



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Racheal Aragon for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on March 20, 2013.  
Title: Re-sounding Harlem Renaissance Narratives: The Repetition and Representation of Identity Through Sound in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*.

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The cultural and historical construction of African American identity in the United States has been closely tied to the dialectical relationship formed between sound and silence. This thesis examines the modernist and postmodernist representation of sound and silence in the African American novels *Passing* (1929), by Nella Larsen, and *Jazz* (1992), by Toni Morrison, as indicators of African American identity and racial oppression during the Harlem Renaissance. I analyze the soundscapes of both texts to expose the mobility of language, power, and space, especially as these soundscapes relate to the production of sound (both musical and non-musical) by African Americans, and the surveillance of these sounds by white audiences. Through my analysis of repetitive sound-images and embodied silence in *Passing* and *Jazz*, as well as textual representations of oral performance, I argue that there is harm in restricting African American voices to approved modes of audibility and/or limiting African American voices to one a singular narrative. This thesis introduces critics and theories from the disciplines of sound studies and African American studies, and applies the widely known theory of double consciousness, established by critic and author W.E.B. Du Bois, as the foundation for my literary and cultural analysis of sound in print.

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Re-sounding Harlem Renaissance Narratives: The Repetition and Representation of  
Identity Through Sound in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

by  
Racheal Aragon

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Racheal Aragon, Author

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## Re-sounding Harlem Renaissance Narratives: The Repetition and Representation of Identity Through Sound in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

*This general question of the voice in the text is compounded in any literature, such as the Afro-American literary tradition, in which the oral and the written literary traditions comprise separate and distinct discursive universes which, on occasion, overlap, but often do not.*

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*

*And the sound of the novel, sometimes cacophonous, sometimes harmonious, must be an innerear sound or a sound just beyond hearing, infusing the text with a musical emphasis that words can do sometimes even better than music can.*

—Toni Morrison, “*Unspeakable Things Unspoken*”

### Introduction: Repeating the Sounds of the Harlem Renaissance in African American Literature

At the turn of the twentieth century, the increase in fiction published by and about African Americans<sup>1</sup> began to draw attention to a fresh and developing literary movement in the United States. W.E.B. Du Bois and his contemporaries—including scholars such as Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson—actively sought to re-present this emerging voice during a time of great racial inequality in what was later termed the New Negro

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis contains a number of terms which refer to the group of people residing in the U.S. with ancestral ties to Africa. I often use the term *African American*; however, other terms used to refer to the same group, which originate from my primary and secondary sources include: *African-American*, *Afro-American*, *black*, *Negro*, and the racial slur *nigger*. Each term, including the term I use most, *African American*, is nuanced with its own set of connotations and limitations and is situated in a particular social/political/historical context. I acknowledge that each term carries a different weight and meaning, particularly when uttered by speakers from different races. I do not intend to over-simplify the complexity of racial labels assigned by the dominant culture or to propose any one term is equal to another. Rather, my intent is twofold: first, to represent the original language of the various authors and theorists whose work I draw from to construct my argument; and second, to incorporate the language and labels available to me in my own socio-political context in order to reveal the malleability of cultural constructions, such as language and race.

Movement, and more popularly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance helped to formalize a literary space for the creation of African-American art; equally important was the way this literary space opened up a much needed dialog between blacks and whites about rising racial tensions during a pivotal moment in history. Du Bois and other leaders helped the New Negro Movement in its aims by contributing and publishing critical essays and innovative works of literature. Many of these texts, taking inspiration from Harlem's urban spaces, helped identify African American narrative voice—a textual voice seldom heard in the nation's collective past.

As these voices emerged, critics and auditors from racially diverse backgrounds began to take note of not only of the increased number of publications by African Americans, but of the increased production of sound in Harlem too. Sounds unique to Harlem's African American communities, especially during the early development of jazz<sup>2</sup>, echoed throughout the city and polarized the audiences who listened. While some auditors celebrated these sounds, other auditors “recoiled from the soundscape<sup>3</sup> of the modern city,” as suggested by Emily Thompson, a scholar whose text, *The Sounds of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*, examines the technologies, communities, and social contexts which aided the production

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Thompson, author of *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*, suggests that northern cities were largely characterized by the sounds of The Machine Age and Jazz Age. Jazz, a genre closely tied to African American culture, and popularized through white patronage, places its “roots...in African music,” but further developed as it drew “influence [from] ‘the American environment,’” like Harlem (Thompson 130-31).

<sup>3</sup> The term “soundscape,” first introduced by sound studies scholar R. Murray Schafer in his text, *The Tuning of the World* (1977), refers to the acoustic environment that encompasses the sounds of a given space (7-9).

of sound in modern America (Thompson 119). Those who heard the sound of Harlem and African American jazz unfavorably, suggested that the so-called noise would “return[] civilized people to the jungles of barbarism” (Thompson 131). While it is important to note the characterization of jazz’s musicality, my thesis focuses more on the way in which jazz culture impacted the formation of African American identity, and ultimately, African American literary production, as suggested by Thompson and others.

Those auditors who were unfamiliar with jazz traditions and other forms of sound emanating from the streets and the communities in Harlem were bothered and threatened by such sounds, and deemed them primitive. Those auditors focusing on “[t]he racist aspect of the criticism of jazz[,] reflected the distress that many Americans felt with the rapidly changing demography of the cities in which they lived,” especially after “[t]he widespread migration of African Americans from the rural south to the industrial cities of the north” (Thompson 131). The changing sounds of the industrial city, and more importantly, those African Americans participating in or promoting the creation of that sound, were marginalized by white auditors.

Outsiders listening to Harlem sounds and communities tried to ignore, suppress, and/or surveil the “noise.” This practice of monitoring and/or ignoring Harlem’s sound became a form of racial oppression and a mechanism of control. In her article, “Streets, Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem,” Clare Corbould, a scholar working on sound in African American studies, examines the production and perception of sound in Harlem. She describes how police in Harlem “monitored with increasing vigor the crowds who gathered around street corner speakers. [The police] presence served as a constant

reminder of the boundaries of acceptable conduct” (Corbould 867-68). This presence and surveillance was, however, for African Americans, “resisted through sound” (Corbould 868). “[S]ound rather than sight,” for African Americans, signified the construction and expression of African American identity, particularly as this identity resisted systemic control during its formation on the streets of Harlem (Corbould 872 emphasis added).

The privileging of sound over sight in African American culture, as it is explained in Corbould’s article, is one of the underlying premises I use in this thesis. Corbould suggests, that African Americans “quite simply defined themselves using a different sensual tradition than that commonly associated with whites” (Corbould 872). My thesis will analyze the ways in which the privileging of written sounds in African American Harlem Renaissance literature, specifically Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Toni Morrison *Jazz* (1992), signifies a culture influenced by Harlem’s soundscape while remaining deeply connected to the rhetorical devices used in oral performance in the African (American) tradition; furthermore, my thesis will also examine the representation of written or textual sound and silence as they help articulate and define African American voice, and serve as a form of resistance to white surveillance and oppression.

The theoretical framework in my thesis, particularly Clare Corbould’s article, have, thus far, implied the connection between sound and power. In *The Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schafer’s text on soundscapes and acoustic environments, he analyzes the relationship between sound and power, and how they are closely tied to space. According to Schafer, soundscapes—an integral term for this thesis—are an “acoustic field[s] of study... [that] consists of events *heard* not objects *seen*” (7-8). Soundscapes are

dynamic environments which evolve and change alongside the societies inhabiting them. I will apply Schafer's premise, that a soundscape "of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society," to my work on Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (Schafer 7). *Passing* and *Jazz*, narratives taking place during the Harlem Renaissance and written from a modern and postmodern perspective, draw from the soundscapes of the 1920s in Harlem to inform their audiences and readers about the social conditions of those societies. The written representations of soundscapes in *Passing* and *Jazz*, and the distinct images that describe or refer to sound, not only serve the reader as an "indicator of the social conditions," but as a re-imagining or reflection of the themes and tropes read or heard in the collective cultural past of African Americans (Schafer 7). For the remainder of this thesis, I will use the term *sound-images* to refer to the images or words that represent sound in writing.

Because a text is made of words, the representation of sound in the textual medium of the novel, however, is not exact. Thomas A. Sebeok, semiotician and author of "Pandora's Box: How and Why to Communicate 10,000 Years into the Future," examines the way meaning is made from signs and transmitted through message systems, because each sign is located in specific contexts. Sebeok's article, although concerned with creating a system of signs which would preserve and communicate a message to people living 300 generations subsequent to this one, is cited in this thesis to explain the way in which sound, like other messages, communicates meaning through signification. Sebeok explains that "[a]ll semiotic systems are not only dynamic but adaptive...to the

external contexts (conditions of environment) and the internal context (circumstances inherent within the system itself)” (Sebeok 454). Sebeok suggests that the reader of any text must negotiate meaning and make interpretations from the external and internal contexts from which it is produced, transmitted, and received. Sebeok describes how language signs fall into one of three sub-categories of signification: iconic, symbolic, and indexical.

In my analysis, sound signification is expressed either by sound-images (iconic and/or symbolic<sup>4</sup>), like the *ringing* of a bell or *drumming* of a drum, or by word sounds/onomatopoeia (indexical<sup>5</sup>), like expression of sound as a *tinkle* or an undefined expression, like *sth*. To make meaning from the sounds described in written narratives, sound-images require the reader’s shared knowledge of the outside source material to which the sounds being described refer. Additionally, words that mimic the sounds they describe require the reader’s implied participation in the performance and construction of that sound. A real or imagined vocalization of the word *tinkle*, for example, helps the reader recall the type of sound described in the text. The translation of sound into writing does not, and can never, fully represent the exact essence of sound; however, the representation of sound in writing *does* allow for a new context and new space from which the writer/reader can communicate and interpret meaning.

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<sup>4</sup> An iconic sign or message “resembles...some agent of the real world to which it refers...and can only be grasped by those informed about the code” (Sebeok 456). Indexical sign or message “is one which ‘points to’ an object or is a sample of it” (Sebeok 456).

<sup>5</sup> Indexical sign or message “is one which ‘points to’ an object or is a sample of it” (Sebeok 456).

*WHY TAKE A SOUND STUDIES APPROACH TO READING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE?*

While the discourse of sound studies was not developed specifically to examine African American texts, the terminology and cultural analysis provided by the theoretical foundations in sound studies have much to contribute to the study of African American modernism. This section reviews some of the basic underlying premises emerging from the discipline of sound studies with which to analyze sound in text. According to Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld in their article “Sound Studies: New Technologies and Music,” sound studies is an “interdisciplinary area that studies the material production and consumption of music, sound, noise, and silence” (636). I will use the premises in this section for the remainder of the thesis with the aim of precisely articulating the different functions of sound as it relates to the representation of identity in the African American novel.

