and to further acknowledge the ambiguity surrounding the activity of reading. I encourage students to view reading as Robert Crosman defines it:

Reading is \textit{both} a solitary \textbf{and} a communal enterprise; we read both for self-discovery \textit{and} to learn about the world; and we go on learning, after we have read a text, by sharing our interpretation with others, and by letting their interpretations enrich our own. (214)

White students at schools which lack significant racial diversity must be encouraged to explore their perceptions of "race," while acknowledging their stance of being white and \textit{not} being black. As suggested by Ruth Frankenberg, within the "framework for thinking about self and other, the white Western self as a racial being has for the most part remained unexamined and unnamed...Studies of racial and cultural identities have tended to view the range of potential subjects of research as limited to those who differ from the (unnamed) norm" (17). Hence, Caucasian students should also explore how the issue of white racism affects not only people of color, but also white people. Discussing minority texts in the classroom can begin to generate such student insights.

Traditionally, the high school academy has paid little attention to the voices of minority authors. Because of this, student responses to the above-mentioned issues are rare: even less frequent would be student interaction with texts which place the perspective of African-American females in the center of the discourse. When approaching texts that do indeed provide insights into other cultures from the perspective of one inside that minority culture, such as when one encounters Morrison's \textit{Jazz}, complications arise for the "privileged" white reader. Forced to interact with the minority perspective of a text, a Caucasian reader must acknowledge his/her ideas of blackness and whiteness;
such ideas and situations otherwise are relatively possible to ignore and to reap the privileges of, without consideration of one's direct and indirect oppression of the minority group caused by that privileging.

Acknowledging black feminist criticism's supposition that white feminists will never completely understand black texts, let alone apathetic white readers content with Hemingway or Stephen King, the teaching of such texts becomes frustrating and challenging. However, by adopting what Alice Walker terms a "womanist" approach, which addresses the "solidarity of humanity," and describes a person "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Collins 38), and by attempting to keep in mind the ideals of black feminism, white readers and teachers can strive for valuable personal and classroom encounters with minority literature. Collins suggests that without such a commitment to human solidarity, any political movement—whether nationalist, feminist or anti-elitist—may be doomed to ultimate failure" (Collins 38).

Finally, because I am admittedly from a segregated, (supposedly by accident) area, I have had limited opportunities to know many African Americans well. For example, in our school district with over 300 employees, there is only one African-American, our high school security guard. Because of this, I have included excerpts from a conversation I had recently with a young African-American woman in a coffee shop, which provided one of my few opportunities to discuss some of the issues I had been analyzing with someone not Caucasian. Willing to accept that I look at the world from a white female/feminist position, I realize that I am handicapped, as black feminists critics have pointed out, by my inability to comprehend what my privilege has conveniently, effectively concealed.
CHAPTER 1.
WHITE READERS/BLACK TEXTS:
WHAT DON'T WHITE FEMINISTS UNDERSTAND?

The first thing you do is to forget that I'm Black.
Second, you must never forget that I'm Black.
Pat Parker, "For the White Person Who Wants
to Know How to Be My Friend"

"When white women look at black women's works they are, of course, ill-equipped
to deal with the subtleties of racial politics."
Barbara Smith

It's ten o'clock on a summer Sunday. It's hot. Hottest Iowa weather
we've had in years. I throw on my gauzy white dress and go to Zanzibar's, a
coffee shop in the state's humid capitol, to reread my notes on white readers of
black texts. Again. And I read, again, the above quotation from black feminist
critic Barbara Smith suggesting how "ill-equipped" I am to cross racial lines.
And I agree, but am again perplexed. Why did I decide to write my thesis on
Morrison's Jazz? Why didn't I stick with O'Connor? Faulkner? Why didn't I
stick with white authors who address racial issues rather than discussing
don't I understand? There's a young black woman at the table next to mine.
She's alone also, reading the New York Times. I want to interrupt her and say,
"Hi. Could you tell me what you think of this quote?" I do, more or less. I tell
her I'm researching Toni Morrison, looking into conflicts between black feminist
criticism and white feminist criticism. I tell her that several black feminist critics
feel that white feminists just don't quite get it--don't cover it all. For example,
Jackie Roy points out a flaw of white feminist criticism which "presents a major
challenge to patriarchal structures, though of black women it is limited by its
failure to engage consistently and effectively with black issues, often subsuming
these to encompass all women in a form of essentialism which denies the
specificity of black women's experiences" (qtd. in Wisker 14). The young woman laughs, and I wonder what she knows. I then share with her a disparaging quotation from Blackburn, a white feminist critic, discussing Morrison's *Sula*.

Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American Life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working. (Smith 190)

I follow this quotation with one from Barbara Smith who responds with, "Blackburn unashamedly asserts that Morrison is 'too talented' to deal with mere Black folk, particularly those double nonentities, Black women. In order to be accepted as 'serious,' 'important,' 'talented' and 'American,' she must obviously focus her efforts upon chronicling the doings of white men" (190).

Donna, the young "double nonentity" now sharing my table at Zanzibar's, enjoys Smith's sarcasm. She tells me of an experience she had in college when searching for an issue to research. A white female professor encouraged her to look at Title 7 and Title 19, addressing whether these adequately aided the black female. Patricia Collins suggests that African-American females "continue to be inadequately protected by Title 7, the primary purpose of which was to "eradicate all aspects of discrimination" (224). Although Donna, now a recent graduate from law school, like Collins, had used "a straightforward, black feminist approach" discussing this issue in her essay, her professor was displeased. I wonder what response the instructor had desired or expected? Donna said that several of her black female peers had also felt this professor's "displeasure," and, at the time, certainly looked askance at the comprehensiveness of the theories of White Feminism. Interestingly, Donna's
college experience echoes one of Morrison's: "Even at Howard University where I went to school, I remember I asked once to do a paper in the English department on Black Characters in Shakespeare, and they were very much alarmed by that--horrified by it, thought it was a sort of lesser topic..." (qtd. in Jones 131).

We talk of Donna's experiences as a minority in Des Moines. She cites frustration with the small minority community, with few multi-ethnic entertainment opportunities. She tells of going for walks in suburban neighborhoods and having the feeling "of being watched or kept an eye on;" she talks of instances of racism she encountered when she worked on a journal at the law school and the "black desk" she was encouraged to take. She recalls playing racquetball with a young, white male at a health club who complained of "reverse discrimination," saying "colored people this, colored people that." She mentions feeling sometimes a bit "paranoid," such as once when a group of white people saw her go into a concert she had wondered, "Are they going to pee on my car?" She talks of dating a white male whose white female friend had asked, "Do you like black women, or what?" Donna adds that it is seen as perhaps a "status jump" for a black man to date a white female, but if a white guy dates a black woman people wonder what the reason could possibly be--"some exotic fantasy or what?" She mentions that her mother still lives in a segregated area in Illinois. And when I tell her of the racist comments and actions that I'd noted the past year I'd taught at a suburban high school in Des Moines--graffiti on walls, violence and threats, offensive comments during class discussions--her first look is one of shocked disappointment, but she follows with, "I guess I'm not really surprised."

I wanted her to tell me that it's good that I am "making" my white students read Jazz; that it is worthwhile to discuss racial issues with them, that a white woman can do her thesis on Toni Morrison, that I don't have to understand what I can't understand--the "subtleties of race politics" that I'm "ill-
equipped" to comprehend. It was a lot to want from a stranger who was just trying to enjoy her Sunday paper and a cup of java: especially a stranger whom I felt as if I'd just accosted with, "Hi. I couldn't help but notice that you're a BLACK WOMAN; could you help me decipher some quotations for my thesis?"

"What can't I understand?" I asked again.

"Well, maybe for one thing, just how dysfunctional so many black male/female relationships are," she offered. I wish I'd asked her what she had meant, but for some reason it seemed too personal, even when talking with a stranger. I hoped that she would volunteer more, but she didn't. In connection, later I read a quotation from Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* which explains the myth of what many Caucasian Americans may want to view as a typical, positive family. She writes, that Afrocentric feminist notions of family reflect a reconceptualization process. Black women's experiences as bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers reveal that the mythical norm of a heterosexual married couple, nuclear family with a nonworking spouse and a husband earning a "family wage" is far from being natural, universal, and preferred but instead is deeply embedded in specific race and class formations.... Placing African-American women in the center of analysis not only reveals much-needed information about Black women's experiences but also questions Eurocentric masculinist perspectives on family. (223)

Pushing forward the discussion with Donna, dodging the "dysfunctionality" of many African-American relationships, I share with her an issue concerning my frustrations: I'm wondering what the point is of a white woman reading/teaching a black woman's novel to white students? For example, bell hooks, in "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women," describes problems between black and white feminists as coming from the idea of "common oppression" which was "a false and corrupt platform disguising and
mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (241). As women are divided by a host of prejudices--sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, to name a few--hooks suggests that "sustained woman bonding" will occur only when such divisions are confronted and hopefully eliminated. However, "divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reverie about common oppression" (241). I readily admit that I feel a certain amount of guilt when I consider oppression and pain that I have no way of understanding. It reminds me of the guilt I felt when receiving counseling for a sexual assault a few years ago. I told my counselor that I didn't want to go to group counseling because I would feel stupid, or somehow worse because I had "escaped" the rape, being merely assaulted at gun point; obviously, women who have had to endure an actual rape would know a pain much deeper than mine. The counselor said, "We don't do a lot of qualifying pain around here. Your situation was serious."

hooks describes the presence of a similar anxiety as women in multi-racial classrooms discussed instances of their oppression. "Many of us feared that our experiences were irrelevant because they were not as oppressive or as exploited as the experience of others. We discovered that we had a greater feeling of unity when people focused truthfully on their own experiences without comparing them with those of others in a competitive way" (Sisterhood 253). hooks quotes one of the women students as writing, "We are not equally oppressed. There is no joy in this. We must speak from within us, our own experiences, our own oppressions--taking someone else's oppression is nothing to feel proud of. We should never speak for that which we have not felt" (253). It is with this spirit that I feel many white feminists would like to engage the issue of racism; however, we continue to feel rather unqualified, even voyeuristic, when encountering past and present pain caused by white racist oppression.

I ask Donna again to read some of my notes. After reading Parker's suggestion for black and white relationships, "The first thing you need to do is to
forget that I'm black. Second, you must never forget that I'm Black," (qtd. in Abel 495) Donna laughs and says, "That's interesting." When I ask her what it means, she says, "Well, I guess treat me as an equal--let's all start on a level playing field, but remember, too, that I am black, and I'm going to act black." I ask her what it means to "act black." "Well," she says, "I mean, I may address some issues--care about some issues that might not otherwise come up." In interracial social situations one often faces the dilemma of wanting to ignore racial difference and to acknowledge racial difference--often for the same good reasons. In *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Frankenberg avers that considering race consciousness can be threatening to white women. "In a hierarchical society, white women have to repress, avoid, and conceal a great deal in order to maintain a stance of 'not noticing' color." She continues by saying that there are seemingly only two options for the white woman: "either one does not have anything to say about race, or one is apt to be deemed 'racist' simply by virtue of having something to say" (33). The white reader faces a similar paradox; ultimately, "the interlocutory situation of a white reading of a black text demands some acknowledgment of racial differences" (Abel 481). For example, when I read a text by Toni Morrison, such as *The Bluest Eye*, which deals with young black girls responding to a damaging "blue eyes are the most beautiful" societal standard, though I may be a Caucasian brunette likewise lacking blue eyes, I also lack understanding of the pain of widespread media racial discrimination which promotes the appearance and lifestyles of Caucasian Americans as superior or ideal.

Critic Mae Henderson mentions the emotional risk involved for white readers who actually try to empathize (as if that's possible) when confronted with black female situations:

The nonblack feminist critic/theorist who honestly engages his or her own autobiographical implication in a brutal past is likely to provide nuances such as that of the black feminist critic. What, however, are the
preconditions and precautions for the nonblack critic/theorist who dares to undertake such a project? (qtd. in Abel 480)

To be ready to feel uncomfortable? Can one acknowledge the depth of someone else's pain—especially when that suffering perhaps partly implicates the reader? Lauretta Ngeobo, a black female writer explains, "We as black writers at times displease our white readership...If the truth be told, it cannot titillate the aesthetic palates of many white people, for deep down it is a criticism of their values and their treatment of us throughout history" (qtd. in Wisker 12).

Many Caucasian students, readers, citizens might want to ask, "But am I really implicated in the oppression of minorities--past or present?" Is not being able to understand another's pain—or choosing not to notice, a form of oppression? Feagin and Vera suggest that young white Americans sometimes argue that because "they have not personally held slaves or discriminated against black people" that they therefore "should not have to pay the price of the remedies for racial discrimination" (6). In using this faulty argument, young whites overlook the numerous ways in which, as a group, "they have benefited from their forebears' access to land, decent-paying jobs, and wealth at a time when most African Americans were excluded from those things" (6).

What are the conditions of the African-American community at present? As an employed Caucasian female, what are issues on which I might choose not to focus? As Donna suggested, what are issues she might "bring up?" According to The World's Women 1970-1990, 60% of African American families are headed by females, 70% of these families living in poverty (Mbalia 642). Black feminist critic Doreatha Mbalia believes that the triple oppression of black women past and present has demanded intense, often self-destructive responses. She discusses "the alarming and increasing rate of teen pregnancy," drugs available in the African community, increasing numbers of middle school youth dropping out, "inadequate health care, poor nutrition, and increasing numbers of Africans in their thirties dying from AIDS, cancer and heart attacks" (642).
Connecting the current situation to that of the women in Morrison's *Jazz*, Mbalia asks, "Is it any wonder there are Wilds in the African community?" (642) Mbalia explains the "Wilds" by illustrating black female response to these desperate situations:

African women--in body, not in age--getting fat off of oppression. African women--in body, not in age--doing the hand jive to signal potential customer. African women--in body, not in age--"word-whipping" anybody and everybody, including their own children, on down the street. African women--in body, not in age--becoming mamas when they're still children. African women--Dorcases--swallowing the flames of oppression. African women. Wild then and Wild now. (642)

Feagin and Vera point out that the 1980's and 1990's have represented an era of "increased white attacks on African Americans and white insensitivity to the realities and pain of racism" (15). The critics mention former president Ronald Reagan's speaking of 'welfare queens' (a coded critique of black women), as well as his opposition to most new civil rights laws and expanded enforcement effects. According to the leader of the Dubuque, Iowa NAACP, "Reagan made it okay to hate again" (Feagin 15).

hooks suggests that white feminist readers immediately acknowledge that that is what they in fact are when they are reading black texts (Abel 486). I'm willing to do so. I am a white feminist critiquing *Jazz*, a novel written by an African-American female. Even more specifically, I am part of that still continuing white feminist interest that Elizabeth Abel says began in 1985, a "watershed year that marked the simultaneous emergence of what has been called postfeminism and, not coincidentally, of pervasive white feminist attention to texts by women of color" (479). hooks also suggests that white feminist theory would have much to offer "if it showed women ways in which racism and sexism are immutably connected rather than pitting one struggle against the other or blatantly dismissing racism" (Sisterhood 248).
Who is damaged by not acknowledging the diversity available in American literature? Oppression is universally damaging. Though a white feminist reader will not be able to read like a black female, frustrating social and academic consequences accompany the continued disregard of minority texts. Karla Holloway feels that the academy has suffered a "crisis of identity" because it has acknowledged only one universal identity. She suggests:

Only if we acknowledge and claim our diverse, subjective, biased, cultural, and decidedly political identities within academe will we avoid the terror and protectionist politics of the mask--those that allow us to hide our differences beneath its surface rather than to step boldly and without disguise into the political environs of our profession. It is not political expediency to claim the diversity of our community; this claim is a political reality. (614)

Is this a political reality at the suburban Des Moines high school where I teach--which has less than ten percent minority students? Of course. There is a desperate need to acknowledge the diversity of America--even in homogeneous groups. Perhaps this need is even more important in homogenous groups which represent merely the majority. While minority Americans have the continual "opportunity" through television, theater, film, advertising, literature, education, to learn even more about Caucasian, Western culture, the inverse of this situation is not readily available to the majority. For example, talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey recently told the all-white cast of the country's most popular sitcom, *Friends*, that maybe they needed some "black friends," or even a black neighbor on their markedly white show.

As a consequence, Lauter suggests, "Many marginalized writers deploy distinct historic sensibilities which interested 'outside' readers must work at constructing if we are to have access to such texts" (60). Hence, if we are to offer all students the opportunity to discover the treasure of diversity within the United States, the present "majority" must make the effort to provide more than
glimpses of non-dominant American cultures. While the costs of racism and oppression will always be far greater for the oppressed, critics Feagin and Vera recognize the damage of racism to the oppressive majority. "Black and other minority victims pay a direct, heavy and immediately painful price for racism, while white discriminators and onlookers usually pay a more indirect and seldom recognized price" (2). A rather selfish need for the majority to heed the minority voice is expressed in Collins' suggestion that "one implication of standpoint approaches is that the more subordinated the group, the purer their vision of the oppressive group" (207). Morrison suggests that "to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the 'raceless' one with which we are, all of us, most familiar" (McBride 756). Jazz, with its poetic, female African-American perspective of New York in the 1920s, as my students discuss in the final chapter of this thesis, provides a glimpse of historical society which had been overlooked in their high school history classes. This in turn helps students to understand the fact that biases exist in even supposed objective perspectives of history.

Graff suggests, "In a society increasingly being forced to come to terms with cultural difference, nothing could be more practical than an education that treats cultural and ideological conflict as part of its object of study" (821). However, that does not mean that doing so won't make the "majority" of readers uneasy. For example, as John Leonard indicates in his review of Jazz, by decentering white readers, Morrison's novels put us in a unique interpretive/emotional situation. "Morrison's white folks are outside the main action of her characters. 'We' are their bad weather and bad luck...How does it feels to a white reader to be bad luck, like chemicals in a lake? As if we're not, every minute of the day, so important" (38). Racially, at least, this is not a situation we majority members often confront.

Donna excuses herself after twenty minutes of enlightening me,
returning briefly to her table, and then leaves with plans to attend a Hispanic concert later that afternoon. She generously extends me an offer to join her; however, as I must continue working, she leaves me alone with my collection of criticism, my guilt, my dilemma, my coffee. I know that to be a responsible white female reader, I need to recognize the struggle but also opportunity African-American writers face of moving contemporary readers "beyond the early responses of liberal curiosity and tolerance...toward a broadening of historical knowledge," toward "reassessment" (Lauter 61). We (white readers) are offered the opportunity to discard "the notion that all literatures produced in this country must be viewed throughout the critical lenses shaped to examine 'mainstream'--that is, largely white and male--culture" (Lauter 52).

However, will I ever be offered the opportunity to read as a black feminist? Patricia Hill Collins suggests that "black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of black women's reality by those who live it" (22). She further suggests that because all African-American women share the common experience of belonging to a society "that denigrates women of African descent...certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a black women's standpoint" (22). For example, one core theme would be "a legacy of struggle." Collins approves of Maria W. Stewart's description of the core themes of black feminism: themes which interlock the nature of "race, gender, and class oppression," a "call for replacing denigrated images of black womanhood with self-defined images," a belief in black women's activism as "mothers, teachers and black community leaders, and sensitivity to sexual politics" (23). Collins feels that this connection between experience and consciousness shapes the everyday lives of all African-American women and thus "pervades the works of black women activists and scholars" (Collins 24).

What then can white feminist readers interested in addressing racial problems hope to accomplish? Perhaps we can at least encourage resistance to the commonly held Caucasian fallacy that views "widespread discrimination in
most institutional arenas as a thing of the past" (Feagin 4). Feagin and Vera also see the contemporary denial of racism as the "white refusal to notice or comment on racial differences, especially regarding programs to eradicate racial discrimination" (3). They advocate the use of the term "white racism" which can be viewed as "the socially organized set of attitudes, ideas and practices that deny African Americans and other people of color the dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that this nation offers white Americans" (Feagin 7).

They quote Toni Morrison’s frustration with this "evasion" of the issue of white racism; Morrison suggests that "it is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" (3). In the Midwestern school where I teach and throughout the county white racism is still highly destructive. Feagin and Vera offer several examples of the widespread white racism in the United States. They discuss a 1992 nationwide count which found "more than three hundred hate groups active in 1992, ranging from skinheads to a variety of neo-Nazi and other white supremacy organizations" with an estimated "thirty thousand hard core members, with perhaps another two hundred thousand active sympathizers" (Feagin). They cite statistics asserting that in 1991, twenty-five hate-motivated murders of minority Americans by white killers were recorded in the United States; from 1993 they specify a gruesome incident when

    two white men were convicted in south Florida of the kidnapping, robbery, and attempted murder of a black stockbrokerage clerk who was vacationing in Tampa. The black man was set ablaze by the whites, who left a note saying, "One less nigger, more to go". (4)

Further disturbing examples come from Michael Gartner's article "Hate Heats Up;" "Since 1991, the FBI has collected statistics on crimes motivated by religious, ethnic, racial or sexual orientation prejudice." In 1993, 7,684 hate crimes were reported, 4,168 dealing with race: "2,476 anti-black, 1,299 anti-white" (5). Besides facing hate crimes, blacks also face discrimination in the workplace, colleges,
restaurants, and in white neighborhoods.

Persisting racial inequality can also be seen in the wide gaps in black and white family income and wealth. Today the median income of black families is about 58 percent that of white families. Blacks are almost three times as likely to live in poverty as are whites. (Feagin 6) Unfortunately, Caucasian responses to such a complex racial situation are often filled with joking dismissals or reliance on damaging stereotypes: black males are criminals; black women are lazy welfare queens.

Relating directly to the need for academic acknowledgment of racism and of minority cultures, Feagin and Vera suggest that homogenous, Midwestern communities are far from exempt from racist ideology. The critics discuss in detail a 1991 situation in Dubuque, Iowa, involving a negative reaction to a city council plan to attract more black families to a their community which was one of the "whitest cities in the nation" (17). Cross burnings, threats, and harassment displayed white racist desire to uphold its motto: "Kingism must be destroyed and replaced with white Americanism" (Feagin 13). Though the violently racist residents of Dubuque, and in other cities in the Midwest present a minority in such communities, Feagin and Vera suggest that Caucasian passivity is almost criminal in such situations as well. Discussing an outbreak of white racism at a mainly Caucasian Midwestern college, Feagin and Vera suggest that most white youth, like most of their elders, did not speak out against the violence and hatred. "Such passivity is a first step in learning to ally oneself with white victimizers against black victims. Remaining passive during one incident may make it harder to actively oppose racism in the future" (Feagin 21). In light of this, white feminist efforts should be made toward enlightening other Caucasians who continue to perceive African-Americans as inferior, and to counter the negativity which may result as a result of white racist hatred and/or the denial of white racism. Hence, though "nuances" in Jazz might escape me, this does not mean that Caucasian teachers should not share minority literature
with majority students.

The Question of Representation: Resisting the Oppressive Melting Pot

"Against the dominant culture's oppressive melting pot, she (Morrison) devises a new form of worldview that is no longer based on unanimity and homogenity, but is founded on individual adaptability and cultural awareness. Its two fundamental values are survival and difference, survival in difference."

Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin

"The current relationship of academic knowledge to political power can be understood, in some decisive ways, in terms of a struggle for representation."

George S. Jay

I grew up with the concept of America's melting pot as one that embraced all cultures—that made the U.S.A. a mixture of diverse ideas, customs, dreams. The melting pot, far from "oppressive," was inclusive. However, when looking at the curriculum offered in many American high school literature courses, it seems there remains a decided lack of minority voices. Hence, the idea of the melting pot becomes a conformity kettle, encouraging assimilation rather than celebrating difference. My childhood concept of a non-oppressive melting pot supposedly embraced Harding's suggestions of "cultural awareness" and a "survival in difference," which in turn relate to the issue of diversifying the canon. Lauter suggests that "a normative model" imposed by the "mainstream image" of the canon "presents those variations from the mainstream as "abnormal, deviant, lesser, perhaps ultimately unimportant" (48). Many of those who resist the idea of adding minority voices past and present to the canon fear that the "quality" of the canon will suffer from such an obligatory representation, and perhaps also worry about the dismissal of standard Western classics or the failure to include the right number of new male texts.

Gerald Graff presents an informal debate which addresses these fears in his article, "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Organizing and Teaching the
Humanities Conflict." The discussion he offers from his department's lounge illustrates the anxiety surrounding this conflict in many college and high school literature departments; similar controversy could surround attempts to "replace" an established "classic" in the curriculum with a minority text such as Jazz. Graff's proffered discussion concerns poetry, the teaching of "Dover Beach," a work which, says OMP (older male professor) is "one of the great masterpieces of the Western tradition, a work that, until recently at least, every seriously educated person took for granted as part of the cultural heritage." OMP complained that his students found the poem "virtually incomprehensible...another sorry illustration of the deplorably ill-prepared state of today's students."

YFP (young female professor) responds by telling him that being forced to read "Dover Beach" in high school made her hate poetry for years. YFP said that the content of the poem offered perhaps the consummate example of "what feminists mean when they speak of the ideological construction of the feminine as by nature private and domestic and therefore justly disqualified from sharing male power...We should teach 'Dover Beach'...as the arch example of phallocentric discourse" (818).

OMP answers that YFP seemed to be treating the poem as a piece of "political propaganda rather than a work of art," therein missing "the whole point of poetry, which is to rise above local and transitory problems by transmuting them into universal structures of language and image."

YFP retorts with, "The fact is, Professor OMP, that what you presume to be the universal human experience in Arnold and Shakespeare is male ebullience presented as if it were universal. You don't need to notice the politics of sexuality because for you patriarchy is the normal state of affairs. You can afford to ignore the sexual politics of literature, or to 'transmute' them, as you put it, onto a universal plane, but that's a luxury I don't enjoy" (818).

Had she been present in the above mentioned lounge, Karla Holloway
would perhaps have chimed in with support for YFP. In The Novel Politics of Literary Interpretation, Holloway suggests, "It is our responsibility to abandon the disabling ethic of the standard that claims whiteness and maleness and Protestantism as accurate or totalizing images. Instead, we must embrace our diversity as our standard, the interdisciplinary project as our challenge, and the multicultural classroom and curriculum as our shared identity" (Holloway 616). So, if one follows Holloway's suggestion, does this mean he/she can't teach "Dover Beach?" This would seem rather extreme; even YFP in Graff's lounge said that a discussion of (even) "Dover Beach" could lead to an interesting examination of gender roles and patriarchal assumptions. However, as displayed by the comments of OMP, there are those who would view such a discussion as a misuse of literature. However, feminist educator Patrocinio Schweickart would have noted the political influence of the male canon, which she feels validates male readers and oppresses female readers: "For the male reader, the text serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal...he is invited to validate the equation of maleness with humanity. (Schweickart 41). Inversely, Schweickart feels that the absence of the female viewpoint in the male canon encourages female readers

to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principle is misogyny...[she suffers] not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal----is to be not female. (42)

Indeed, one could further ask is to be universal to be white: not Asian, not Hispanic, not Black? Basically, the feminist reader must view how we read as "inextricably linked with the question of what we read. More specifically, the
feminist inquiry into the activity of reading begins with the realization that the literary canon is androcentric, and that this has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers" (Schweickart 40). A black feminist approach would emphasize also how the whiteness of the androcentric canon affects minority female and male readers.

Opposition to this sort of black feminist approach is displayed by ex-NEA chairperson Lynn Cheney's *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*. Cheney's suggestions have excited resistance among critics interested in increased minority representation. Houston Baker feels that Cheney offers a how-to book encouraging us to "place tab A into slot B, and achieve a pop-up picture of the West" (130). Baker argues, "Cheney's core curriculum depends on the formula, 'Praise the West from which all blessings flow.' *50 Hours* might thus be read as a mass-produced book of hours designed to lead the faithful back to Plato and the ancient prophets" (132). Obviously, Baker, like Holloway, Schweickart and YFP, resists the implied commandment of "Thou shalt pursue a core curriculum based upon Western Great Books" (Baker 129). Schweickart feels that significant critics who formed current theories about American literature such as Matthiesen, Chase, Feidelson, Trilling suggest that "the theoretical model for the canonical American novel is 'the melodrama of beset manhood,'" which, consequently, excludes novels which deal with what Nina Baym has termed "melodramas of beset womanhood," as well as virtually all fiction centering on the experience of women" (45), and the further excluded "melodramas of beset" minority women. Kolodny suggests that what we have read will influence what we continue to read, and thus, according to Schweickart, we are caught in a "rather vicious circle. An androcentric canon generates androcentric interpretive strategies, which in turn favor the canonization of androcentric texts and the marginalization of gynocentric ones" (45).

Schweickart feels that to break this cycle, feminists must fight for both the "revision of the canon to include a significant body of works by women, and for
the development of reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal device that constitute these texts" (Schweickart 45). The highly political debates concerning the canon are increasingly fueled by the reality of an impressive contemporary collection of African-American female texts: Morrison's Nobel prize winning collection leading the crowd.

However, resistance continues; we are faced with the dilemma in this period of concern over "educational correctness" as to how to "allow" representation of minority voices to merge with what is good, important, useful, valuable of the Western Voice. Critic George Jay in his article, "Knowledge, Power and the Struggle for Representation," suggests that despite flaws in "the classical schemas" we should avoid "simplistic calls to 'trash' Western Civilization or to ignore the dialectical virtues of the Enlightenment tradition, which after all contained much of the rhetoric of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness now enlisted in the cause of the marginalized" (Jay 16). However, something needs to happen; presently, despite the concerted efforts of many professors and teachers to diversify their curriculum, there remains an incredible imbalance in representation. Focussing on the lack of female voices acknowledged in the literary academy, Kathleen Komar suggests, "The absence of women in the canon, in turn, perpetuates their marginality and further exclusion" (137). She cites as a telling example The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces (fifth Edition, Vols. I and II), which "dedicates to a few token women writers only 198 pages of its 4,217 total" (Komar 138—italics mine). In light of this less than five percent representation, I have similarly wondered why the general educated public doesn't know who Toni Morrison is when I tell them I am researching Jazz. I realize that literature is not everyone's "bag," but she's a Nobel Prize winner.

I agree with Komar's following suggestion and would suggest the same to Cheney: "If the university curriculum implies that the 'great books' somehow define culture or literature, let those 'great books' include texts by the women
and minorities who have been silenced in the dominant tradition" (136). The same adjustment needs to happen in the high school curriculum. In lieu of attempting to "suppress the historic and the emergence of new people," Charlotte Pierce-Baker in her essay "A Quilting of Voices: Diversifying the Curriculum Canon in the Traditional Humanities," suggests engaging "the difficulties of hybridity that confront the academy in the final decade of the twentieth century" (132).

Some educators, in an attempt to meet the contemporary needs of our diverse Western culture, utilize practices such as Adrienne Rich's call for "revisionary" readings of "classics" which entail the act of "looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (qtd. in Kolodny 1136). Schweickart recognizes critics such as Kate Millet and Judith Fetterley as well as many others have become "Resisting Readers," with the goal of disclosing the harmfulness of "androcentricity of what has customarily passed for the universal" (Schweickart 42).

Other instructors have supplemented their traditional curriculum with minority texts. In her classes, critic Charlotte Baker's students compare the texts Jane Eyre with Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. She also places The Great Gatsby next to Their Eyes Were Watching God, comparing the personal struggles of Janie and Gatsby. Similarities would also arise in a comparison of Morrison's Jazz and The Great Gatsby, both of which deal with the musical, dangerously festive environments of the jazz age, and also address infidelity and murder. In the third chapter of this paper, I discuss one of my student's comparison of Jazz and Bronte's Wuthering Heights. The student looks at similarities in the authors' techniques and similarities in the characters' situations. Pierce-Baker's goal with such pairings is "to create the patchwork—to make a quilting of diverse voices—in order to validate and valorize nondominant groups along with the dominant ones in society" (159). Another goal, of course, would be to enhance both the reading of the established classic
text and of the minority text through comparison of strategies, themes, and the influence of cultural perspectives.

Lauter recognizes that resistance to canon diversity may raise many questions:

Are we not obligated to teach 'the best' of what has been written, rather than works that are representative, either of experience or history? Would you have us include inferior work because it is by or about women, or minority people, or the working class? Or because it illustrates some set of historical circumstances or contemporary issues? (103)

Adding authors such as Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neal Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lesli Marmon Silko, Sandra Cisneros, or Amy Tan to the curriculum is not going to diminish the educational or cultural value of a literature course. Likewise, addressing this political struggle for representation is necessary and logical in a nation ever increasingly diverse. This presents an immediate challenge for literary educators. Komar suggests that

just as women writers have taken up re-visionary tasks, feminist critics and teachers must also engage themselves in rethinking, rewriting, and re-presenting both the canon as it has existed in the patriarchal tradition up to this point and the many writers who have been so carefully excluded from it. (146)

However, as mentioned earlier, effectively teaching and reading minority texts presents difficulties for non-minority educators. Fortunately, there is a small but growing body of helpful supplementary material which addresses the issue of reading across racial lines. One such collection is Karen Wisker's *Black Women's Writing*, in which she acknowledges that "those of us who are white academics are conscious that this poses a problem in our reading and teaching of texts from other cultural configurations;" her collection of essays openly confronts and addresses that problem, without "pretending" to solve it (5). In my analysis of student responses to *Jazz* in a later chapter, I likewise become part
of the white feminist community recognizing and addressing the concerns and benefits of teaching minority literature to high school students without assuming that I have conquered deeper social problems of discrimination.

For example, I had no certain answer when a female colleague asked me recently if I could explain why high school boys so resist female literature. I said, "Maybe because it's not directly about them?" A stronger response might suggest that the young males have been well socialized to despise that which is associated with the female. This reminds me of an interview with the Paris Review, in which Morrison discussed her perspective on white people commenting on the "narrowness" of her topic range:

I think they mean, "Are you ever going to write a book about white people?"; For them that's kind of a compliment. They're saying, "You write well enough. I would even let you write about me...You write well enough. You could come into the center if you wanted to. You don't have to stay out there on the margin." And I'm saying, "Yeah, well I'm gonna stay out here on the margin, and let the center look for me." (121)

Hence, to those white males and females who say, "Why not write about our struggles?" Morrison responds with a magnanimous willingness to be "marginalized?" However, those of us in the supposed center will do the academy a disservice if we continue to allow the continuation of such a marked misrepresentation of African-American female texts in the canon. Jazz, part of a trilogy which begins with Beloved, addresses the social history of the African-American female, and stands as an ideal addition to a college and/or an upper-level high school curriculum. Lauter suggests that we need to work for "the creation of a new cultural history" which is part of a larger process of "building 'an account of the world as seen from the margins,' a necessary prerequisite to transforming the 'margins into the center'" (52).

Lauter writes that while composing, "Reconstructing American Literature: Curricular Issues" he tacked on the wall near him the syllabi for two American
Literature courses taught in the 1980s at "well-known, indeed prestigious, institutions in the United States. One covered thirty-two writers, all white and male, except for one assignment on Emily Dickinson and one poem by Marianne Moore," while the other course included twenty-three male writers and Emily Dickinson. Lauter rightly suggests that such "courses are simply not truthful, nor professionally current. The pictures they present to students of (as they were titled) 'The American Literary Imagination,' or 'Life and Thought in American Literature,' are woefully incomplete and inaccurate" (97).

In another eighties survey Lauter collected American literature syllabi from 500 courses. Focussing on the initial fifty, the rest of the survey supporting "the finding of the original study," Lauter found that the sixty-one authors taught in three or more of the initial fifty courses surveyed included only eight women, five black men, and no black women. Emily Dickinson was twelfth on the list of most-often taught writers. Lauter sees one possibility for the slowness of the curricular change, an issue which has been discussed since the 1960s, is the availability of texts.

As discussed earlier, women are not well-represented in most general anthologies. At our high school, where, for the first time (at this school), I will be teaching a course entitled "American Authors" this fall, I asked if I could add Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a text of which the school owns no copies, to the junior/senior targeted curriculum, as few female and minority authors were represented in the present syllabus. The head of the English department said that I could offer students "the option of reading Cather's *My Antonia*," of which the school *owns* copies.

As will be indicated later in the chapter which analyzes student responses to *Jazz*, no African-American female novels exist in the entire high school literature curriculum: in my survey, students read *Jazz* individually and voluntarily. I assume the department head certainly would not resist my teaching Hurston's novel or novels by other African-American authors *if the*
school actually owned copies of the texts. Last year's American Authors courses began with Puritan literature, included Anne Bradstreet, but no Native American representation. A story by Flannery O'Connor was required; two novels by Cather and Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* (which offers a male experience from a male perspective) were "choices" for novels. One of the teachers also included "some Emily Dickinson," which completes the list of included women.

For those interested in diversifying their high school English curriculum, Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge, two high school English instructors, have co-authored *Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High School English Curriculum*. This text offers instructional and curricular suggestions for incorporating female writers ranging from contemporary American authors such as Morrison and Atwood to examples of eighth-century English female poetry. Whaley and Dodge offer insights into modifying pedagogy in traditional courses and for creating a women's literature course at the secondary level.

Concerning the college-level curriculum, a valuable resource is the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* edited by Paul Lauter. This anthology "includes works by 109 women writers of all races, twenty-five individual Native American authors (as well as seventeen texts from tribal origins), fifty-three African American, thirteen Hispanics (as well as twelve texts from earlier Spanish originals and two from French), and nine Asian-Americans" (Lauter 101). Lauter is encouraged as the text has done "remarkably well in commercial terms," but adds, "needless to say it has not taken over the market" (101).

Lauter recognizes that how we go about deciding what to include in a course or an anthology, especially after realizing the choice is not "foreordained by God, the curriculum committee, or even the Norton anthology," will move us to a "spectacular and dangerous" territory of "choice" (102). Of course, that is if you can overcome those philosophical hurdles, as well as that inevitable final hurdle which slows many high schools across the country: budget. But even in
questions concerning the distribution of the budget, one might ask, along with Lauter, "not how to apply a given and persisting set of standards, but where standards come from, whose values they embed, and whose interests they serve" (104). Lauter suggests that we are at the beginning of the creation of a "complex history," a "full literary history which "requires both parallel and integrated accounts of differing literary traditions and thus of differing (and changing) social realities" (51).

According to Feagin and Vera, it is imperative that Americans begin to see white racism for what it actually is: "a tremendously wasteful set of practices, legitimated in deeply embedded myths, that deprives its victims, its perpetrators, and U.S. society as a whole of much valuable human talent and energy and many social, economic, and political resources" (9). Hopefully the reluctance of the leader of my district's English department to include an African-American female novel in the "American Authors" curriculum stems from lack of budget in lieu of what Collins describes as the lack of credibility deemed those scholarly communities that challenge basic beliefs held in the culture at large, as less credible than those "which support popular perspectives" (Collins 203), in this circumstance the canon debate.

Wisker suggests that "writing is a political act of breaking silence" (3), and I feel that discussing literature can be an act of acknowledging privilege and discrimination. Hazel Carby wonders why in the post-civil-rights era there is still so much active resistance including the use of "massive resources" to "programs that focus on non-white or ethnically diverse topics and issues" (16). As displayed in Barbara Dodd Stanford's 1970's text, Black Literature for High School Students, the resistance Carby presently sees has perplexed those eager for canon diversity since the early 60's. Stanford discusses the historical placement of her collection in the following quotation:

In the 1960's the struggle was for integration, and both blacks and whites...were trying to prove that we were all the same under the skin and that
the happy ending was only a few more freedom marches away. Ten years later, we have been more open with ourselves and each other and are realizing that the experience of blacks and whites in this country is quite different and that the evils of three hundred years cannot be dissolved in one rousing chorus of "We Shall Overcome". (1)

What about twenty years later?

Changes have been made. During my tenure as a graduate student at Iowa State University, several professors have displayed attempts to diversify textual and critical representation. And, while I recall reading no minority authors in high school, in my eight years as a high school English teacher, during which I have taught Advanced Placement Literature and Composition, Freshman English, and many courses in between, I have been able to add minority literature to the curriculum. However, according to Carby, "changes too frequently amount to only the inclusion of one or two new books in an already established syllabus, rather than a reconsideration of the basic conceptual structures of a course" (Carby 11). As is acknowledged by many feminists, it is not good enough merely to "add a few women and stir." Educators must address the stylistic and thematic complexity of marginalized artforms, which call not only for representation, but also, due to the uniqueness of their traditionally overlooked perspective, it is also necessary to reconsider the traditional lines of literary history.

Carby expresses another disturbing concern; she feels that even within some women's studies and some literature departments, black women writers have been "used," and "abused as cultural and political icons." She feels that "We need to ask what cultural and political need is being expressed, and what role is the black female subject being reduced to play?" (11) Just as black students are often brought into white institutions "without significant efforts to change the racist attitudes of whites or the white-dominated culture of the colleges and universities" (Feagin 41), attempts to mix and stir the canon resist blending
without actively addressing why the voices were earlier left out. While progress is being made, there exists a marked problem with textual diversity.
CHAPTER 2. MORRISON'S JAZZ: REVISING FORM AND RE-SINGING HISTORY

"I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am."

Maya Angelou

In this chapter, I offer a critical discussion of Jazz. A reader might ask why, when writing an essay which will later focus on reader-response criticism, would a writer pay such extended attention to critical interpretations of a text? As an educator, I am interested both in the responses student readers have to the text as well as the responses of established literary critics: both provide insights which help to refine my interpretation of the text. And secondly, one might question why the writer/educator would choose Jazz? I chose Jazz because of its stylistic acknowledgment of the importance of multiple perspectives in one's search for the truth and because of its intriguing historical retelling of the 1890's through the 1920's, told from an alternative perspective. Written by one of the most important writers working today, an African-American female whose oeuvre provides an invaluable resource for diversifying curriculum, Jazz offers an ideal opportunity for students to learn more about and be influenced by the African-American female perspective.

As part of a trilogy Jazz serves as a continuation in a retelling. Inherently female, and focusing specifically on maternal issues and crediting a non-masculine narrative form, Jazz privileges a sense of unending, intimacy, circuitousness over a distanced linear structure. The diversion from the traditional male linear format acknowledges the necessity of altering style in order to address marginalized themes. In this chapter I will address the jazz-based nature of this non-traditional style and discuss why this works well for a non-traditional retelling. I will acknowledge how it fits stylistically and thematically into earlier works in Morrison's canon. Specifically, I will analyze
how the use of the improvisational style of the novel coincides with the special healing concerns of the characters and also parallels the situation of the African Americans living in the Harlem of the 1920's and the present. I will also address the emphasis on the maternal and female in the novel, and how this affects both style and theme. Finally, I will also address the presence of the narrator, and teamed with the sense of unending, the unusual requests this text makes of the reader.

History from the Narrative Margin

"A small girl and her mother passed a statue depicting a European man who had barehandedly subdued a ferocious lion. The little girl stopped, looked puzzled and asked, 'Mama, somethin's wrong with that statue. Everybody knows that a man can't whip a lion.' 'But, darling,' her mother replied, 'you must remember that the man made the statue.'"

Katie G. Cannon

"Around the world, she (Morrison) has offered a new lens through which to view American literature and African-American experience."

Trudier Harris

Morrison's non-Western narrative style in Jazz effectively retells this story of lack, infidelity, murder, healing; the atypical jazz-like format is also an effective tool for "retelling" such a history. How can one stay inside a traditional, masculine, Western language to describe feelings and situations outside that language? Holloway feels that what appears behind the veil of the Western tradition is a shifted, alternative universe. In such works, the presuppositions of power in valor and maleness, accuracy in written records and clarity in a temporal linearity are constantly dissembled. (135)

Works like Morrison's suggest that there are situations, viewpoints, histories that cannot fit into the conventional triangle of plot, and which resist the traditional privileging of the authorial voice. Thus, situations that do not fall under the category of traditional Western experience, call for a different format,
and if possible, language. According to Harding and Martin, in *A World of Difference: An Intercultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*, Western style's progressive development "does not correspond to the black American experience of rupture, dislocation, and radical change imposed by events external to the community....If an alternative vision of history is to be related, narrative techniques must be altered" (168). Morrison's work displays her open distrust of conventions and the necessity of manipulating language and style.

In her Nobel Lecture, Morrison alludes to the ineffectiveness of all language to communicate powerful experience: "Language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide or war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable" (7). In "its reach toward the ineffable," Morrison's works provide a oppositional glimpse of "Western" history. In *The Novel Politics of Literary Interpretation*, Karla Holloway suggests that when African-American woman-centered texts reject "conventional historiography, feelings are proven more durable and trustworthy than history" (137). An artform that engages emotion and encourages the expression of feelings would present an effective medium for retelling such an experience. Harding and Martin also feel that "only music can express the complex chemistry of life in the City--people's appetite for life and their anger at what life denies them" (100). And feelings are apparent in jazz and blues traditions of music, which, like the tradition of black Baptist church services, is also eager for emotional response from the audience. Harding and Martin also suggest that music represents an original African-American response to the need for "community cohesion. Like storytelling, black musicmaking is collective, improvisational, and cumulative." Contradicting the "romance" of Western myths, jazz does not claim to be "eternal and timeless," but "instantaneous and ephemeral and therefore unique and inimitable" (129).

Though *jazz* is Morrison's most obvious attempt to include musical
technique in her writing, many critics recognize that the influence of jazz and the blues has been apparent in much of Morrison's prior work. As obviously indicated in the title *The Song of Solomon*, this novel also incorporates music in a retelling, rediscovering, and reworking of a family history in effort to deal with a present dysfunctional family situation. Musical techniques can also be found in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which opens with two variations of the family "tune" of Dick and Jane, safe, in a peaceful suburban setting. Her story then plays off this idyllic version to show the possibility of homes where little girls go crazy because they feel they're ugly because they can't have blue eyes, homes where the closest thing to "mother" is three prostitutes upstairs, and reality is dealing with sexual abuse and watching cat murders. The Dick and Jane tune is repeated near the end, followed by a suspended call and response discussion of the little girl's incestuous pregnancy.

Anthony Berret suggests that "Morrison bases her stories on legends or fables that act as standard tunes on which her characters play their own improvisations" (271). The Dick and Jane "legend" is the dominant, oppressive tune in *The Bluest Eye*, and Pecola, overwhelmed by self-hatred and inadequacy, plays on the tune by obsessing about having the bluest eyes, and therein becoming beautiful; Claudia, too young to have "arrived at the turning point in the development of my (her) psyche," which would allow her to love Shirley Temple, offers a harmony of hatred for the hurtful Dick and Jane standard. Claudia "hates Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she dances with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slip down under their heels" Her solo shares her desire to "dismember" her blue-eyed baby dolls, to "break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around"(BE 20).

Berret's above-mentioned, 1989 reference to Morrison's musical use of
legends also accurately describes *Beloved* and predicts *Jazz*, both based on actual incidents from African-American lives. While *Beloved* was at least partially inspired by an actual account Morrison read of a woman killing her child to keep the infant from enduring slavery, the story for *Jazz* was taken from a photograph in James Van Der Zee's collection. Gates offers the photographer's description of the picture:

She was the one I think was shot by her sweetheart at a party with a noiseless gun. She complained of being sick at the party and friends said, "Well, why don't you lay down?" and they take her in the room and laid her down. After they undressed her and loosened her clothes, they saw the blood on her dress. They asked her about it, and she said, "I'll tell you tomorrow, yes, I'll tell you tomorrow." She was just trying to give him a chance to get away. (Gates 53)

Both of these "legends" are, according to Harding and Martin, "facts of the African-American past that defy the careful arrangement of cause and explanation into a coherent (Western-friendly) pattern" (166). These texts, in lieu of "surrendering meaning or form to a rigidly ideological and imposing Western tradition... successfully revise the nature of the imagination." In doing so, they also "decenter the Western ethic and replace its operative aesthetic (which excludes them) with one that extends from a cultural tradition characterized by alerity. Because of its decentering, the text's responsibility is to itself rather than to an ideology" (135).

*Jazz* clearly does not conform to traditional styles. As Rodrigues asserts, this novel offers a "loose, fluid non-Aristotelian experimental form. Not the tight climactic Freytag structure...but the form of a jazz piece" (739). Merely the use of a jazz style, being inherently black, and willfully meandering, approaches the borderline between reason and madness for some Westerners. "It's not linear!" "It doesn't progress with presumable straightforwardness to a climax!" "One teller's version is not privileged!" To retell her history, Morrison needed
to "buck the Western metaphysical tradition in her style. This "making and remaking" is a retelling of history—her style makes a commentary on the Western version of history—questions it. As a result, Rodrigues feels that like jazz music, "Jazz hits us below the Cartesian belt and offers us a powerful experience that does not insist on definite meanings" (751).

This need to offer a non-traditional history perhaps explains Morrison's ambitious project of the Beloved trilogy which offers a retelling of the entire era of black American female experience. Morrison's goal perhaps is similar to Maya Angelou's, who said, "I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am" (qtd. in Wisker 3). This need for a history is played out in the female characters of the novels as well; Komar discusses how "loss is the substance of history" for women like Sethe in Beloved; the same could be said for Violet, Dorcas and Alice in Jazz. Komar suggests that such a character applies "the meditative ways of re-memory" which insist themselves into previously unsuccessful and losing archival patterns. Komar continues:

this way of reconstruction (revision) is a way of shifting an alternative universe into the place that history has poorly served. Because women's cultures of the diaspora are fractured by history, the creative literature of African-American women has resisted its form of documentation. (Komar 122)

In essence, perhaps in the process of her trilogy, Morrison is questioning what history is. She seems at least to be offering a narrative critique of the established view of history as merely facts, and asking what is the meaning of my history as a black woman and how should it be told? The idea of the Beloved trilogy as history is perhaps further supported when Morrison admits in an interview to a possible direct genealogical connection between Beloved and Jazz, in the presence of the most non-traditional, complex, mysterious character in each of the novels. Morrison suggests:
Wild is kind of Beloved. The dates are the same. You see a pregnant black woman naked at the end of Beloved. It's the same time, you know in the Golden Gray section of Jazz, there is a crazy woman out in the woods. The woman they call Wild...could be Sethe's daughter, Beloved. When you see Beloved towards the end, you don't know; she's either a ghost who has been exorcised or she's a real person pregnant by Paul D. who runs away, ending up in Virginia, which is right next to Ohio. But I don't want to make all these connections. (Belles Lettres 42)

As Karen Carmean notes, "Jazz picks up roughly where Beloved left off and continues the greater story Morrison's wishes to tell in her trilogy in progress, the story of her people passing through their American experience, from the days of slavery up to the present" (100). Perhaps the entire trilogy is history: history—not only including, but emphasizing African-American females; history which, like the narrator in Jazz, is yearning to be made, acknowledged, remade.

Morrison told interviewers for the Paris Review that the novel does retell a history: discussing the Harlem of the 1920's and what it represented to its residents in the early part of this century. The novel also addresses how black people have dealt with their history. Morrison feels that the city was "seductive" with its "promised forgetfulness" and the "possibility of freedom...from history." The author continues to discuss our ambivalence toward history, and suggests that though history should not become "a straitjacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten" (Paris Review 114). She indicates the necessity of critiquing, testing, confronting and understanding history in order "to achieve a freedom that is more than license, to achieve true adult agency" (Paris Review 114). By penetrating the seduction of the city, it becomes possible to confront one's own history--"to forget what ought to be forgotten and use what is useful--such true agency is made possible" (Paris Review 114). This is part of what Joe and Violet must do. Compelled to look back, they must learn to deal with the history of abandonment, pain, and exile that they're carrying. Jazz
definitely offers a look at an important socio-historic African-American period, artistically dramatizing the saga of those born after Emancipation, who migrated from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North in search of refuge and a new life (Rodrigues 736).

This novel looks at the ambiguity of Harlem—fills in the gaps of history—of what New York represented for the millions of blacks migrating from the South. Accompanying the young and dancing Joe and Violet on their train ride to the City were a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back....However they came, when or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than the heifer's stall and darker than a morning privy, they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did. (Jazz 32)

Racism and poverty prompted much of this migration. The narrator fills in the history, "The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s, the '80s; the '90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it" (Jazz 33). The narrator describes the newcomers, like Joe and Violet, as country people, quick to forget the country, quick to fall in love with the city. In "the City" "they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves." And they love this new version of themselves so much that they forget what "loving other people was like—if they ever knew that is"(Jazz 33). Harlem was "the beacon of light" for Africans all over the country, promising "relief from lynching, unemployment, rape, slave labor—freedom from oppression;" however, for many, "the legacy of oppression continued, creating a wildness in the people that was perhaps uglier than that in the South because it was more
subtle" (Mbalia 625).

Despite the hopes of freedom and employment alternatives that the City offered for the migrating blacks, the new environment also presented threats of violence and loneliness. Throughout Harlem literature moves a theme of disconnection; likewise, the characters in Jazz are exiled, disconnected from each other and from their personal histories. This leaves them in a precarious state, as in the City they now "have the means to live but without the vital community structures that supported them" (Harding 107). Rodrigues feels the theme of Jazz historically deals with the "impact of their most recent move on the psyche of a people." He alludes to "the earlier 'move' over two hundred years before" which had taken place on slaverships from Africa. The current journey from the rural South—which for many of the uprooted had begun to feel like home—to the industrial North, from the country to the city, though not as dramatic was definitely profound. "It changed them" (Rodrigues 744).

James De Jongh's Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination indicates that "by the mid-1920's 'going to Harlem' was an act fraught with connotations and implications" (15) In a Belles Lettres interview Morrison describes Harlem as an area where one could claim freedom. "You go into a big city. There was a thrill of seeing yourself in large numbers, again developing a sort of black town;" this freedom for everyday people allowed them finally "the freedom to fall in love, to own your body, to be immoral" (40).

De Jongh views the poetry written about Harlem, as associating "the dualism of Harlem with the quintessential patterns of twoness (that is, call and response; problem and resolution; being and becoming) that are the structure and spirit of the blues" (22), or one could say, the structure of Jazz. De Jongh suggests that the best literature written about Harlem discussed more than "dispiriting topics of passing, intraracial color prejudice, and class divisions," and perceived "the potential of an immanent selfhood in Harlem" while facing "the ironies and actualities of black life" (47). Likewise, racial issues such as violent
riots and extreme prejudice in legal situations and health care certainly affect the characters in Jazz; however, Morrison dwells more on the developmental healing of Joe and Violet's psyches. John Leonard's description of Morrison's work in a review describes her as acknowledging racism, but also as providing an analysis of selfhood. According to Leonard, blatant racism always seems "peripheral to some other drama of baffled hopes, family wounds, confused paternity, broken connection or historical amnesia, in a separate republic of dreams." It is within this "republic" that Leonard sees the process of "identity-making," which is extremely "political" (38). Part of this "identity-making" will involve destroying negative, harmful images that have stunted self-growth. Like "the best literature" concerning Harlem, "Jazz makes a claim for the integrated self. The double has to be destroyed, mourned and finally forgotten so that a newly coherent self can be formed" (Harding 57). Violet and Joe both go through several versions of "self," and yet seem to end up with one intact.

Readers of Jazz are offered through the narrator's manipulation a combination of historical information and a personification of Harlem of the early 1900s. Barbara Christian views this oxymoronic being as one made of "freedom and danger" (489). Marilyn Mobley goes as far as to call New York City a character which Morrison deftly develops. Mobley also sees "woven into the descriptions about New York" Morrison's customary concern with African-American history and the ways in which African-American people accommodated, resisted, and subverted the oppressive circumstances that partly determined the contours of their lives." While many find it tempting to call Morrison's view of Harlem and black circumstances romanticized, Mobley counters, calling Morrison's portrayal of the Harlem Renaissance, as romantic but not "romanticized,"

From the references to slave ancestors, Jim Crow laws, race riots and racial harassment, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (the organization of the most prominent Harlem black nationalist, Marcus
Garvey), and the references to black publications such as *The Amsterdam News, The Critics, the Messenger*, it is clear that Morrison is critiquing the political realities of black life during the '20's at the same time that she celebrates the cultural resources African-Americans drew on to survive and thrive. (623)

In the stories that she presents to her people, "she places the center of her fiction right in the middle of her community's enduring dilemma, embracing both past injustices and present confusion...the picture she addressed to her people is enriched with the complexities they have had to incorporate" (Harding 172).

However, relating to my earlier discussion of cross cultural readings, will Caucasian readers comprehend this "complexity?" What "hope" do distanced, privileged racially privileged readers have of understanding situations, people, places, and history which defy conventional Western retellings? Cora Kaplan argues against the probability of adequate interpretation because our more than usually fragmented and partial knowledge of the history, politics and culture in which they were produced and originally read, frequently leads us into teaching and thinking about these texts through an unintentionally imperialist lens, conflating their progressive politics with our own agendas, interpreting their versions of humanism though the historical evolution of our own. (qtd. in Wisker 6)

Again, when confronted with texts that incorporate African-American history, we must find a way to first discover and then avoid that "unintentional imperialism." Morrison has provided a new lens for our viewing, according to Harris: "Around the world, she has offered a new lens through which to view American literature and African American experience" (Harris 9). For this, those of all races owe a debt to Morrison; a kind gesture in return would involve reaching for those new lenses in lieu of the handy imperialistic pair.
Textual Improvisation: A Path of Response, Participation and Healing

"...and how does one punctuate a resonance?"

Eubesio Rodrigues

Critics greeted with mixed responses the unusual, (non-Western) style that Toni Morrison employed in her latest novel, Jazz. As I will discuss later, the unusual style, gaps, and multiple narration offer call for reader-response. I will also later address how the author's style can be especially challenging for high school readers, somewhat perplexed from the novel's opening. The first six sentences of the novel, like an early jam session, divulge much of the plot information, and with those first six sentences begins a critical debate about the success of Morrison's non-traditional style.

Sth. I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deep-down, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, though all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you." (Jazz I)

Critics Bruce Bawer and Eubesio Rodrigues respond in opposing ways to Morrison's opening. In an article that repeatedly criticizes Morrison's technique Bawer says, "That's just the first half-dozen sentences and already you need to step out for some air" (11). Rodrigues, in an article emphasizing explication, enthusiastically discusses the beginning of Jazz, starting with its "flatted monosyllabic" title that "extends into a voiced double sibilant. Like the muted soundsplash of a brush against a snare drum--confusion caused by the speed of
the initial telling." Rodrigues embraces the initial confusion saying,  
We read on impatiently, wanting to interrupt and ask questions, but the voice is in a reckless hurry to tell everything at once without stopping...We read on bewildered, but intrigued, looking at the words, listening to their rhythm, their rhythms,...Halfway though the novel we pause to take stock, to put things together, to get our bearing. (734)

I agree. I wanted to interrupt almost immediately and ask, "Who's this talking, and what does she/it have to do with the story?" However, assuming continuing to read would soon clear up the narrative mystery, I read on, "impatiently," but not without interest. I liked the voice. I liked knowing a bit of the plot, and I was intrigued by the gossipy intimacy of the opening whisper. Later I will discuss student responses to the novel's opening chapter, full of assertive ambiguity. Like the established critics, the high schoolers were likewise "bewildered," "frustrated," and "enthusiastic."

Marilyn Mobley sees Morrison's first paragraph as providing "the baseline melody or bare facts" of a "bluesy jazz tune"(621), a strategy present in earlier Morrison novels. Karen Carmean sees Morrison's opening as indicative of the style her work will take, "the text begins with a sound instead of a word...and from then on the story flows like an extended piece of progressive, improvised jazz." She explains the "fast opening" as similar to many pieces of jazz music which "establish a dominant note and theme" and then break into "different parts--various stories (passages) and voices (instruments); various motifs, images and relative themes" (102).

How important is the jazzy style? I view the narrator's improvisational and invitational manner as vital to the novel's final impact. Morrison feels that the "playful technique" is the novel's "raison d'être", admitting that this might "cause a great deal of dissatisfaction in readers who just want the melody" (Paris Review 110). She said that the "art of the enterprise" for her was "bumping up against that melody time and time again, seeing it from another point of view,
seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth" (109). Antony Berret says that Morrison approaches music as a model for her writing, following its sounds and rhythms in her prose "in order to ease her people into the literary medium and make them feel at home in their new environment" (268). As mentioned in the past chapter, I see the jazz technique as vital to the retelling of the history of and for this group of marginalized people. The repetition in the form of solos, improvising on the original tune, the use of call and response, "breathless run-ons" (Rodrigues 736), riffs, "the repeated melodic phrase around which many solos are constructed," (Rice 424) and call for audience participation which make up this form of African-American music, provide an appropriate style for the winding journey of this recursive telling of an overlooked history.

Morrison uses the technique of the riff with her narrator and characters. The use of various solos, as in a jazz presentation, provides us with different perspectives on the melody of the infidelity and murder. Though just as in jazz music some perspectives seem preferable, perhaps of a higher quality to the listener, the idea of allowing a variety of instruments to improvise on the established pattern and notes, inevitably discloses that there is more than one way, for example, to approach the melody of "Mac the Knife," a recording of which I played for the group of high school students with whom I discussed jazz. Indeed, it would be possible to get enjoyment and the idea from merely hearing Louis Armstrong's solo of the melody, but jazz is interested in varying the perspective, ever working to create that pleasurable mixture of the melody, or in a novel's case, the basic plot. "Stylistically, Morrison structures the narrative of Jazz the way a jazz trio performs. After the melody come the riffs on it, come the individual solos, alternating among one another, to round out the performance" (Mobley 622). Like jazz music, Jazz challenges the assumption of the authority of one privileged solo version of the story. The audience is privileged by getting to hear solos from not only the narrator, but Joe, Violet, Felice, Alice, and even Dorcas, which relay varying perspectives on the events of the novel, and the
factors which caused the tragedies and the healing.

Alan Rice in his article "Jazzing It Up a Storm: The Execution and Meaning of Toni Morrison's Jazzy Prose Style" sees "the use of a jazz aesthetic as a pivotal structural device" in *Jazz* (424). While commenting on her use of several of the trademark techniques of jazz, he focuses on the non-Western idea of non-closure and the need for repetition as an "organizing principle" of true improvisation, as "an improvisatore relies on the ongoing recurrence of the beat" (424). Besides repetition in the form of the retelling of Dorcas' murder, we also hear improvisations of the Golden Gray story. Several shorter motifs run through the narrative which display the various forms of the past which demand the characters' present attention, or which help to define the characters' personalities. Several motifs develop the confusion and recursive healing process of Violet. "THAT VIOLET," who Violet refers to as the creature within her who was able to cut Dorcas' dead face; shows the complexity of Violet's response to the dead Dorcas: the simultaneously nurturing and jealous concept that the dead girl needed "her ends trimmed" runs through Violet's mind. Further division in Violet's character is shown through the repetition of her infatuation with Golden Gray, and the narrator's frequent reminder that Violet once sat down in the middle of the street. Several characters refer throughout the novel to Joe's two-colored eyes, which are interpreted as having various meanings by the Dorcas, Felice and Violet. Also, the motif of Joe's hunting for Wild is improvisationally intertwined with his search for Dorcas.

This cyclic, jazz-like format was more amenable to Morrison's goals as "Eurocentric/classical music has historically stressed linear progress to a climax, so African-American culture, exemplified by jazz, stressed (and stresses) non-closure and circuitousness" (Rice 424). Though Morrison viewed her story as a vehicle which moved us from its beginning to end, she also wanted the reader to find "delight...in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around at it, as though it were a prism, constantly turning" *(Paris Review* 110).
And where, exactly, is the end of a prism? Harding and Martin describe the objective of Jazz as similar to that in Beloved; which is not to account for the dramatic events in the story, but "instead the novels relate how and following what train of events these tragic happenings can be accepted and justified after the drama, and how their perpetrators can reintegrate themselves into the community" (166--italics mine).

This novel definitely deals with the need to heal--African Americans and America itself still need to heal from this past wound of racial dominance and oppression and the present one of continuing abuse. However, the atypical healing presents my ultimate question with Morrison, the narrator, and the characters as well. Regarding Jazz, how is all this so quickly (even on the surface level which it must be) resolved? "Morrison's usual montage of flashbacks, repetitions with variations and slanted perspectives," according to Harding and Martin, is designed not to accentuate the dramatic core of the plot but "to produce a kind of empathic justification for actions that seem to defy understanding, as if the stories did not need to be told, or rather as if storytelling was no longer the most appropriate way to accede to reality" (166). Thus, her style presents an alternative to Western storytelling and healing; as Lauter suggests, while a "significant portion of American literature presents men pushing toward frontiers, exploring, conquering, exploiting the resources of sea and land," for many immigrant and female writers, "removal to the frontier represents a tearing up of roots; their concern is less "conquest" than the "reestablishment of family, community, and a socially productive way of life"(103). The major exploration involved in this novel is an attempt to heal, to reunite after the destruction.