Michael Bull and Less Back, editors of the *Auditory Culture Reader* (2003), a collection of essays that explore the “social nature and meaning of sound,” consider how we, as readers and listeners in Western culture, relate to sound. In their introduction, Bull and Back note that Western societies tend to be visually oriented, and they caution their readers against “supplant[ing] one ‘primary sense’ [sight] with another [sound]” (3). Instead, they urge their readers to entertain “the opportunities provided by thinking with our ears” (3). By carefully tuning our ears to the role sound plays in the novel, we are provided with new opportunities to interpret a given text. I propose that the four core premises which tie together the essays in the *Auditory Culture Reader* have much to offer the reader of this thesis, insofar as they provide a concise articulation of the theoretical

approach to reading and perceiving sound as acoustic document. Sound, according to Bull and Back, first

makes us re-think the meaning, nature and significance of our social experience. [Second,] sound makes us re-think our relation to community. [Third,] sound makes us re-think our relational experiences, how we relate to others, ourselves and the spaces and places we inhabit. [Fourth,] sound makes us re-think our relationship to power. (4)

Sound, then, according to Bull and Back, has the power to shape perception and interpretation; sound also influences how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive ourselves in relation to the community and world around us. Once attuned to the complexities of word sounds and sound-images as they are represented in the African American text, the reader is positioned to re-view/re-hear the re-sounding (of) themes in African American culture—themes that speak to issues of aurality, by focusing on how things are heard, and issues of orality, by focusing on how things are spoken.

*RE-VIEWING /RE-HEARING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE*

Themes tied to re-viewing and re-sounding in African American culture stem from Du Bois' work on double consciousness in representational works of art. Growing up in the Reconstruction Era, Du Bois committed himself to transforming racial inequality in the United States. His leadership and guidance over the New Negro Movement focused on art that sought to promote racial uplift that broadened the country's understanding and views about race. In 1903, Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this text, he engages the topic of race and representation, in part, by incorporating lyrics and musical notation from popular spirituals. He asserts that African Americans are tasked with the difficulty of navigating "the two worlds within and

without the Veil” (3). The extended metaphor of living behind a veil describes the way African Americans were divided and positioned as the masked outsider living within the hegemonic culture, resulting in the formation of a “double consciousness” among African Americans. Such consciousness was expressed by Du Bois as the burden “of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois 7). The concept of double consciousness is paramount to my analysis of Larsen’s and Morrison’s African American novels. The image of a veiled subject invokes a set of historical and cultural connotations and serves as the point of entry from which to expose the structures of power working to keep African Americans closed off, distanced, and othered from the dominant culture. Du Bois’ critical work was vital to the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance; furthermore, Du Bois’ work has greatly impacted the way in which African American culture and art is created, articulated, and analyzed by critics today.

Double consciousness serves as the foundation for the argument and cultural critique I make about African American literature insofar as it provides the underlying premise that African American texts have a reflexive nature in which the dominant [white] cultural gaze can never be shed. Du Bois’ premise is specifically applied to my reading of *Jazz* in Chapter Three, as I explore how both the implied and real reader of the text embody a type of double consciousness through the narrator’s use of second person. The reader must “view” herself through the “eyes” of *Jazz*’s narrator during some passages which shift from first or third person to second person.

The white cultural gaze, of which Du Bois speaks in double consciousness, creates a psychological division in African Americans that is often read in African

American literature as the doubled self, or doppelganger. The assumed gaze or surveillance of African Americans, according to Du Bois, causes African Americans to “ever feel[] his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 7). In African American narratives, the doubled self expresses an unresolved division of African American identity, which isolates the “African” heritage from the “American.” In Chapter Two, I suggest a type of psychological doubling that takes place inside Clare Kendry’s character. She, a woman of mixed racial backgrounds, publicly denies one side of her own race, while in the presence of the other. Although Clare does not exactly embody a doubled self, as she does belong to two separate races, she does participate in Du Bois central theme, the psychological division of one’s own identity. In Chapter Three, I will examine the narrative strategies which create a psychological double of the protagonist, Violet Trace. The narrator describes Violet as she sits “in the drugstore...wondering who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin” (Morrison 89). Violet and “that other Violet” exemplify the psychological split and the doubling of the self that becomes a trait associated with the construction of African American identity.

The doubled self can also read as an embodied form of textual repetition and signification in African American literature. It may also be read as an estrangement of an *I* from a *you*—reader and interlocutor—through which language sound is mediated from. Henry Louis Gates’ work in *The Signifying Monkey*, examines the forms of signification specific to the African American tradition, as he creates a set of theory specific to

semiotics in African American literature. Signifying, or black Signifyin(g)<sup>6</sup>, as Gates' uses the term, "is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning" (Gates 82). Gates asserts that African American texts draw from the canonical texts in both Western and black culture to signify through its language "surface and latent meaning" (82). Gates draws a distinction between "standard English signification" which, he suggests, "denotes meaning," and the "black tradition [of signification which] denotes *ways* of meaning" (82 emphasis added). Gates suggests that "ways of meaning" in African American texts draw from the connotation and denotation inherent in the message, in addition to the style of delivery of that message.

Ultimately, Gates makes a claim that African American texts, emerging from a long history tied to the vernacular traditions, communicate additional meanings in language through the representation of oral narrative techniques. The African American tradition, "extraordinarily self-reflexive...[and] exceptionally conscious of its history and of the simultaneity of its canonical texts," mimics "verbal models of the Afro-American social condition" in writing (xxiv). I will show in the following chapters how black voices are sounded in *Passing* and *Jazz* through repetition of sound-images which reflects

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<sup>6</sup> Gates distinguishes a type of signification specific to Afro-American culture. Signifyin(g) in the black sense "addresses the nature and application of rhetoric" (Gates 85). To distinguish between the traditional sense of the word and black Signifyin(g), Gates not only capitalizes the word, he also "bracket[s the] final g...to connote the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final g as 'signifyin'" (Gates 46). I make the distinction between signifying and Signifyin(g) here to articulate the nuance of signification, for Gates, inside and outside the African American tradition.

a meaningful audibility deeply ingrained in African American culture, and particularly how the representation of oral performance is enacted in *Jazz*.

Gates argues that texts themselves have their own voice, and that these voices, in part, through the repetition of signs and tropes read in Western and black culture, form an intertextuality with other texts that serve as a continued conversation taking place in the African American tradition. Repetition is not simply repeating, but in the African American tradition, it is repeating “with a signal difference” (Gates xxiv). I will show how the repetition, and ultimately, the re-vision of sound-images, like bells and silence, to name a few examples, serve as the site for intertextuality and cultural/historical signification as a means of reflecting the “Afro-American social condition” (xxiv).

The social condition reflected in the repetition and black signification in writing, as Gates argues, creates a Bakhtinian double-voiced text. Wendell V. Harris describes Bakhtinian double voicing in his analysis of Dickens and Eliot, as “one piece of work” which “present[s] the reader with two voices speaking as it were simultaneously,” (“Bakhtinian Double Voicing” 446). Although Bakhtinian double voicing was not invented to explain African American textual efforts, Gates applies this theory in his analysis of African American literature. Gates argues that African American “texts speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures,” and yet, these texts “almost always speak with a distinct and respondent accent, an accent that signifies (upon) the various black vernacular literary traditions, which are still being written down” (Gates xxiii). Gates’ argument in *The Signifying Monkey* ultimately stresses that African American texts subvert the standard (white) conventions of discourse to signal or

signify other connotations. Black voice expressed in writing forms dual meanings—meanings which reveal “that black people colonized a white sign” to make it their own (Gates 47).

Black signification in double-voiced texts help create a distinct voice in the tradition that “presupposes an ‘encoded’ intention to say one thing but to mean quite another” (Gates 82). A double-voiced text, or speakerly text, in Gates’ application of the term refers to the “speaking black voice in writing” (xxv-xxvi). Gates’ speakerly text, “the direct discourse of the novel’s black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator com[ing] together to form a third term, a truly double-voiced narrative mode,” is used in my analysis of *Jazz* in Chapter Three (xxvi). The narrator of *Jazz* represents black vernacular culture and speech patterns, while still participating in the standard conventions in Western English. The narrator switches from traditional third person omniscient narration to first and second person narration which is representative of African American vernacular speech.

I will use Gates’ interpretation of Bakhtin, the double-voiced speakerly text, to show how Morrison’s African American text signifies African American narrative voice by using speech patterns indicative of black vernacular culture, while still participating in the Western conventions of the printed text. In this section I have discussed the theoretical and historical application of double consciousness and black signification as it relates to sound and voice established in African American literature, particularly African American literature written or taking place during the Harlem Renaissance. In the next

section I will look to the way in which the presence of white audiences influences the production of sound in the city and in African American communities.

*THE HEGEMONY OF SOUND AND SPACE IN HARLEM'S HISTORICAL COMMUNITIES*

Historically, the perception and interpretation of the sounds produced in Harlem varied depending on the ethnic make-up of the auditors who listened. Clare Corbould's analysis of the sounds and aural traditions taking place during interwar Harlem, notes how "[w]hite elites" living at that time considered sound produced by the Harlem community as meaningless "noise," and/or "a marker of racial primitiveness" ("Streets, Sounds, and Identity" 861). But, as Gates suggests, sound, though interpreted as meaningless or primitive to white audiences, signified a different meaning to black audiences. J. A. Rogers, journalist and historian during the New Negro Movement, describes the numerous sounds heard in Harlem's jazz-inspired soundscape, in his essay "Jazz at Home." He describes in the multiplicity of sounds within the soundscape, which included "cowbells, auto horns, calliopes, rattles, dinner gongs, kitchen utensils, cymbals, screams, crashes, clankings and monotonous rhythm," (Rogers 665). The sounds which inspired the genre of jazz, and the musical compositions which followed, according to Rogers, was not meaningless noise, but rather, "a joyous revolt from convention, custom, authority, boredom, even sorrow—from everything that would confine the soul of a man and hinder its riding free on the air" (Rogers 665). Rogers credits the plethora of different sounds clashing together as a symbol of "freedom in the air," in which African Americans could resist the social, political, and economic constraints imposed by white society. The dichotomy of interpretations for different races about the sounds in Harlem,

in part, expressed the struggle for both black and white communities to assert their control over the city spaces.

Although residents living in the Harlem neighborhoods were primarily African American and/or other minority groups, those with systemic control in the neighborhoods—the police, the business owners, and the landlords —were primarily white and resided outside the city’s limits. Because most African Americans living in Harlem at that time were unable to claim a stake in the construction of the city through accrued real estate or capital, they sought to “own” the “semi-private, semi-public” spaces by their production of sound within the city’s limits (Corbould 861). African Americans experiencing the effects of racial oppression laid aural claim to Harlem’s spaces and soundscape to make audible, in addition to visible, their social resistance. The potential for sound signifying is thus as physical boundaries of a space. The desire to remain in control over the space is enacted through various forms of delivery of sounds and silence.