The improvisational healing in Morrison's novel perhaps suggests a larger idea of the necessity of alternative modes of healing for many African-American families. "In many ways, Jazz is about the process African-Americans used to mend themselves, to survive the disillusionment that followed the high
expectations of the 1920's" (Mobley 624). Also, the style of jazz music, heavily reliant upon improvisation offers the opportunity of arriving somewhere one would not have gotten to going the usual way. In an interview Morrison suggests that writing Jazz was a very complicated activity, the most "intricate thing she had done," because she wanted to represent two contradictory things--"artifice and improvisation" (Paris Review 116). Her goal was to present an artwork, appearing both planned through and through, and instantaneously invented, like jazz. For Morrison, that seemed to be:

the combination of artifice and improvisation--where you practice and plan in order to invent. Also the willingness to fail, to be wrong, because jazz is a performance. In a performance you make mistakes, you don't have the luxury of revision that a writer has; you have to make something out of a mistake, and if you do it well enough it will take you to another place where you never would have gone had you not made that error. So you have to be able to risk making that error in performance. Dancers do it all the time, as well as jazz musicians. Jazz predicts its own story. Sometimes it is wrong because of faulty vision. It simply did not imagine those characters well enough, admits it was wrong, and the characters talk back the way jazz musicians do. It has to listen to the characters it has invented, and then learn something from them. (Paris Review 116)

The characters in Jazz must employ similar improvisational techniques, must be willing to make errors, must be willing to learn from their mistakes, as they attempt to respond to, what Terry Otten feels is the "absence of love--love multi-facettted, profound, and ambiguous"(661). For example, the murder of Dorcas can be viewed as both a response to lack of love, and then as another absence from which the characters must recover. The murder of Dorcas exemplifies for Otten "much more than the murder of a wayward lover." As she represents the child
Violet and Joe never had, her death is an infanticide. And on another, deeper level, Dorcas embodies the love lost when Joe's and Violet's mothers abandoned them (Otten 661).

The absent mothers in Jazz simulate other important absences apparent in Morrison's other novels, such as the marked absence of Eva's leg in Sula, and the absence of Pilate's belly button in Song of Solomon. In Jazz all the characters improvisationally respond to a variety of absences: Golden must deal with his absent father/arm; several characters must deal with absent mothers; likewise, as O'Brien suggests, "Violet must deal with the absence of a baby--or should I say the presence of an absent baby?" (50). All significant characters in the present drama in Jazz are unified as they must respond to a central absence; however, as they are all affected uniquely by the presence of Dorcas' absence, each character's improvisational healing calls for a unique response to the initial crimes and thus forms a different solo of recovery.

Morrison's improvisational style effectively parallels the methods utilized for the variety in the attempts to heal from the present tragedy. Joe, who commits the central crime which provides the present absence, does so in response to his history of abandonment, of which even his self-appointed last name, Trace, (his parents "left without a Trace") is a symbol. Ironically, Joe shoots Dorcas, according to the narrator, so "he can keep the feeling going." Is he trying to stay yet another potential absence? According to Harding and Martin, his act of violence is an attempt "to fill the void that attends the abandonment. But instead of solving the problem her death accentuates it--Violet tries to cut the corpse. Alice is deprived of her surrogate daughter, and Felice of her best friend" (83). Joe Trace's affair with Dorcas and eventual killing of her is an attempt to cope with his mother's rejection of him; perhaps the impact of having a Wild, non-attentive mother, causes him "to search most of his life for Wild, or someone like Wild...Not nursed or nurtured at all...he craves the attention of wild young girls like his mother. Both Violet and Dorcas have
traces of Wild in them" (Mbalia 626). Joe's healing consists of first searching for, then finding substitutes for his mother.

In my discussion with the students they feel that Dorcas reminds Joe of a "young Violet," who in turn perhaps reminded him of his Wild mother. Ironically, when Violet becomes similar to Wild in her silence and thus her seeming rejection of Joe, he turns to another replacement. The teenage Dorcas with whom Joe has an affair, represents both "a longed-for child for Violet and a lost mother for Joe." Finally, afraid that he will again lose his "surrogate mother," Dorcas, he murders her, to stop her act of abandonment. In his healing, he cries, worships Dorcas' picture, and mourns until Felice arrives with the improvisational music and the details that can help him forgive himself. According to Carmean, Joe in his healing is,

more contemplative and inward than his wife, his healing takes a different, less erratic route. While on his outward journey of death, his inward journey takes him past his many stages of transformation brought on by the necessity of surviving in a world hostile to his color. He comes out in the end scarred by his history but wholly capable of caring for others again, because, like his wife, he will have learned (or relearned) to wholly surrender to the mystery of passionate feelings. (101)

Likewise, Violet's actual healing represents far more than merely a recovery from Joe's infidelity. Her nervous struggles began long before Joe began to see Dorcas. The act of her dissociating into herself and "that other Violet" stems from "her sense of extreme deprivation in her family life. She has lost both her mother and the possibility of motherhood, so that at the time when Joe notices Dorcas, she is already spending her nights with a doll cradled in her arms and her free moments tending a parrot that she has narcissistically neglected to name, teaching it only to say 'love you'" (Harding 31). Joe's emotional abandonment of Violet for Dorcas accentuates the painful sense of inadequacy Violet has felt since her mother's suicide and True Belle's harmful placement of
Golden Gray's superior blond curls in Violet's mind.

Violet's response to the adultery takes her through a myriad of improvisational attempts to recover: first, she wants to destroy the dead Dorcas, then shortly after that to become like and worship the girl; she briefly attempts to punish Joe by flaunting other men. Finally, she discusses her pain and anger with the dead girl's aunt. Through the roughly eight-month process, Violet finally becomes for the first time in her life self-impressed, and free from the ghost of Golden Gray which had been harming her self-esteem. Collins suggests that "by emphasizing the power of self-definition and the necessity of a free mind, black feminist thought speaks to the importance African-American women thinkers place on consciousness as a sphere of freedom" (229). Collins also uses Audre Lorde's description of the focus of revolutionary change which "is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us" (229).

In the case of Violet, her healing takes an emotional, interactive approach ...the more she finds out about the lives of Dorcas and her aunt, the more her inner healing progresses. When Felice eventually begins to visit, Violet arrives at the point where she can again reach for love. What has brought her to this final healing is the fact that she has undergone altering perspective of all the passionate and painful-filled lives found in Harlem, from the orphaned life of Dorcas to her own. (Carmean 101)

Violet is plagued by two hungers in Jazz according to Rodrigues: "the unfulfilled 'mother-hunger'" and "the stories True Belle had fed Violet about the golden-skinned baby that made her yearn to be 'White. Light. Young again'" (745). Later, Violet's healing is possible when Violet befriends Dorcas's aunt and then Felice, allowing Violet to come to terms with her lack, "She discovers the source of her inner hollowness in the stories her grandmother told 'about a little blond child' who came to inhabit her mind" (Harding 32). This "insidious form of violation experienced by Violet who has a blond child living
inside her mind" displays the possibility of the destruction when a character fails to defend the boundaries of the self (Harding 33). On a problematic metaphorical level, Golden Gray represents the actual replacement of the black daughter with the white male. It is this destructive maternal (grandmother) devaluation which makes Violet the most "Wild." What happens to Violet as a result of the breakdown of her family is a "breaking down of her concept of African womanhood" (Mbalia 629).

Because the characters improvise their way through their pain, guilt, feminine form of healing through the improvisational creation of community makes possible the semi-happy ending of Jazz. While damage to the ego is caused by lack of nurturing, abandonment, and rejection of black as beautiful and valuable, healing in the novel is shown through characters "becoming Mamas for one another" (Mbalia 634). The novel is about learning to share pain and help each other recover. Joe and Violet stay together to "offer each other distraction from their aching sense of maternal deprivation. The two abandoned children thus comfort each other's losses" (Harding 82). For the survival of the characters, and for the culture, the novel seems to offer a feminine call for acknowledging the voice of the maternal. Paired women such as the unlikely duo of Alice and Violet "come together not so much in order to experience extended possibilities for living, but to come to terms with personal loss" (Harding 53). The two women share many similarities in that are both childless, and have experienced the infidelity of their husbands, and "together they mourn this lack, sharpened for both by Dorcas's death....Their friendship becomes way to explore buried feelings" (Harding 53). This bonding together of the struggling characters is a metaphor for a larger recovery. "Just as African people as a whole must band together to survive and to progress, so also must African women--the most exploited adult sector in the world--help one another in order to live healthy, wholesome lives" (Mbalia 633). Felice, Joe, and Violet form another surprising healing community as they come together in the apartment and work
through grief with the improvisational help of music. Laughter and a reestablishment of a sense of hope pervade both healing communities by the end of the novel.

Ironically, the sense of hope in the novel exists not only due to Joe and Violet's amazing reconciliation, but also through the presence of a young character who has reached out to help, who attempts to empathize with the difficulties of the adults. While the central plot of the novel involves the destruction of a child, the ending leaves us with a self-confident African-American daughter, Felice. In both *Jazz* and *Beloved* "the harmony between the central couples is reached after acts of cathartic violence and atonement which leave their participants exhausted, but absolved of all passion" (Harding 83). In each of the novels, hope finally lies in the children: Denver and Felice. Each girl has been witness to the adult dramas and also represents an uncertain promise not to replicate the same cycles. In *Jazz*, out of all this death and jealousy and obsession, what has been improvised is the possibility of someone like Felice. As Morrison says,

Felice learns a great deal from exploring the relationship and talking to Joe and Violet and rethinking what is going on....Felice gets to think back and let herself think about how she was with men and decides herself not to be like that. She's the one who has to go out and face the world and become somebody who's independent. I want to work. I don't want to be a prostitute. And she's looking like that experience has been good for her. Sad for her. But at the same time she has learned a lot from it, I think. And she's more likely to have a coherent personality. She will never be somebody else's side chick again. (*Belles Lettres* 43)

As regarding stereotypes associated with African-American females, Morrison's description of Felice offers a direct resistance to the perpetuation of those attitudes. As will be discussed in the final chapter of this essay, the character of Felice provides a positive young female role model for both African-American
and Caucasian girls.

Gina Wisker in "Black and White: Voices, Writers and Readers" asserts that "Fiction is a creative and revolutionary model for change; it enables expression of experience and as representation of some of the possible alternative and solutions to problems in black women's lives." Likewise, "The new self imagined in jazz is neither victim nor aggressor, but an original creation that is born out of the rejection of imposed roles"(Harding 57). Morrison in Jazz constructs tragic scenes of love and violent death while pushing her characters "toward the abyss of in order to see what is remarkable because that's the way I find out what is heroic" (Fussell 284). At the abyss, one is almost always forced to improvise.

The improvisation in the text of Jazz and its characters parallels the improvisation demanded of the black people of the time. Morrison relates how she was writing about a period in American history when the culture of black people "was evolving different things and being constantly invented and improvised" (41). Like jazz music, unpredictable texts make special demands on the audience, and on the performer. This ambiguous, risky call of the jazz style holds appeal for Morrison as both receiver and creator. She says,

Jazz unsettles you. You always feel a little on edge. 'Did I catch it?' Then you have to listen again. You're not in control. It was this assumption of control, the reader's control, the book's control--all of these had to be displaced, so no one's in control. (Belles Lettres 42)

Similarly, the people of Harlem of the 1920s felt a lack of control; Morrison suggests that they always had

to be on guard and be able to adjust quickly. The ability was a double entendre: at the same time according the grief we felt and the determination not to let life beat us up completely--you know the instinct for survival plus joie de vivre was very important. (Belles Lettres 41)

It was from this combination of emotional need and excitement that
Morrison acquired her style and title: "The word 'jazz' seems to encompass all of that, although its etymology has been contested. Most people agree that it is French, 'jism,' meaning ejaculation, semen" (Belles Lettres 41). Several critics have discussed Morrison's title, a word which does not appear in the rest of her novel. Carmean claims that Morrison chooses the title because "the word originally was a slang term for sexual passion, and because it also attached itself to the most famous form of black music" (101). However, though jazz encompasses both the style and spirit of the novel, the characters would never say "jazz." As Morrison suggests, "It has implications of sex, violence, chaos, all of which I wanted in the book;" (Belles Lettres 41) but because of the vulgar associations with the word jazz many black people and musicians of the time would have refrained from using it. It is appropriately historical then that part of Morrison's goal was to tell a "simple story about people who do not know they are living in the jazz age, and never use that word" (116).

Rice says that the problem at the center of Morrison's writing is "to maintain an African-American cultural heritage. In the face of its undermining in modern America, her willed use of a black American cultural form is central to that endeavor" (432). Again, however, Morrison's efforts do not work for Bruce Bawer, who says that

at its weakest her fiction can be as monotonous as the most pointlessly protracted of modern jazz improvisation, as melodramatic as the most maudlin blues ballad, as mindless as the most hackneyed spiritual....She has risen less and less frequently to the wit and facility of the greatest jazz, the expertly modulated passion of the greatest blues, or the sincere devotional fervor of the greatest spirituals. (10)

However, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. compares Morrison to jazz master Duke Ellington, seeing her as "paradoxically" able to "create an ensemble of improvised sound out of composed music" (55). Rodrigues feels that her text is "a musical score that has to be made to spring into audial life, into sound and
rhythm and beat." He feels that she is similar to Louis Armstrong who finally made "the trumpet his very own...by incorporating all manner of vibratos, bliss and do's, growls, shakes and gradations of tone into his technique" (736). He calls to our attention an Armstrong tune in which he sings, "What did I do? What did I do, to be so black and blue?...My only sin in my skin" (Rodrigues 742), which certainly resembles the theme of one of the obvious lyrical sections in Jazz, "Blues man. Black and bluesman. Black therefore blue man" (Jazz 119). Rodrigues offers another comparative reference to Armstrong's "West End Blues," which he sees as similar to the end of Jazz; like the song, "the novel ends with a closing ensemble of interludes and breaks and brief solos. Played in a low register, at slow blues tempo, the seven subsections use stretched blue notes to restate and to purify earlier experiences of joy and pain" (751).

Morrison feels that jazz music was especially important to the blacks of the twenties as for some of them "jazz meant claiming their own bodies," which was extremely important for people "whose bodies had been owned, who had been slaves as children or who remembered their parents being slaves." Because both the blues and jazz represented "ownership of one's own emotions," their style is "excessive and overdone: tragedy in jazz is relished, almost as though a happy ending would take away some of its glamour, its flair" (Paris Review 113). In discussing her works, Morrison also alludes to the paradoxical traits of jazz, which might foster inaccessibility for some: "There is a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language. The analogy that occurs to me is jazz; it is open on the one hand and both complicated and inaccessible on the other (qtd. in Beret 270). Again, as relating to the earlier sections of this paper, Morrison's intended audience members are black people who she suggests will perhaps more quickly and fully embrace the jazz technique. We white folk likely just won't get it all.

For example, Morrison wanted to make "the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken" (Rodrigues 737). However, Morrison is also
ready for Caucasian criticism of such a style; she suggests that African-American art is continually "written off" by whites because of the black artists' attempts to make it look effortless. This appearance of effortless becomes a "double-edged sword" as white critics then believe that the performance takes no talent. "White people say it's natural or it's magic or something ridiculous like that, because black people are very interested in making it look as though no thought went into it" (Rice 424).

In a critical response to Morrison's seemingly effortless jazzy style, Karen Carmean in her collection of criticism Toni Morrison's World of Fiction, discusses Morrison's unified meandering:

Jazz begins and ends in Harlem of the mid 1920s, but between the story...moves freely in place and time. Winding generally backward and sideways before coming forward again, the story presents major characters not only as individuals with private lives, but also representative victims of enormously cruel and powerful racial forces. (100)

Komar feels that in African-American female texts that the methodology often "dissolves the distinction" between the linguistic principles...of simultaneity (synchrony)" which becomes compatible with rather than distinctive from "the long expanse, (diachrony)" (72). Komar discusses the technique of historical recalling/repetition which becomes one of incorporation:

The persistent paradox in black women's literature is not simply that historic events often exist in the same space as the events of the present. In addition to literary synchronicity, a figurative sharing of metaphysical space between historically recoverable events and events metaphorically retrieved through the instantiation of memory and myth occurs. This blurring of what in Western literature are traditionally discrete constructs marks an important shift in this linguistic principle as it is applied to the black text. (72)

The structure of jazz works especially well for a retelling of feminine history as is
pointed out by Komar.

The recursive structures with black women's literature simultaneously construct (historic) contexts (for the course, meaning and reading) and revise those same contexts in an intentional effort to destabilize them. The end product of this activity is that the past, present and future are synchronized into what is essentially a deconstructive configuration. (Komar 73)

Deconstructively, in Jazz, the past is paradoxically both past and present. Violet, trying to deal with her husband's recent infidelity, is simultaneously trying to deal with her mother's suicide, her grandmother's obsession with the white boy she abandoned the family to care for, her childlessness, the absence of what she once had with Joe—when they danced into the City on the train. Likewise, Joe's history is intertwined with his present obsession: he confuses his search for Dorcas with his tracking of his alleged mother, Wild. Similarly, when Dorcas dies, she imagines her murdering lover's sales case as holding the paper dolls which were burned in the fire which killed her mother.

Another jazz element, repetition, is available in Morrison's work. Acknowledgment of what has come before is vital to Morrison's view of dealing with the present by acknowledging one's history. Therefore, as Harding and Martin suggest, "backward movement" is always present in Morrison's fiction. Something has to be reconstructed and comprehended in order for the story to proceed toward new developments...In her narrative Morrison rewrites history as a process where present and past interact in a dynamic and always unfinished exchange. (169)

Hence, Harding and Martin suggest that the "linear, progressive, monologic narrative of the Western tradition" is replaced by the spirally, unfinished, many coifed story of a community where interests in the progression of plots is abandoned in favor of the process of accumulating multiple stories themselves...merely an indication of a
people's living creativity. (169)

Hulbert shares the view of Harding and Martin, feeling that Morrison wants to "derail expectations of anything like a linear narrative and to raise doubts about the possibility of empathy." However, she feels that Morrison's attempt is less successful; "Morrison's riffs on her disoriented characters have a way of ending up flat and faint, even while the opening notes are true....The performance is almost too predictably meandering" (46). I find Hulbert's paradoxical notion of "too predictably meandering" interesting. She offers a lengthy example:

now coolly surveying, as if from above the rooftops, the Harlem of the 1920's where the story is set; now intimately swooping in to report on characters' lives and thoughts; now rushing the rhythm to anticipate events that have not yet transpired; now slowing down to circle back and cover the ground again, and then to dip dreamily even further back to the past and the South in a effort to explain why violence erupts the Trace's lives in the City in 1926. (46)

I wonder what is predictable about this meandering--except that like a performance of jazz music, one begins to count on some meandering? Hulbert feels that "what starts out lyrical quickly becomes labored," insinuating that Morrison's "bird's eye view celebrations of the heady tempo and daring temper of black life in Jazz age Harlem have a tendency to lapse into the cliche" (46). However, she is a bit unclear as to whether it is Morrison she feels that is being "cliche" or the narrator, and we might have to ask along with Hulbert, again, what/who is this narrator supposed to be and what is she/it/he supposed to accomplish? Also, I see a type of unity in the meandering. Mobley agrees and suggests, "Like the music for which the novel is named, the narrator improvises on the story she has to tell with fluid prose that connects the chapters by picking up a word here, and a sound there, where the previous ones left off" (624). The meandering narrative provides thematic unification.
That Enigmatic Narrator: A Critical Conversation

"It is always possible, even in improvisation, to be mistaken."
Adolf Nielsen

As a feminist educator who relies heavily on dialogic techniques in the classroom, my research and essay seem to share a similarly heavy acknowledgment of a large collection of opinions. In my discussion of the narrator, similar to my discussion of the success of Morrison's improvisational techniques, I grant much of the stage to a dialogue between the critics in which I participate, while resisting domination. When discussing Jazz with students, I selectively share some of these professional critical responses with the students; however, I first attempt to provide a space in which the students feel compelled to assert their own conclusions and discuss the literature with peers who have also read the text. A later offering of suggestions from the larger critical reading community includes our classroom discussion in the comprehensive Jazz dialogue. Perhaps also due to my being a feminist instructor who relies largely on encouraging reader-response strategies, I try to avoid an initial assertion of my opinion as fact after which the students follow with their opinions. In an attempt to disperse "authority" I encourage students to value, share and then analyze their own opinions during their personal and group encounters with a text. A similar strategy will be apparent in the writing of this section, in which I attempt to make my "informed" judgments in response to several critical perspectives. My strategies, especially my display of power, are somewhat akin to those of Morrison's narrator, who inevitably has the first and last word, and also seems to provide some control over who speaks when, but indeed shares the narrative stage with others.

Similar to the contradiction of opinion displayed in the discussion of Morrison's improvisational technique, dissension appears when critics respond
to Morrison's narrator, as well. Hence, classroom discussion question number one, "What do you think of Morrison's narrator?" While Rodrigues sees the voice as "warm and human, reassuring, a voice of quiet authority in command of itself" (737), Bawer finds Morrison's narrator "just a bit too rich, its general effect that of a somewhat too heavy perfume (11). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. feels that the narration of Jazz is even more compelling than the novel's plot:

A disembodied narrator slips easily and guilelessly from third person all-knowingness to first-person lyricism, without ever relaxing its grip upon our imagination. It is a sensitive, poetic narrator, in love with language of fiction, enraptured with the finest and rarest of arts, the art of telling a good tale, reflecting, as it goes along, upon its responsibilities as a composer, and its obligation to the individual characters whose sole destiny is to make this composition come alive, to sing. (54)

He credits the narrator with "riffing" off Duke Ellington--"Who allowed solos and improvisation, but they always had his quotation marks around them" (55).

However, Karen Carmean suggests that the narrator is perhaps "too cool." By starting the novel off with news of illicit love, murder, and revenge, Carmean feels that we "are promised hot, low-down, erotic action. But what follows is described in an unusually dispassionate, lyrically distanced way" (Carmean 102).

I find Carmean's suggestion about the narrator's dispassionate distance interesting, as from my angle, (holding the book) I feel a steamy, almost up-too-close discomfort. Granted, the voice of the narrator seems to take on many different attitudes: generous to judgmental, self-critical to arrogant, but while some of the text may seem "dispassionate" the narrator's last speech is filled with emotion: "I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me" (219). I think with a little encouragement this book would gladly join in a co-dependent relationship with me--or with whoever is holding its cover at the time.
feels the same way about the characters—obsessing about their loving, changing, killing, cheating, and healing seems to be his/her/its raison d'être.

"Co-dependent" when one examines each side of the hyphen, seems to merely suggest a relationship in which both people depend on each other—however, the term has extremely negative connotations in our society. Though healthy relationships demand a certain amount of independence, it is also important to acknowledge that being able to "depend" on another is vital to healthy intimacy. However, this seeming call for "dependency" of sorts by Morrison's text makes some readers uncomfortable, perhaps especially many who have spent a career bowing to androcentric critical forms. If a feminist reading or a feminist text presents a call for "an intimate, subjective encounter," this is apt to make those who would rather resist "intimacy" or who dismiss subjectivity eager to dismiss the value of the novel. As Schweickart explains, "close rapport with another provokes both excitement and anxiety. Intimacy, while desired, is also viewed as a threat to one's integrity" (55).

This is a connection to feminism; as Collins suggests, "The emphasis placed on expressiveness and emotion in African-American communities bears marked resemblance to feminist perspectives on the importance of personality in connected knowing" (217). Similarly, feminist Ntozake Shange describes a goal of her work as "trying to change the idea of seeing emotions and intellect as distinct faculties;" Collins uses Shange's opinions to support her belief in the "appropriateness of emotions in dialogues" as part of an African-American "ethic of caring." Shange feels that "Our (Western) society allows people to be absolutely neurotic and totally out of touch with their feelings and everyone else's feelings and yet be very respectable" (Collins 215). In African-American feminism,

neither emotion nor ethics is subordinated to reason. Instead, emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims. In an Afrocentric feminist epistemology,
values lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process such that inquiry always has an ethical aim. (Collins 219)

Collins emphasizes the importance of emotions in a famous example of rock music, which may also relate to the highly emotional genres of jazz and blues: "Without emotions Aretha Franklin's 1967 cry for 'respect' would be virtually meaningless" (Collins 216). Is our narrator a textual Aretha? Indeed, the final narrative cry for intimacy is filled with longing, passion and a desire for acknowledgment.

This brings us to classroom question number two: "What is the narrator?" Harding and Martin view the narrator as a gossip who must vie for a claim to a kind of omniscience, fighting for stage time with other characters (99). Later they rename her as "the Voice of the City...comprehending, intuitive, reactive, passionate, lyrical." They say that she is "a multiplicity of voices, both garrulous and censorious, fascinated and penetrating...she is changeable and adaptable conscience capable of both sympathizing and denigrating, analyzing and trivializing" (99). Supporting this impression, when asked in an interview why she uses multiple narrators in her writing, Morrison responded, "It's important not to have a totalizing view. In American literature we have been so totalized--as though there is only one version. We are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way" (Paris Review 117). Harding and Martin feel that her unusual style shows "the inadequateness of the storytelling process itself" (Harding 168). As mentioned earlier, while an androcentric critic might dismiss Jazz because of its unusual technique, and highly intimate narrator, "Morrison altogether dismisses the machinery of the novel as fundamentally deficient means of representing the inaccessible humanity of its subject" (Harding 168).

Several critics attempt to address the question of "who is the narrator" by declaring which sex "it" is not, or by simply noting what traits "it" has and has not. Mbalia sees the narrator, who she calls a "hybrid creature," as vital to
Morrison’s adherence to a jazz style, as “half character, half omniscient narrator” the voice simulates a jazz musician; "as with jazz, the storyteller (the narrator) is not distinct from the story she is telling, so in Jazz the storyteller (narrator) is not distinct from the story she is telling” (624). Gates says, despite its revelation of full and lyrical consciousness, despite its extensive ruminations about its characters’ consciousness, it (the narrator) remains indeterminate: it is neither male nor female; neither young nor old; neither rich nor poor. It is both and neither. But it is alive, alive with feeling and embodies regard and scorn, blindness and insights about the human actors. (54)

Rodrigues feels that the narrator is a “female deity” who cannot actually penetrate human hearts or understand “what being human means...she had underestimated the human resilience that enabled a whole people to believe they will overcome” (748). Paula Eckard feels that “Jazz is the mysterious narrator...like a jazz performance it creates a montage effect in its story-telling...it improvises on itself, utilizes language of isolated and syncopated rhythms, and sings classic blues themes of love and loss” (11). Eckard sees jazz music as personified in the text, and utilizing jazz techniques, she sees Morrison as having created a post-modernist novel in both themes and subjects.

Leonard says the voice which speaks directly to the reader, is "the book itself, this physical object, our metatext" (49). Morrison makes a similar assertion: "It’s a book talking, but few people read it like that. Most reviewers said 'she (I mean Toni Morrison) is pleading with the reader to forgive her' (Belles Lettres 42). She says everyone probably assumes the "I" is a woman because the author is a woman, but Morrison says, "for me, it was very important that the I would say what a typical book would limit itself to, what a physical book would say. The book uses verbs, 'I think,' etc., but it never sits down, it never walks, because it's a book." Morrison deliberately restricted herself to using an 'I' that was only connected to "the artifact of the book as an
active participant in the invention of the story of the book, as though the book were talking, writing itself, in a sense" (Belles Lettres 42). Thus, the voice is the voice of a talking book. So when the voice says, 'I know what it's like to be left standing when someone promises.' It talks to the reader. It sounds like a very erotic, sensual love song of a person who loves you. This is a love song of a book talking to the reader. (Belles Lettres 42)

My comment? I agree with these critics--Morrison's narrator is a "hybrid creature" who talks like a book, who narrates like music, who emotes like a character, who knows like a deity. Later I will also discuss the reader-response of a friend of mine who views the narrator as a potentially abandoned mistress, the "beloved" crying for, longing for attention. The narrator needs the reader to experience its "jouissance."

Acknowledgment--the narrator, like the characters, needs acknowledgment. Harding and Martin also see the plea in the narrator's last lines as an "evocation of the narrator's longing for love," (33) a "projection of her need awaiting its accomplishment in the reader's response" (34 italics mine). However, they believe her plea for love suggests little hope for jouissance, and that rather, "the cycle of abandonment and isolation goes on," carrying on the theme of isolation and adding of note of somberness to an otherwise happy ending (83).

Morrison obviously has presented the reader with an unusual narrator: one whom people can comment on emotionally, and sexually, but also one that actually grows, changes. Harding and Martin succinctly explain the narrator's change from beginning to end:

From the gossiping arrogance of the opening line the narrator undergoes a change in the course of the novel. The final chapter renounces any claim to control, making a case for the dialogic mode that goes against the traditional Western privileging of the authorial voice. (99)
Many critics highlight the multiple tellings of Golden Gray's arrival at his father's cabin, as showing the growth in the narrator and Morrison's experimentation with narration. This multi-layered narration accomplishes different goals: displaying the complexity of Gray's emotional response to his father and the ambivalence apparent in the narrator's responses to Gray. The narrator goes "from her initial hostility to the privileged, golden-haired son of a slaveholder to her final acknowledgment of his deprivation" (Harding 166).

"It is always possible, even in improvisation, to be mistaken," according to Nielsen, "but such mistakes are corrected in the same way that they are made" (204). Of course, as readers have to deal with the fact that our narrator is wrong, has been wrong, and admits it. Besides changing her mind about the Golden Gray situation, as Leonard says, as is obvious in the final scene between Joe, Violet, and Felice, the narrator's prediction was faulty; "no matter what she told us--no one's shooting anyone the second time around" (151).

Hulbert feels that this change in the narrator is "heavy-handed" on the part of the author, merely a "device to liberate her characters from predictability" (48). However, Sbead's explanation of jazz music seems to support Morrison's attempt to create a jazz-like atmosphere; "...black music sets up expectations and then disturbs them at irregular intervals. Improvisations, cuts, and departures from the 'head' or theme and from normal harmonic sequences are evidence of this process" (qtd. in Eckard 13) It is because the narrator does not know, has not been "privileged" with infallible knowledge of the future--because she is arriving with Felice at Joe and Violet's apartment that she was able to make such a mistake, and "like Felice, the narrator discovers a love set free in ruinous brutality" (Otten 663). And thus, the narrator has to improvise, has to respond, has to explain to itself and to the reader how it could have been wrong once again. Nielsen's description of the jazz musician effectively describes the demanding narrator's situation. "The jazz musician must be at once the most attentive of listeners and a consummate composer" (Nielsen 202). The narrator's
seeming failure at times perhaps displays Morrison's rejection of the idea that any single individual can claim to represent the complex multiplicity of the black community or that a single imagination can do justice to the collectivity. The narrator is finally converted into one of the humblest of a number of storytellers, making her confession to the listening reader. (Harding 199)

Recognizing that readers may be frustrated with Morrison's complex experimental style, viewing it as "self-indulgent," Trudier Harris asserts that this experimentation is part of jazz music; "the structuring devices in the musical form allow for interrupted patterns, for individualistic performance even in a communal setting, and for constant variation of what has been presented as the central theme" (13). As later the high school readers will display, after adjusting to the complexity of Morrison's project, her style becomes less intimidating.

However, critic Edna O'Brien, a reader who feels distanced, is in disagreement with Harris' "It's jazz" explanation:

It is almost as if Ms. Morrison, bedazzled by her own virtuosity...hesitates to bring us to the last frontier, to a predicament that is both physical and metaphysical, and which in certain fictions, by an eerie transmission, becomes our very own experience. Such alchemy does not occur here. (51)

However, as I mentioned earlier, though I also feel distanced from the characters' struggles at the end, I feel uncomfortably closer to the struggle of the narrator, and with this discomfort begins my struggle with a desire to dismiss the collective strife which the Voice might signify. I wish I could ask O'Brien, "What do you think?"
Brutal Love and Other Perplexing Paradoxes

"Sometimes good looks like evil; and sometimes evil looks like good."

Toni Morrison

"Making a little life for oneself by scavenging other people's lives is a big question, and it does have moral and ethical implications."

Toni Morrison

I remember being amazed after first reading this novel in a graduate level minority literature class, that despite the tragic and at times bizarre actions of the novel, the author was suggesting that the characters could reconcile. Though Joe was an orphan and his wife slept with a doll, and he was terribly sorry that he had shot his teen lover, it still seemed unlikely that his wife, the dead girl's best friend and even all of his neighbors would be willing to forgive him within a year. Obviously the equation of destruction and compassion was balancing in what seemed to me, an atypical manner. However, forgiveness is indeed a mysterious gesture, often fraught with complex motives. In this novel Morrison offers extreme characters about whom a reader makes and remakes judgments. In his essay, "Horrific Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction" Terry Otten notes that in characterization as well as narrative structure,

Morrison denies all attempts to resolve the duality and moral uncertainty of character or action. She has called her characters "the combination of virtue and flaw, of good intentions gone awry, of wickedness cleansed and people made whole again. If you judge them by the best they have done, they are wonderful. If you judge them by the worst they have done, they are terrible. (651)

Otten feels that Morrison's work displays her belief that even "noble and innocent" beliefs and actions can generate the most "heinous criminality;" that violence can surface in the midst of kindness, that good and evil coexist and are often intertwined, that even love can produce devastating destruction.
Morrison has said that all of her work is about love, "All about love...people do all sorts of things, under its guise. The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do...With the best intentions in the world we can do enormous harm" (qtd. in Otten 652).

In examining one of the most "harmful" events of Jazz, Bruce Bawer asks, "Is Joe guilty?" Bawer then suggests that all Morrison's protagonists are "victims" (11). I find myself "protestantly" curious as well; is anyone guilty in this novel of more than love? Terry Otten would likely define Joe's murder of Dorcas as one of the many examples of "horrific love" found in Morrison's novels, a love which is multi-faceted—psychological, social and historical....It is the creation of forces so brutal that they can transform conventional "signifiers" of cruelty and evil into gestures of extraordinary love--incestuous rape, infanticide, and murder articulate not the immorality condemned by the dominant culture, but the inverse. They become acts "signifying" a profound if often convoluted love. (657)

Yeah, and perhaps battering one's wife, holding a burning cigarette on a toddler's arm--maybe these could also be added to the love list? I disagree. Incestuous rape, like all rape, is not an act of love, but an act of violence and power. The murder of a seventeen-year-old-girl by a fifty-year-old man had nothing to do with the selflessness, generosity, kindness, that I might readily associate with love. Incest and murder could more easily be signifiers of selfishness, self-hatred, hatred and the absence of love.

Perhaps my background is showing; my codes are getting in the way--I am guilty also of that Western desire "for a posthistorical clean conscience" (Nielsen 33). I want the wicked to be punished. I want the victim to be helped. But what if she's dead, and the murderer is sorry? What more can you do? "Is perhaps the entire Western idea of "clean conscience" one of the myths I have a hard time letting go of?" asks the white feminist reader. Regardless, I reserve the
right as a feminist reader to disagree that rape or incest are acts of love. However, I must also ask, has there been a race of people in America deprived of seeing most crimes upon their loved ones avenged? For example, it is not as if the deaths of 60 million in the middle passage could ever be adequately "punished."

Jane Smiley in her review of Jazz suggests that Morrison indeed "recognizes bad behavior, but grinds no axes" (160). Morrison is more generous with Joe than I am. And he is not the only "wicked" character in the novel. Violet cuts a dead girl's face in a coffin. Bruce Bawer mentions Alice's thoughts about wanting to brutally murder her husband's lover. Bawer feels that Morrison is suggesting that "such violent dreams, we are apparently meant to understand, figure in the history of every feeling human heart; to love powerfully is to be capable of extraordinary acts of brutality, which are not the harvest of love but of love rescinded or refused" (121) Smiley feels that to judge the characters is to miss the point of Morrison's novel; she feels that Morrison is not a "didactic" writer, and that Jazz is not a novel trying to enforce a conduct code, but rather it is "a celebration of a certain place and a certain period" (160). But, on a simplistic level, I ask, what about the people/characters? What about the pain? What about the rights of a dead teenager who wants to break off an affair with an older married man, preferably without being murdered? As a high school teacher considering using the text with males and females the age of Dorcas, I must acknowledge that such questions might arise.

Otten feels that Morrison's fiction "inverts conventional moral categories. In a world warped and distorted by brutish oppression, innocence can assume a criminal nature, and evil can become a regenerative force" (663). He feels that in Morrison's novels love takes on many characteristics: desperation, tenderness, jealousy, generosity, freedom, sacrifice, barbarism. "In her fictional world monstrous deeds can become expressions of compassion, violent deeds can lead to the restoration of love" (664).
Thus, perhaps I am looking at what is actually a complex metaphorical murder a bit too literally. As a high school teacher, I see a difference between the sexual and emotional responsibility of children and adults. If a student Dorcas' age were to mention to me that she had broken off an affair with a much older man who she feared might as a result become violent, I would at this point feel no "pity" for the older male. Does this fictional murder account ask for more than pity for the young victim? Smiley says that "Morrison clearly shows that the subtext of American black life is often made up of astounding by routine suffering. Every character in Jazz has been deprived of someone" (158). She suggests,

Joe, Violet and Dorcas know what American white racism is in fact--it is a license to damage or kill members of the hated group. They feel white racism in their bodies and in their psyches--it is no abstraction, no personal inclination, but an experience that has molded their lives and finally their histories. (160)

Perhaps Dorcas' death is symbolic of a violent response to dealing with a history and the present reality of racism.

Harding and Martin agree, suggesting that both "Wild and Dorcas in their different ways come to represent all the violence and loss suffered by the black race. Joe's attraction to the two is motivated by the desire both to alleviate his suffering and indulge in it to the full" (55). The murder of Dorcas exemplifies for Otten "much more than the murder of a wayward lover" (661). He feels that because she represents the child Violet and Joe never had, her death is an infanticide, and that Dorcas embodies the love lost when Joe's and Violet's mothers abandoned them. As Morrison admits, the ambiguity of oppression perhaps parallels the novel's ambiguity.

Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that the matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and
privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives. (Collins 229)

Finally, Trudier Harris sees Morrison's goal as much more than telling a story of murder—but rather exploring the forms of fiction. The tale of killing and Violet's attempt to mutilate the corpse are the mere covering for Morrison's exploration of the nature of narration. Beyond simply the question of challenging linearity, she dissolves the internal integrity of the text by creating a self-conscious narrator who appears and disappears at will, who reflexively exhibits an awareness of his/her role in the text, and who teases us about the power he/she has over us in detailing information about the story being told. (13)

Well, maybe every noble venture has its victim(s). As mentioned earlier Morrison has suggested that all of her novels are about love. It is therefore doubly ironic and significant that in this novel entitled Jazz which is about love, the word jazz is never mentioned and the only one who says, "I love you" is a nameless, caged parrot.

The Healing of a People Through a Search for the Maternal

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

"Thunder, Perfect Mind," The Nag Hammundi

"Thunder, the Perfect Mind: aha—feminine power," writes John Leonard. He continues, "I am the whore, and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the mother and the daughter' and so on"(48). His "aha" stems from his belief that because Morrison's epigraph for Jazz deals with feminine power, associated with thunder in The Nag Hammundi, that feminine power in turn is the theme of the novel. In Jazz, we are given an unnerving look at the feminine and maternal, and asked ultimately how much can one rely on a "Wild"
woman? Along with Joe and Golden Gray we are asked how important it is to acknowledge "Her?" Mbalia suggests that this may be intimidating as, "it is the wild in African women which is especially alarming since they are the cultivators and nurturers of the family unit" (625). However, it is their story that Morrison is most anxious to present because it is only they who experience the triple oppression of class, race and gender.

Agreeing with Leonard and Mbalia, I feel that the core of this novel calls for an acknowledgment of the enigmatic complexity of maternal silence, absence, and power. Komar says the woman-centered ideology in African and African-American women's literature places with women's creative powers "both the ability to create life and the ability to tell--to reveal the quality, dimensions, and history of living"(132). Similarly, many feminists view "the true historic as transmitted through the mothers"—the tongue of history is female (Rigney 10). While an androcentric approach to retelling history has rarely involved valorizing the perspective and importance of the experiences, nonetheless the silence of black females, a text such as Morrison's Jazz repeatedly calls for the often painful acknowledgment of the importance of the voice, silence, and wisdom of the mother by her characters and readers. This is conducive to what Collins sees as history approached from black feminist thought which attempts to develop an "emancipatory and reflective" view toward history, which can aid African-American women in their struggles against oppression. This unique view of history "consists of theories or specialized thought produced by African-American women intellectuals designed to express a black women's standpoint" (Collins 32).

Jazz, with its heavy reliance upon the importance of recognizing the characters' interpersonal romantic and family relationships, as well as their continual exploration of past maternal influences, seems to value a "particularly female way of knowing;" similarly, this is the goal of black feminist thought, especially "in societies that denigrate African ideas and peoples" (Collins 214).
Collins views the articulation of black women's experience as key to their survival. Through the compilation and articulation of individual experiences, "a collective, focused group consciousness" becomes possible. Collins sees black women's self-expression as "key to black women's survival....if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others--for their use and to our detriment" (Collins 26). Literature written by women offers the positive task of "recovering, articulating and elaborating positive expressions of women's point of view, of celebrating the survival of this point of view in spite of the formidable forces that have been surged against it" (Schweickart 51)—even more so for black females, who traditionally have faced more extensive forms of marginalization.

By valuing the maternal as the transmitter of history, a silencing or absence of the maternal will likewise lead to a silencing of women and of African-American history. Collins notes that Black feminist historian Elsa Barkley Brown, poignantly subtitles her essay on black women's history, "How my mother taught me to be an historian in spite of my academic training" (209). Collins cites bell hooks who feels that by acknowledging and valorizing one's historical viewpoint, oppressed people identify "themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story" (Collins 34). Just as Morrison's narrative style in Jazz expresses a distrust for traditional conventions of narration, "the Afrocentric feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth" (Collins 219).

In the following quotation, Cixous speaks of the difficulty of female expression in general, but in terms that Wild, Rose Dear and Violet live: "We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevies--we are black and we are beautiful" (1092). Ironically, Jazz is a feminine text filled with absent and silent women. As women are carriers of the
voice and transmitters of history, loss of language and loss of history are both represented by the loss of the mother. Morrison's is a feminine voice of history; the Beloved trilogy becomes black female histoire, which acknowledges a separation of families, absence of mothers by force as caused by slavery, and later poverty and oppression. This separation of mother and daughter is important in discussion of female identity, and thus the consciousness of female characters inevitably returns to the special nature of the mother-daughter bond.

The current, rapidly proliferating literature about motherhood stresses that the daughter's identification with and separation from the mother is crucial to the daughter's mature female identity. (Gardiner 186)

The maternal figure is key in any of Morrison's novels: The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, Beloved, Sula; however, Rigney's suggestion about the maternal in Morrison's fiction does not seem to relate directly to Jazz:

"Morrison's characters are most frequently politically muted in spite of the lyrical language of the mother she always provides for them. They themselves do not articulate, or perhaps realize, the political ramifications of certain of their actions" (25). However, how many children in Jazz actually hear the voice of their mother? Maybe Rose Dear heard too much of her mother's voice when True Belle returned from an extended abandonment of her daughter only to share fond stories of the beautiful Golden Gray—perhaps enough motivation to make the daughter throw herself into a well? However, True Belle serves as the only vocal mother in the novel. Despite the silence of many of the mothers in the novel—Wild, Rose Dear, Dorcas and Felice's mothers—these maternal figures influence the characters' present actions and consciousness. Rigney explains,

The central paradox, however, is that the silence of women echoes with reverberation, speaks louder than words....Reverberation is that quality which characterizes all of Morrison's fictions—what is left unsaid is equally as important as what is stated and specified; what is felt is as significant as
what is experienced; what is dreamed is as valid as what transpires in the world of "fact." (26)

Orphaned children crowding *Jazz* include Dorcas, Joe, Rose Dear, Violet, Wild, and even Felice. Dorcas, who lost her mother in a fire caused during a race riot, offered in response a last tragic questioning plea to her violently silenced mother. Rodrigues suggests that Dorcas' cry of "Mama?" hurled into the city sky "is a question that has no answer...It is also the cry of a whole people seeking a way out of suffering and injustice and despair. No answers are provided. Help is perhaps possible in words like 'hard' and 'love' and 'music'" (750). Ironically, Dorcas resists the oppressive "mothering" of her aunt, and opts instead to become a stand-in "mother" for Joe. Even after he has fatally wounded her, she promises, "Mama won't tell," thus using "a vibrant word that refers beyond herself to the primal source out of which all love springs" (Rodrigues 747).

Adrienne Rich has suggested that the mother-daughter separation is the great unwritten story; this novel offers glimpses of multiple mother-daughter separations: True Belle/Rose Dear; Rose Dear/Violet; Dorcas/her mother; Felice/her mother. Rose Dear, Violet's mother, orphaned when her mother leaves with Vera Louise to care for Golden Gray in a Northern city, represents oppression by the whites: "She is defined in this novel only by dispossession—she loses her mother, her husband and finally her home to the whites" (Harding 56). True Belle's abandonment of both Rose Dear and Violet to care for a beautiful, beloved blond male child, destabilizes each daughter's sense of history and self-esteem. Eventually this becomes played out in neurotic, suicidal silence for both Rose Dear and Violet. Rigney, however, would suggest that this silence is what needs to be acknowledged as the important language of the female body.

If hysteria results in silence, that, too, is a form of discourse: Silence: silence is the mark if hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonie, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their
tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that
talks, and man doesn't hear the body. (21)

The silence of both Violet and Wild significantly affects Joe, who becomes
the ultimate textual example of a male orphan who is unable to hear the voice of
the maternal body, despite his desperation for acknowledgment, for a sign from
his silent mother, Wild. Rigney alludes to Kristeva's exploration of the
semiotic, saying, "The semiotic may be equaled with the instinctive desire for
the mother, the unconscious wish to enter the chora which is the maternal
space...a space Berg describes as 'the womb from which we seek consciously to
escape and to which we struggle unconsciously to return'" (16). Joe's tracking of
his mother becomes a lifelong search: beginning with his pursuit of a Wild
woman in the woods, and then continuing in his relationship with Violet, a
young woman "substitute," and later, climaxing in his pursuit of and murder of
the "Wild, even" Dorcas. Joe's search for his mother in the woods culminates
in a scene fraught with imagery of the womb and genitalia. Joe finds what he
assumes is Wild's cavelike, thicketish abode, and hears "the scrap of a song"
from a woman's throat. Joe then:

thrashed and beat his way up the incline and through the hedge, a tangle
of muscadine vines, Virginia creeper and hibiscus rusty with age. He
found the opening in the rock formation but could not enter it from that
angle. He would have to climb about it and slide down into its mouth.
The light was so small he could barely see his legs. But he saw tracks
enough to know she was there. He called out. "Anybody
there?"...nothing stirred and he could not persuade himself that the
fragrance that floated over him was not a mixture of honey and shit. He
left then, disgusted, and not a little afraid. (Jazz 177)

Later, when Joe returns the last time to his mother's womblike den, he begs for
acknowledgment, "Is it you? just say it. Say anything...Give me a sign then...Let
me see your hand....A sign....You my mother? Yes. No. Either.. But not this
nothing" (178). As Rigney quotes Kristeva, the "relationship of the speaker to the mother is probably one of the most important factors producing interplay within the structure of meaning as well as a questioning process of subject and history" (12). Perhaps Joe discovers that history through merely signs is inadequate--there is a maternal history that is inaccessible through traditional exploration.

Joe cannot force the silent Wild/history to respond--to care for him. However, in Morrison's world, women pass on meaning, and through this Morrison is valorizing the feminine through this maternal emphasis on revision of history. Joe's mother represents the maternal before language. Wild, the consummate maternal figure, "signifies defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, selfishness and silence--all caused by class exploitation and race and/or gender oppression" (Mbalia 626). Morrison personifies the feminist point of view, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the maternal when one "goes back" to find what makes meaning possible. And though Joe wants a sign, she won't give one--her answer calls for a different, silent medium. Rigney suggests that silence plays an important role in Morrison's canon. This silence is at least partially imposed upon African Americans because like a great many immigrants to America, "and even women," African Americans are forced "to write and speak in a language they do not own as theirs...but which belongs to a male culture." Rigney feels that historically, the dominant culture has enforced black and female silence through illiteracy and hysteria, "through the metaphoric and actual insertion of the bit in the mouth which inevitably results in the wildness" (21). She further suggests that the entire point of Morrison's novels, is to "give voice to the voiceless, to speak the unspeakable on the part of the speechless" (21). Never completely absent from the stage is the noted presence or absence of the African-American mother.

While many American novels ignore, silence or romanticize the position of the mother, Morrison's mothers enter into complex interaction with the
characters and their consciousness. For example, like Joe, who uses male strategies to communicate with the maternal, Golden Gray typically goes looking in the wrong place for history; he is merely interested in investigating the paternal. In his typically Western, highly Oedipal search to find and kill his father, Golden Gray finds first a black naked pregnant female. The search for the father is interrupted by presence of ultimate maternal/body image. If Golden is looking for answers of meaning, Morrison again seems to suggest that meaning/history will be discovered through the female. The answer he gets is Wild—the "berry black" pregnant, muddy female—unconscious, pre-oedipal, the voice of the body that men can't hear. This black, naked, pregnant female sidetracks him from his Western quest, saves him from fulfilling his Western destiny. According to Harding, "Wild's blood and nakedness promote golden Gray's conversion," thus diffusing one of the novels potentially most dramatic events" (166), the potential patricide. Both Joe and Golden Gray in their search for meaning, find Wild, who doesn't speak, but offers an overwhelming presence. Readers of Jazz are confronted with this mysterious answer as well; indeed, "the space of the mother is ambiguous and problematic" (Rigney 15).

Is American literature ready for an authentic valorization of the maternal? One that involves female issues like menstruation, birthing, the oppressiveness of female parental responsibilities, the issues of mother blaming, of maternal power and powerlessness, of the separation of mothers and daughters, of being a "childless woman" and all from the female perspective? Hence, is American literature capable of acknowledging a feminist approach? Collins suggests that "becoming a feminist is routinely described by women (and men) as a process of transformation, of struggling to develop new interpretations of familiar realities" (27). Emphasizing menstruation or birthing in lieu of conquest could indeed alter the canon.

As Lauter suggests many popularly canonized American literature texts present "hunting" a whale or bear as paradigms for 'human exploration and
coming of age, whereas menstruation, pregnancy, and birthing somehow do not serve such prototypes" (102). Lauter suggests that we need to "consider whether texts of quality which explore such crucial female experiences...do not have important places in our curriculum" (103). Collins also recognizes the importance of including texts which promote black feminist thought which "affirms and rearticulates a consciousness that already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance" (Collins 32). Jazz could conceivably "stimulate resistance" to oppressive androcentric theories which attempt to ignore or devalue the importance of the maternal.

Lauter also wonders if we "define heroism or even courage as qualities exclusive to the battlefield and perhaps the bullring?" (Lauter 103) If the collective answer to his question is "yes," what then is possibly heroic in the feminine arena? The American College Dictionary offers words such as "daring," "noble," "bold," "dauntless," and "valiant" for "heroic;" and for courage, "fortitude," "pluck," and the sentence, "Courage is that quality of mind which enables one to face dangers, difficulties, threats, pain, etc., without fear."

Do any of the female characters in Jazz qualify as courageous? The major difficulties and pain which Violet must face are internal, emotional. While suffering the triple oppression of being a poor, black female, she must also cope with her mother's suicide, her grandmother's valorization of blond child, displacement from family-surrounded country to isolation in the City, a personality disorder, childlessness, and her husband's affair with a teenager. Violet unsurprisingly looks for guidance from her absent mother in the midst of the struggle, asking "Is this when you do it? Is this when you commit suicide?" But instead of committing what many view as an act of cowardice and selfishness, Violet struggles through her emotional turmoil and succeeds in creating a self—a self with whom she is pleased enough to want to show her mother. Violet succeeds in creating a self which even Dorcas, the earlier
mentioned symbol of hope for the future, can look to as an admirable mother figure and role model. Violet "discovers a new imperative for living. Rather than seeking compensation for the lack she perceives in herself, she affirms to Felice the possibility of inventing herself anew, of becoming 'the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see"(Harding 32). As mentioned earlier, healing for the characters is possible through women "becoming Mamas" for one another. The importance of the maternal relates to Violet both as an abandoned daughter and as a potential mother-figure. Cixous gives a description of women which again seems like a description of Wild, of Violet, Dorcas, of all the wild women, the image of the mothers:

they have wandered around in circle, confined to the narrow room in which they've been given a deadly brainwashing. You can incarcerate them, slow them down, get away with the old Apartheid routine, but for a time only. As soon as they begin to speak. At the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark. (1092)

Violet has embraced self-hatred due to her darkness as compared to the beautiful lightness of Golden Gray. To address the darkness of self-hatred and to come out ahead, intact is indeed brave, perhaps heroic.

Texts by black feminist authors and the ideals of black feminist criticism both demand acknowledgment of the influence and importance of the maternal in both male and female relationships, as well as in a recapitulation of the concept of one's history. Schweickart suggests that "women's writing brings with it a shift in emphasis from the negative hermeneutic of ideological unmasking to a positive hermeneutic whose aim is the recovery and cultivation of women's culture"(51), or I would add, history. "Black women's experiences
with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse" (Collins 201). Female African-American texts call for representation in a racist society even more so than male texts. Activist Pauli Murray found that "from its founding in 1916 to 1970, The Journal of Negro History published only five articles devoted exclusively to black women" (Collins 8). This has been a dangerous absence because, due to their influential position and their grounding in Afrocentric culture, black women were key in the retention and transformation of the Afrocentric worldview. Alice Walker says that in her writing she strives among other things to "write all the things I should have been able to read," but were unwritten because as Collins suggests, "the minds and talents of our grandmothers, mother, and sisters have been suppressed" (13). I feel Morrison's canon presents active resistance to such suppression and valorizes the female/maternal heroic.

A Sense of Unending

"It's what you don't write
that frequently gives what you do write
its power."

Toni Morrison

Considering how "pulled in" I was by the Jazz characters' tragic solos, it surprised me how distanced I felt from them at the end. Hulbert suggests, "The cycle of pain ends but we are left with a sugary tableau of peace" and the characters, despite all of their "struggle to define themselves in all their complex, contradictory, evasive, independent, liquid selfhood," only end up "seeming one-dimensional" (47). Admittedly, I feel most distanced from the characters at the end as well. Basically, I find it hard to believe that people—even characters—could heal so quickly. Harding notes that "the community seems to have forgotten their acts of violence the past winter, and the couple finds a place to
rest and talk on any stoop they want to" (167). It seems to me that neither individuals nor communities recover from tragedies so quickly—"it takes more than six months, another teen with some music, some tears in the window. Mbalia avers that "characters, narrator, author and reader have developed by the end of Jazz" (639). However, I sense that I have not grown and/or healed as much as the Voice or the characters at the conclusion as I still need a few "bright spots of (Dorcas') blood" to ponder—and feel that several of the characters should be pondering Dorcas' blood as well. However, perhaps we're all of us distracted; in the final chapter of this paper the student readers will agree with Gates who suggests, "We will not weep for Dorcas; rather, we are left spellbound by the narrator's final aria, a tour de force of longing, of longing for a love that endures even its cruelest betrayal" (54).

Gina Wisker, author of Black Women's Writing, expresses a critical concern with the end of Alice Walker's The Color Purple which may also apply to Jazz: "There are technical concerns with novel, largely centered round its use of a Utopian, magical ending," the use of which is "actually frequently met in writing by black women from a number of cultures" (2). While I resist the "sugary tableau" of the principle characters, I agree with Harding and Martin that the narrator's plea for love makes the ending somber, as if "the cycle of abandonment and isolation" will continue. However, the peace, if possible, is perhaps merely knowing that despite the agony one endures: survival may be possible, has to be possible. Collins suggests that black feminist thought views the world as a dynamic place where the goal is not merely to survive, to fit in, or to cope; rather it becomes a place where we feel ownership and accountability. This struggle is played out in the struggles of the Jazz characters facing their seemingly irreconcilable situation. However,

the existence of Afrocentric feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be....it also shows that while individual empowerment is key, only
collective action can effectively generate lasting social transformation of political and economic institutions. (Collins 237)

Like Hulbert, Edna O'Brien also criticizes Morrison's ending saying she misses "the emotional nexus, the moment shorn of all artifice that brings us headlong into the deepest recesses of feeling" (50). Instead, O'Brien, too, finds herself distanced from the characters. Because of a "lack of emotional impact at the end," O'Brien feels we are left with "the bold, arresting strokes of a poster and not the cold astonishment of a painting" (51). The narrator definitely leaves us with a sense of no-ending. "As the narrative of political history advances, the modern imagination engages in the altering of form that a dialectical movement past posited endings implies—not final form, but the sense of unending derives from epilog, the textual drive to say more" (Nielsen 27). The unfinished dialogue of the novel involves a continued retelling of history, a continuation of a trilogy, and a developing relationship with the narrator.

Paul Gray offers a Western cry for closure in his critique of Jazz for Time magazine; "for all its local eloquence, Jazz never accounts for the horror that Joe and Violet feel compelled to wreak. That they have suffered—from white racism, poverty—is made abundantly clear. Their individual motives for lashing out as they do are not....Great fiction explains the inexplicable" (70). Morrison admits that her characters' dilemma seems insurmountable; however, their recovery lies in the resilience of their personalities. Morrison says of the end of her novel, "You could never imagine those two could reconcile, but they are able to— not because the voice says so, but because the voice discovers who they are" (Belles Lettres 41). When the narrator confesses that it is to blame for failing to foresee the "unexpectedly anti-climactic turn of events," claiming to have been distracted by the City, Hulbert finds the narrator's "verdict uncomfortably close to the mark," when it says, "(the city) Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound human. I missed the people altogether" (Jazz 220). Hulbert feels that the fact that the narrator "renders" the comment and then
"ruminates at some length about the many obstacles to sympathy doesn't retroactively deepen the characters or tighten the plot" (47). Though I feel more distanced from the characters at the end, I feel closer than ever to the narrator, and wonder, from her ruminations, if the entire story has indeed been merely about this Voice.

However, Morrison's explanation of her narrator's experimental job in Jazz perhaps justifies the voice's ruminations. According to Morrison, the voice must "actually image" the story it is composing, which she views as risky, "because if it's really involved in the process of telling the story and letting the other voices speak, the story that it thought it knew turns out to be entirely different from what it predicted because the characters will be evolving within the story, within the book" (Belles Lettres 42). This reminded Morrison of a jazz performance: musicians on stage, well-rehearsed, but ever prepared to create or to respond to surprise.

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. Now, in improvising on the spot in front of a live audience, you find yourself in place you could not possibly predict. But what happens when you go to this unpredictable place is that you are frequently taken into a room that you could not possibly have found if you had gone the normal way. (Belles Lettres 42)

Going to that room by an atypical, unpredictable route is what allows the retelling of this history--a new historical interpretation that deals with oppression and encourages an alternative method of healing in lieu of mass denial. Hence, in spite of the narrator's initial conviction that people were doomed to repeat cycles of violence and misery, the characters in Jazz discover new patterns for survival (Harding 126). Felice's record, for example, represents a new way for blacks to make sense of their surroundings.

Though I admire the efforts toward healing at the end of Jazz, I dislike the
sweet snapshot of Joe and Violet. I was intrigued by the narrator's perspective, and unlike Hulbert, I believe the voice's ruminations are the point. Even the suggestion that healing is possible is intriguing, especially when it seems the situation and people are far past forgiving. Again, for this reader, the healing comes just a bit too soon. Had another year passed before the narrator shows Joe and Violet in their "tableau of peace," chatting warmly on any of their neighbor's front steps, all would seem more plausible.

However, as mentioned earlier, black feminist thought is interested in the renewal of the community, a goal less frequently pursued in Western Literature. Like Huck Finn, or even Nick, in The Great Gatsby, a white protagonist is able to flee "from civilization to evade the responsibility and guilt of assuming his place in the dominant group. In Morrison's novels the individual's only chance for survival lies within the community; outside is the threat of annihilation" (Harding 89). Unlike Western heroes who can venture beyond the society's limiting boundaries, when Morrison's characters "embark on self-defining quests" they rarely move beyond the borders of their community. Although from Western perspectives Morrison's communities may "seem to circumscribe individual existence, in the logic of the novels, they provide the only frame in which characters can fulfill themselves" (Harding 88). Due to the racist danger which would surround the "flight" option of a character fleeing from his/her community, Morrison's characters perhaps fall into an effective though non-traditional healing approach which could presumably hasten the healing process. The characters in the novel actually approach the people with whom they could share their pain, or with whom their could explore their anger, perplexity or grief. Unlikely healing communities are formed: Violet and Alice (the woman who tried to cut the girl's face and the girl's aunt), and Joe, Violet, and Felice (the couple who assaulted the girl, violated her in life and death and the girl's best friend). The coming together of these communities, though odd and initially painful, allows open discussion about the pain that all are experiencing. As
previously mentioned, this could hasten the healing process—some.

Carman feels that "in the end human passion is urged on as a creative force, with the narrator telling us what we the reader, the listeners, and by implication, also the participants in the whole story are free to remake" (102). She feels that the "energizing, life-giving force of jazz" which drives the novel originates from "mystery, continues with surprise, and ends in a sense of renewal" (10). Harding and Martin see the ending as offering a marked contrast of scenes: Violet and Joe's reconciled love juxtaposed with "an evocation of the narrator's longing for love and an appeal to the reader to 'make me, remake me'" (33). Joe and Violet have gone beyond the destructive myths of their past, "addressing the debilitating gaps that have severed their lives; they find themselves together at the end because of their shared deprivation, the couple is united finally in the fullness of their common experience" (Harding 57). This healing of couple and community through accommodation and forgiveness makes possible the happy ending, at least for the main actors in the drama. The narrator's final suggestion, prompted by the realization of loss, offers an open invitation to continue the story; thus Morrison has created a reading experience of a non-Western intimacy with an unprivileged narrative voice "ending" with a definite sense of non-closure. *Jazz*, a text which addresses black feminist issues, openly analyzes strategies for healing, and also encourages a retelling of experience by re-acknowledging the past, there is an appropriate absence of Western finality.
"What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of other? What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman?"

Patrocinio Schweickart

"Feminist criticism essentially adds a vital new perspective to all that has gone before, rather than taking anything away, it enjoys at least the possibility of enhancing and enlarging our appreciation of what is comprised by a specific literary text."

Annette Kolodny

Post-modern critics have challenged the concept that we might ever discover the one "true" meaning in a text. However, working as a high school teacher, I find that I regularly bump up against student desires for the Truth. But, when confronting any literary text, let alone one as ambiguous as Jazz, one must ask students whether a novel can or should offer such an absolute meaning, and if so, who can find it? In his collection of essays, No Man is an Island, philosopher Thomas Merton suggests from his Western perspective that the desire for truth is innate:

Our need for truth is inescapable. What then is truth? Truth, in things, is their reality. In our minds, it is the conformity of our knowledge with the things known. In our words, it is the conformity of our words to what we think. In our conduct, it is the conformity of our acts to what we are supposed to be. (191)

And "truth" in our reading? Most reader-response critics would look askance at the idea that one might find the Truth in an encounter with a piece of literature. Though the desire for the answer(s) might be innate, most contemporary critics
acknowledge how the particular social and emotional situation of each reader might influence his/her version of interpretation.