In order to generalize beyond particular representative groups, Michael Warner’s text, *Publics and Counterpublics*, explains the large scale effects of the relationship between the dominant and oppressed. Warner focuses on the role of the counterpublic, marginalized groups whose existence opposes the dominant culture’s view points. According to Warner, the counterpublic representation of people is, in part, defined by their tensions and relations with the larger public. These counterpublics are “structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” (Warner 56). While Warner’s concern is primarily with

the formation of identity as it relates to publicness and privateness, his assertion that counterpublics are positioned to “mak[e] different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” can be extended to the larger argument I make about what can be sounded, and what can/must be silenced among the counterpublic sphere as it is expressed by characters in Larsen’s and Morrison’s narratives (Warner 56).

What can and cannot be vocalized in African American spaces, particularly, in the presence of white auditors, suggests a form of non-visible oppression that forces African Americans to assimilate to Western standards. Cultural critic Crispin Sartwell addresses the social and political implication of “approved” racially inflected sounds and speech in his book *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity*. He argues that in order “to maintain the epistemological transaction of racism,” the hegemonic public sphere silences “the voices of the oppressed” and/or “restrict[s]...them to *approved modes of audibility*” (Sartwell 11 emphasis added). Imposing “[a]pproved modes of audibility,” and/or silencing African Americans became a means to marginalize and eliminate African American voices and vernacular culture from degrading or penetrating white society (Sartwell 11). I use Sartwell’s argument here to provide the framework in Chapter Two about how representations of Irene’s African American voice, while in the presence of a white man (Bellew), causes her to silence herself. I will also show how Larsen uses dynamics in her descriptions of the soundscape—both uncontrollable laughter and stifled screams—to amplify black signification. In my analysis of *Jazz* in Chapter Three, I use Sartwell’s understanding of approved modes of

audibility to demonstrate the ways in which silencing African American voice is transformed during a silent protest parade into a signifier for social resistance.

Speaking against and resisting the dominant culture's approved mode of audibility is not without struggle. Bell hooks, a well-known theorist and activist in African American and feminist studies, argues in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* that "[l]anguage is also a place of struggle" (146). Hooks directs us to look to the margins and liminal spaces for the voices which speak to issues of repression, as I will show in Larsen's novel in Chapter Two. I use hooks in Chapter Three to highlight the multivalent position of African American narratives in the postmodern novel *Jazz*.

*FROM SOUND TO SILENCE: HEARING AND READING THE INAUDIBLE*

The hegemony of sound or the dominant culture's approved mode(s) of audibility often demands silence from the oppressed group. Silence is conventionally understood, and sometimes misunderstood, as the counterpart to sound. My reading of sound and silence in *Passing* and *Jazz* will demonstrate a type of dialectical and interdependent relationship between the two, in which textual audibility and inaudibility form a social screen that foregrounds those sounds—sounds that can be obscured or lost in high volume soundscapes. Cheryl Glenn closely analyzes different types of silences in her text, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. She argues that silence is often attributed as the representation of oppression, feminine expression, emptiness, ignorance, and/or subservience. And, while "silencing" can be "an imposition of weakness upon a normally speaking body," Glenn also notes that "silence can function as a strategic position of strength" (xix). Since "speech and silence are not mutually exclusive," but rather,

“inextricably linked and often interchangeably, simultaneously meaningful,” Glenn argues that silence represents more than a void of or opposition to language (7). The representation of silence in written texts pushes non-verbal modes of communication to the foreground, and serves as a site for meaning making for the reader. My analysis of textual silence in both *Passing* and *Jazz* demonstrate the different forms of silence, especially as silence relates to the white surveillance of black sound.

Silence in both novels exaggerates the relationship between power and language, a relationship which is explored in many African American narratives. Toni Morrison addresses this inextricable link between sound and silence, particularly as they relate to privilege and power, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison explores the representation of black identity and tropes read in the literary canon, and describes “how Africanist language practices...evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness” (52). As suggested in this introduction, the narrative strategies which shape African American identity emerged from the unique speech patterns and forms of oral performance in African culture. Morrison suggests about Africanist language, its ability to help us “establish a cognitive world split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power” (Morrison 52). Articulating African and/or African American voice in the written text requires the participation in Western language traditions, from which Africans and African Americans were once excluded. As I construct my reading of Morrison’s *Jazz* in Chapter Three, I will show how her postmodern narrative participates and subverts the Western tradition by manipulating the written conventions of the novel

to represent oral performance and speech practices. Furthermore, the text, as it blends together written and oral narrative devices, signifies the division between speech and text, while it embodies a type of union of these cultures.

*RE-CALLING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN NARRATIVES*

Harlem Renaissance literature provides a particular soundscape—a space, a community, and an acoustic environment—from which to “re-call” or re-voice tensions concerning language, power, and the construction of (racial) identity during a critical moment in African American history. The theoretical work by Corbould, Thompson, Gates, et. al, provide the foundation from which I begin my analysis of textual sounds, as they relate to the construction of voice, in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*. The Harlem soundscapes in these African American narratives—in particular, the sound-images, descriptions of silence, and representations of oral performance—engage in the collective history and culture of the past of African Americans, while still presenting something new. *Passing*, a modern narrative, and *Jazz*, a postmodern narrative, are two examples of Harlem Renaissance narratives that, ultimately, suggest the need to unfix our collective preconceived notions about race and racial representation. As I explore double consciousness and the repetition of sound (and silence) in these soundscapes, I show how African American narratives create space for (re)sounding and signifying culture and identity.

In Chapter Two, I analyze the sound-image of the bell and discuss the historical and literary implications of that sound and its association with African American voices. I also look at the impact silence has on different races, particularly when the racial identity

of Clare and Irene, main characters in the novel, are kept secret. At the end of Chapter Two, I examine those sounds and silences that take place after Clare's and Irene's racial identities are unveiled. In Chapter Three, I focus on the narrative structure of what Gates terms a speakerly text. I also analyze the narrative devices which make audible the performance of the postmodern text. I entertain a discussion about the narrator and the fragmentary organization of the novel to suggest a disorientation of double consciousness and black signification on the language and narrative itself. Later in this chapter, I address the repetition of sound-images, like drumming, silence, and whispers, to demonstrate the struggle and violence enacted through repetition of language.

*Passing* the Threshold: Re-presenting Narrative Sound & Silence in the  
Liminal Spaces of Larsen's Novel

*"PASSING" THROUGH HARLEM*

*Passing*, by Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen, explores the complexities of expressing racial identity in 1920s Harlem. The narrative follows the newly re-kindled friendship between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, as it exposes the controversies associated with those who "pass" for white, with the knowledge of their African American ancestry. Part I: Encounter, the first of three parts, (Part II: Re-Encounter, and Part III: Finale,) begins with the discovery of a letter sent to Irene by Clare. Clare's letter reminds Irene of her childhood and the experiences she once shared with Clare. The letter, an invitation to get together during one of Clare's visits to New York, was spurred by the women's chance encounter two years back at a white-only rooftop restaurant in Chicago. Irene eventually discovers that Clare, a half-black and half-white woman, has been passing for white since she relocated outside of New York. Clare not only passed for white in public spheres, like the rooftop restaurant where she saw Irene, but also in private spheres, like her marriage to an unsuspecting white racist. Irene is never fully accepting of Clare's choice to deny her African American roots and identify as only white, nor is she fully accepting of Clare's choice to re-connect to her African American roots. Clare, however, stranded between two racially polarized worlds, and ultimately left outside both, insists on befriending and joining Irene and her social circle in Harlem. But, with each of Clare's secret trips to Harlem and to Irene's home, the stakes are raised for both women—raised in terms of the danger of asserting one's identity and voice as

African American, and in terms of the danger of opening up fixed notions of blackness to hybridity or variation.

Racial identification in the novel—how one self-identifies and is identified by others—raises many questions about the cultural construction of race, especially when belonging to more than one race. While many critics of *Passing* explore the text for its visual applications, I will treat Larsen's text and the issues surrounding racial dualism and racial identification in terms of its aural applications. Sound, as discussed in Chapter One, can be a significant marker of African American identity, and many of these sounds in *Passing* exaggerate and amplify the liminal positions that are occupied by Clare and other characters in the text. Occupying a liminal position, as bell hooks reminds us, is not only an act of repression, but also resistance, one where “[t]he oppressed struggle in language to recover [them]selves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew,” as I will show later in the chapter (*Yearning* 146). Clare's character demonstrates hooks' point, as Clare struggles to precisely articulate in terms Irene can understand, her loneliness from existing on the margins of both the white and black race.

Sound-images in the novel also draw the reader's attention to the voices that exist at the boundaries and margins of the Harlem Renaissance soundscape. In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to outline the variations of significant sounds and silences as they are represented in the soundscape of *Passing* to uncover the way in which racial identity is obscured by the discourse of hegemony. In addition, I will locate these sounds (and silences) as they relate to interior and exterior soundscapes to draw attention to the

divisions, limitations, and restrictions that are present in the modern African American narrative.

*PASSING & THE "BELL"ES LETTRES OF SOUND*

One prominent sound-image which draws attention to the liminal spaces in the novel is the bell. The bell sounds heard in *Passing* provide insight to the characters associated with such sounds; outline the soundscapes in the novel; and by virtue of the bell's symbolic presence throughout history signifies the looming presence, and potential danger. The first instances of bell sound in the text are associated with the distinct voice and laugh of Clare. Her voice and, particularly her laugh, are often described as ringing or metallic. For instance, Irene hears in Clare's "lovely laugh...the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal" (Larsen 12). Other examples of Clare's laugh are described, again, as "ringing bells ...[with] a hard metallic sound," or as "tinkle[s] [that] rang out," even "little musical trills following one another in sequence after sequence (Larsen 19, 46, 50). Bell sound-images are also described in other contexts in the novel, particularly in domestic spaces, through ringing telephones, or chiming clocks. The way in which Larsen weaves the sound of the bell seamlessly into the soundscape of Harlem represents a space for cultural (and historical) listening, while heightening the audibility of the African American voice.

In the text, the audibility and familiarity of the African American voice strikes Irene as she dines atop a white-only hotel restaurant in the city. While enjoying tea by herself, she meets the eyes of a stranger across the room. The unknown woman approaches Irene and breaks their silent gaze to say, "I think I know you" (Larsen 11).

The narrator describes the unidentified voice as being “slightly husky,” [which] “held a dubious note,” as if to reference the dubious identity of the woman Irene does not yet recognize (11). Irene quickly tries to place the woman in the proper context from her past, using the familiarity of the woman’s voice as a guide. However, it is not until she hears the woman’s “lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling,” that she identifies the woman as childhood friend, Clare Bellew, formerly Kendry. In this example, Clare’s distinct bell-like laugh becomes a significant marker of her identity for Irene, rather than her appearance. The description of the bell sound, “delicate” and “precious,” suggests that Irene admires and treasures the sound associated with Clare’s identifiable laugh. The “tinkling” sound of a “precious metal” also suggests that Clare is fragile and capable of being broken. Finally, the word sounds and sound-images suggest her unique or elite quality, as “precious metals” are known to have. The way in which Clare is represented in association with bell sounds, the metallic tinkling and ringing, repeats and echoes with slight variations.