Morrison seems eager to embrace the personal aspects of interpretation. In an interview she shares her passion for the "beautiful intimacy of reading," which she suggests deeply involves the emotions. Morrison's narrator, which she says is the book itself, closes the novel by not only confiding in us, but also inviting our active response:

I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else...I want you to love me back...I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning...If I were able to 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. (Jazz 229)

Critic Paula Eckard, assuming that most likely our hands are probably holding a copy of Jazz when encountering these lines, feels that the reader is called to "'make' or 'remake' its music, language and meaning" (19). As Komar suggests, the "open-ended structure and ironic closure" of Jazz "invite readers to complete performances in and out of the narrative" (126).

Both Komar and Eckard's assertions suggest that the novel calls for reader-response interpretation. According to reader-response strategist, Robert Mailloux, this approach consists of two critical moves: showing that a work give readers something to do, and then describing what the reader does by way of response (Murfin 257). Rosenblatt, another leading reader-response critic, emphasizes that "the reader is active" (Murfin 255). Definitions offered by both critics would relate readily to Jazz, which, Rodrigues says, demands a reader who must "participate in the process of musicalizing the text before it will yield up all its meaning"(737). However, not only does this text call for an active reader, i.e. the one holding the book, as mentioned earlier: within the text, several of the characters are also retelling and responding to the "text" of the affair, the murder, the recovery. This, in effect, puts the characters in the same position as the
reader. By having the text itself composed of multiple responses to one initial
story, Morrison offers layers of reader-response issues worth exploring.

Like the characters in the novel, the reader must work for meaning. Major reader-response critic Stanley Fish prefers such a text—a dialectical
presentation that "prods" and "provokes," rather than presents an opinion as if
it were truth. In Jazz, the narrator's cry of "Make me! Remake me!" obviously
calls for an active reading and perhaps re-reading experience. And it is the
reader's struggle to make sense of a challenging work that reader-response critics
seek to describe (Murfin 254). Further indicative of Jazz's value as a reader-
response text, Fish feels that such a text may not have the kind of symmetry that
formalist critics seek. Instead of offering a "single, sustained argument" (Murfin
254) the nature of Jazz's non-omniscient, needy narrator calls immediately for
reader discretion and judgment. As Eckard suggests,

With its improvisation Morrison's text would promote this type of
learning by nature of her style and changeability, jazz as narrator
constructs the text, and as a community of readers and 'listeners' we
participate in its performance. However, we cannot take the narrator's
words too seriously; they are suspect. (19)

A reader-response critic basically describes the reader's way of dealing with
the sudden twists and turns that characterize what Murfin calls "the dialectical
text"—that make the reader return to earlier passages and to see them in a new
light" (255). With its multiple-narration, Jazz calls for an investigative
learning—a reader-response technique promoted ironically by feminism and
Freud. Investigative learning proceeds not through "linear progression" but
through breakthroughs, leaps, discontinuities, regressions, and deferred
actions, the analytic learning-process outs indeed in question the
traditional pedagogical belief in intellectual perfectibility, the
progressivistic view of learning as a simple one-way road from ignorance
to knowledge. (Felman 27)
By nature of its jazzy, improvisational narrative structure, *Jazz* privileges this type of random "break-through" learning.

Another way Morrison actively involves the reader in this text is by pulling us into a "drama of interpretation." Occasionally, the narrator even invites us to make our own imaginative choices between possible meanings. As Brodhead suggests, with such a novel, "at several points, situations described in the text invite this kind of involvement and choice by mirroring the situation the reader is in." At this point, the "author releases us from his narrative authority" and this allows us to choose among interpretations. At times readers are obliged to choose between different or even opposite meanings (Murfin 258-59). Morrison offers the reader several such opportunities in *Jazz*. We are involved in a drama of interpretation that involves merely the narrator as she offers three opinionated interpretations of Golden Gray's arrival at his father's home with Wild in his arms. Throughout the novel, despite the narrator's dominant voice, we are allowed to hear several characters work through their versions of what happened concerning the affair, murder, and recovery.

The author also invites us into a drama of interpretation in scenes such as that of Violet "stealing" the baby. We hear this story from multiple perspectives of "stand-byes." The narrator's perspective (at least at first) suggests that Violet is indeed stealing this baby. She says Violet is already assuming that Joe will love it, and speculating as to which furniture in their bedroom could be converted to a temporary crib. However, the lack of consensus of the bystanders pulls us again into a drama of interpretation, in which we are allowed to formulate our own opinion, perhaps even to override the narrator's seemingly semi-omniscient perspective on the incident.

It was the laugh--loose and loud--that confirmed the theft for some and discredited for others. Would a sneak thief woman stealing a baby call attention to herself like that at a corner not a hundred yards away from the wicker carriage from which she took it? (21)
Further proof of Violet's innocence seemed to "lay in the bag of hairdressing utensils, which remained on the steps where Violet had been waiting." Violet asks, "Would I leave my bag, with the stuff I make my living with if I was stealing you baby? you think I'm crazy?...In fact, I would have taken everything, Buggy too, if that's what I was doing" (21). However, Violet's innocence seems unlikely to a minority.

Would a kindhearted innocent woman take a stroll with an infant she was asked to watch while its sister ran back in the house, and laugh like that?...Why not pace in front of the house like normal? And what kind of laugh was that? What kind? If she could laugh like that, she could forget not only her bag but the whole world. (22)

The narrator gets the last word, suggesting that Violet grumbles, "Last time I do anybody a favor on this block. Watch your own damn babies!" and then chooses to remember the incident as "an outrage to her character. The makeshift crib, the gentle soap left her mind" (22). The narrator's final suggestion is that, yes, indeed, Violet was walking home with that baby; however, we have certainly been invited into a broader, though still slightly biased look at the situation. And, in light of the narrator's later mistakes concerning her prediction that someone else would be shot at the end of the novel, that Joe and Violet could never reconcile, it is possible that we could look askance at her earlier declarations. Novels like Jazz, which dramatize the act of interpretation, allow the reader the freedom to choose from possible meanings contained in contradictory elements and, thus, invite diverse, even irreconcilable readings. One of our reactionary choices, with the pleading book in our hands at the end inviting, our response and participation, is to become one of the storytellers. Iser says, "Thus, the reader, in establishing these interrelationships between past, present and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connection" (Iser 1222)—all Jazz characters and readers engage in such a response to the initial story in the text.
"Reader-response criticism raises theoretical questions about whether our responses to a work are the same as its meaning, whether a work can have as many meanings as we have responses to it, and whether some responses are more valid, or superior to, others" (Murfin 252). This again raises my question about the value of white readings of black texts. Reader response critics have had to address the definition of the reader, wondering "Just who is the reader? Just who is the reader? Who is the informed reader, the implied reader? (Murfin 257). If, as Smith suggests, white readers are "incapable of comprehending the subtleties of racial politics," obviously, white readers cannot be the ideal readers of a black text. In light of this, what kind of reading can a white critic offer? If it is impossible to cross racial lines and produce an effective reading of a minority texts, shall we even do it? Fish feels, "Literature exists when it is read" (qtd. in Murfin 253). If this is true, does it become vital to incorporate more female literature and, even more specifically, Black female literature into academic curriculums, so that it can "exist" for more than those who might be interested in picking it up at a bookstore?

According to Fish, "readers produce different texts as they read above all because they have different beliefs: 'The shape of belief...is responsible for the shape of interpretation,...Just as what we see depends upon what we bring to the seeing, what we read depends upon what we bring to the reading" (qtd. in Dasenbrock 239). Fish feels that we hold these different interpretive expectations and assumptions not in isolation but as members of a larger community. Many feminists agree with Fish, that:

the production of the meaning of a text is mediated by the interpretive community in which the activity of reading is situated: the meaning of the text depends on the interpretive strategy one applies to it, and the choice of strategy is regulated (explicitly or implicitly) by the canons of acceptability that govern the interpretive community. (Schweickart 50)

However, the feminist reader also recognizes that "the ruling interpretive
communities are androcentric, and that this androcentricity is deeply etched in the strategies and modes of thought that have been introjected by all readers, women as well as men" (Schweickart 50). As mentioned earlier, I am inevitably a male-influenced white female reader of Morrison's Jazz, which may help to explain the difficulties I have with the lack of resolution at the end of the text, and my discomfort with the intimate advances of the narrator on my psyche. Many feminists believe that reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism to politically acknowledge the source of our potentially androcentric reading strategies. Kolodny supports the idea that feminist interpretations of texts more adequately accommodate the readings of female readers: "Nonfeminist critics, after all, tend to ignore the fact (and significance) of women as readers as much as they tend to ignore the potentially symbolic significations of gender within a text" (161). It is important to acknowledge the presence or absence of feminist criticism when encountering a female text. Perhaps the value that women place on relationships and on negotiating "between opposing needs so that the relationship can be maintained" (Schweickart 55) influences the type of response demanded by a feminine text. However, whether the reader valorizes or degrades the realization that they identify with female strategies is when the politics of feminism intervene. Schweickart suggests that in a dialectic of communication informing the relationship between the feminist reader and the female author/text, the central issue is not of control or partition, but of managing the contradictory implication for the desire for relationship (on must maintain a minimal distance from the other) and the desire for intimacy, up to and including a symbiotic merger with the other. (55)

Hence, central is a drive to connect rather than to control. This call for connection relates to the Jazz narrator's needy pleas at the end. However, how one responds to the narrator's breaking of boundaries deserves analysis.

Reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser believes the text is full of "gaps," or
blanks," which powerfully affect the reader. The reader is forced to explain them, to connect what the gaps separate, literally to create in his or her own mind a novel that "isn't in the text, but that the text incited" (qtd. in Murfin 254). Iser suggests that "focusing critical interest on the gaps in texts--on what is not expressed--similarly redefines the reader as an active maker...what is missing from a narrative causes the reader to fill in the blanks creatively" (qtd. in Murfin 255). My student readers of Jazz attempt to deal with the reality of gaps in Jazz.

TA (Tracy Anderson, interviewer): I'm interested in why our stories are so different--is it important to hear all five of those stories--to go past the first two pages of the story--to find out more than the fact that Joe shot Dorcas. Why do we need to know that Alice's husband was having an affair, why do we need to know that Golden Gray saved wild?

Hillary: Well, you get to know the characters, and why they did what they did. It fills the gap. That's why the whole novel was written--to explain why--they did what they did.

Angy: It's like human nature to want to know "Why" people do what they do.

As Schweickart suggests, for women reading male texts, it is important to recognize that the text pressures the woman to read as "the other," making it a struggle to read and to "affirm womanhood as another, equally valid, paradigm of human existence"(50). A gap in a traditional text may call for supporting the androcentric ideals promoted by both text and society. However, I suggest that women must analyze their "gap-filling" not only when encountering male texts, but even when encountering female texts; females must be careful not to dismiss the inherently female issues as the less valuable issues of "the other" of which we are part. Perhaps Angy's desire to dismiss her reading as an example of "human nature" displays an attempt to avoid claiming her reading as feminine/female?

This connects to subjective reader-response critics Holland and Bleich who do not "see the reader's response as one 'guided' by the text but rather as one
motivated by deep-seated, personal, psychological needs” (Murfin 256). Joe and Violet’s responses to the tale of the basic plot of the novel lead them to consider their personal struggles with their family identity, self esteem, and their depression, all of which affect their perception of the kernel tale. Similarly, when students interact with a text such as jazz, what if their "psychological needs" mandate a denial of the realities of racism, privilege, and the importance of acknowledging minority history? Enter stage left the political agenda of the feminist educator, who habitually views feminist criticism as a mode of "praxis," the point of which is not merely to interpret literature in various ways, but "to change the world. We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as praxis. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (Schweickart 39). Thus, while interested in encouraging honest responses from students, many feminist educators acknowledge the importance of then analyzing and addressing harmful and oppressive statements and strategies.

The one who responds to a text, accepts and reads the text, the reader, Genette and Prince prefer to speak of as "the narratee,...the necessary counterpart of a given narrator, that is, the person or figure who receives a narrative” (Murfin 257). It seems Morrison’s narrator would embrace the idea of a narratee—placing a traditionally feminine importance on his or her response. Leverntes' version of reader-response criticism perceives the reader and the narrator as "interlocked, twin halves of one entity or event,”(qtd. in Murfin 260). Mobley feels that in Jazz "The narrator connects the reader with the narrator, the text" with the reader, the call with the response (616). However, if the intended "narratee" is an African-American reader, how does the intended response change for a Caucasian reader? The job of the de-centered majority becomes a willful suspension of one’s ideological codes. Is this possible? How likely is it that a Caucasian reader will willingly admit he/she is "fantastically privileged” (Schweickart 39) and that this affects his/her reading?
Larry Anderson, a professor at Louisiana State University, who employs reader-response techniques with his literature students, acknowledges student difficulties with recognizing their biases as such. He notes that "reader expectations, biases and assumptions usually disguise themselves as universal truths, or at least as 'the way things ought to be.'" Because of this, Anderson suggests, these assumptions "seldom come under scrutiny. However, a full understanding of the reading process demands that we try to make ourselves and our students aware of these underlying influences." Anderson suggests that a central educational aim ought to be "to enable students to discover and articulate their responses to literature, and such responses can only begin with the acknowledgments of the various ideological forces at work in the production and consumption of language" (144). Ironically, this might be an even more difficult task in a homogeneous classroom.

As Fish suggests, "Common identity themes exist" and this accounts for the "stability of interpretation among (some) readers" as an indication of their shared 'interpretive strategies...which exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read" (Murfin 256). Such similarities will definitely be apparent in an "interpretive community" such as the one I selected from my school district to read Jazz. The possible danger in this might be that the lack of minority responses to the minority text may further encourage the majority's views, offering all the more reason to think of one's opinion, one's world view, as a "universal truth." It is because of this that we as non-minority teachers of African American female texts must encourage non-minority students to recognize their opinions as possible indicators not of "Universal Truth," but of a "Culturally Accepted Idea."

Because meaning can be viewed as an event located in the reader's time, "A text exists and signifies while it is being read, and what it signifies or means will depend, to no small extent on when it was read,"(Murfin 255) and, I will add, on who is reading it, and what they have experienced. A feminist "staple of
common sense" is to theorize "from experience." Also, feminists critique "objectivity" and "distance" as the best stances from which to generate knowledge. For, feminists argue, "there is a link between where one stands in society and what one perceives" (Frankenberg 8).

For example, a highly personalized interpretation of what Jazz's narrator is was offered by Karla, a friend of mine, whose reader-response was at least partially affected by the fact that she has recently been involved in an romantic affair. Karla said she readily agreed with Morrison's suggestion of the narrator as lover. Rereading the last two pages, Karla said, 'The narrator is obviously talking to you like she's a mistress—one who would be loved again, one who was 'beloved.' While a mistress might say, 'My being is to be his lover even if he's married,' the novel might say, 'My being is to be read by you even if you can choose to make me wait.' Morrison's diction in the last two pages is indeed sensual, filled with sexual imagery and longing.

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it—to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, q turning...Make me. Remake me. Look where your hands are. Now. (Jazz 229)

Karla felt that the text was clearly inviting the reader to make love to it.

The text is saying, "Remake me." But, "Make love to me?" Maybe, "Communicate with me?" or "Join me in a bit more jouissance?" This concept of "jouissance," refers to the term Roland Barthes coined describing the elevated pleasure possible in reading. The new way of reading, according to Barthes, produced "jouissance, a nearly untranslatable word ("bliss" is the usual equivalent) that suggests both the joy and the sense of loss experienced in the
sexual climax" (Richter 948). For the narrator, there seems to be something like sexual pleasure involved, but it doesn't reside merely in the book, but in our reading of the book--it is as if the book is saying, "It's when you read me that I experience my jouissance." When the book begs, "Make me, remake me" it is also playing into Fish's reader-response suggestion that texts don't have meaning until readers make them. In the world of the "beloved" it is as if her world has romantic meaning when she is united with the lover. Indeed, the idea of the book as a mistress is an interesting concept for a novel whose plot deals with infidelity. However, while the novel and Dorcas both share the limited power of the "beloved"; their attitudes toward the romantic relationship are different. For the novel, this experience of "jouissance" with the reader certainly hasn't been a meaningless affair or fling.

In the Western tradition of binary oppositions, the reader as lover seems to be in a position of power over the novel as beloved. Similarly, Joe is in a position of power over Dorcas because of his sex, his age, his strength, and his identity as employed, married. The only real power of Dorcas, the mistress, the beloved, is to withhold the love, which she fatally does. The Voice of the narrator as beloved is older, more committed, willing to "play for keeps" than Dorcas. Like an illicit mistress, the voice is destined to "envy the public love" of Joe and Violet and perhaps of the reader in his relationship with the world. When I asked Karla if Morrison's use of the love of a mistress trivialized such relationships in her eyes she responded, "Not at all. It's almost a glorification of the mistress's life." Barthes says, "As for the Text, it is bound to jouissance, that is to a pleasure without separation"(1010).

Karla perhaps emphasizes the idea of the mistress due to her recent romantic situation. She's also pursuing a PH.D. in philosophy and literature, which will also affect her reading. Likewise, the high school girls with whom I discuss Jazz in the following chapter were also affected by both the situations of their lives and the atmosphere of the discussion. The fact that they are close in
age to Dorcas and Felice, the fact that most of them are living with their parents, and that they are white females discussing a text about African Americans with no males or minority representatives present—all will influence their response. Even reader-response criticism, with so much that feminists would embrace, still has the potential to be a form of pedagogy which "always makes available particular identities at the cost of others" (Britzman 152). Wisker denounces "arrogance, bandwagon-jumping and any attempts to pass off one example of Black writing, one image of Black women, as universal and essential are equally critical traps to be avoided" (170), as well as traps to be acknowledged by Caucasian students responding to a text.

As earlier suggested by Anderson, students should be encouraged to recognize the ideals which formulate their reader-response. Often young readers are willing to continue to concede to the "authoritative discourse" present in many texts and classrooms. Authoritative discourse (Bakhtin) signifies the "received and institutionally sanctioned knowledge that demands allegiance to the status quo and authorizes stereotypes as if they were unencumbered by ideological meanings" (Britzman 152). As mentioned earlier, as feminists, we want to use reader-response criticism to show us how we need to change the world, thus to analyze and perhaps challenge such accepted examples of authority. The feminist's highly political perspective addresses the difference between men and women, the way the experience and perspective of women have been systematically and fallaciously assimilated into the generic masculine, and of the need to correct this error. Finally, it will identify literature—the activities of reading and writing—as an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it. (Schweickart 39).

Schweickart also suggests that the hope for the feminist reader is that "other women will recognize themselves in her story, and join her in her struggle to
transform the culture" (51). Because of the highly political nature of feminist instruction, it is important that the teacher admit to herself the "limits of the teacher and the contradictory desires she holds" (Britzman 153). This idea connects to those of black feminism, which Collins suggests provide "the conceptual space needed for each individual to see that she or he is both a member of multiple dominant groups and a member of multiple subordinate groups" (Collins 230). Abel's hope for white feminist readings is as follows:

If we produce our reading cautiously and locate them in a self-conscious and self-critical reaction to black feminist criticism, these risks, I hope, would be counterbalanced by the benefits of broadening the spectrum of interpretation, illuminating the social determinants of reading, and deepening our recognition of our racial selves and the 'others' we fantasmatically construct—and thereby expanding the possibilities of dialogue across as well as about racial boundaries. (498)

I might hope the same eventually for Caucasian student readings as well.

According to Jay, "Human subjects occupy more than one social or cultural position, and so they have several kinds of Otherness inside them...We need to recognize the Otherness within ourselves as much as the Otherness that may separate us from other people. This shared sense of Otherness might then become a way of making our politics responsible to a wide set of subjectivities and so of going beyond the exclusionary effects of pluralistic consensus" (26). A feminist instructor should be interested in both of the following questions: What is the Caucasian reader's response to a black text, and what is that text being asked to accomplish? Carby suggests that texts of black women sit uneasily in a discourse that seems to act as a substitute for the political activity of desegregation....For white suburbia, as well as for white middle-class students in universities, these texts are becoming a way of gaining knowledge of the "other": a knowledge that appears to satisfy and replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks
of segregation. Have we, as a society, successfully eliminated the desire for achieving integration through political agitation for civil rights and opted instead for knowing each other through cultural texts? (Carby 17)

My unsophisticated response to this is, "Yikes." It becomes vital that all Caucasian readers of minority texts strive not to dismiss the real issues and individuals indicated in the fiction.

According to Ross Murfin, "Reader-response criticism is merely a name we give to a variety of analyses that share an interest in the reader's reactions" (260). Feminists want to push these analyses a step further, using the acknowledgment and analysis of reader codes and strategies as a way of moving toward political change. "Antiracist and feminist pedagogies have begun to address the uneven relations of theory and practice—the daily problems of transforming the curriculum, students, and the self—as well as the complicated resistances students and teacher bear when they confront the imperatives of social change, social control, and radical agency" (Britzman 153). Because of the magnitude and social explosiveness of the task presented to the feminist educator using reader-response strategies, it would be helpful to employ what Felman calls "analytic teaching" which is "interminably self-critical" (39). To be enlightened and to enlighten others we must be forever watchful of our own opinions. Easier said than done.
"We must acknowledge that our role as teacher is a position of power over others. We can use that power in ways which diminish or in ways which enrich." bell hooks

In reading *Jazz* with students at a suburban high school near Des Moines, Iowa, I knew that I would be working with students distanced from Morrison's themes in the same way that I am: the high school of nearly 1,200 has fewer than five African-American students, with slightly more Asian-American and Hispanic students. Though several of the white students I have gotten to know the last year in the classroom and through extra-curricular involvement are angered over expressions of white racism that occur in our school, and many other students would never engage actively in racist behavior, racism is still an intense issue in our largely homogeneous environment.

Ruth Frankenberg in *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, reports on a study she conducted in which she interviewed several white women of varying ages and social status, discussing with them the development of their perceptions of whiteness and minorities. I feel some affinity to Frankenberg and her much more voluminous project, as, like those in Frankenberg's project, all of my participants were white, female, and volunteers. Like Frankenberg's respondents all of my volunteers knew they could refuse to answer certain questions or discontinue the process.

My project involved giving copies of *Jazz* to over 20 male and female students at our school, to read not in a class situation, but on their own. I encouraged them to keep a reading journal, and told them that we would have an evening discussion at some point which they would be encouraged to attend. Interestingly, I ended up gathering responses from only five readers: all female,
all Caucasian, ranging in age from 15 to 18. The young women seemed comfortable discussing their responses in our similar, intimate interpretive community, and the information gathered from the insights of the five female students reinforced my desire to include more African-American literature in our high school literature curriculum.

I was, of course, disappointed not to have written or verbal male responses to analyze—especially as I am looking into the reception a novel like Jazz might receive in an assigned classroom situation. The lack of male interest in reading Jazz calls to mind Kathleen Komar's article "Why Are There so Few Men in My Comparative Literature Courses on Women Writers?" in which she discusses this rather telling absence. In her search for remedies, Komar considered revising the titles of her courses—simply titling a course "20th Century Classics" and teaching only women authors—with no comment whatever. However, she felt the response would be "a disgruntled group of students claiming to have been tricked and misled" (140). Komar finds that the majority of men interested in female literature courses are "those exceptional males willing to risk exposing their interest in female writers and issues, men who often come from minority cultures themselves, and therefore understand(ing) marginality" (138). Why is there so little male interest in the study of women? Perhaps, as Komar suggests, it is because "a feminist perspective still represents a threat to the status quo" (134).

As indicated, I gathered all of my participants from the same Iowa high school. I began by asking for volunteers in my sophomore literature classes and by requesting names of junior and senior male and female students who might be interested. I talked with the instructors of the Talented and Gifted program, the Advanced Placement Literature and Composition instructor, and all of the juniors and seniors on the high school speech squad. I had originally hoped for responses from at least 10-20 high school students, from ages 15-18, with a close balance of male and female readers. I wanted, I wanted, I wanted. The most
convenient procedure for my project, of course, would have been to actually teach *Jazz* to a College Prep Literature or Advanced Placement class. However, due to the constraints of budget, permission, and time, I found myself needing to rely on volunteers. Three of the females who began openly decided to discontinue the process while several other females took copies of *Jazz* and then drifted away. I succeeded in gaining three male participants in the project, from whom I never received follow-up information.

From the beginning I was open with my students about the nature of my project and my goals of using the research in my thesis. The traditionally male-valued objectivity is almost impossible in projects such as Frankenberg's and mine. Like Frankenberg, I developed a "dialogical" approach to the interviews. Rather than maintaining the traditionally distant, apparently objective, and so-called blank-faced research persona, I positioned myself as explicitly involved in the questions, at times sharing with interviewees either information about my own life or elements of my own analysis of racism as it developed through the research process. (30)

Also, my willingness to share my personal and critical response to the text encouraged students to volunteer similar responses. Feminist oral historian Sherna Gluck finds "that it may be necessary to step outside the neutral persona and tell potential interviewees the philosophy behind the project in order to secure their interest and help" (Frankenberg 31).

As Frankenberg says, "No presentation of self is really neutral," and there are problems with being the "blank-faced, neutral interviewer." Like Frankenberg, as a feminist I am interested in "sharing power by sharing information" (34). Thus, I decided to share with my volunteers the basis of my project, and also examples of critical information I had gained through my research concerning *Jazz* and black feminism. I invited the students to see the professional criticism as individual responses which help to create a body of communal response. Offering these critical suggestions and letting students
express agreement and/or disagreement encourages interpretive empowerment. Our discussion was very possibly affected by the nature of my relationship with each of the girls: to Hillary, I was perhaps her "mom's colleague," to Jennifer, Heidi, and Angy, a "speech coach," to Mindy, "a teacher;" perhaps to all of them at different times I seemed like a graduate student: nosy, boring, domineering, confusing, etc. My familiarity with the participants also further hindered my stance as a "neutral interviewer."

The questions I put to myself at the beginning of this study with the high school students were: Will high school students be able to "handle" a novel like Jazz? How will they respond to the issues of race, sexuality, violence, and the unusual narrative technique? Would the novel be more enjoyable/accessible for males or females? In pursuit of answers to these questions I provided all readers with optional question sheets concerning content, themes, ideas about Jazz. (See Appendix.) I encouraged each student to keep a reading journal, and relied most heavily on a dialogic approach: discussing the novel in depth with the students for a two hour period. In the dialogue, akin to Frankenberg's experiences, sharing my personal experiences and responses at times helped to open up their responses (36). Again, this made me less distanced as a project coordinator, however, provided for a more intimate dialogue.

"Knowledge is irreducibly dialogic," according to Shoshanna Felman, author of "Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable." Felman views dialogue as the radical condition of both learning and of knowledge, "the analytically constituted condition through which ignorance becomes structurally informative; knowledge is irreducibly dialogic" (33). Despite relying heavily upon the dialogic in conducting the student encounters with Jazz, I have also included an example of the usefulness of this novel for analysis in critical essays, and exploration in reader-response journals.

As mentioned earlier, the five girls ranged in age from 15 to 18: one freshman, one sophomore, three seniors. The three seniors I knew from speech
club; the freshman I had had in English class; the sophomore is the daughter of another English instructor in our district. The group was more intelligent than an average student group, and more academically motivated, which is perhaps obvious, as these young women were willing to read and discuss Morrison on their "own time."

Agreeing with Frankenberg, that "it is crucial at the outset to begin to give an indication of who these women were..." (24), I have provided thumbnail sketches of the five volunteers.

Mindy: an active participator in my freshman English class, extremely outspoken, quick to laugh and smile, committed to a "burly" boyfriend, recently transferred from an inner city school where she had been in the honors English program.

Hillary: sophomore TAG student, singer, was provided special, individualized track for English freshman/sophomore year; her mother teaches English.

Angy: a senior speech club member, salutatorian, winner of the senior English award, editor of award-winning student creative writing magazine, tall, sarcastic, tennis player, sometimes kiddingly called "Angry" (in lieu of Angy—just like Violet/Violent) by her peers.

Heidi: also a speech squad senior, cheerleader, outspoken, had taken AP Lit as a junior.

Jennifer: Senior speech squad member, TAG student, volleyball spiker, artist.

Though each girl has different interests, all share an above-average talent for comprehending literature, as well as the same race, and similar ages. However, even in such a homogenous reading community, as an instructor using reader-response criticism, it is important to remember, as Richard Beach suggests, that students may be applying different sets of rules than teachers (29) or than one another. Just as a text like Morrison's invites suspicion toward the ultimate authority of the author or narrator, reader-response criticism looks askance at the teacher who employs the ideals of New Criticism and sees herself...
as "the master explicator" (Beach 17). It seems that in texts like *Jazz*, no one is the privileged explicator; everyone or no one is the "master." Morrison as an author is more successful in this redistribution of authority and control than perhaps I was as an interviewer. As Frankenberg noted,

> There is in general a power imbalance between a researcher and the subjects of research in the sense that the researcher sets the agenda and edits the material, analyzes it, publishes it, and thereby takes both credit and blame for the overall result. (29)

However, encouraged my students to examine their individual responses and group responses to *Jazz*, with the hope that they would also glean benefits from my research.

One way in which I encouraged student introspection about their responses was to invite the students to examine their own reading histories. "A student's response," according to Barthes, "with one text is related to their experience with another text or with all other texts in their reading history" (qtd. in Beach 35). This is why it is important to help students place their reading of the present text in relation to other texts they have read. When I asked the girls what African-American literature they had read, seventeen-year-old Angy recalled a junior high example of a teacher reading aloud *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane: a story of a South African black boy who met and admired Arthur Ashe—the novel told of the boy's struggle to overcome the oppression of apartheid. As an alternative novel in her sophomore class, Hillary read *The Bluest Eye*, after finishing *Jazz*, which affected her interpretation of both. No novels by male or female African-American authors had entered their high school curriculum. All the sophomores in the district read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which, of course, deals directly with race issues but is written by a white woman, and our new freshman and sophomore textbooks offer a variety of powerful short stories and poetry by minority authors. Heeding Barthes' suggestion, for those holding black feminist views, besides calling for
acknowledgment of the reader's "prior knowledge" there exists the necessity of representation of African-American female texts—as an example of their voice to include with the others in their "intertextual loop" (38). Indeed, the comparative absence of female African-American literature the girls had encountered was likely to affect their responses to Jazz.

In gathering and analyzing the student responses to the novel, I employed many of those encouraged by Richard Beach: "engaging, conceiving, connecting, explaining, interpreting, and judging" (6). Beach feels that encouraging students "to make their own links... may foster more learning than in traditional literature instruction" (39). It was also one of my goals to make students more aware of their responding process, helping them to learn more about the political content involved in our response to all literature. A student can also learn more about herself in viewing what theories and ideas she embraces or rejects. This reflexive process will help the students to become learners who critique not only the text they are reading, but also the strategies they use when reading it. So much for good ol' reading enjoyment, eh? Though quality self-analysis is perhaps difficult for teenagers to accomplish, valuable insights and power may be gained through the attempt to do so. bell hooks discusses the importance of being a critical and creative leaner, by offering Pablo Friere's philosophy of education:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or becomes "the practice of freedom" the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (qtd. in hooks 76)

hooks also asks the relevant question, "How can we transform consciousness if we do not have some sense of where the students are intellectually, psychically? (78).
To find out what factors might be influencing my students' perceptions of a black text I asked them to describe examples of racism that they had noticed at our school or in their community. Mindy, a freshman volunteer, sees racism a "major issue" at our high school: "If this book was required to be read in our school, I think that there would be some protest. Since ours school is considered 'lily white,' I do not think that a book with all African-American characters would be accepted. Many people would be prejudiced against this book due to the racial content." Mindy's feeling that students might bring their racist attitudes to their interpretation of the text emphasizes Stanley Fish's point about responding to literature; "indeed, starting from scratch is never a possibility" (233). The student(s) who writes "I kill niggers" on the wall, tells racist jokes at lunch, or brags of "starting fights with 'coons' at a convenience store" would definitely bring some "interpretive baggage" to his/her response to a Morrison novel.

When I asked the students reading Jazz and others in class discussions concerning race issues for specific examples of racism at school, the answers varied. Angy admitted to "stereotyping," saying, "I hear racist jokes from the cowboys all the time." Angy also talked of a Mexican girl at school who is "very out-spoken about her heritage," adding that she is not invited to parties because she "brings her Mexican friends and they cause problems." Several mentioned a Vietnamese-American girl at school who claims that the theater director is racist because she is "never cast in the shows." Another Caucasian student complained of one of the black girls at school who wears T-shirts sporting slogans such as, "too black/too proud" and, "not only am I perfect, I'm black too," seeing this as an annoying "double standard—her not wanting others to be racist, but wearing "proud to be black shirts." Is it "a double standard" for a minority student to oppose white racism and yet display pride in their own unique heritage?

Similarly, there was school-wide controversy and discussion over
Confederate flag and Malcolm X hats and T-shirts. Several students "wearing" the Confederate flag claimed, "It's not a racist gesture." However, as Feagin and Vera suggest, the image of the Confederate flag threatens African-Americans. While the T-shirts are banned at our school, "in the mid-1990s the battle flag of the old Confederacy is still flown by whites over several state capitols, in spite of the great insult and pain this symbol of slavery and racial oppressions delivers to African-Americans." Feagin and Vera express frustration that obviously, by means of their lack of resistance, "Many whites have acquiesced in such act of symbolic violence" (xi). According to the late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, modern racism is "slavery unwilling to die" (Feagin xii). I asked some students who were especially angry about the banning of the Confederate T-shirts, if they realized that said flag was a symbol of slavery, and if they seriously wanted to be viewed as supporting such an idea. Eric, a freshman boy suggested, "Bring back slavery. That'd be great." Ironically, this vocal and violent student nonchalantly supporting racial inequity, is extremely "proud to be an American," which Feagin and Vera point out is to hale from "a society with egalitarian ideals" (xiii).

A girl defending the Confederate flag wearers' rights claimed in class one day, "I have the right to be racist." Many students, like this girl, will openly admit to being racist during class discussions; several of them suggest family influences as rationales for their ideals. Jamie, a senior in Career English, listening to a fellow student's claim that people have to be racist if their parents are, responded with, "That's bull. My parents are some of the most racist people I know, and I'm not racist at all. I hate hearing racist jokes, or hearing and seeing racism at home, at school, anywhere." Inversely supporting Jamie's idea that it is possible to oppose parental ideas, Sandy, one of the white females interviewed by Frankenberg in her analysis of race and white women, mentioned that though her mother was an "active integrationist," her sister became "racist in her adult attitudes" (45).
Positive students who will be as vocal as Jamie need to be encouraged to continue to speak out. It is hoped that her words will eventually have an effect on some of those in her Career English section who seemed to accept a "less-than-human image of black Americans" (Feagin 142). When, in Career English, Sarah, a Caucasian senior, offered during a discussion of race issues that she was presently carrying the child of a black man, two Caucasian boys in the class made comments under their breath about "monkeys." When I asked them to explain what they meant by using that word in this situation, they both became upset with me, suggesting that I was overreacting. As an educator I have noticed that just as a student's unexamined personal problems sometimes lead them into senseless blaming of and anger with uninvolved black subjects, a student's anger over being confronted about those ideas, may easily lead to some form of frustration with the teacher, who Felman says, in pedagogical situations becomes the authoritative figure, in Lacan's words, the "subject presumed to know" (36). Jill, the above-mentioned proudly racist girl, was very upset when she realized that I would hold firmly to my stance that racism is negative and encouraged her to reconsider her pride in her prejudice.

Feagin and Vera suggest that because adult experiences are often shaped by childhood experiences, perhaps racial stereotyping and prejudice may be rooted in nonracial pain and distress experienced by whites as they grew up...People of color, and also Jewish Americans, often become socially convenient scapegoats for unreflective whites who fail to understand the true sources of their pain. (16) When I asked the school's Students At Risk counselor where he thought that Eric (above-mentioned) had acquired his hatred of blacks, he said that Eric admits that his father is "racist in a real big way;" ironically, though the son has accepted these attitudes from his father, the two share "a physically violent relationship--both drink heavily." Last year Eric spent at least part of the second semester living away from "home."
The above described attitudes and motivations are far from isolated to the small but significant group of students at our school. Many white Americans seem to view black bodies as dirty, something to be kept at a distance. Black shoppers report that some white clerks refuse to touch their hands in giving them change. One white person interviewed recoiled in disgust at the idea of giving a black person mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. (Feagin 149)

Feagin and Vera also cited a woman who in discussing her elementary school experience, said of her multi-ethnic classroom, "I was thrown in with a bunch of apes. No, I'm just kidding;" she also criticized affirmative action and favored racially-segregated neighborhoods. However, unlike Jill, this woman recognized that society viewed the term racist negatively; she did not view herself as racist, saying, "when I think of the word racist, I think of the KKK, people in white robes burning black people on crosses and stuff, or I think of the skinheads" (Feagin 161).

Acts of white racism are played out in a variety of manners, which Feagin and Vera suggest "frequently have a ritualistic nature." In the following quotation, Feagin and Vera define the ritualistic participants, acts, instruments, and myths involved in racist rites.

Racist rites involve minority victims, several categories of white participants (officiants, acolytes, and passive observers), a range of acts (gestures, words, avoidance, physical attacks), an assortment of instruments (workplace appraisal forms, burning crosses, police batons), and an array of myths (stereotypes about black Americans) that legitimate racist acts in perpetrators' minds. (9)

Although racism can spring from a variety of motivations, and involve a variety of participants and actions, unfortunately, as has been the case in our school environment, in whatever manner the actions of hatred or acquiescence are committed, "whites need not be aware of their racial motivations to inflict harm
on blacks" (Feagin 13).

Returning to a final example from our school environment, the worst (well-known) example of racism at school last year involved Sarah, the aforementioned pregnant student. When Sarah was eight months pregnant, a freshman girl, who had repeatedly verbally harassed Sarah for "getting pregnant by a nigger," punched Sarah in the stomach in the school hallway. Several students were upset by the incident; I found out about it when Josie, a girl in freshman English class, asked, "Miss Anderson, don't you think it's awful that someone would punch a pregnant girl in the stomach for five dollars?" Sarah, who only made a couple more appearances at school, said that the punch had been accompanied by a threat, "Stay out of my way, or next time I'll make sure you lose that baby." Several students, like Josie, were very open about their emotional disapproval of the act. The girl accused of the punching said it wasn't true, that she had been "set up" by some people who hated her.

Such an event, especially if there had been damage to the fetus, could have been as explosively publicized as the incidents of racism at other homogeneous cities in the Midwest. It seems odd to me that racism would be such a "hot issue" at a school with such sparse minority representation. However, in such an environment which Feagin and Vera call a "white bubble": White men, women, and children "living in a spatial and psychological 'bubble,' separated for the most part from the world of African Americans"; views come from "the mass media, parents, relatives and other traditional sources of stereotypical knowledge rather than from direct experience (20).

Students in the white bubble are likely to allow the media to help form their opinions. And, according to Michael Dyson, the media can be counted on to give black males who have committed crimes more than adequate news coverage. Dyson sees O.J. Simpson's name as added to a list of

(in)famous black men whose personal problems have made them poster boys for the perversions of (white) patriarchal culture....Mike Tyson and
date rape. Clarence Thomas and sexual harassment. Michael Jackson and child molestation. And now, O.J. Simpson and spousal abuse. (229) (One could easily add to the above list Magic Johnson with sexual promiscuity and AIDS.) Dyson says if the men are guilty they should be punished, but wonders about a discrepancy in the intensity of the publicity given to these black men's crimes. In a nation where millions of white men, famous and anonymous, commit similar offenses, they often avoid the "stigma or punishment. Even the moral and legal consequences of crime appear to be determined by race" (229). And, unfortunately, very seldom is "the law-abiding majority of black Americans mentioned, much less given credit for surviving under serious economic and racial difficulties" (Feagin 155). This is not the part of the black population that gets the major coverage.

Though there are several successful African American athletes and entertainers who receive much media attention, the limelight can easily be followed by a merciless fire of media slurs. Leonard Berkowitz has "argued that the mass media play an important role in reinforcing antisocial images and behavior. The U.S. media are overwhelmingly white-oriented and white-controlled" (qtd. in Feagin 12). Unlike the frequent white reliance on the media for perceptions of minorities, "black views of whites are primarily grounded in concrete everyday experiences with many whites" (Feagin 10). In my students' responses to Jazz they show at least some influence of the media. Though racialized images may be fictional, unfortunately their consequences are nonetheless real, and communities with small minority representation are not immune to white racism. As discussed earlier, the 1991 cross burnings, threats, and violence instigated by white citizens in Dubuque, Iowa, while protesting a city council plan to attract more minority families to the community, invalidate "assumptions that black population concentrations or interracial interaction are necessary prerequisites for significant racist thoughts or actions" (Feagin 15).

On the contrary, according to Angy, one of the participants in the Jazz
reading, this drastic imbalance is perhaps what makes race more of an issue in our school district. When she went to elementary and junior high school in districts with racially mixed student bodies, she had close friends of several racial backgrounds. Angy said, "We just never saw it (race) as problem." Like Angy, Sandy, one of Frankenberg's interviewees, recognized while growing up that she was "white," but "merely described white as another ethnic group" (63). The fact that Sandy grew up in a racially mixed area with friends and relatives of different backgrounds is likely to have encouraged her "raceless" viewpoint. Angy continued by pointing out that "being in a racially-diverse environment makes racism somehow different. It's as if at (our school) people are 'allowed' to be racist, because there are so few people to stand up against it--to be really offended. It's not like they are confronting an actual person, with actual feelings. It would not have gone over so unnoticed at (her old school)."

Jay, echoing Angy's allusion to the fact that the inclusion of minorities affects the discursive environment, emphasized that "the inclusion of minority students in the classroom changes what the professor and the other students feel free to think and say, and that is more often to the good than to the bad in a society plagued by bigotry" (Jay 26). (My guess is that Jill would not have been as eager to claim "I have the right to be racist" if an African-American student had been in the classroom.) If a community resists or is apathetic to the concept of busing and other active integrationist ideas, perhaps schools could send students to at least visit other school environments. Hillary visited an inner city school for a school day through her TAG program. She said that it was dominantly black, and was excited about the environment, "people seemed more unique--individuals. I saw or heard no examples of racism. It was cool." And, for the white high school students who have limited opportunities to actually interact with students of color, it would be a step to at least introduce them to some diverse texts in which they might acknowledge that their own race does indeed influence the (often) privileged manner in which they view the world.
Even though, as earlier noted, Mindy and Fish insist starting "from scratch" is an impossibility when encountering a given text, isn't it worth it to try to offer minority literature? Shouldn't predominantly white schools offer texts which confront racial issues, texts written by minority authors? bell hooks says that as teachers we must be willing "to restore the spirit of risk--to be fast, wild, to be take hold, turn around, transform" (79). Fish also asserts that the risk may be worthwhile, as it is possible to bring someone to new knowledge by "beginning with the shape of his present understanding" (234). Whatever that understanding may be?

In what is now a dated text, Barbara Stanford describes the reactions white students are likely have to books "which show white people as oppressors and perpetrators of sadistic atrocities" (13). She recognizes the difficulty of effectively teaching the history of the black in America "without encouraging in white children the kind of self-hatred which has been so damaging to black children." While suggesting that white children do need to learn about "the evil that their ancestors have committed...while they are assimilating this painful information, they need to be able to feel that their teacher respects them and cares for them" (Stanford 13). Like Stanford, Wisker also recognizes the dangers of "guilt tripping" not only for white students, but also for white feminist critics. She suggests that guilt "is not the ideal impetus behind the white feminist critic's appreciation of black women's writing," as it "confuses and silences" (170).

When I explained to my racially-marginalized readers Leonard's assertion that white people are "bad weather" and "chemicals in a lake" in Morrison's novels, Hillary said, "It bothers me. I worry minorities perceive all whites that way. I feel frustrated being stereotyped by people who haven't even had the chance to get to know me--we all have pre-determined thoughts of others though." Hillary's final disclaimer echoes Wisker who says, "Black or white, inevitably we read out of a context riddled with covert and overt racism and widespread ignorance" (12). For many white readers, white racists, "Black
individuals become 'they' or 'you people.' Black men, women, and children become hated objects instead of subjects" (Feagin 16). Obviously, Hillary fears the same sort of objectification, and she expresses frustration with the difficulty of resisting the preconceived notions others may hold of her.

**Student Responses:**

*Five White Girls and One White Female Teacher Discuss Narrative Strategies, Sexuality and Racism in Relation to *Jazz*

*Jazz*, like the reader-response texts discussed by critic Wolfgang Iser, demands some "gap-filling;" this suggests that the reader is presented with a set of incomplete instructions that must be completed, and thus "the reader adopts a wandering viewpoint throughout the text" (Beach 20). Our dialogic interaction with *Jazz* and with each other deals with confronting the textual ambiguity (gaps) involved with responding to a) a female text, both fluid and ambiguous, which sports an unusual narrative voice, b) aspects of sexuality and relationships, c) issues of whiteness, privilege and oppression.

Though *Jazz* deals directly with two high school girls, and their search for love and identity, many of my colleagues were surprised when I said that I was planning to read it with high school students. Of course, simply because a novel deals with adolescents does not mean it is adolescent-friendly reading material. *Jazz*, indeed, deals with adult themes, and, beyond this, another intimidating aspect of this text for young readers is the circuitous, layered narrative style. Not a surprise, the students did express frustration and confusion in their encounter with the author's narrative approach. I began the discussion of Morrison's technique with the questions, "Were you frustrated with the style? It's not exactly a fast read."

Hillary's comments from her reading journal are characteristic of responses a teacher might expect toward Morrison's technique: "The first chapter of *Jazz* is sort of a garbled mess of words. Not being used to this type of
writing. I had difficulty reading a sentence or phrase and then retaining it—some parts seem like an endless bunch of ramblings on. After a while, the reading seemed to get easier, and I as able to absorb the material." The following two comments show Hillary's ambivalence toward the narrative voice: "The narrator, whomever that might be, keeps bouncing from one subject to the next and it's driving me crazy!" and later, "The way the author writes in and out of the story at hand--is there a word for this--gives me a sense of warmth." More of her comments show the demands that Morrison's style make on young readers: "I had to go back and read things over. When I got to the Golden Gray part I thought, 'Did I miss when this part began?'" She also felt some impatience with the seemingly simultaneous tellings of various stories: "It's really aggravating, the way there are about four different stories including flashbacks going on at the same time. Not only that, but right at the peak of the story, when you're most interested, the next story is picked up with the other being dropped totally. Ugh!"

I asked all of the girls in the group discussion why an author might tell a similar story over and over from varying perspectives. Angy felt that the author was suggesting that "you can never get the true story from one person." Heidi agreed, elaborating, "they're all true stories--it's all the same story, but it's the way this person felt about it or this person felt about it and the way they dealt with it that's important." These two senior girls seem to share Alice Walker's valorization of multiple perspectives:

I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after. (Walker 49)

Wondering if this interest in multiple perspectives is more typically female, I asked my students the following questions:

TA: Are women more interested than guys in why and how one gets from A to
Z than just the fact that someone went from A to Z? Do you think girls would have an easier time with the multiple perspectives, the kind of convoluted truth--this state of always wondering *where* are we going in this novel?

Angy: Yeah, because girls deal with that on a daily basis--girls understand that. Just recently I heard a story from like four different points of view and I understand now what happened. But I can't take it all from one source--you hear it from five different people and you understand--ok that's what they *all* said, but everyone keeps something back--like everyone keeps something back that they don't want to tell everyone, but then you figure it out because someone else who doesn't think it's that big of a deal will tell you.

Heidi: Guys tell everything straight out while...

Hillary: ...girls are trying to protect their friends..

Angy: or *themselves* or something.

In this dialogue the girls display that in their interaction with hearing stories from their acquaintances, they employ the common reader-response technique, of "distrusting the narrator," by means of which readers (listeners) realize that the very form of the story itself calls into "question the veracity of all stories and all narrators, inviting them to entertain larger questions about the conventions of storytelling and the difficulty of understanding or interpreting the world" (Beach 29). According to Iser, coping with indeterminacy requires an awareness of "a meaninglessness which is at the same time a rich meaningfulness, undeterminable by any single interpretation or analysis" (23). In his essay "How Readers Make Meaning," Robert Crosman says that to read Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is to negotiate a series of oppositions that the text itself has left unresolved. We feel compelled to resolve its ambiguities, but however we do so, some of the evidence will have to be ignored" (212). Do readers do the same when confronted with Morrison's *Jazz?* Angy's earlier response conveys that she is using these strategies in both her encounter with *Jazz* and with the stories of her friends.
Cixous suggests that texts which offer a lack of resolution may have to do with its being an example of feminine narration; she describes a feminine textual body as one which "is always endless, without ending...A feminine text starts on all sides, all at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over" (qtd. in Rigney 32). According to this definition, Jazz is certainly a feminine text; however, does a feminine text appeal more to female readers than to male readers? Below, the high school Jazz readers speculate about male and female responses to multiple narration.

TA: Do you think girls would also be more willing to hear four perspectives on the same story--more willing to, say, find that interesting?
Hillary: Well, I like to find out the whole story.
Mindy: Guys might have a little trouble with it.
TA: How do you think that students at SEP --if I taught it to a class of sophomores--how would they react--would racist comments be made? Would it be more interesting or less because it deals with black perspectives? Uh, who would like it more guys or girls...?
Angy: I think guys would like the dirty aspects.
Hillary: Like when Joe's sleeping with Dorcas they'd be like, "All right, gettin' it on the side."
Angy: Sophomores strike me as really young--sophomore guys are immature--
TA: Well, let's take a class of AP junior and senior lit--who would like it more--guys or girls?
Hillary: I think girls would probably no matter what enjoy it the most because it's really...intimate.
TA: It is intimate.
Angy: It's almost like a love story.

From the girls' discussion, the girls seem to corroborate that high school girls would enjoy this novel more than high school guys. First of all, they seem to base their ideas on stereotypes: females enjoy love stories, appreciate intimacy;
male readers would be interested in sex, "the dirty aspects." However, traditional assumptions about male and female responses to intimacy and to the development of identity could support the girls' assumptions about responses to a female text. The "feminine style of writing," according to Irigaray, is "always fluid, always resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea, or concept" to the point that 'linear reading is no longer possible" (Rigney 31).

As indicated by my colleague's question, "Why do high school boys resist female literature," attempting to place an African-American female novel into the curriculum might meet with resistance from male readers. White males might resist the prospect of acknowledging the ideas, customs and struggles of minority racism if they feel threatened. Adam, a senior in the district, would argue with females that "the white male is the most oppressed of all people." Unsurprisingly, Adam was very opposed to "affirmative action." Perhaps Adam is playing what Feagin and Vera call the "zero-sum racial game," maintaining the common white notion that "when blacks gain, whites lose"(xii). The two critics also suggest that unfortunately, all "victims and perpetrators are losers" (xiii). Ironically, I heard no one speak of victimization and oppression as much at school as this white, college-bound, male.

However, according to Feagin and Vera, while white male supremacists often present themselves as victims, they are not the only ones to do so. "Opinion polls and media reports have emphasized that white men in all segments of society feel targeted and harassed and have a sense of losing political, social, and economic status" (Feagin 146). While the interviewed girls suggest that young male readers might be less interested in feminine texts, one wonders if a similar breakdown would occur when male and female readers address texts from a minority standpoint. And if so, why? Would white high school girls, more interested in texts which deal with relationships, also be more responsive to texts that present minority perspectives? Incorporation of African-American female texts into a dominantly white curriculum may seem to some "a
challenge to white men's power by those who have been oppressed...White men sense that they are losing legitimacy and power and wish to stop this process" (Feagin 146). A glimpse at the statistics mentioned in an earlier section of this paper which discuss statistical representation of minority literature compared to the literature of Western man, would make it difficult to believe Adam's plea that "the white male is the most oppressed of all people."

The girls also seem to feel that females would enjoy the text more because they would respond better to its "intimacy" and inter-relatedness. Their feelings are indicative of what Gardiner suggests are more flexible ego boundaries and the often significant "merger of self with others" that help to develop female identity (182). Gardiner feels that "female identity is a process," and more "flexible and relational than for men" (185). She feels that this difference in the flexibility and interaction of gender identity has "far-reaching consequences for the distinctive nature of writing by women" (183). The girls' comments seem to suggest that such consequences are also apparent in female readings. Morrison's multiple narration technique and her invitational ending encourage reader interaction with the text. Morrison describes her own work as containing holes and spaces so the reader can come into it....My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and I think that is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader...we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience. (qtd. in Rigney 25)

Female readers, more willing to mix their identity with another would perhaps more freely engage in the interpretive intimacy the text demands.

**Responding to the Female Text**

One of the most readily apparent non-traditional aspects of the text which offers specific gaps needing reader attention involves the dominant narrative voice, the intimacy and improvisatory nature of which make he/she/it one of
the many non-Western, feminine aspects of this text. Below is an example of the
dialogic approach shared with my readers as they attempt to deal with their
feelings about "the voice."

The Narrator

TA: The narrator--who or what do you think the narrator is? Is it male/female,
both/neither, the voice of the book, or jazz?

Angy: It's a woman.

Heidi: It's definitely a woman.

Hillary: It's a neighbor leaning out the window--a woman who's watching
everything that's going on.

Jen: Like on 227.

TA: What?

Heidi: She was an old black woman who watched the neighborhood--it was her
job. She knew everyone that came in and went out, and she knew what they did.

TA: Was she right or wrong about her judgments, or did she just watch?

Heidi: It was a comedy--it wasn't very deep.

TA: Do you take the narrator pretty seriously--is she someone you can trust?

Let's read the first page. Try to imagine the voice as male and see if it works for
you.

(We read it.)

Angy: It's a woman. She goes into detail too much--too flowery.

Heidi: A man would just say, "Yeah, she ran away, without any "windswept."

TA: Is the narrator too poetic to be a character--a gossip upstairs like the woman
on 227?

Jen: She rolls off words like "windswept" a bit easily. But she could be into
romance novels.

Hillary: I just saw her as a really neat old lady. Someone who'd had a lot of fun
when she was young--she's just romanticizing about life. It's almost as if the
narrator and I are sitting around, drinking a Pepsi and discussing the latest
Like many of the critics, in the girls' attempts to make sense of the narrative voice, they attempt to assign gender. In this brief discussion they are perhaps attempting to define what a feminine voice is, what it says. According to Gardiner,

Feminist critics have approached writing by women with an abiding commitment to discover what, if anything, makes women's writing different from men's and a tendency to feel that some significant differences do exist. The most common answer is that women's experiences differ from men's in profound and regular ways. (178)

However, as Gardiner further explains, feminist critics using this approach look for examples such as "recurrent imagery and distinctive content in writing by women, for example imagery of confinement" (Gardiner 178) and unsentimental descriptions of female issues. The girls in the discussion seem to be eager to identify with the voice, and perhaps therein envision it as female. Hillary's reader-response views the narrator as a real person with whom she could have intimate discussions. Again in their haste, are the girls relying on stereotypes? Women like "romance novels" and use romantic language' women "gossip," and the narrator is like a stock character from an eighties black sitcom? Indeed, it is probably a safe assumption that a group of black teenagers reading the text might not need to rely on a television stereotype to envision the narrator.

The eagerness of the girls to envision a narrator as a talkative woman with whom they might easily communicate again relates to Gardiner's discussion of female readers:

Both the reader and writer can relate to the text as though it were a person
with whom one might alternatively be merged empathically or from whom one might be separated and individuated....Through the relationship between the narrator and the reader, such fictions re-create the ambivalent experiences of ego violation and mutual identification that occur between mother and daughter. The woman writer allies herself intimately with her female reader through this identification. Together they explore what is public and what is private, what they reject and what they reflect. (Gardiner 188)

In this case, the "public and private" which will be explored, according to Hillary is, "The reasons why people do things."

Unlikely Relationships

These younger readers seemed fairly willing to embrace the many non-traditional techniques, relationships, and themes in the text. The students also discuss the atypical relationships in Jazz with emotional energy rather than distanced objectivity. In the following discussions they comment on how and why female characters are affected by their relationships with each other.

TA: How can people screw each other over like this and have everything be "hunky dory" at the end?
Heidi: (laughs) Her girlfriend Felice comes over and they're all getting along just great—*it's great*.
TA: ...and the fact that Violet hangs out with Alice?
Hillary: I know! I kept thinking--this is psycho!
Heidi: I think she disliked Violet, but was so attracted towards her too--wanting to know what was in her mind.
Angy: I thought they were just so much alike too--both their husbands cheated on them...
Hillary: I wondered if Alice would ever expose her secret contempt of her husband's former mistress. I thought it was very interesting that Alice would be...
able to condemn a woman for the same feelings she felt. Maybe she's trying to forget hers, and Violet is reopening the wound.

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TA: What incident made Violet think she didn't want to have kids?
Angy: Her mother's suicide.
TA: I don't quite understand the connection.
Heidi: I wonder if it wasn't a self guilt thing--did we cause our mother to jump in the well maybe just because she had all of us to take care of she couldn't handle it--did we cause our mother to do that? She doesn't want her kids to ever feel like that--does that make sense?

Heidi's comments, especially in the above dialogues, suggest that she is searching for explanations based in the relational and emotional, earlier both described as feminine. However, Heidi, unlike Angy, does not seem to reject her emotional searching for answers as an invalid form of interpretation.

Sexuality and Relationships

A topic which often entered our discussion was sexuality--involving everything from attitudes toward dating, affairs with older men, to sensual language. Part of the ease of discussing this topic for the females could have been that they were in a homogeneous group: five teenage females with a female teacher. Any discussion of Jazz at the high school level or any level will have to deal with this rather central theme. I told the girls Morrison's discussion of how she chose her title, which made them laugh a bit; however, it is not everyday one hears someone say "semen" aloud. I wanted to discover how students would respond especially to Dorcas' affair with Joe, and then later her murder. I was also wondering how they felt that students at school would feel about the sexual aspects of the plot and diction.
Morrison says,

Sex is difficult to write about because it's just not sexy enough. The only way to write about it is not to write much. Let the reader bring his own sexuality into the text. A writer I usually admire has written about sex in the most off-putting way. There is just too much information. If you start saying, "the curve of..." you soon sound like a gynecologist....Less is always better. Some writers think if they use dirty words they've done it. It can work for a short period and for a very young imagination, but after awhile it doesn't deliver...that (emotional) meaning to me is more tactically sensual than if I had tried to describe body parts. (Paris Review 108)

Ironically, Hillary, in her reading of The Bluest Eye found some of the "sexual" parts offensive. Hillary wrote, "I thought I was going to throw up when I read through the raping of Pecola, How demented. I am all for being up front and honest when writing, but GROSS. TOO EXPLICIT!" I am assuming that Hillary's strong response and frustration with the explicitness of the description is partially affected by being forced to read a graphic account of a painful event.

In the group discussion, Heidi offers the first voluntary jump to discussing the sexual language of the text by responding to my question of, "Why did Golden Gray/Morrison choose the words "berry black" and "liquid female?" to describe Wild?" with the terse response, "It's sensual." She was right, of course. Though the entire scene between Golden and Wild has sensual if not Oedipal implications, I had not analyzed that particular section for sensual diction. I was impressed by her observation. Following the Golden/Wild discussion we moved to another obviously sensual exploration of diction appearing earlier in the novel.

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. (Jazz 60)
Heidi, further showing she obviously understood what Morrison was doing with
her word choice, read it aloud and emphasized the sexual imagery: "Licking"
"stick" "beating his skins" "blowing off his horn" "you've got the right key, baby,
but the wrong key hole." "Put it in here." I told them I couldn't do that at
school—say, "OK, please emphasize the sexual parts," but I was kidding—I
probably could—it's a wonderful example of purposeful diction. Students can
read it and get it—juniors and seniors with an appreciation for style would
probably enjoy discussing what Morrison does with language. Heidi laughed, "I
think they'd love it."

Discussion of the Teenage Orphan/Mistress
In the girls' discussion of the actual affair, they seem quick to judge, but
slow to empathize with Dorcas. All of the girls participating in the reading have
a solid group of both female and male friends as well as supportive parents. For
example, I have met the parents of all of the girls, at speech contest or parent-
teacher conferences—of whom none are divorced, a statistical phenomenon at
our school. Perhaps the girls' supportive environments and higher social class
make Dorcas seem even more distant?
TA: How do you envision Dorcas?
Angy: When they say she has bad skin, do they mean light skin or acne?
Hillary: Acne.
Heidi: Yes, Joe sees hoofmarks—I love that—how it connected to his tracking and
his hunting days.
Hillary: I can't figure out what about the girl is so attractive to Joe. It's obvious
that it's something about her, or he would be on every other girl or woman that
walked by. Strange, I mean, even after she'd get all readied up—I still pictured
someone with long scraggly hair, and awful skin, and still unattractive.
Heidi: I pictured someone who tries so hard—who'll go and buy every tube of
make up someone offers and then they'll plaster themselves with make up
because they think that it makes them look pretty, and they'll put on too much
jewelry they think that makes them look nice.

Hillary: I know someone at school who tries so hard to fit in, and it makes her so
she's not even appealing.

TA: What are some things that are very important to Dorcas?

Heidi: Guys, clothes, materialistic stuff.

Heidi and Angy: Uhhh, probably not.

Angy: She overdoes it.

Heidi: I pictured someone I know who always seems to be trying to get sympathy
and reinforcement about her appearance—always is saying things like, "Oh, I'm
so fat," so you'll say, "Oh, no you're not."

Heidi: I also see Dorcas as someone who does anything she can to please guys.

Like in today's terms she'd sleep with the guy just to keep him.

It is interesting that though the girls recognize Dorcas' neediness and insecurity,
they have little compassion for her. Later they seem much more interested in
the more assured character of Felice. The girls do not address the fact of race in
their discussion, except that in a side comment someone said, "I thought of this
girl at school who is black, and who is like that." This was interesting, I thought,
that the girls could relate so little to a black girl that they chose to relate her to
one of the very few in our school.

Morrison stated in an interview, "You can imagine the adoration that an
older man can bring to a young girl, particularly at that age. It's so flattering and
you're so empowered by it, and you can manipulate him for attention and that's
terribly exciting" (Belles Lettres 42). Morrison's assumption about teenage girls
is consistent with her portrayal of Dorcas who says, "With Joe I pleased myself
because he encouraged me to. With Joe I worked the stick of the world, the
power in my hand" (Jazz 191). However, since when I was in high school, I thought thirty-year-olds were "ancient," the prospect of a fifty-year-old man as a sexual partner would have been far from appealing. So I tossed the question to my high school female readers, "Were you surprised that a seventeen-year-old girl would sleep with a significantly older guy that she hardly knew?" All of them responded with a quick, "No." Their reasons were different. Mindy thought, "Some of Dorcas's reason for going out with an older man could have something to do with her aunt's oppression. Dorcas was given no freedom, and so like any teenager, she did everything she could to prove her independence." Heidi connected Dorcas's attraction to Joe as indicative of her parental absence, "She never had a father figure--he's the love she missed." Angy felt that for Dorcas the choice was at least not surprising, "She seemed so weak to me--it didn't even strike me as something she'd think twice about." However, one might suggest that starting an affair with a man more than twice one's age is pretty "gutsy." When I asked the girls if they thought Dorcas had been flattered by the attention, I received another quick consensus, "Yeah." Hillary said, "I think she was just caught up in the moment," and then alluded to the inevitable break up, "and then she started to feel overwhelmed because she wasn't used to having that attention." This "attention" leads her to her grave and continues in her grave, as discussed in the following dialogue.

TA: Let's discuss jealousy--a student once told me that you can't be jealous of someone of the opposite sex--Instead, I'm going to be jealous of Hillary because she's looking at my man--or you, because you're looking better than me today. Is it illogical that Violet goes to cut Dorcas's face in the coffin--instead of Joe's cheating face? I mean, on top of this, Dorcas is 17 and Joe's 50--is this illogical that she would be angry with Dorcas?

Angy: No--that's exactly what happens most of the time--girls don't get mad at the boyfriend who's looking at every other girl, but they'll get mad at the girl who may not be doing anything."
TA: Did Joe LOVE her?
Hillary: No, I think he loved the thought of her.
Angy: I thought he reminded her...
Heidi: of Violet.
Angy:... of the young Violet, and that's why he was attracted to her.
TA: I don't get the feeling that anyone is that sorry...
Angy: ...that Dorcas is dead. Laughs--she (Violet) took the picture. She had tried to attack the girl's face before and now she wants a picture of what it looked like before. What's that about?