The representation and variation of the bell sound in *Passing*, however, signifies more than tonal descriptions of the characters. Mark M. Smith, author of “Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America,” states that “[m]etaphors, analogies, and similes, are not invented in a vacuum; for example, tornadoes cannot sound like trains until trains exist and listeners are accustomed to them” in his article about the soundscape of plantation life (138). Similarly, sound-images of bells function as a metaphor after the reader is accustomed to the way in which the bell and its chime have functioned in

previous historical and cultural contexts. Before I continue to examine the way in which bells are used to signal the voices and presence of others in *Passing*, I will first introduce the key elements and definition of the bell.

Listeners have, of course, been accustomed to the sounds of bells for centuries, shaping and filling the soundscape from which they rang. The bell is first referred to in 1000 AD, according to The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), and is now commonly understood as a “hollow body of cast metal...with a recurving brim, which is struck by a ‘clapper’ or ‘tongue,’” that rings “or emit[s] a clear musical sound,” (OED). The physical construction of the bell, then, also lends itself to the analogy drawn between its ring and the sound of one’s voice; in the way that the tongue of the bell slaps against the brim of the metal encasing to emit a chime, the human tongue also flutters about the roof of the mouth to help create the distinct sounds of one’s voice. The “hard metallic sound” of Clare’s “ringing...laugh,” represents the reverberation of the African American voice which appears to ring freely even in white-only spaces (Larsen 19). Later in the narrative the ringing bell sounds are heard not only in association with Clare’s voice, but with her presence in the domestic space.

#### *THE BOUNDARY OF THE BELL SOUNDS*

Larsen also weaves the sound of the bell into the narrative by making use of the everyday domestic features of the home, like the telephone and doorbell. Alain Corbin, author of “The Auditory Markers of the Village,” notes how bells, throughout history, have been used as tools to outline spatial territories and “reinforced divisions between an inside and an outside” (Corbin 117). The ringing of the telephone or doorbell also

reinforces division between inside(rs) and outside(rs). At the beginning of *Passing*, Clare is often marked as the outsider ringing the bell to gain entrance or access to Irene and her social circle. For example, the narrator notes how in Irene's home "The Telephone [sic]...had rung like something possessed. Since nine o'clock [Irene] had been hearing its insistent jangle" (Larsen 23). The caller on the other end of the telephone, whom Irene refused to answer, is Clare. After their chance meeting at the rooftop restaurant, Clare feels the strong desire to re-connect with Irene and to her African American culture. The ringing telephone repeatedly disrupts the domestic soundscape and serves, briefly, as a substitute "voice" for Clare, as Irene and the reader associate the "insistent jangling" sound of the unanswered call with Clare's desire to speak to her (23). Here, Clare's character represents the struggle of the oppressed, as bell hooks reminds us, to express in language the need to "recover" herself as both white *and* African American, and "to reunite" with Irene (*Yearning* 146). Persistent in her struggle to speak this language to Irene, the call continues to ring, but goes unanswered by Irene, for many hours.

The ringing phone as a substitute voice for Clare also marks the presence of an outsider trying to connect with those inside the home, which re-establishes and reinforces the division between inside and outside. Clare later occupies the liminal space of the doorway as an outsider looking to enter Irene's home. In *Passing*, the bell announces Clare's presence as a racial outsider. The division between outside and inside spaces in the novel reflects the division of Clare's racial identity, a part white and part African American woman who publicly (and privately) separates the two sides of herself. Clare, as a result of her exclusion from her African American side, feels like an outsider to both

her races. Clare identifies as white outside Harlem's city limits, but longs to re-identify as black while inside the city's limits. She is often positioned at the threshold of the interior/exterior spaces when the sounds of bells are heard. For example, Irene's household swells with the

sound of young voices. Sometimes Junior's serious and positive; again, Ted's deceptively gracious one. Often there was laughter, or the noise of commotion, tussling, or toys being slammed down....The noise and commotion from above grew increasingly louder. Irene was about to go to the stairway and request the boys to be quieter in their play when she heard the doorbell ringing. (44-45)

The myriad of boisterous and lively noises in this scene crescendo until the ring of the doorbell interrupts the commotion and shifts the bell sound to the foreground. The domestic soundscape emphasizes the distinct sounds of the boys playing until the sounds of the doorbell obscures the playful noise and shifts the focus to the outside(r)—to Clare waiting at the door.

*RACIAL INSIDERS, OUTSIDERS, AND THE LIMINAL SPACE BETWEEN*

Clare attempts to gain access to Irene's home. Her movement from outside to inside the household symbolizes the collision of Clare's once split (racial) identities. Crossing the threshold in *Passing* signifies a crossing over into an opposite-raced world. Clare's character re-presents a take on the Du Bosian doubled self. The reader will remember that Du Bois describes how African Americans experience a psychological split, "ever feel[ing her] twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body," (Du Bois 7). Clare's "twoness" is both her "white American" side and her "Negro" side, although she is not of a "dark body" (7). As she re-enters a private space, an opposite-raced world, she openly

identifies as an African American to Irene and Irene's family and friends, in an aim to resolve her split identities.

Clare's intention to re-connect with Irene demonstrates her desire to cross over to the opposite-raced world with which she is no longer familiar. Notably, Irene also crosses over to an opposite-raced world after she enters Clare's home. However, it is not until after the arrival of Clare's husband, John ("Jack") Bellew, that Irene discovers her has transitioned into a white-dominated space. The tensions within the novel surface in Part One: Encounter, after Clare invites Irene over to her home for tea. Clare, Irene, and their friend, Gertrude, who have been out of touch with one another since childhood, converse and share the details of their adult life. To break up the "oppressive little silence" among the estranged friends, "Clare's voice came pleasantly, conversationally," to announce that her husband Jack would be joining them shortly (Larsen 24). Silences are heard throughout the scene, but are first described as "little," as if to trivialize the moment (24). As we saw in Chapter One, Cheryl Glenn's work on silence suggests that "paraphasias, the silencing of words," is sometimes caused by "the stress of the social moment" (12). The silences due to "the stress of the social moment" among the women, at first, represent how conversation among estranged friends is not always fluid, but can sometimes stagnate (12). Additionally, the silences are amplified due to low ambient noise levels in the intimate space of Clare's home. However, the stresses grow and the tensions surface when their conversation turns to the topic of race.

Inside the home, the women share with each other their experiences of existing on the cusp of these opposite-raced worlds as light-skinned African Americans. They, as

African American women, have also all passed for white for trivial and not so trivial reasons. The private domestic space in which Clare, Irene, and Gertrude discuss controversial topics—including the choice to pass for white, and the racial sub-ordering that privileges those with fairer skin—amplifies the rising tensions developing between the women, as it simultaneously reflects the diversity in public opinions, for African Americans, about passing and racial sub-ordering. The women, though light enough to pass, have different perspectives about their own position as light-skinned African Americans, and the problematics of publicly denying their own race. Dialog, and later, silence, in this scene reflects the ambiguity and flexibility of sound and space, as it expands and constricts social boundaries of acceptable speech.

Irene finds that Clare stopped identifying as black in most social situations, and that Gertrude was paranoid and phobic about having dark-complected children. Irene's "sense of not belonging to and of despising the company in which she found herself" surfaces as silence (Larsen 26). Gates reminds us, that signification in African American culture, "is the figurative difference...between surface and latent meaning" (Gates 82). Irene's silences in this scene signify her indignation for the women, while invoking the historical connotations of silence on slave plantations during slavery.

The ebb and flow of conversation constructed before and after the sound-image of the bell demonstrate the way in which space is not fixed, but instead, flexible, even mobile. As Clare's husband, Bellew, enters the scene, a transformation takes place. The home shifts from an African American-dominated space to a white-dominated space.

This shift in space also signals a change in power structures. The mobility and flexibility of the space is amplified by the sounds created by those inside it.

In the remainder of the scene, the description of the auditory dynamics reflects the oscillation between an open and closed space for a discussion of race and expression of racial identity. This scene also incorporates bell sound-images that expand or abbreviate the auditory space between the dialogue, highlighting for the reader, how language is seemingly open to those in power or of equal power, and closed to those who are not. In my reading of the scene, however, there appears to be an open space for deriving alternate meanings from the language. The sounds and silences, in particular, provide the reader and women with the opportunity to hear one person's speech or lack of speech as something other than what is being (un)said.

For example, after Irene reveals that one of her children is dark, the "oppressive little silence" surfaces, once more, in stilled conversation between the women (Larsen 24). Gertrude, having just made the comment that, "of course, nobody wants a dark child," immediately falls silent (Larsen 26). Gertrude's physical movements embody her silence, as her "mouth flew open[as s]he tried to speak...[and] could not immediately get the words out" (26). Aware of the growing tensions and anger surfacing between herself and her guests, Clare "steer[s] carefully away from anything that might lead towards race or other thorny subject[s]" (27). As the conversation shifts toward more pleasant topics, Clare's identifying laugh, once again, "tinkled and pealed" like that of a bell, as if to break the tension and lighten the mood (27).

Soon after the chime of Clare's laugh, Irene hears "the sound of the outer door being opened" (28). It is unclear if the bell-like laughter in this scene represents an alarm/warning or offers a tone of protection like the way in which bells were, at one time, believed "to preserve the space of a community from all conceivable threats" (Corbin 122). Whether a sound of warning or a sound of reassurance, the sound-image of the bell in Clare's voice moves to the foreground of the soundscape, and signals the arrival of Jack Bellew, Clare's husband.

*"BELLEW" THE SILENCE AND LAUGHTER: CONCEALED RACIAL IDENTITIES*

Jack Bellew is one of the few white characters in the text, and represents a racial outsider to the Harlem/African American community. His wife refers to him as Jack, but the narrator refers to him, simply, as Bellew. The name "Bellew" provides another form of repetition and connection to sound-images of bells in the text. As I have argued with the theoretical framework from Henry Louis Gates in Chapter One, repetition in the African American novel repeats, but with "signal difference" (Gates xxiv). One variation of Bellew's name conjures the Low German and Old English spelling of *bell(e)*, meaning "to make a loud noise," and another variation includes "the Latin word *bellum* ([meaning] war)" (Schafer 50). Both connotations suggest a powerful and intimidating presence related to sound, like that of a bellow. Also, because Bellew is a white male, he often positions African American (women) socially and racially "below" him. As his name suggests, Bellew's aural presence in the novel signals (and amplifies) tensions regarding race.

Bellew's arrival in the narrative, signaled by Clare's bell-laugh, indicates to the reader a transition from the African American dominated space to the opposite-raced world, in which Bellew assumes control over the soundscape. The African American women must adapt to the approved modes of audibility dictated by Bellew's presence, which often requires the silencing of their voices. The women see Bellew before they hear him, and his physical appearance indicated to Irene that he was

a tallish person, broadly made...somewhere between thirty five and forty. His hair was dark brown and waving, and he had a soft mouth, somewhat womanish, set in an unhealthy-looking dough-coloured face. His steel-grey opaque eyes were very much alive, moving ceaselessly between thick bluish lids. But there was, Irene decided, nothing unusual about him, unless it was an impression of latent physical power. (Larsen 28)

Bellew's appearance suggests a delicate man with his "womanish" features like his "waving" hair, and "soft mouth" (28). Irene's cursory glance of his physical appearance left her at ease as he exuded "latent physical power" (28). However, his somewhat effeminate, somewhat weakly appearance is incongruent with the image he projects through the sound of his voice. His physical appearance and aural impression are in direct opposition to one another, and suggest to the reader that visual representation alone can provide and perpetuate misrepresentations.

The women hear Bellew's voice when he greets his wife with his term of endearment for her, "Hello, Nig" (Larsen 28). Before formal introductions are made with Irene and Gertrude, Bellew's first words ring out for the whole room to hear. The soft impression projected by Bellew's physical appearance quickly calluses after the women hear the familiar biting racial slur, "nigger," repeated with slight difference to form

Clare's pet name, "Nig" (28). Bellew's movement into the space and language signal the shift in power in the room.

With two words, Bellew's speech changes the visiting women's impression of him, as well as the cultural soundscape of the room. His presence and language position him as the dominant white male, and thrust Irene and Gertrude into shocked silence over the unexpected and offensive nickname. Bellew, while maintaining ignorance of their racial background, changes how the women make sound and/or how they assert their African American voices. The soundscape of the home, previously filled with seemingly trivial, but oppressive little silences and laughter, shifts toward amplified silences and tense laughter after Bellew crosses the threshold of his home.

Irene's laughter and her silences are marked by her physical movements in this scene. Instead of simply noting that she "sat gazing at husband and wife," the narrator first describes how she "caught her lip between her teeth" (28). Silence in a novel can be a hard acoustic element to pin down, because it is often viewed as an absence of sound. Nonetheless, the description of Irene is not simply un-sounding or only gazing, but an action, biting her lip, which implies a choice to remain quiet and, perhaps, a reflex to physically mute herself and her desire to make sound. "Silence," according to Glenn, "is meaningful, even if it is invisible" (4). Larsen's novel makes visible the silences which carry meaning, whether through direct language from the narrator, or through the physical actions of the characters. Irene's lack of words in response to the slur allows Bellew's words to linger in the room. The silence expands the space between the last words spoken, almost slowing the tempo of the conversation, and underscores the

importance of power dynamics in the scene. The silences highlighted in this scene reflect the social context Larsen observed, in which silence was often the response to, rather than speech or protest against, racism and racist attitudes. Bellew, though unaware of the effect his racial slur had on the women, disturbs the soundscape and creates a distance between the couple and their guests. Irene maintains her distance by regularly inhabiting the silent space she has etched out for herself in the Bellew's home. In her choice to remain silent, Irene does not have to confront Bellew or ask him to explain his comment, nor does she have to risk her expose her own racial identity or position on race.

Irene adjusts her dynamics, particularly her silence, which becomes both a choice and an imposition. Her quieted sounds and lowered dynamics function differently than the silences heard in the soundscape before Bellew's arrival. Silence, according to Glenn

can be something one does, something that is done to someone, or something one experiences. However [the form of silence] takes shape,...the function of specific acts, states, [or] phenomena of silence—that is, its interpretation by and effect upon other people—varies according to the social-rhetorical context in which it occurs. (9)

Irene's silence, simultaneously, is “something [she] does, and something that is done to [her]” by Bellew (Glenn 9). Bellew's dominant position as a white man “others” the African American women in the room, which does not go unnoticed by Clare in this racially charged scene. Clare, in her attempts to “fill up social space and compress silence,” draws attention to the shocking nickname (Glenn 6). Unlike previously, when Clare steered the conversation away from the topic of race because tensions began to arise between Gertrude and Irene, in the presence of Bellew, Clare directs the conversation toward race, asking, “Did you hear what Jack called me?,” to ensure the

women would participate in the conversation (Larsen 28). The other women are no longer allowed to maintain their silence and distance from the topic of race or from Bellew. Clare's inquiry also facilitates a brief discussion about the nickname—its origin and usage—and suggests her implicit approval of the word and of the “ridiculing of her race by an outsider” (Larsen 28).

At Clare's request, and with a modest “chuckle,” Bellew explains the origin of Clare's nickname: “when we were first married, she was...as white as a lily. But...she's gettin' darker and darker....if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger” (Larsen 29). His concluding thought, Clare becoming “darker and darker” and “turn[ing] into a nigger” sends him “roar[ing] with laughter” (Larsen 29). Bellew's laugh, described as a ‘roar,’ becomes a signifier for his identity, not unlike the way in which bell-sounds become a signifier for Clare's identity. The roaring nature of his laugh reflects his animalistic anger and intimidating quality, much like the connotations of his name, as mentioned previously. From a chuckle to a roar, Bellew's outward amusement at the absurd and unlikely nature of his wife turning African American, incites “Clare's ringing bell-like laugh,” and “after another uneasy shift in her seat” Gertrude's “shrill one” too (Larsen 29). The dynamics of the soundscape crescendo to fill the social space, which quickly constricts the space, closing for Irene, her ability to speak freely about race.

Both Gertrude and Clare mirror Bellew's intense laughter. And, while everyone is laughing, the characterization of Bellew's and Gertrude's laughs, a roar and a shrill, signify the danger and severity of Clare's situation. Their laugh also signifies their

participation in the approved modes of audibility in this particular social context. As African American women, Gertrude and Clare laugh to show compliancy with the unspoken power dynamics between Bellew and the women; Bellew, a racist white man, becomes the dominant figure of authority. The women appear to be limited in their available response to Bellew's racial slur. The approved modes of audibility and response in this scene include laughter, verbal or non-verbal agreement, and/or silence.

The laughter in this scene represents the way in which the soundscape is used to cover and uncover the tensions below the surface in the Bellew's home, especially surrounding Clare's African American identity. Irene cannot express her thoughts or "desire to shout" at Bellew, "And you're sitting here surrounded by three black devils," (Larsen 29). While she, at first, chooses silence, Irene, no longer able to keep her "lips tightly compressed," joins the others in their "gales of laughter" (Larsen 29). Irene "laughed and laughed and laughed[ as t]ears ran down her cheeks[, and h]er sides ached," at the social situation she unexpectedly found herself in (Larsen 29). Irene, no longer able to compress her body and silence her voice, replicates their reactions to Clare's nickname with her own laughter. As Irene considers the full context of the situation—of Clare, an African American woman married to a white racist man—she "laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided" until "catching the sight of Clare's face" suddenly "struck her" with caution (29).

Irene's dynamics, her crescendos and decrescendos in and out of silence, signify to Bellew, her approval of his racist views. Her dynamics also signify, to the reader and the other women, the irony of a racist white man unknowingly marrying an African

American woman. In this instance, Irene's laughter signals a type of power she holds over Bellew, as she bears knowledge to which he is not privileged. Bellew's laughter disrupts the silence in the room and attracts the laughter of others; but, the addition of Irene's laughter, and at great length, does not incite more laughter, but rather takes the opposite effect on Gertrude and Clare by collapsing them into silence for fear of revealing their racial identity to Bellew.

*SILENCING THE BELLS: SEEKING SAFE SOUNDSCAPES*

Fear and silence, throughout history, have long been associated with one another. For instance, during slavery Smith notes how "[s]laves' ability to quash sound, to impose silence, was itself an act of resistance against the will of the master. Slaves learned how to control sound to maintain their dignity, and their understanding of the aural world allowed them to commit resonant acts of resistance" ("Listening World of Antebellum" 147). I would like to draw a parallel between the slave-master relationship Smith describes and the tension building between Irene and Bellew in the scene at the Bellew's residence. It is not my intention to claim that Irene and Bellew epitomize the slave girl and slave master relationship. However, Bellew's presence, gender, and race position him with a greater political and social authority over Irene and the others. His presence, like that of a slave master, creates, for the women, a hyperawareness to their own production of sound, especially sounds that speak to their African American identity. Irene, while on the surface is subservient in her silence and laughter, uses the stressed dynamics of those sounds to create an audible resistance toward Bellew's white authority, a sound that holds additional meaning of which Bellew is not aware. Her sounds signify her superior

knowledge of the ironic situation he described about marrying someone outside his race, and subverts the underlying power and dominance which Bellew's presence suggests.

And, while Irene uses her sounds to signal her amusement over the irony and subversion of Bellew's authority, she also uses her silence to resist exposing her racial identity, as it was used on the plantation. Sound, during slavery, was a tool to locate, expose, conceal, and identify slave movement on the plantation. Slaves were forced to wear bells around their necks exposing their whereabouts to their masters at all times. Smith notes that "Slaves, always alert to the aural betrayal of their physical acts, muted the bell's clapper [locked around their necks] with mud" (Smith 145). Irene's decrescendo from "laugh[ter that went] on and on and on, long after the others had subsided" to silence, after "catching the sight of Clare's face," a look of warning, suggests an act similar to the silencing of the clapper on a belled slave (Larsen 29). Irene's ability to mute and control "her disastrous desire to laugh again" becomes an effective tool with which to resist the exposure of her and the other women's identities inside the Bellew's home (Larsen 29). Irene's control of her own sounds helps maintain orderly conduct within a group, and keeps at bay the potential unsafe environment in which the women, especially Clare, find themselves.

Irene continues to repress her feelings and sounds while the conversation eventually shifts toward less racially charged topics like city life in Chicago versus New York. At the end of their visit, Irene and Gertrude say goodbye to both hosts, but even while "[p]lunging downward [on the elevator] they were silent" (Larsen 32). Only after the women reach the exterior of the building are they able to leave the oppression of

silence behind. On the street, among the many sounds taking place at once, “Gertrude, in the manner of one unable to keep bottled up for another minute that which for the last hour she had had to retain, burst out: ‘My God!’” (32.) The uncontainable release, “my god,” as a response to the pairing of Bellew and Clare almost mimics or, rather, ironically parallels Bellew’s uncontainable outburst of roaring laughter (32). While outside, Irene and Gertrude exhibit a freedom to voice their opinions about “the mess [Clare was] liable to get herself into” without fear of revealing Clare’s identity or their own (32). Gertrude and Irene wait until they are among the busy soundscape of the street to unpack their bottled-up feelings. The safety to make sound and to speak, freely, without having to refrain from honest dialog about their race or re-veil their racial identity, demonstrates the way in which the streets provided the space and opportunity for African Americans to establish their voice, without discretion.