The girls picked up on the fact that Dorcas was many things to Joe and that Violet's response to her is interesting as well. As Hillary mentioned, this "attention" may have been a lot for this orphaned girl to handle. Harding suggests Dorcas bears a triple association for Joe: "Joe imagines that in choosing Dorcas his childhood lack will be fulfilled, that he can change at last from child to man and grow up and rise in love. He addressed Dorcas as lover, a motherless child, and a father...their relationship cannot sustain the weight of this triple association"(82).

TA: Why doesn't Dorcas leave when she knows he's coming for her? Does she know he'll kill her? Is she masochistic?
Hillary: I thought she just wanted to die--I thought she felt dirty sort of.
TA: How do you guys feel about the way the death scene is written?
Hillary: Well, it doesn't shock you or scare you.
TA: Why doesn't she tell?
Heidi: I don't know--as she's talking, though, it's like she begins to weigh Acton and Joe and begins to realize what Joe was to her too.
TA: What does she like about Acton?
Angy: (with sarcasm): "That he's shaping her into the perfect woman."
TA: Yes, she thinks, "I'm getting a personality now." Does this happen anymore??
All: (Laughter)... YES.
TA: Why? What kinds of things do boyfriends control for their girlfriends at school?
Heidi: Who you can be friends with. What you can do. They set rules and standards.
Angy: And it's usually double standards.
Heidi: I can think of a girl who's been controlled by all her boyfriends.
TA: Why would a girl want a guy to control her? Joe's the one who gives her gifts and says, "here take seconds..."
Angy: (laughs) That'd be great.
However, letting another "iceberg moment" slip by, I received no answer and didn't push for one as to why women let men control them. According to Erickson, because the female specialized role is that of childbearer, she seeks to fill and to protect this inner space rather than forge into outward accomplishments. Therefore, Gardiner asserts, a young woman (like Dorcas) spends adolescence looking for the man through whom she will fulfill herself (180). Obviously from their comments, a less self-assured group might have been more sympathetic with Dorcas' desire to be controlled by somebody "cool" and "popular" and who is desired by other women.

Likewise, this is perhaps an obvious spot where the facilitator's lack of distance may be affecting the discussion. Had my goals been different I might also have received interesting comments as to why men let women control them, and insights as to whether male and female desires for a loving "master" are similarly motivated.
Distance Versus Identity Themes: Responses to the Wronged Woman

Though the high school readers seemed to relate little to Dorcas and her desires for the attention of an older man and then for popularity, several of the girls said they enjoyed reading about Joe and Violet's young relationship. While Angy and Heidi analyze what happened in the relationship, Hillary responds emotionally, eagerly blaming Joe. She writes, "Joe disgusts me totally. Why does he think just because he's not 'getting it' at home he can go get it somewhere else? His wife is obviously not out cheating on him. What gives him the right? If he really doesn't feel the sparks with Violet anymore, he should leave her and get it over with." Angy, on the other hand, searches for reasons as to why the couple has fallen away from their originally functional relationship. She says, "Joe and Violet both lost something when they moved to the city. Maybe just their youthfulness. Like at one point she was talking about his thigh—his thighs had gone soft—how hard it once was, and now it's gotten soft."

Heidi: I think he needed to be needed in life—Violet really lived life on her own. Angy: Joe falls for Dorcas because she reminds him of the young Violet. It says something about what's a man supposed to do when his wife's sleeping with a doll?

While Angy recognizes Violet's unusual behavior, Hillary's writing continues to show further identification with the young Violet: "While Violet relives the times of picking cotton and meeting Joe I could almost feel myself there, sleeping under the stars by night and doing back-breaking work by day, as they did. I think it's very sweet the way she follows Joe all over for love, instead of returning to her family." Hillary writes of her later empathy for Violet: "I feel very bad for Violet while she's sitting in the drugstore or wherever. What a depressing life, to have to sit and baby a milkshake while your husband at least has the pleasure of knowing he had a good time for awhile. It's so depressing when Violet thinks about all the things Joe let Dorcas. And she thinks of all the
prizes he won and must have indulged Dorcas with. What a terrible feeling to know your husband loves someone else, yet holds on to you for old time's sake."

In her response, Hillary is employing what Holland calls an "identity theme" which reveals the "personal role" in reading, writing, teaching, etc. "Each self possesses and competes with the text using what it wants and needs, discarding, even distorting the rest" (qtd. in Gardiner 181). Hillary's response seems to suggest that she is indeed identifying with Violet much more than with Dorcas. She seems to relate quite romantically and sentimentally with the adventures of the young Violet and to empathize strongly with the mistreated Violet. She seems to "discard" the fact that even in the first telling of Violet's youthful romance, Violet admits that Joe is merely a "substitute" for her vision of Golden Gray, the fact that she had little to return "home" to, and that Violet was basically a silent woman suffering from a personality disorder when Joe began seeing Dorcas.

However, Hillary's romantic perspective toward the original marriage relationship seems not that far from the picture of warm, dancing reconciliation Morrison offers at the end of the novel. In our discussion Hillary says, "I love that part when they were talking about when they were younger, and then I thought it was so sad how they, they lost the spark. It was like the two of them needed to be re-introduced. They had grown so far apart that even talking to each other was scary for them." I asked, "So is this what happens? Are they reintroduced? Felice brings music and they're dancing again. It amazes me that after somebody is killed, there's been infidelity, they're dancing together in their apartment—in front of the murdered girl's best friend?"

Heidi suggested, "It's like Dorcas died so they could live—otherwise they would have gone on separated." Hillary agrees, "Dorcas is like a sacrifice." Harding and Martin agree with Heidi and Hillary, seeing Dorcas's death as a "sacrificial ritual" with more than one participant (147). Also in concurrence, the "right sacrifice" according to Jardine consists
not in inflicting violence or in consenting to the attendant guilt, but in accepting both at the same time and feeling the purifying influence of both. Hence following upon their destruction of Dorcas, the Trace couple inaugurates a ritual of acceptance focusing on the photo of the dead girl. This painful period of reconciliation prepares for the arrival of a substitute for Dorcas, a more hopeful representative of the generation of black survivors, as her name, Felice, evocative of positive energy and self-acceptance suggests. (147)

Harding and Martin also feel "Dorcas represents the superficial, exploitative, and suicidal aspects of violence invading the souls of all black survivors" (147). Dorcas then is a character fraught with complex symbolism; my white female readers related much more readily to the more hopeful Felice.

Discussion of Felice: The Makings of a Young Feminist Heroine or An Episode for Rikki Lake?

While the girls offered no positive comments about Dorcas, they expressed a rather feminist admiration for Felice.

TA: Well, what do you guys think of Felice?
Heidi: She's smart. You don't actually know what all has happened until Felice comes back and tells it all.

TA: I didn't care that much about Felice when I read it the first time, I thought it was interesting that she reentered the story, but she seemed so much less tragic, I guess her story pulled me in less.
Heidi: That whole ring story was just funny—the mother taking it just for spite—and what was kind of neat though was how she was going to tell her mom that she was proud of her for her act—not the ring.

TA: Did you think Felice had some things figured out—did you admire her?
Heidi: Oh yeah—she knew things about people that they didn't.
Hillary: I kind of felt funny when I read the part about Joe, Violet and Felice all
sitting around, family-like.

TA: What do you think of Felice's attitude toward guys/relationships? Felice obviously does not admire Dorcas's attitude toward relationships.

I didn't have a fellow for the party. I went along with Dorcas and Acton. Dorcas needed an alibi and I was it. We had just renewed our friendship after she stopped seeing Mr. Trace and was running around with her "catch." Somebody a lot of girls older than us wanted and had too. Dorcas like that part—that other girls were jealous, that he chose her over them; that she had won. That's what she said. "I won him. I won!" God. You'd think she had been in a fight. What the hell did she win? He treated her bad, but she didn't think so. She spent her time figuring out how to keep him interested in her. Plotting what she would do to any girl who tried to move in. That's the way all the girls I know think: how to get, then hold on to, a guy and most of that is having friends who want you to have him, and enemies who don't. I guess that's the way you have to think about it. But what if I don't want to? (Jazz 216)

TA: What is that desire to have the man other people want about?

Hillary: Some people feel like they just never have enough.

TA: How is Felice different?

Angy: She wants to be independent—she wants to have her own identity—she doesn't want to be just "his Wife" she wants to be herself, self-sufficient.

TA: How does Felice feel about Joe? Let me set up their meeting alone. Do you remember when you would baby-sit before you could drive? I'd hate it when...

Angy: The dad would drive you home!

TA: Forced conversations—you know them but not very well—only well enough to take care of their kids. Being alone with "him" was always a bit weird.

Angy: Awful. Ugh. I'm not sure why.

TA: Well, Felice and Joe in the living room—maybe I'm a weird reader—but, to be a girl alone with that adult male can be a little weird intimidating, but here's
Felice alone with Joe, with the man who is...

Angy: her friend’s ex-lover.

Hillary: and murderer.

TA: I’d also be wondering what he thinks of me.

Hillary: I’d wonder if he thinks that—like he did with Dorcas.

TA: (reading)

Mr. Trace didn’t sit at the window this time, he sat next to me on the sofa.

"Felice, that means happy. Are you?"

"Sure. No."

"Dorcas wasn’t ugly. Inside or out."

I shrugged. "She used people"

"Only if they wanted her to."

"Did you want her to use you?"

"Must have"

I wished I hadn’t taken by sweater off. My dress stretches across the top no matter what I do. He was looking at my face, not my body, so I don’t know why I was nervous alone in the room with him. (Jazz 212)

I DON’T KNOW WHY!?" (sarcastically)

Angy: (Laughs) But he’s not psycho like that. He’s like such a normal guy.

TA: They talked earlier that if you were in trouble on the street he’s the one you’d run to. Is it even likely that someone like could do something like this—could kill—could start an affair with a girl that’s 17? Think of someone you know who’s fifty.

Angy: My dad.

TA: OK, your dad starts an affair with a seventeen year-old girl.

Angy: We can’t do this--laughs --we can’t use my dad.

TA: Ok, well think of someone else’s dad. Just to have like someone that age—someone else’s dad—just start.

Hillary: Ha. This is like Rikki Lake!
TA: It is. Or is it? That's what I'm wondering—is this possible, likely or is it like Rikki Lake? Is it just way out there—or could a nice guy have an affair with a girl, kill her, and then get back together with his wife?

Or, I could ask myself, does it have to be realistic? This is fiction, after all. Morrison describes the situations that she puts her characters in as ones of great duress and pain, you know, I "call their hand." And, then when I see them in life threatening circumstances or see their hands called, then I know who they are. And some of the situations are grotesque. These are not your normal, everyday lives. They are not my normal everyday life, probably not many people's. (qtd. in Jones 141)

This hand-calling strategy coupled with people leading atypical lives certainly describes Jazz as well. It is not up to us to decide whether or not this group involved in a 1920s fictional incident of infidelity and murder might end up on a 1990s talk show arguing about their motives in front of all of America. Is it inappropriate to ask oneself, or one's students, "Do you think this could really happen?" What are we supposed to think about this novel's adulterous murderer and ambiguous ending? Morrison suggests,

But what if something really terrible happens, can you still—so that it is always a push towards the abyss somewhere to see what is remarkable, because that's the way I find out what is heroic. That's the way I know why such people survive, who went under, who didn't, what the civilization was because quiet as it's kept much of our business, our existence here, has been grotesque. (qtd. in Jones 141)

I revise my approach, returning to the safety of the narrator's story.

TA: You could tell the same story so many times—so many ways—choosing to emphasize different details. This story is one of pain and recovery. How do people get through seemingly impossible pain and start to work again?

Hillary: In this case...they were all hurt so badly—I think Violet realized Joe was hurt just as much as probably she was—so they helped each other. It wasn't just
like one person being totally hurt and the other saying—"Tough, get over it."

The readers then try to formulate some sort of a young feminist understanding of Violet's reaction to Joe's infidelity.

Hillary: I think it must be an aged story--maybe back then things like this were more accepted?
Angy: Women were much more silenced then.
Hillary: Back then you had your man and stuck by him no matter what.
TA: Would Violet have walked now?
Angy: I hope she would.

TA: Female African-American texts are sometimes criticized for having a magical, happy ending--do you have a problem with the happy ending? Or don't you see it as happy? Is it happy or bittersweet or what?
Mindy: Why were people so open and forgiving? Or were they just trying to keep their feelings hidden?
Hillary: I just see it as life goes on--I don't see it as happy--I don't have a descriptive word for it, just people putting their lives back together.
Angy: It's almost as if they're too far in along in their lives to start over, so they're going to just keep going.
TA: "Shit happens" and you get to a point where you have to just adjust?
Hillary: It's not like they forgot about it, but they worked through it and went on.

TA: Do you think they recaptured some of that that they'd had?
Hillary: I guess that's what it's all about. All of their missing links are filled. They're whole, fulfilled.

Morrison said, "I don't shut the doors at the end of books. There is a resolution of a sort but there are always possibilities--choices, just knowing what those choices are or being able to make a commitment about those choices or knowing something that you would never have known had you not have had that experience--meaning the book" (qtd. in Jones 136). How does one deal with
an inconclusive ending? "By being frustrated in their attempts to seek closure in responding to poems, readers recognize the limitations of their own attempts to impose closure" (Beach 29). Hillary seems to sense more closure at the end of the novel than I do; again, perhaps she is empathizing more with Joe and Violet, while I at that point am more worried about Dorcas and the needy narrator.

White Female Readers: Race and Reading in the "White Bubble"

"Not only do African Americans have racial experience; white Americans do too."  

Dwight McBride

With my skin color (or lack of) do I automatically bring to a text all of the biases and privileges of my race? Critic Robert Crosman feels that the reader's freedom is limited both by the elements in the story and by his cultural codes; however, Crosman also feels that the reader is "free to select which codes he applies, which elements he constitutes," and, therefore, in practice is "no more constrained by them than putting on a pair of sneakers compels me to run." Instead, the reader is merely "forced" to apply some strategy, to look at some elements of the text, the essence of reading, "and in so doing he joins a community of which all other readers, and the author himself, are members—he enters, that is, a dialogue, all of whose voices speak within him, all of whose roles he plays" (214).

So does this mean that the white identity patterns that are shared by my interpretive community can be set aside—like a pair of unused running shoes while I try to interpret Morrison's Jazz? Can I ask my students to do the same thing: "OK, now everyone put aside your intentional and unintentional white biases, we're going to read some African American literature." Crosman continues by saying that the ambiguity of literary texts demands that individual readers fill "hermeneutic gaps, with their own individual psychological makeups, their own 'identity themes,' to borrow Holland's phrase." However,
Crosman insists that the reader and text do not exist in a void. "Rather, they are framed by a vast series of linguistic, literary, and cultural conventions of interpretation, some of which, at least, readers cannot help knowing and using, since that is what 'reading' is" (214.) These numerous conventions or codes, however, are often so "mutually contradictory, that the individual reader still exercises considerable freedom in the way he interprets, merely by his choice and emphasis among the conventions" (214).

Which codes can I take off/put on? Are those that encompass my "racial community" removable? Which codes should I reject when reading, for example, Morrison's Jazz? Marilyn Mobley's description of Toni Morrison's fiction suggests:

The author lyrically moves us through uncontested terrains, exposing the difficult truths that reside there and offering us opportunities to join her on a journey to discover more about ourselves....When Morrison speaks, reads, or writes, we must pay attention, knowing that everything that comes from her is informed by a compelling sense of history, and extraordinary love of language, and full knowledge of the power of the word to destroy and create. (628)

Where can my students and I get the special shoes I need for this "journey?" For a start, I need to acknowledge the difference in the cultural context; I need to recognize that I am "a white feminist critic" from the rather homogeneous state of Iowa. Critic Mae Henderson explains that those of us who do not come from the various cultural contexts out of which Afro-American writing springs (or one could suggest any minority literature), spring, need to recognize the "diverse 'otherness' of these texts;" we need to pay special attention to the "context" from which the literature comes "in order that we may grow nearer to an appreciation of their intention and achievement" (qtd. in Wisker 6).

I began the discussion of our racially-influenced readings of the Jazz by telling the students, "Perhaps most American texts are written with white
readers in mind—there are a lot of white readers. However, Morrison says, (paraphrasing) 'Not me, I'm writing for black readers and if white readers get something out of it—that's ok, but that's not how I measure my success.' So I want to talk about how you feel being a white reader, and about her intent.

Carby warns against the "Hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women" which "often takes the concerns of middle-class, articulate white women as a norm" (17). In light of this I am frustrated by my above suggestion as it basically says, "White people are the norm," and in our homogenous group, the views of white women do present an overwhelming majority. However, inversely, in the discussion I wanted the girls to consider how their reading is affected by their assumptions about whiteness and blackness.

In their response to Joe's lack of punishment, the girls' white readings begin to show through. I expressed earlier my frustration with Joe's lack of punishment, the quick recovery of all around after a teenager's murder. Bawer also says, "Joe is never arrested, though everyone knows he's guilty. Or is he? For to Morrison, all her protagonists would appear to be victims, the seeds of whose common tragedy lies in their ancestors' bondage and their own past misfortunes" (11). When I asked the girls for their impressions of this supposed lack of justice, Mindy wrote in a journal entry that she wondered, "Why there weren't any charges pressed—not only for murder, but for statutory rape?" Heidi felt that Alice didn't press charges because she "knows human nature—she knows they're going to suffer—there wasn't anything she could do to make things worse for him." While Mindy's questions show a 1990s white feminist desire for punishment for Joe's mistreatment of Dorcas, and Heidi is crediting Alice with insight, neither girl directly addresses the fact that Alice is responding as a black person, unsupported by a white legal system in the 1920s. Unfortunately, according to Frankenberg, even in the late twentieth century, there remains a "problematic relationship with the police that leaves many
communities of color with, at the very least, a sense that they lack legal and physical protection" (Frankenberg 60). Tapes displaying the beating of Rodney King and the racism of Mark Furhman confirm Frankenberg's anxieties. In Jazz when Dorcas is dying, Felice recognizes the probable futility of trying to get the police or ambulance to come to her young, black, female friend's aid.

Mindy wrote of our students' possible responses to the border of white oppression circumscribing the characters in Jazz: "I think that people just don't want to know the truth. They don't want to believe that things like this really happened." Mindy's comments echo Shoshanna Felman's discussion of how acknowledging "ignorance" affects education. 'Teaching, like analysis, has to deal not so much with lack of knowledge as with resistances to knowledge. Ignorance, suggests Lacan, is a "passion"...Ignorance, in other words, is nothing other than a desire to ignore" (Felman 30). Resistant white students are similar in many cases to Oedipus: "it is not a simple lack of information but the incapacity—or the refusal—to acknowledge one's own implication in the information" (Felman 30). However, while I would agree with Mindy that "not wanting to know the truth" may be a desire for some white students, this willful ignorance concerning issues of race doesn't plague all students in our district or anywhere.

As Wayne Booth says in "Who is Responsible in Ethical Criticism, and What For?" "Readers must always in a sense decide whether to accept a given responsibility. We can if we choose—as Swift said, to 'employ the pages of the greatest classics as bumwipes'" (253). Despite the author's or the teacher's intentions, each student reader has a decision to make. bell hooks also quotes Friere as saying,

Students who want to learn hunger for a space where they can be challenged intellectually. Students also suffer, as many of us who teach do, from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life, unsure even about whether it is important to stay alive. They long for a context
where their subjective needs can be integrated with study, where the primary focus is a broader spectrum of ideas and modes of inquiry, in short a dialectical context where there is serious and rigorous critical exchange. (qtd. in hooks 76)

As mentioned earlier, Friere also calls "education the practice of freedom" (hooks 75), and in this light, the work of any teacher committed to the full self-realization of students is "necessarily and fundamentally radical;" because ideas are not neutral, to teach in a way that liberates, expands consciousness, or awakens is "to challenge domination at its very core" (hooks 75). As mentioned earlier, if being white means basically not having to think about it, encouraging Caucasian students to consider the perspective of African-American female is perhaps "radical."

Crossing racial lines in her journal, Hillary offered intense emotional responses to several of the examples of racism in the novel: "The way Miss Vera's parents react to her situation is so—disgusting. I guess, although, it mirrors the thinking of this time period; how can people be so ignorant? The racism in this paragraph is so startling..." She also notes, "The way Golden Gray deals with the black woman, black people in general is very disturbing considering he is part black." Later Hillary suggests, "It's nice when Golden Gray starts to realize that his father is a real person, the person who will fill his emptiness, not just a 'nigger.' Oh, I hate that word!!" However, although her passionate frustration with racism is admirable, I would like to see Hillary push more for attempting to interpret the complex question of why Golden Gray would hate the part of himself which is black. In the conversation below, the girls discuss the damage due to a white standard, which ironically was caused by this half-black little boy.

Heidi: Can I ask a question? Violet's grandmother told her about Golden Gray--so it was always this perfect figure--she can't measure up to these standards---Golden was perfect in the eyes of her Grandma.
TA: What do you think Golden represents—what type of standard?
Angy: White people?
TA: One critic said that when she tries to cut Dorcas' face in the coffin she's lashing out at the image of someone else...
Heidi: She's lashing out at Golden Gray? Ooooo.
TA: Why would she want to lash out at Golden?
Heidi: She felt like she never really measured up to that standard of perfection that her grandmother talked about.
TA: And what standard is that? What does Golden Gray represent? It's like in *The Bluest Eye*. Hillary, what Golden Gray-type figure did one of the girls obsess about?
Hillary: Shirley Temple—it's like the way Pecola's mother treats her. It's deplorable. I mean, it's sad that her mother needs that job so badly that she has to neglect her own child's needs and baby the spoiled brat girl.

Looking back, this again might have been a "tip of the iceberg moment" such as Frankenberg discusses in her interviewing—moments when you could push the speaker and perhaps get more, but something holds the facilitator back. I wished I'd asked if the girls thought that their mother/daughter relationships were privileged, easier, better due to the fact that they are not of minority backgrounds. In the discussion that follows I attempt to get the readers to analyze how their whiteness affects their reading of this minority text.

TA: How does being a white female reader affect our reading? Talk to me about racism. Would our reading be different if we were black females?
Angy & Hillary: Yeah.
TA: How?
Angy: Well, you'd be able to relate to the history part better—you can't understand what racism feels like unless it happens to you.
Hillary: When the author talks about what it was like to be segregated, black and whites, it was sort of difficult to follow—to understand the feelings.

Hillary: I always thought racism happened only white people to minorities, but I've had things said to me that are very racist, like a person at school says, "You're so white," "That's so white." What kind of statement is that to make? I'm a very non-racist person, and it really hurt me. The first time she said it I thought we were friends. It really hurt.

Hillary's comment reminds me of one from hooks' essay:
Concern with how and what students are learning validates and legitimates a focus, however small, on personal confession in classroom discussion. I encourage students to relate the information they are learning to the personal identities they are working to socially construct, to change, to affirm. (hooks 79)

However, despite the emotional content of Hillary's statement, Feagin and Vera would counter by saying that black racism, and in this case Vietnamese racism, "does not exist." They perceptively define the term "racism" in the following quotation:

Racism is more than a matter of individual prejudice and scattered episodes of discrimination. There is no black racism because there is no centuries-old system of racialized subordination and discrimination designed by African Americans to exclude white American from full participation in the rights, privileges, and benefits of this society. Black (or other minority) racism would require not only a widely accepted racist ideology directed at whites but also the power to systematically exclude whites from opportunities and rewards in major economic, cultural, and political institutions. (ix)

However, though I would like to agree with Feagin and Vera, what would one call what happened to Hillary; perhaps we need a term for this? Also, convincing the individuals who were victims of the 1,299 FBI acknowledged
hate crimes committed toward whites in 1993, and other Caucasians who have been verbally or physically attacked due to their skin color that there is no such thing as minority racism might be difficult. Hillaiy's expression of concern with being labeled a racist led to my sharing a similar concern with the students.

TA: I'm uneasy because there's a black feminist criticism movement that says that white feminists don't get it—that white feminists have ignored the whole race issue. So I'm thinking of a little sub-heading for my thesis: "What's a White Woman Doing Writing her Thesis on Toni Morrison?" Because I mean--do I have any hope? Should I teach African American literature to students at a predominantly white school? Yes? No? Why?

Hillary: I thought it was great, I mean. I like history, and so this is sort of, I mean it wasn't all history, but...

TA: Well, it's opened a certain period for me and a certain perspective—like the twenties...

Angy: The twenties we hear of were the roaring twenties—parties...

Hillary: ...white women—flappers—that's all I think about—white guys decked out in top hats. I don't ever think of black people being involved except for in jazz.

TA: It is interesting to get something from the black perspective. Jazz, music, black people were a big deal for the period but so marginalized. (Morrison sees black people "whose culture was evolving different things and being constantly invented and improvised" as the "core and shape" of that period (Belles Lettres 41).

Hillary: In history last year all we were taught about were black people in like the work area—like you don't hear about any other social aspect of their lives—because I guess they just weren't into that.

Angy: It's like they say you can never take the information in history books as facts—because you don't know exactly whose perspective you're getting—it's usually pretty limited.
That's progress. I would never have questioned a *history* book in high school. Morrison makes a similar comment, "That's why I can't trust much research when I do novels because most of the information I want is not written. I mean, I can't go to most history books" (qtd. in Jones 134). Mobley says we need to appreciate the sense of history that undergirds all of Morrison's writing, and specifically encourages us to notice the focus of *Jazz*, which "resonates with the sights and sounds of the 1920's,"

the Harlem Renaissance, a period relatively distant from the days of slavery, a period when African-American classical music—jazz—transformed American culture...this novel is as much about a marriage and extramarital affair gone bad as it is about the ways in which black people coped with the infectious hope and deferred dreams that accompanied the Great Migration from the South to the North. (621)

Also, Hillary's comment that she wanted to know more of the social aspects of the period than what she received in history class, perhaps is a feminist inclination which connects to Morrison's proposition that "narrative is 'the principle way in which human knowledge is made accessible" (Lauter 57). The same "westering ideology" which has designated the manner in which American history has been written and American History has been taught has been used to designate artistic periods. The works of women and minorities, though often with vastly differing agendas from those sharing their westerly era, are forced to fit (or not fit) into the ideology of their contemporaries. Wisker says that it is very important in our reading, teaching and studying of black women's writing to ensure "recognition of cultural and historical context" (5).

Morrison's unusual narrative technique calls attention to the cultural and historical context of African Americans. Marilyn Mobley feels that Morrison's weaving in and out of "the spaces of the baseline narrative" invites the reader to visualize the circumstances that "brought thousands of black people to Harlem in the 1920's, that brought Violet and Joe Trace together, that brought Joe and the
eighteen-year-old Dorcas together, that drove Joe to pawn his rifle for a .45 and to shoot her at a dance," and that caused Dorcas not to tell, and that led Violet with a knife to Dorcas' coffin (Mobley 621).

When encountering Jazz, both the cultural history and the specific fictional tragedy of the central group encourage an emotional, interactive reading. Such a reading is similar to what Sartre suggests that the writer requires of the reader:

the gift of his whole person, with his passion, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values...to give himself generously?...Must I not also accept the responsibility to enter into a serious dialogue with the author about how his or her values conflict with mine? To decline the gambit, to remain passive in the face of the author's strongest passions and deepest convictions is truly condescending, insulting and finally irresponsible. (1178)

After reading the section of Jazz in which Alice dwells on the violence toward black women, Hillary responds to this topic with which the author seems strongly concerned, "This reading is very disturbing!! I never realized how disgusting the things that happened to black women were. The constant patronizing must have been so--degrading!! How could they live with themselves?!?" Hillary's emotional attempt to deal with what she's learning of the oppression of black women seems to suggest Sarte's recommended intense interaction with textual body. Also, Gardiner might suggest Hillary is offering a female reading: the "difficulties in learning how to respond to social rules for what being female means in our culture" (189).

Hillary's Response Journal

Besides offering fuel for interesting dialogues between students, Jazz also lends itself well to personal analysis in a response journal. Gardiner says that for female readers the relationship between self and what one reads and writes in
"personal and intense", and thus, female readers are more likely to ask, "what does this say about my life?" (185). Hillary worked through her varying interpretations of the characters in her response journal. In Richard Beach's *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism*, he discusses Mailloux's idea of the reader's susceptibility to incorrect interpretations. "Readers will sometimes realize that their own initial judgments have been misguided. While we begin by trusting the narrator's impressions later we may doubt them."

This later encourages readers to deconstruct their own judgment, creating a sense of ethical concern. Hillary offers a variety of responses to Joe in her journal. She begins by saying, as quoted earlier, that Joe "disgusts her" for cheating on Violet; later she responds to his incessant crying at the window, by calling him "a slobbering pervert!"

However, Hillary's response to Joe softens after she reads the Wild section of the novel. She likes the way he chose his name, finding it realistically "childlike" and "sad." She also pities Joe's state of separation from his mother. "Joe's reaching out to his 'mother' makes him seem so naked. Like he's been transformed from someone seemingly sure of himself to an unknowing child. Pitiful." Gardiner suggests that as female readers we oscillate between transient empathic identifications with these characters and defenses against them, defining ourselves through them in the process" (188). By looking at her own responses to Joe, Beach suggests that Hillary might become aware of own her own beliefs and attitude are shaping her reading experience. "From worrying over external facts, the discourse moves the reader to judge first internal motivation and then moral responsibility"(22). I assume by "moral responsibility" Beach means that I need to ask if my judgments about the character's and about their internal motivations have been fair, or have they merely indicated the privilege and bias with which I view the world?

In an emotional journal entry, Hillary also admits to altering her perspective of Dorcas after reading Chapter Eight: "Learning about the real
Dorcas in this chapter is sort of disappointing. I have had a stereotypical thought of her in my head, which, of course, is not at all on target.” Concerning Joe she says, “This is all so difficult—to decide how I feel about these characters! One minute they’re cheating and next they’re being cheated on!” Hillary’s response echoes that of Terry Otten, author of "Horrific Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction," when he writes,

Morrison works the gray areas avoiding the comfortable absolution and resolution that can satisfy or reassure most readers. There is an underlying strain of cruelty and violence that can erupt in her most sympathetic and victimized characters and compel them to inflict frightful destruction on seemingly innocent people. They seem at once capable of enormous criminality and unmitigated love. They demand both condemnation and admiration, both respect and fear. (651)

Hillary’s responses are typical of those demanded by an ambiguous, reader-response encouraging text like Jazz. As Beach suggests, as readers move through the text their expectations are either fulfilled or frustrated requiring a "continual shifting and revising of perceptions which may cause reader uncertainty" (22). In general, I find Hillary’s answers emotionally charged, and deeply prompted by the actions of the characters. She obviously is more concerned with relating to the actions and struggles of the characters than in trying to analyze the author's narrative techniques or motives. Though I would encourage instructors to wait until students’ senior years in high school to teach Jazz, I was pleased with Hillary's sophomore encounter with both Jazz and The Bluest Eye.

Jennifer’s Critical Comparison

While sophomore Hillary’s writing, full of searching, opinions, and judgments suggests that she is certainly an active and emotional reader, involved in the continual re-examination of shifting perspectives in an
"ongoing interpretive interaction" (Beach 22), Jennifer, a senior in the Talented and Gifted program, writes a formal essay, in which her insights might suggest that she is a more "informed reader"--someone "who is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of literary discourses, including everything from the most local of devices (figures of speech, etc.) to whole genres" (Murfin 257). Though many high school educators might suggest that a novel like *Jazz* is too difficult for high school students, bell hooks also quotes Friere as saying,

> Students who want to learn hunger for a space where they can be challenged intellectually. Students also suffer, as many of us who teach do, from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life, unsure even about whether it is important to stay alive. They long for a context where their subjective needs can be integrated with study, where the primary focus is a broader spectrum of ideas and modes of inquiry, in short a dialectical context where there is serious and rigorous critical exchange. (76)

Jennifer's adroit comparison of two difficult novels indicates the eagerness for intellectual challenge of students at the secondary level.

A project like Jennifer's also makes progress concerning the issues of inclusiveness and representation.