In *Passing*, the series of (racial) tensions that center on one’s status as an insider and/or outsider are often punctuated by the sound-images of ringing bells and resonating silences. These tensions which exist between opposite-raced worlds and insiders and outsiders, however, are not fixed. The variation and repetition of sound-images—like bells and silence—as they persist throughout the text, demonstrate the way in which the thematic tensions set up by Larsen early in the text are transformed and re-viewed in different contexts later in Part II: Re-Encounter and Part III: Finale.

#### *RE-ENCOUNTERING SOUND AND SPACE*

In the second and third parts of the novel, Clare begins to re-connect with her African American identity, but only in Bellew’s absence. Clare connects the African

American community in Harlem, safe from Bellew's gaze, through the social opportunities provided by Irene and Irene's husband, Brian Redfield. But, as Clare continues to intrude on Irene's life and social circle, Irene begins to form adverse and jealous feelings toward Clare, which are expressed in the soundscape of the characters' homes in Harlem. For example, shortly after Irene's tardy arrival to her own party, the first sound-image heard in the soundscape from "the room beyond," is a "clock chime[, a] single sound" (Larsen 63). Moments after weeping silently in her bedroom, Irene descends the stairs to attend the party, just as the clock bell chimes. Irene, suspicious of potential romantic feelings between her husband and Clare, which caused her sadness and tardiness, must mask her jealousy by faking pleasantries while among her guests. As Irene focuses more on her emotions, and less on the events of the party, the soundscape becomes less precise. No longer does Irene hear the precise number of chimes of the clock, rather, the ambient sounds she hears is general, like the "[c]hatter, chatter, chatter" of her guests (Larsen 63).

Irene even tries to mingle with her guests. However, the dialog in this section only captures Irene's part of the conversation, "'Oh, Mrs. Runyon....So nice to see you....Two? ...Really?...How exciting!...Yes, I think Tuesday's all right...'" (63). Irene's absentmindedness, her forced "repetitions of her smile" and her "manufactured conversations," embody those actions and norms expected of a caring host, but without the sincerity (64). The one-sided manufactured conversation represents the emptiness and abandonment she is feeling—a feeling that intensify for Irene the longer she accompanies Clare on her journey toward reaffirming her African American side.

Irene's feelings of emptiness and abandonment also enforce the need for her to control her sounds and mask her feelings during the social gathering in her home, not unlike her need to control her sounds and mask her fear/disdain toward Bellew during the small gathering at Clare's home. Irene's home, unlike Clare's home, is a space in which African American identity is not restricted to approved modes of audibility by white auditors. The catalog of sound-images in this scene, such as "the familiar little tinkling sounds of spoons striking against frail cups, the soft running sounds of inconsequential talk, punctuated now and then with laughter," help to obscure Irene's anguish (Larsen 64). However, it is also the soundscape that signifies the growing tension between Irene and Clare.

Irene's emotional anguish is symbolized in the text as the sound-image of breaking porcelain. "The chatter [of the guests] stopped" at the sound of "a slight crash" on the floor (Larsen 66). The chatter of the guests halted, which creates space in the soundscape for listening to the heightened sound of the teacup crash. "Dark stains dotted the bright rug" and spread near Irene's feet, leaving behind "white fragments" of a teacup (Larsen 66). The emphasis on ambient sounds at the party and the onomatopoeic sound of porcelain crashing to the floor, surface at a time when Irene is unable to vocalize her angry feelings towards Clare. Additionally, the crashing of the tea cup, suggests that the tension between Irene and Clare has reached a breaking point. The soundscape in Irene's home and repetition of particular sound-images, which are also present in Clare's home, the tinkling bell-sounds, silence, and laughter, reflect not only a difference in the social context, but a difference in the way the characters relate to the sounds.

*RACIAL OUTSIDERS UNVEILED*

The soundscape and racially-inflected space in the last social gathering of the novel echoes the sound-images at another Harlem residence, hosted by Irene's friend, Felise Freeland. The Freeland home, a name and space that connotes a certain freedom and openness, provides the soundscape and stage for the dramatic re-vision of the scene at the Bellew's home. For instance, whereas the small gathering at the Bellew's residence is defined by its swells of silence and laughter, the Freeland residence is noted for continuous "talking," in addition to abundant "laughter [that] never for a minute ceased" over the "blare" of music coming from the phonograph (Larsen 79). While at the Freeland home, Clare's racial dualism<sup>7</sup>, though previously concealed from her husband and new social circle in Harlem, is finally exposed to both audiences. The consequence of denying part of the self, for Clare, results in her death.

Inside the scene at the Freeland home, the doorbell sound-image rings to mark, once again, the arrival of the racial outsider, Bellew. The bell sound-image, as in Bellew's home, also alerts those listening to the potential threat waiting beyond the doorway. The guests in the home, particularly Clare and Irene, identify the man outside by "the roar of [his] voice [which was heard] above all the other noises" (Larsen 79). The booming sound and threat in Bellew's voice silences the guests and draws their attention to the commotion at the party. Bellew, who discovered Clare's racial background after accidentally running into Irene and her African American friend while on the city streets,

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<sup>7</sup> Nathan Irving Huggins, author of *Harlem Renaissance*, suggests Larsen's own experience coming from a family with mixed racial background, has prepared her to "treat[] the schizophrenia which results from racial dualism" (Huggins 159).

confronts Clare in an emotional and rage-filled accusation, “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” (Larsen 79). Bellew’s choice words upon entering Felise’s home invoke his first words in the text, “Hello, Nig,” his perverse term of endearment for his wife (Larsen 28). However, the term of endearment, when echoed at the end of the novel is stripped of its deceptively endearing qualities and revealed as a truly vulgar expression of hate.

Bellew’s expression of hate, along with the racial identity of Clare and the racial dualism of her once divided life, are spoken about freely in Felise’s home. However, unlike the way in which Bellew’s presence in his own home transformed the space to an opposite-raced world, placing Bellew in a position of authority, the Freeland home is a space that remains open to all, while asserting an African American dominant presence in the space. The “snarl and a moan” in Bellew’s voice, though an intense “expression of rage and of pain,” does not privilege him nor invest him with any special authority in the African American-dominant space (Larsen 79). In fact, it is not until the “silver chill of [Felise’s] voice” that he is reminded of his outsider status as “the only white man” in the room (79). The silver chill of Felise’s voice, which fills the space of the room, like the silver chill of the bell sound-images heard in the text, highlights his position as an outsider in the Harlem space. As a racial outsider, “Bellew [stands] speechless,” a silent signification of his powerlessness (79).

In the Harlem soundscape, racial identity is not denied or silenced, but confronted and affirmed. Clare, publicly exposed, stood near the window as if “the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her” (Larsen 79). Clare’s already fragmented identity—as Bellew’s white wife and Irene’s African American friend—like

the broken teacup mentioned previously, lies divided and shattered in the room for both races to examine long after Bellew stopped snarling. Clare's liminal position as an insider and outsider to both races is reflected in her physical position in this scene. Her character metaphorically resides in the liminal space between the two racial worlds, and literally in the liminal space between the interior of the apartment and the exterior of the street.

However, her position in the window, unlike her position in the doorway, allows her to view herself and the others in a faint reflection of the glass while still looking at the scene of the city outside. Clare views the collision of the two divided scenes, the cityscape and the house party, and the collision of her separate identities at once. Furthermore, her position next to the window, unlike the doorway, does not provide her the opportunity or invitation (from Bellew or Irene) to enter the space "inside." Her permanent position as an outsider, in which she is able to gaze at her fragmented self and the commotion at the Freeland's in the reflection, shatters as she falls from her marginal position in the window to her death.

The cause of Clare's fall from the window remains ambiguous to the reader. The guests in the room share a "gasp of horror," but it is not clear whether Clare's fall was an accident, caused by her hand, or the hand of another like Irene or Bellew (Larsen 79).

The reading laid out in this chapter would suggest that because Clare is left speechless—without a voice, without a space for her to publicly exist as both African American and white—she chooses to fall from the window in the ultimate act of resistance against boundaries and confines imposed by a society unwilling to make space for racial hybridity. After her fall, layered over the "gasp of horror" is Bellew's "sound not quiet

human, like a beast in agony. ‘Nig! My God! Nig!’” (Larsen 79). Those tones and sounds most identifiable with Bellew’s voice, a roar, a snarl, and lastly “a beast in agony” encourage a reading of his character as primal and/or animalistic, perhaps to represent the primitive nature of racist attitudes which perpetuate the violence associated with racial stereotyping (79).

*THE WEIGHT OF WHISPERED WORDS*

The final soundscape of the novel takes place on the Harlem streets. The “little circle of strangers” hovering over Clare’s body, “speaking in whispers, or in the awed, discreetly lowered tones adapted to the presence of disaster” to process the event (Larsen 80). The hushed tones on the street reflect the need for quieted sounds during the traumatic event Irene and the others witnessed. Irene, still in shock, “stammered: ‘Is she—is she—?’” to those whispering in the crowd (80). Irene’s behavior and speech heard in the context of Clare’s death is quite different than her behavior and speech at the end of her visit Clare’s apartment. At the end of the visit in the Bellew’s home, Irene could not wait to descend from the apartment building and onto the street to freely voice her silenced opinions about Clare’s relationship with Bellew; however, at the end of the novel, Irene lingers in the building long after the others, and upon her descent to the horrific scene is unable to speak a full sentence.

Her transitions from inside to outside, suggests a transformation in her feelings of jealousy and anger toward the attention Clare receives from the Harlem community, to feelings of grief and guilt over Clare’s death. Irene, noted to have “choked down” whimpers and “convulsive sobs,” displays her own mixed feelings about her relationship

with Clare and with those who “pass” (80). Irene’s silences throughout the text often depict a physically violent reaction, like the instance in which she bites her lip in the Bellew’s home. Her silences at the end of the text also depict a violent sound-image, such as the “convulsive sobs” and her “choked down” whimpers. Irene’s intense emotional state leaves her almost speechless. The Harlem street provides Irene and the others the opportunity to step out from the margins to express themselves openly in the soundscape; however, in the midst of trauma, the African American voice, while still present, is hushed to a whisper.

*THE RESONANCE OF RACIAL IDENTITY*

The soundscape of *Passing* is one marked by a cacophony of sounds and voices, including those that are like a ringing bell, snarls and roars, metallic reverberations, and much more. In addition, the soundscape captures the way in which voices and language can represent racial identity. The characters in *Passing*, particularly Clare, enact the struggle African Americans experienced during the Harlem Renaissance: struggles to articulate, to affirm, to deny, to divide, and to unite the racial self in various social/public spaces. The way in which inside and outside space impact the expression of language and identity for the characters demonstrates the way in which environment shapes the social settings and communication between people within those spaces. However, the racially-inflected spaces in *Passing* are anything but fixed. As argued in this chapter, the repetition of echoing of sound-images, such as ringing bells, helps to highlight the flexibility of a particular space. The soundscape of the novel helps to expand and/or abbreviate the auditory space between dialogue to demonstrate the way in which open

discourse among different races is not equal to everyone and often a privilege to those “in tune” with the dominant culture. Furthermore, the soundscape becomes a compensatory space for African Americans looking to shed racial stereotypes and the dominance of sight, in raced sign systems. The soundscape also suggests to the reader that visual representations alone can provide and perpetuate misrepresentations.

In the next chapter, I will continue to explore those sound-images repeated in the Harlem soundscape of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*. Additionally, I will use Gates’ work on African American literary criticism to guide my analysis of the rhetorical and vernacular strategies used to mimic the sound and patterns of speech heard in African American defined spaces. I consider the how *Jazz* employs a postmodern narrative structure to achieve what Gates term, the speakerly text, “whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition” (Gates 181). My analysis of *Jazz* will shift from an aural emphasis to an oral performance, in which I analyze the narrative style and structure of the text to show how vernacular culture is enacted in a literary space.

## Re-Voicing Harlem's Oral Culture: Performing Narrative Sound & Silence Heard in Morrison's *Jazz*

Sixty-three years after Larsen's *Passing* (1929), the sound of Harlem voices are picked up by Toni Morrison in her novel *Jazz*<sup>8</sup> (1992). This chapter on *Jazz* extends my analysis of sound in Harlem Renaissance literature as a cultural and spatial identifier for the African American community; however, this chapter particularly focuses on the postmodernist aesthetic and representation of sound in literature. While the narrative techniques that Toni Morrison employs in *Jazz* are fundamentally different from those of Larsen, the same theoretical approach applies.

Sound and vernacular culture, as Clare Corbould reminds us, was a creation and expression of modern identity for African Americans with the authority and privilege to speak in certain Harlem spaces. For African Americans, certain sounds rise above the threshold of audibility to white ears, and the so-called "noise" becomes a medium from which "to build community through collective action" (Corbould 862). The emphasis on community action, as it relates to the production of sound in the Harlem soundscape, was a result of a variety of cultural practices emerging on the streets, practices which highly valued collaboration and communal participation. *Jazz* expresses these concepts through

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<sup>8</sup> This thesis analyzes the elements of jazz music in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, insofar as its musical references offer another cultural perspective from which to understand the Harlem Renaissance era. Nicholas Evans' argument in *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s* suggests that literature and writing which include elements of jazz always incorporate a referential and re-visionist perspective. Re-viewing jazz's musical elements in the African American novel provide the sites for literary analysis of the text. However, I intend to only analyze elements in the text which represent jazz music for their broader, cultural applications.

postmodernist techniques that allude to the traditions within oral performance in African American vernacular culture.

*THE RENAISSANCE REVIVED: CONSCIOUS ECHOES OF HARLEM'S VERNACULAR CULTURE*

*Jazz* opens with a synopsis of the recent tragedy in the Harlem community: the murder of young Dorcas Manfred and the lingering effects of her death. Dorcas' death symbolizes the thwarting of communal promise, which leaves members of the Harlem community longing to find resolution in their broken or dysfunctional relationships. The narrative primarily follows the details surrounding Dorcas' death, particularly her secret love affair with her eventual murderer, Joe Trace, and the morose obsession Joe's wife Violet develops for the girl after she learns about the affair. However, the chronology of this story of love-lost is disrupted by recursive vignettes from Joe and Violet's past. The narrator shifts from present-day 1920s Harlem, in which Violet and Joe are the central characters of the novel, to the 1850s, in which the focal point becomes Joe and Violet's ancestors' journeys from rural Virginia to urban New York.

The shifts between "present-day" Harlem and its past, represents the haunting effects of our collective history. Furthermore, the shifts in narrative threads reinforce the Du Bosian psychological fragmentation that persists in the African American collective consciousness. Morrison's postmodern interpretation of Harlem's collective consciousness<sup>9</sup> and fragmented past requires the reader's active engagement with the

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<sup>9</sup> Morrison's entertains questions concerning collective consciousness and "racial 'unconsciousness,'" in her text, *Playing in the Dark* (Morrison xii). She says, that "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author," American fiction often assumes the reader to be white. This collective awareness and, sometimes, unawareness of race in

text. The reader must piece together *Jazz*'s narrative, and find cohesion and connection between the little narratives<sup>10</sup> that branch off from events surrounding Dorcas' death. As the reader makes connections among these little narratives, the aural and oral qualities of the text begin to surface, particularly as the narrator of the text represents itself as a *speakerly text*.

Gates' describes the type of text which aims to communicate "the direct discourse of the novel's black speech community" at the same time as it participates in the "the initial standard English," as the speakerly text (Gates xxvi). *Jazz*, as a speakerly text, employs this technique through its unconventional narrator, especially as the narrator shifts between a sentence structure and narrative style that communicates the type of speech spoken in African American vernacular culture, and the type of speech spoken and read in the omniscient narration of many 19<sup>th</sup> Century English novels. For example, as the narrator sets the scene in Harlem, she describes, in first person, how "[a] city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep....Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff" (7). Morrison's narrator performs, in the printed text, the speech patterns indicative of vernacular culture in Harlem streets. The one word sentence, "hep," reminds the reader how much of vernacular culture is made of sentence fragments, and provides the reader

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American fiction is a topic Morrison intentionally addresses in not only her academic writing, but, also her works of fiction.

<sup>10</sup> Little or local narratives (*petits récits*), according to A.T. Nuyen's article "Lyotard and Rorty on the Role of the Professor," become "the postmodernist response" to "the abandonment of grand narratives" (44). The series of local narratives, rather than the grand narratives, "attempt to achieve some *local* effects [as the] values [are] confined to a *localized context*" (Nuyen 44).

with a slang term used in that time period. Morrison's narrator draws on the type of oral performances which invoke rhyme and rhythm, in part with the frequent use of the dash. By disregarding the conventions and narrative structure expected in the standard novel, Morrison's narrator re-creates a new type of printed speech, which more accurately captures and communicates the voice of African Americans.

Other sections of the narrative take on a more traditional form of language in print. For example, the narrator describes how the character, Hunter, "ben[t] down then to look at the mother, who hadn't said anything since that scream. Sweat covered her face and, breathing hard, she licked beads of it off her upper lip. He leaned closer" (Morrison 171). This section of narration follows Hunter's experience helping woman living in the woods give birth. This section is narrated from third person point of view, instead of the first person point of view, as read in the previous excerpt. Here, the language adheres to regular sentence structure and third person limited omniscience. The sound-image of that scream is intended to communicate action in the scene. In this chapter, I will focus on how the performance of the postmodern text makes vocal the sounds and soundscape of middle-class Harlem, while producing in the reader a heightened awareness of those tools used to express sound in writing.

My reading of *Jazz* argues that the narrator and narrative structure exist to orient the reader to the many aural/oral elements represented in Morrison's re-vision of the Harlem Renaissance. I propose that three major elements in the narration—narrative voice, point of view, as well as call-and-response—re-views the traditional African American speakerly text. Furthermore, the voice and mode of narration impress upon the

reader a culture (and narrator) steeped in vernacular practices. Through these practices, the voice and narration of the text engage in a type of performance which signals the audibility of a multivalent soundscape, as it re-mixes fetishized jazz culture from a postmodern lens.

In the second half of the chapter, I shift from the narrative structure and style of *Jazz* to the interior of the text to analyze the sounds and soundscape heard in Morrison's Harlem spaces. I amplify the sites in the text that form clusters of sound-images, including aural representations of drumming, silence, and whispered or lowered voices to show how aural culture represents a variety of speech practices.

#### *JAZZ'S RIFF ON NARRATIVE STYLE AND STRUCTURE*

The elements which require the reader to imagine, if not perform, the text as an oral story begin with the narrator's voice and her point of view. The unnamed narrator in *Jazz* opens the novel with an unreferenced textual sound, "Sth"<sup>11</sup> (Morrison 3). The onomatopoeic sound, reminiscent of an inhale, does not have an exact definition or counterpart in written language, rather, its expression is one heard and mimicked in African American vernacular culture. "Sth," like the sound of air being sucked against teeth or a sigh in reverse, precedes the narrator's claim of personally "know[ing] that woman," at the center of the narrative web, Violet Trace (Morrison 3). Morrison's narrator privileges the unreferenced word sound before using formal language, signifying to the reader a narrative entrenched in oral performance and storytelling strategies.

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<sup>11</sup> The reader should note that the use of an oral sound-image that lacks an exact textual counter-part is not unique to *Jazz*, as Morrison uses this rhetorical device in *Beloved* too.

As readers, we do not know the narrator as one of the characters, but as a strange omniscient narrator—strange, because such narrator-characters are typically stable orators, not gossips. The narrator is also strange because the narrative voice embodies and performs a type of estrangement. The narrator, though eager to reveal key details about the Traces' dysfunctional relationships in Harlem, tries to keep the details about her own identity hidden. Rather than describing how she came to know Violet and the others, the narrator presents herself to the reader as an opinionated voice interjecting conversational asides. For example, after Violet's violent episode at Dorcas' funeral, the narrator shares that it "never happened again as far as I know—[Violet's] street sitting—but quiet as it's kept she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it" (Morrison 17). She speaks about Violet's guilty and inappropriate behavior, but does not provide evidence to support these early assertions. Like the town gossip, she dedicates herself to "watching everything and everyone" while struggling to "make sure no one knows all there is to know about [her]," a necessary precaution, she claims, for living in the city (8). The narrator's interjections and vernacular style of oration reject the illusion of narrative objectivity, especially when she speaks in first-person. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, editors of *Modern Literary Theory*, suggest that postmodern narratives avoid representations that claim totality or objective Truth; the postmodern narrative "no longer [concerned with] a transcendent space from which to offer a critique of [African American] culture," instead, provides a "disruption from within, micropolitics, language games, parody and fragmentation." (*Modern Literary Theory* 308). While *Jazz's* postmodern narrator does not claim narrative objectivity, she does claim to be

undetectable, as she “make[s] sure no one knows all there is to know about [her]” (Morrison 8).

In addition to being undetectable, *Jazz*'s narrator also claims to be indestructible. For example, she describes herself as “strong[, a]lone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible—like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one” (Morrison 7). With a contemporary lens of U.S. history from which this work of fiction takes its cues, the reader knows the narrator's claim is premature, and, with the passing of time, will prove false. Similarly, the reader can assume that her claim to be undetectable and indestructible, basically, impenetrable, will also not hold. As the narrator continues to tell the story about Violet and the others taking part in the creation of the Harlem community, the narrative structure begins to reveal, as Rice and Waugh suggest of postmodern texts, “disruptions from within” (308).