The inclusion of minority students in the classroom changes what the professor and the other students feel free to think and say, and that is more often to the good than to the bad in a society plagued by bigotry. The inclusion on the syllabus of Harriet Jacobs next to Henry David Thoreau...Virginia Woolf next to Alice Walker, changes the context in which we interpret both and the kinds of understandings we can produce about them. The subaltern cannot speak if she is never let into the room. (Jay 26)

As mentioned earlier, though it is difficult to place a minority student in each
room in our high school, Jennifer in a critical essay placed Jazz, a contemporary, minority text next to Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights. Jen notes several similarities in the character development and narrative techniques of the novels, saying, first, that both texts "tell the tales of men and women whose lives are unified to such an extent that they can never be put asunder. Questions are raised, but the answers are unattainable. Love is lost, then found; the past is revealed." She then comments on the unusual narrative style of both novels:

Each author, in her own way, expresses her rage at the inconsistency and occasional intolerability of life through her characters' tribulations...Like the work of Morrison, Bronte's tale is cyclic. Narrated by Mr. Lockwood, as recounted by Ellen Dean, the novel is "a complex narrative structure built upon a series of interlocking memories and perceptions" according to critic Lawrence Laban.

Jennifer continues to discuss narrative similarity saying,

Occasionally Nelly interjected her opinion of a certain person's actions or speech during her accounts to Mr. Lockwood. These instances are especially suggestive of the idea that, as Laban says, "all human perception is limited and failed" because even the reader is periodically compelled to disagree with her assessment of the situation.

And in Jazz a similar editorialized narration is offered--we hear the retelling of Golden Gray several times--and suspect Felice won't be killed or Joe or Violet in the end.

Jennifer feels that at the end of Morrison's novel, "the soul and motivations of man remain a mystery." She feels this is displayed through the narrator and through the character of Joe. "Admitting she does not really know those people about whom she speaks, the narrator, an unnamed old gossip, remarks, 'they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of...To this moment,' she continued, 'I'm not sure what (Joe's) tears were for" (221). Most likely, Joe was not sure either.
According to Jennifer,

Although they dwell in the same body, the heart and mind are often strangers to one another. Man's inability to understand his own soul makes an absolute comprehension of others an impossibility. Attempting to grasp the motives behind the actions of others (and their own, as well), the characters in *Jazz* struggle to understand answers they do not even know the questions to.

Jennifer cites critic David Gates who feels that the narrator's confession of not knowing the characters is a confession of weakness on Morrison's part, that "the character got away from her" (66). She then asserts, "it is far more likely (and fitting) that the gossip's ignorance is representative of man's universal ignorance of the heart." Jen also notes the ambivalence we feel toward the characters in *Jazz*, one often similarly felt by readers confronting Heathcliff and Cathy. Jen says, "Everyone has been wronged and has done wrong. No one is innocent, yet no one is entirely to blame. Shadows of gray, right-meets-wrong rhetoric are enhanced by the shadows of Harlem, and the sweet, dark, lulling wail of jazz clouded the mind still further."

In conclusion, both girls, Hillary and Jennifer, address the ambivalence they feel toward the characters and text of *Jazz*, to different ends. This is characteristic of reader-response criticism. Wolfgang Iser feels that during the process of reading, there is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection...the impressions that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual but only within the limits imposed by the written text as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The "stars" in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. (1224)
Reflections on the Students' Interaction with *Jazz*

"It is the nature of people working for revolutionary change to be optimistic about the prospect of redirecting the future."

Patrocinio Schweickart

What does the inclusion of this chapter of student responses accomplish? As Frankenberg asked herself, "What does it all mean, anyway, when the talking is done, the microphone cable is rewound, and the tapes are labeled and transcribed?" (41) Hopefully it has shown the usefulness and the struggle one might encounter when reading *Jazz* with Caucasian students. Though it is admittedly a difficult novel for many readers, as displayed in the research, those students who are eager to be challenged at the high school level can become involved in interesting discussions concerning the novel's style, characters, and themes. Likewise, in our school with little diversity and with few minority authors represented in the curriculum, reading and discussing *Jazz* provided, at least this handful of young, Caucasian female readers with insights into the alternative view of American history being created by Toni Morrison and other women of color. I have included a copy of the questions I composed and provided for each student as an optional study guide. Several of the students had considered and answered many of the questions; Hillary answered all of them in writing.

I was impressed with how this novel lent itself effectively to several mediums and levels of education. Jennifer's critical analysis, Hillary and Mindy's reading journals and the group discussion all added new insights to my interpretation of *Jazz*, encouraging my desire to teach challenging minority literature to motivated high school students. As the girls suggested, and I agree, students in advanced high school literature courses would be more adequately prepared to respond to this complex novel which deals with adult themes. If I were to teach an Advanced Placement Literature course or any college
preparatory literature course in my district in the near future I would try to incorporate *Jazz* into the curriculum. Until then, I will continue to recommend that other educators working with such students consider adding *Jazz* to their syllabus.

Would it be possible to teach this novel to the "Caucasian masses" of our school district in some other level of required English? To do so effectively, I would suggest approaching the dialogue with a questioning technique, demanding students to examine their logic and assertions. I would certainly use a study guide to assist students with *Jazz* in a traditional classroom setting, such as I provided for the volunteer students. In daily discussions we would address questions concerning plot, narrative style and theme which would undoubtedly arise along the way. In their perhaps more resistant response to Morrison's style and to her privileging of the female and African-American perspective, the use of questioning would encourage introspective dialogue.

Such a method was used by Socrates who told his student, "You see, Meno, that I am not teaching...anything, but all I do is question" (qtd. in Felman 24). Placing similar value on questioning, Collins notes that Black feminist historian, Elsa Barkley Brown wrote, "it was my mother who taught me how to ask the right questions--and all of us who teach and do this thing called scholarship on a regular basis are fully aware that asking the right questions is the most important part of the process" (qtd. in Collins 29). The technique of teaching via questioning indeed has Western (Socratic) roots, and can be an effective crossing point for black feminist and more "traditional" approaches to literature. Teaching is the act of fighting ignorance through questioning. But what questions should one ask? According to Socrates if "all learning is recollection," ignorance is "a kind of forgetting, forgetfulness; ignorance is linked to what is not remembered, what will not be memorized....Ignorance is not a passive state of absence: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information" (Felman 30). Ignorance--the act of not wanting to learn or remember--must be acknowledged when an
instructor attempts to counteract racism, or to explore privilege and oppression from a minority and/or majority perspective.

Confronted with a minority text which deals with ideas which deny the privileging of Western male thought, Eurocentric resistance may likely arise. As educators we need to ask,

Where does it resist? Where does a text...precisely make no sense, that is, resist interpretation? Where does what I see--and what I read--resist my understanding? Where is the ignorance--the resistance to knowledge--located? And what can I thus learn from the locus of that ignorance?...How can I turn ignorance into an instrument of teaching?

(Felman 31)

Thus, teaching becomes much more than the transmission of ready-made knowledge, facts. It is instead the "creation of an original learning-disposition" (Felman 31). So it becomes imperative that the teacher acknowledge the students' present philosophical standpoint on the issues to be discussed in accordance with the teaching of a novel--race, feminism, alternative approaches to art, in order to find where a student's points of resistance to new perspectives, and to new paths to knowledge might lie.

Lee, the earlier mentioned At-Risk counselor, finds that the questioning technique seems to work well when dealing with racist students:

I keep asking them questions--pushing them to defend their attitudes--they usually hang themselves; the racist kid might end up standing basically alone with his lack of logic. By continuing to ask the (vocally racist) kid relevant questions in response to the negative comments they've made--their logic, always illogical, will be laid out in front of the other kids--and sooner or later many of them will recognize that this ("logic") doesn't make sense.

Lee feels that despite the negativity that inevitably occurs when a racist student vocalizes his viewpoint, following the comments with a positive discussion can
become almost an affirmation for the minority students. Lee has found that often "when you have a discussion like that a few people--sometimes several, will come to the minority's defense. Minority kids, of course, are very aware of the fact that there are racist kids who hate them, but it may be a nice surprise for them to find out that they've also got some allies who are willing to speak out as well." Similarly, important and potentially positive situations could hopefully arise from the discussion of minority issues as displayed in novels such as Jazz. In dealing with classroom discussions of Jazz, one must be ready to confront the ambivalent feminist situation of hoping that students will say what they think and yet fearing the articulation of insensitive thoughts. Similarly, Britzman sees the feminist educator's situation as including "the desire for students to take up concerns for social justice, and the dread threat they will hold onto repressive discourses as if they were their own" (Britzman 167).

How do we fight for diversity; how do we help to develop consciousness in the classroom? How do we overcome our "covert racism" and "ignorance?" Jay suggests

that the important thing in democratic discourse is that the interested parties be brought together to negotiate their differences face to face. This inclusion of the Other in the room decisively changes the dynamic, the ethic and the direction of discourse. (26)

But how about when "the Other" just isn't there? He's in math class that period, or she has biology? Due to the lack of physical representation of the "Other" in the student body, do we decide then not to teach the Other's texts? Jay sees "calls for open debate and a fresh exchange of views," as "naive and potentially oppressive" when they overlook the "unequal starting points and positions of the antagonists." He asks, "What good does it do to stage a debate if only one side gets a place on the platform or if others show up hobbled by material depravation and social intimidation?" However, Jay suggests that some adjustments can be made, and steps must be taken to alter the balance of power
and resources among potential agents of representation to "offset the legacy of past discriminatory practices. One way to do this is through making curricular and institutional investments in the representation of the marginalized" (Jay 23).

What can we do? Teach Jazz. Teach *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*
CONCLUSION

White racism seriously continues to plague our country. Negative opinions about black people displayed in an NORC 1990 poll included that a majority of whites believed blacks were "inclined to live on welfare, and disinclined to hard work, and a substantial minority still stereotype black Americans as unintelligent" (Feagin 137). Also, pollers discovered that "forty-four percent of white respondents nationwide" preferred a law which gave a white homeowner the right to refuse to sell to a black buyer, and that a majority of white respondents expressed a negative view of intermarriage. "Two-thirds were opposed to a close relative marrying a black person. In addition, about a fifth of the whites interviewed nationwide favored a law banning marriages between blacks and whites" (Feagin 137). In an NORC poll in 1991 over 60 percent of whites said that the reason blacks "have worse jobs, lower incomes, and poorer housing than white people" was mainly because most blacks "just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty.' Blaming African Americans for their own poverty has been a characteristic of white opinion for decades" (Feagin 138). The racist misconceptions that many white adults hold spring from the same illogical pool as that of the high school teenagers Lee and I encounter at school. Feagin and Vera say that several these "cognitive notions and stereotypes of contemporary racism... include myths of the dangerous black man, the lazy black person, the black woman's fondness for welfare, and black inferiority and incompetence (Feagin 10).

Feagin and Vera also feel that the rationale behind such "anti-black fictions" makes "as little empirical sense as the hostile fictions that underlay the Nazi Holocaust" (Feagin 10). At the base of the need to diversify the canon is the need to acknowledge intellectual, emotional, and ethical equality, while learning also to recognize the (general) privileging of white citizens which has caused race to also be an issue of class. And it is a process which calls for both
logic and compassion. The inevitable questioning that accompanies the teaching of novels which decenter the white male and replace HIM with the black female will indeed force student introspection about their concepts of race: whiteness, blackness, Otherness. As discussed earlier,

Apparently, for most whites, being white means rarely having to think about it. This attitude contrasts sharply with the reports of many African Americans that their blackness is forced into their consciousness virtually every day by contacts with white Americans. (Feagin 139)

Indeed, reading Jazz as a high school senior will not solve the problems that surround race; however, teaching African-American literature at least will lead readers to consider their whiteness, via blackness, and visa versa.

The apathetic and privileged position of ignoring race has damaging effects for minorities. Dyson suggests due to the country's attempts to deny racism in the O.J. Simpson trial, race has become even more apparent. "Can we seriously doubt that if O.J. had been accused of murdering his black wife and not the ultimate symbol of ideal white beauty we wouldn't be learning of it with a similar degree of intensity, its details adorned in such gaudy omnipresence?" (Dyson 228) Dyson proposes that the most effective manner of confronting and transcending white racism would involve not denying its presence. Such "ignore-ance" according to Dyson reinforces its influential power as it gains strength in secrecy... Like a poisonous mushroom, the tangled assumptions of race grow best in darkness. For race to have a less detrimental effect, it must be brought into the light and openly engaged as a feature of the events and discussions it influences, even in subtle ways. (227)

Hazel Carby, author of "The Multicultural Wars" acknowledges the detrimental ignoring in academia saying, "The fact that more than 90 percent of all faculty members across the nation are white;" she calls this an obvious "scandal" but also notes that this misrepresentation "is not, apparently, a cause for journalistic
outrage or newspaper headlines" (8).

Using a Morrison text in the classroom, the strength of which, according to Rigney is that the author openly "represent(s) otherness," can lead to "revelations" about both the "larger culture as well as to the African American culture." These revelations about one's own and another's culture allow the reader to recognize "the other as one's 'self,'" to come to terms with one's own otherness, to enter willingly the forbidden zones of consciousness (and unconsciousness) that lie through and beyond the mirror of gender and race," a process which will allow the reader "to become more fully human, more moral, and more sane" (Rigney 3). Obviously, this theoretical emphasis on the recognition of difference and otherness, requires us to ask, different from and for whom? Carby recognizes the danger of reducing the black text in the classroom to "merely a tool to motivate that response" of the white reader's construction of self in opposition to the black subject (12). Carby correctly wonders "to what extent are fantasized black female and male subjects invented, primarily, to make the white middle class feel better about itself; and, at what point do theories of 'difference,' as they inform academic practices, become totally compatible with—rather than a threat to--the rigid frameworks of segregation and ghettoization at work throughout our society?" (12)

As a white feminist, encountering the ideals of black feminism in this research has made more clear to me the troublesome extent of the problems of privilege, social injustice, and ignorance that continue to divide our nation. Hopefully, I can use this newfound knowledge in an attempt to assist and enlist other Caucasian students and educators: assist them in attempts to discover the often overlooked social privileges we have gained from our whiteness, and enlist them in efforts to create academic and social environments which acknowledge and celebrate diversity. By moving to the center the voices of the oppressed, literature departments, teachers, government can attempt to acknowledge the difficulties and discuss remedies for the divisive ignorance.
Black feminism calls for this. "A wide range of African-American women intellectuals have advanced the view that black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment" (Collins 37). Furthermore, black feminism is "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (39). However, these texts must not be misused:

texts of black women sit uneasily in a discourse that seems to act as a substitute for the political activity of desegregation....For white suburbia, as well as for white middle-class students in universities, these texts are becoming a way of gaining knowledge of the "other": a knowledge that appears to satisfy and replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation. Have we, as a society, successfully eliminated the desire for achieving integration through political agitation for civil rights and opted instead for knowing each other through cultural texts? (Carby 17)

Carby suggests that even in seemingly well-meaning environment such as within women's studies and some progressive literature departments, "black women writers have been used, and I would argue, abused as cultural and political icons....We need to ask what cultural and political need is being expressed, and what role is the black female subject being reduced to play?" (11)

As Lauter suggests, when encountering a tribal myth a teacher cannot recreate the real impact of the tale within the tribe, and thus its real function on the people by and for whom it was created; however, this does provide us with "an opportunity to explore the important problem of how responses to a work differ according to the circumstances in which it is encountered and depending, also, upon the reader's or listener's own position in the world" (108). Lauter continues by suggesting that the problem of changing the curriculum has "primarily to do with learning to understand, appreciate, and teach about many varied cultural traditions," (108) and then, I would add, the practical necessity of addressing the concern of the money with which to do so.
Another problem with adding more minority literature to the curriculum concerns the larger canon debate. Just as Feagin and Vera have noted that "Black students are brought into white institutions without significant efforts to change the racist attitudes of whites or the white-dominated culture of the colleges and universities" (Feagin 41), this is similar to canon diversifying attempts to mix and stir minority literature. Without actively addressing the earlier absence of such texts or how they possibly alter "traditional" margins of literary periods such inclusion seems a perplexing and inadequate accommodation. As Carby notes, "changes too frequently amounted to only the inclusion of one or two new books in an already established syllabus, rather than a reconsideration of the basic conceptual structures of a course" (11). Instead of merely sprinkling in some black female voices, educators must address the fact that the canon and its breakdown of literary eras has been developed by and to accommodate the history of white males. According to hooks,

Women will know that white feminist activists have begun to confront racism in a serious and revolutionary manner when they are not simply acknowledging racism in a feminist movement or calling attention to personal prejudice, but are actively struggling to resist racist oppression in our society. (Sisterhood 251)

What should be done? Acknowledge that in the process of discussing minority literature a white student will bring his bias and privilege with him. Acknowledge that inclusion of such literature in the syllabus is long overdue and merely the beginning of what needs to happen in our country's academic struggle to recognize its diversity. Recognize that distanced empathy and discussion of minority people and perspectives will not solve the social and economic oppression that many minorities endure.

If, as Morrison suggests in Playing in the Dark, "deep within the word American lies the word race," (47) all Americans need to understand as much as we can of each other's histories in order to communicate effectively concerning
present American issues. Attending to each other's histories will help create a
current unity; however, one must be careful not to misuse the history, the text,
the body of another. Carby suggests that "the black female subject is frequently
the means by which many middle-class white students and faculty cleanse their
souls and rid themselves of the guilt of living in a society that is still rigidly
segregated" (11). All Caucasian instructors using minority texts should be
conscious of what they are attempting to accomplish by discussing "race."
Reading black women's texts, and reading our readings of them, is one (although
certainly not the only) strategy for changing the habitual perception that. " It is
not our different interpretive communities that keep us apart; it is simply our
different interpretations" (Dasenbrock 243). This quotation offers hope that
although my interpretive community is Caucasian, I can acknowledge and
embrace the ideals of black feminism.

Perhaps we should "privilege" the minority voice; as Frankenberg
suggests, "the oppressed can see with greatest clarity not only their own position
but also that of the oppressor/privileged, and indeed the shape of social systems
as a whole"
(8). Why use Jazz in the classroom? Perhaps for selfish Caucasian
reasons of wanting to learn more about what it means to be white by
encountering a rather realistic fictionality of what it means to place black women
in the center. Though I may seem unduly optimistic in my assumption that
continuing efforts to diversify the canon will make even a small difference in
the way students in the "white bubble" view white racism and minority cultures,
I am encouraged by the following suggestions from Schweickart: "It is the nature
of people working for revolutionary change to be optimistic about the prospect of
redirecting the future" (55), and "it is dangerous for feminists to be overly
enamored with the theme of impossibility" (Schweickart 56). The educational
goal of Wisker and her colleagues was to acknowledge and analyze the
"difficulties" rather than the "impossibilities" of reading and teaching black texts
as a white feminists to classes of predominately white readers. I found myself in
the same situation in reading *Jazz* with students, and with any text I teach at my school. Like the Caucasian teachers involved in Wisker's project, I too was searching for "self-aware, culturally contextual, critical reading techniques," and hoping to avoid "blunders of any covert racism" (5).

Advice to all of us teaching across racial lines from Wisker includes that "arrogance, bandwagon-jumping and any attempts to pass off one example of black writing, one image of black women, as universal and essential are equally critical traps to be avoided" (170). I eagerly encourage open dialogues about minority issues striving with varied success for acknowledgment of minorities without belittlement. I believe one of the basic tenets of feminism must be acknowledging and resisting all forms of oppression, which can be fought through analytic, dialogic education. Analytic teaching is "interminably, self-critical" (Felman 39); dialogic teaching promotes awareness, introspection, the possible passing over a hurdle of ignorance. The teacher as well as the students must be ever self-critical. Thus, Mae Henderson's following comment could relate to Caucasian educators and students as well as critics: "The incumbency for the non-Afro-American-woman critic is to finger the jagged grain of brutal experience in which—if he or she is white and/or male—he or she is implicated" (qtd. in Wisker 15). As mentioned earlier, it is important for any given reader (or instructor) to realize she might simultaneously hold different political positions: privileged and unprivileged, oppressor and oppressed. Fuss sees this state as one of double-reading...in the sense that we are continually caught within and between at least two constantly shifting subject-positions (old and new, constructed and constructing) and these positions may often stand in complete contradiction to each other. (87)

One of the most admirable aspects of black feminist thought as described by Carby is that it "sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination...Investigating black women's particular
experiences thus promises to reveal much about the more universal process of domination" (Collins 222). Though it is present in many African-American female texts, Caucasian students who are underprivileged, abused, physically handicapped, or dealing with oppressive social problems may not readily recognize the common thread of oppression which links all humanity, and which is ever explored in black feminist criticism. Through feminist philosopher Jean Grimshaw, Fuss shares the view that "experience does not come neatly in segments, such that it is always possible to abstract what in one's experience is due to 'being a woman' from that which is due to 'being married,' 'being middle class' and so forth" (Fuss 80). In light of the complexity of our reading positions, what, then, does it mean to read—"as a feminist?" My final response would be that to be a feminist instructor is to read politically, to acknowledge the factors latent and obvious which likely affect one's interpretation of a text, and to realize that a feminist instructor is interested in the political aspects of reading environments for students. Do the same rules apply to both the white and black feminist?

Indeed my "whiteness" affects how I read, the way I teach, and also the thesis I write. However, within the community of "whiteness" we do have the opportunity to move beyond exclusion and ignorance. As a feminist instructor I am interested in student readings, in professional critics' responses to literature, in black feminism, in combating the politics of oppression. Acknowledging all of these political arenas, will hopefully assist me in knowing what kind of questions to ask. I am optimistic about what teaching minority literature can do for marginalized groups and for the Caucasian masses. Carby poses a pertinent question about the intensity of the canon debate: "I feel it is essential to question the disparity between the vigor of debates about the inclusion of black subjects in a syllabus, and the almost total silence about and utter disregard for the material conditions of most black people" (Carby 16). Though acknowledging the difficulties, joys, and similarities between races through works like Jazz will not
directly solve social issues which must continue to be addressed, I do agree with Alice Walker that the written word has "the power to reach, to teach, to empower and encourage—to change and save lives" (qtd. in Lauter 64). And while I will always admit that Smith is probably right that I am "ill-equipped to understand the subtleties of racial politics" when I read minority texts, I will continue to read the ideas of black feminism and attempt to apply those "humanist," "womanist" ideals in my educational efforts. I'm just a white woman trying, trying, trying to be a good reader.
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Resources for Teaching *Jazz*

**Pre-writing**

Before you read the novel, write a journal entry about a situation you can remember in your life when people had different perspectives on the same incident. Think of something as simple as a basketball game. Consider how the perspectives of the following might be different: a starter, a guy on the end of the bench, a girl who's home from college who played the year before, a referee, a manager, a girlfriend in the stands, a cheerleader, a parent in the stands, a little kid under the bleachers, an administrator, an intoxicated person, a pep band member, etc. Also consider: If you wanted to find out the TRUTH about “the” experience of that game/evening how would you do so? Is there A TRUTH or MANY truths to be discovered? Who would have the most reliable perspective? Why?

**Reading Journal**

Keep a response journal as you read *Jazz*. Please write at least a page or so journal-like reaction to each chapter. Consider the following in your entry: What made sense? What's happening? What do you like/dislike about the style, the characters? What parts are way too confusing? What imagery is interesting? what issues does the author seem to be concerned about?

**Pre-Reading Music Connection**

After providing students with the lyrics, have them listen to one of Louis Armstrong’s many ensemble versions of "Mac the Knife." Discuss with them how different instruments interpret the melody in jazz. Discuss jazz-related terms: riff, call and response, improvisation, etc. Discuss with them the historical background of jazz—its African-American roots. Encourage the students to consider why Morrison picked the title *Jazz* for her novel (in light of this information) as they read the text.

**Jazz Worksheets**

1. What are some details that we find out about the woman who the narrator whispers about on the first four pages? List 5-6 details.
2. How does the narrator feel about the city? What City do you suppose this is?
3. What is the narrator interested in figuring out about people?
4. What/who do you think this rather confusing, gossipy narrator is?
5. This novel is set during the 1920's—how had the previous war affected Blacks in the City?
6. What's the only living presence in the Trace's home, and why is this highly ironic?
7. How did Violet's action at the funeral affect her profession?
8. Who does Violet distrust more—men or women? Explain.
9. Why can't you rival the dead for love?
10. How is Violet's fascination with Dorcas affecting her?
11. What bizarre memory does Violet attach to her "visit" to Dorcas’s coffin?
12. According to the narrator, even though Violet (and other black women) are overwhelmed, this is preferable to them. Why?
13. What does the oft-repeated motif that begins on p.32, "dancing on the train," signify?
14. What does the City do to people? p.33
15. When were many, many Blacks moving to the City? Why then, do you suppose?
16. Another motif, the fire, relates to what? What might it signify?
17. What does Dorcas want Joe to do? p.39
18. Whose room does Joe rent from Malvonne? What had this earlier tenant been like? Why might this be important?
19. Do you feel pity or disgust for Joe during this conversation with Malvonne? Why? p.44-49
20. What are Thursday men?
21. The next chapter seems to be the closest we get to Alice's perspective, though it's narrated by the unknown all-knowing narrator. What did she experience on July 17, 1917. and why did this affect her personality? (see p.57)
22. On the top of p.59 how do white newspapers describe jazz music?
23. What is Dorcas imagining on p.61? Why does she obsess about these seemingly trivial losses according to the narrator?
24. What's extremely important to Dorcas on p.63?
25. What social strikes that Dorcas had against her?
26. What particularly painful memory does she have from a dance?p. 66-67
27. Describe the treatment Joe receives when he comes to Alice's, p.69-73. Why do they feel comfortable treating him like this? What's especially ironic about the encounter?
28. On p.73, why does Alice feel especially betrayed by Joe?
29. Why does she not call the police? p.74
30. Also—what do you make of Morrison's style in the second paragraph? What is she trying to accomplish with these phrases? How has Alice's perspective changed by reading these articles? Does this seem realistic? Why? Why not?
31. See p.74 and 77: does Alice feel that black women, often victims, are "defenseless as ducks?" Explain.
32. Why in the world would Violet go visit Alice, and odder yet, why would Alice let her in? See p.82; what do Violet and Alice have in common?
33. Write down the four short sentences on p.81 that seem to encompass the novel's key questions.
34. Explain the paragraph on p.83 beginning "the thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company." In the next paragraph, why do you suppose that Violet becomes "the only visitor she looked forward to?"
35. Though Alice says on p.84 that killing people makes her sick to her stomach, who had she wanted to kill, how and why on p.85-87? What else do Violet and Alice have in common?
36. Do you think Alice is justified in saying, "You don't know what loss is?"
37. What does "turning into teeth" refer to? Why do you suppose she clings to this image?
38. What significance might there be in both of these women's professions: hair dressing and ironing?
39. On p.90-91 what part do the boys play at the funeral? What details does Morrison give us of their perspective?
40. "That" Violet might more readily be "wearing a pelt" than skin. What does that mean?
41. What are the differences between "that" Violet and Violet? List several. Are we to assume that Violet suffers from multiple personality disorder?
42. On p.93 what's the deal with the parrot? What's Violet done with it? What's significant about what the parrot says?
43. Morrison's characters often offer an image that represents a significant memory, such as "turning into teeth." Violet was "sliding on ice trying to get to somebody's kitchen to do their hair" while...?

44. p.97 What is the importance of "golden" in this novel?

45. Also on p.97, explain this statement: "Which means from he beginning I was a substitute and so was he."

46. Why does she get "quiet?"

47. p.98 Who was Violet's mother and why did she commit suicide?

48. Who are two people that showed up to "help" Violet's family?

49. Who is True Belle and what does her comment at the top of 101 mean or refer to? Do you agree? Explain?

50. What are three things on p.101-102 that Violet thinks may logically have pushed her mother to suicide?

51. On p.105, how does she meet Joe, and why does she feel she has the right to "claim him?"

52. How long had they been married before they moved to "the City?" Look for reasons why it is especially ironic that Joe would move there.

53. On p. 107-108 What did Violet not want until she was 40? What incident mentioned earlier in the novel displays this desire?

54. On p.109---Violet wonders if Dorcas might have been...?

55. Showing the depth of Violet's "anguish" on p.110, she in an "apostrophe" asks her mother..."Is this...?"

56. Write down Alice's advice on p.112, when she says, "You want a real thing? I'll tell you a real one." We know the advice means much to Alice because she does what? How do you feel about Alice's advice? Do you agree or disagree? What does it mean for Violet?

57. In Aristotle's Poetics, he writes that laughter is a reaction to something gone wrong. For example, we laugh when a man walking across the street drops several boxes, or someone says Danielle Stool instead of Danielle Steele. When Violet and Alice laugh at the burned shirt, what comment does Violet make about laughter? Who do you think is right? Violet, Aristotle, both? Why? Please write a bit on it.

58. How's Joe been spending his time?

59. What does everyone in the city lose? Do you suppose it's true? If so, what is gained? Old lovin'?

60. On p. 125-126, who does Joe live with as a child and why? With whom is he especially close?

61. How many times does Joe say he's changed? Does he also suffer from multiple personality disorder, or do you think all humans change their identity several times? Read the Shakespeare quotation and write a few sentences on what you think "the bard"—(Shakespeare was called this: it means "the story teller") seems to be saying. ("Seven Stages of Man") How many of you do you think there have been so far? Dare explain?

62. On p.129 write down what Joe says about snakes. What might this image be a metaphor for?

63. On p.130--What "trail" is Joe talking about following? It may take you a few pages to figure it out. How does the trail end?

64. p.130--What's ironic, even to the murderer?

65. On p.132-133 how does Joe compare to the "roosters?" Why do you suppose he bothers to make the comparison?

66. Is Joe's tragic flaw "hybris?"

Shakespeare's Othello kills his young, beautiful, lighter-skinned wife because another man convinces him that she is being unfaithful. When the truth comes out that Othello has been duped (by the evil Iago) and that Desdemona was completely innocent he says right before he kills himself, "Remember me not as someone who loved wrongly but too
well." He had smothered her with a pillow despite her pleas that he reconsider her innocence. Do you think other "lovers" who murder their loved ones have the same justification as Othello, the same regret as Joe Trace?

67. An "allusion" in literature is when the author refers to a famous piece of art or literature which they assume the reader will recognize. Explain Joe's interpretation of the Adam and Eve story from the Bible. Why is this particular literary allusion appropriate?

68. p.133--What does the motif "hoof marks" refer to? How do you feel about Joe's use of this image?

69. p.135--when Joe says, "I chose you," this continues a motif introduced ironically by whom?

70. An "apostrophe" in literature is when someone addresses something that cannot respond. For example, if I said, "Oh, sun, shine upon my face," or "Oh, death, I fear thee not," neither sun or death is going to answer. How much of Joe's chapter and perspective "apostrophically" delivered?

71. Who is True Belle and why did she move to Baltimore?

72. Why does Golden go South?

73. How does he react to the woman in the woods--why?

74. Why didn't Vera Louise give up her son/mortification?

75. What do you think of Golden Gray? On p. 155 what is the narrator willing to do?

76. Describe the reference of "one-armed."

77. On p.160-161 what does our narrator admit? What does this mean for us as readers?

78. How does Golden Gray "break the news" to his father, and what is his father's response?

79. On p.176, what did Hunter's Hunter tell Joe?

80. On p.178-179 describe the Joe/Wild almost encounter.

81. Why does Joe marry Violet?

82. On p.190, what does Dorcas like about Acton?

83. Dorcas' motif in this section is "he's ________." Why doesn't she leave the party?

84. Describe Dorcas' death.

85. What makes it seem to the narrator that "you'd have thought everything had been forgiven?

86. How often does Felice see her parents?

87. List the several orphans or pseudo-orphans in this novel.

88. What is Felice like--describe her perception of Dorcas.

89. Who does Felice want to be like--why is this ironic?

90. Another motif--Joe's eyes, what does Felice say about them?

91. What does Violet mean when she says "me?"?p.210

92. How does Felice know where the ring is?

93. What does this "just one apple" business mean?

94. Why doesn't Felice want to be alone with Joe?

95. How does Felice help Joe and Violet?

96. With what kind of picture of Joe and Violet are we left? How do you feel about this?

97. What is the narrator's mood at the end?

98. What is she asking the reader to do at the very end? What do you think "it" means?