#### *RE-VOICING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*

Some of the “disruptions from within” the narrative structure of *Jazz* include the slippage in the narrator's language, specifically, the repetitive shifts in narrative voice. The narrator, through multiple shifts in voice and point of view, encompasses multiple perspectives. African American postmodernity, as suggested by bell hooks in my introduction avoids representing “blackness one-dimensionally,” by “affirm[ing] multiple black identities [and] varied black experience[s]” (Hooks, *Yearning* 28). The narration in *Jazz*, mostly articulated as free indirect discourse, appears, at first, to be a collage of voices that continually disrupt the chronology and sever the continuity of the narrative voice and narrative frame. And while the several shifts in voice provide diverse

viewpoints from which to build this multivalent narrative, the shifts also resemble the improvisation quality popularized in the jazz tradition through the use of unconventional narration represented in the speakerly text.

The narrator of the speakerly text, according to Gates, is a “hybrid character...who is neither the novel’s protagonist nor the text’s disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness” (Gates xxvi). Although her identity is not encompassed in any single character, *Jazz*’s narrator serves the text as a hybrid and communal voice that encompasses the persona(e) of the city. Harlem’s past and present communities are, however, most closely aligned with the protagonist of the text, Violet. Violet and the narrator “merge in a moment of consciousness” in the scenes proceeding Violet’s violent outburst at Dorcas’ funeral (xxvi). The narrator begins by describing “*that* kicking, growling Violet” as an observed other in third person (Morrison 92). But as the scene continues to detail Violet’s odd behavior in the moments leading up to and after “the butcher knife struck [Dorcas’] neckline just by the earlobe,” the narrator becomes a double for Violet’s character (95). Violet is no longer “somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes” (95-96). According to the narrator, “*that* Violet is me!” (Morrison 95-96). Here, the narrator asserts she is the “other” Violet, as she participates in Violet’s feeling of “twoness...two unreconciled strivings,” such is the condition of the doubled self according to Du Bois (Du Bois 7).

Exclaiming that “*that* Violet is me!,” the narrator shifts from third to first person and shifts into the persona and voice of Violet. The stress of the pronoun “*that*,” attached to Violet’s name is the distinction between Violet as an observable character and Violet

as the double/hybrid narrator (95). Additionally, the stressed, italicized demonstrative pronoun “*that*” embodies the vocal emphasis heard and performed in oral narration (95). The narrator’s stressed language communicates to the reader the difference between Violet and Violet’s doubled self. Furthermore, the double, in this instance, creates a disruption in the narrative stream, while simultaneously expressing the psychological division taking place in African American culture—a division to which the narrator can deeply relate.

Morrison proposes in her critical text, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, that “[r]eaders and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds” (Morrison xii). I suggest the narrator strangeness also communicates the struggle to interpret and perform language practices in the imaginative world of *Jazz*. The language and soundscape of *Jazz* reveal the way in which tensions within the community are not always spoken directly to each other, but enacted as disruptions from within the narrative voice. and/or construction of identity.

Other characters represented in the first person in *Jazz* include Joe, Dorcas, and Dorcas’ friend, Felice. Sections narrated by these individuals in first-person are marked differently from the section narrated by the hybrid narrator/Violet. Narrations by Joe, Dorcas, and Felice in the text are noted by the use of continuous quotations, as if to represent their perspectives as embodied entities, rather than the evocation of a doubled self. The quotations also indicate the preservation of the characters’ exact words, which underscores the way in which oral stories and oral performance can be vulnerable to

transformation when re-told. The multiple perspectives from which the narrator shares the *petits récits* or local narratives rejects or interrupts the notion that there is only space for one master narrative. Additionally by providing multiple points of view and character vantage points, the narrator can resist the notion of singular authorship.

*RE-VIEWING THE AUDIENCE: CONTROLLING NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW*

The disruptions within the narrative also include shifts to second person point of view. The unpredictable shifts to second person signal written representation of orality and its audibility. The unidentified “you,” to which the narrator repeatedly speaks, at first, represents an imagined reader/auditor, one whom the narrator addresses irregularly and conversationally. The second person addresses create the illusion of a collaborative or dynamic relationship between orator and listener, another feature of oral tradition. In this relationship, the narrator often assumes the role (and the voice) of experience, while the reader/auditor often assumes the role of the novice in the city. The narrator lends her voice of experience to the audience in the form of a warning, that “[i]f you don’t know how [to be clever and defensive], you can end up out of control or controlled by some outside thing” (Morrison 9). The desire to maintain control of the body becomes a central theme in the text. Denise Heinze, author of *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness”: Toni Morrison’s Novels*, argues that by virtue of the second-person address in Morrison’s work, the “writer” or speaker “creates an imaginary audience that is allied to her values and ideals [and] in a sense invites the reader to become part of the audience” (11). The reader/auditor, or reader/audience, is ushered into *Jazz*’s narrative as the audience and becomes witness to the narrator’s performance. And while the narrator

communicates how highly she values the performance of control, she also projects that value on to the reader/audience through second person addresses: commanding, warning, and advising the reader/audience.

The text also creates, for the reader/audience, a Du Boisian sense of double consciousness. Because the narrator describes about Harlem how “you can pop the cork and put the cold glass mouth right up to your own,” in second person, the reader must imagine herself drinking in that space (Morrison 11). Here, the narrator creates a sense of viewing oneself through the “eyes,” or in this instance, the narrative language, of another. The reader images herself as the subject participating in the action of the narrative, and she begins to become conscious of this view of herself with each incantation of second person.

Shifts in and out of second-person point of view also make explicit the blend of vernacular and written modes of narration; at the same time, shifts in and out of second person demonstrate the way in which the narrator exercises control over the text. For example, when describing the alluring yet dangerous pockets of Lenox Avenue, the narrator uses second person to control the audience in their first encounter of the city. The narrator introduces the audience to the places “[w]here *you* can find danger or be it; where *you* can fight till *you* drop and smile at the knife when it misses and when it doesn’t” (Morrison 11 emphasis added). The use of second person locates the body of the imagined audience in a specific space in the text and in the city. The second person address effectively brings the reader/audience into the context of the narrative and controls how the reader/audiences should interpret the space.

The narrator pulls the reader/audience in to the final pages of the text, with an extended address in second person. Admittedly “[un]able to say out loud,” those italicized words that follow on the printed page, that “*I have loved only you*”, the narrator overtly calls attention to the limitation of the novel’s ability to fully represent the performance of storytelling, as it remains a printed text (Morrison 229). The narrator limited in her ability to actively intermediate her performance with the implied audience of the text ends the novel with a request to “[s]ay make me, remake me,” (Morrison 229). The novel ends with a request to go back to the beginning, suggestive of the way in which African American narratives create meaning through forms of repetition. The reader/audience’s choice to re-read the narrative, opens a space to discover new meaning by providing the reader with a renewed context from which to view it—ie, upon a second reading of the text, the reader has a different context/perspective about how narrative details participate with central themes and subsequent plot development that take place.

The once guarded narrator, at the end of the story, unmask herself as a voyeur longing to bridge the distance between she and the reader/audience. She confesses that “[she] *ha[s] loved only you....the way you hold me....your fingers on and on, lifting, turning* (Morrison 229). The details included in the narrator’s lament, such as “*the way you hold me*” and the “*fingers [that lift and turn] on and on,*” allude to a physical romance, but also signal the process and physicality involved in reading texts (229). This instance of second person merges the action taking place outside the text with the action

taking place inside the text, thereby blurring the boundaries between real and imagined, insiders and outsiders, and fixed and unfixed narratives.

The narrator's concern for control of the paradoxically fixed and unfixed narrative dissipates as she requests of the reader/audience to "[s]ay make me, remake me...[and y]ou are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. [sic] Now" (229). The request, rather than command, to "make" and "re-make" meaningful interpretations and connections within the text—to ultimately, re-read and re-engage the performance of the narrative—place the agency of control not in the narrator, but rather the reader (229). Furthermore, the call to "look where your hands are. Now," reminds the reader of the freedom she *now* has to flip back to page one and re-read/re-visit the text—"Now" being the concluding word of the text (229). Merging the elements of written and oral narratives, and blending together the real and imagined audience of *Jazz*, creates in the reader a hyper-awareness to the modes of literary production performed in the postmodern Harlem narrative. The use of second person highlights the way in which the audience listening plays an integral role in the perception of orality in the text.

#### *RESPONDING TO THE SOUND OF THE STREET*

The performative representations and orality in *Jazz*'s narrative structure also dig deep into the oral tradition by drawing upon the form of call-and-response patterns. Call-and-response—a practice well-established and critically explored in the African American tradition of oral performance—begins with a "call" or phrase posed by the leader/lead speaker, to which the audience/crowd extends a response to the original

phrase. According to Nathan Huggins, author of *Harlem Renaissance*, call-and-response methods were often heard in churches, in compositions of blues, jazz, and gospel music, as well as in other performances of spoken word in the African American tradition, which “engaged the audience in the speaker’s art” (Huggins 229). Variations of call-and-response are echoed in *Jazz*, sometimes expressed through the character dialogue and, at other times, directly through narration. Violet and Joe use the most basic form of call-and-response as a way to identify one another in their home. Joe “calls loudly to [Violet] as he closes the door behind him... ‘Vi?’ and Violet “calls back... ‘Joe?’” (Morrison 223). The reproduction of call-and-response in *Jazz* becomes a method to aurally/orally identify, define, and claim Harlem spaces as African American and to articulate tensions within these spaces.

Call-and-response also signals the connection between speaker, listener, and space. More intricate forms of call-and-response were heard in urban spaces, like Harlem street corners<sup>12</sup>, where audiences would gather to speak, listen, and take part in communal performance. According to Huggins, “whole remembered phrases would come

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<sup>12</sup> Street corners in urban places became the site from which African Americans could participate in the public exchange of ideas during the New Negro Movement. Clare Corbould describes how “[t]aking a walk down Seventh Avenue” one was likely to hear soapbox speakers of all types (Corbould 873). While some, like “the Barefoot Prophet (Elder Clayhorn Martin),” were there to speak the word of god or “reveal to [the audience] the day’s number, which might enable them to win on the gambling game so popular in Harlem at the time,” others, like “renowned ‘soapboxer,’” Hubert Harrison, were known to let “political commentary [fly] from [their] lips” (Corbould 873). Corbould also acknowledges that the communities and audiences listening to these street corner orators and “soapboxers” were free to participate in the speakers’ performance. Quite often, “[r]ather than walking off, audiences might express their displeasure more directly. Heckling was frequent and anyone not up to scratch was booed off the [soap]box” (Corbould 873).

in unison” on street corner (Huggins 229-30). Corbould’s source material about Harlem’s sounds suggests that those regularly commuting or existing on the streets were familiar with the vernacular culture and practices of street corner oration. In Harlem “the sounds of the streets were inescapable,” particularly the “walk down Seventh Avenue, where one’s ears were likely to be assailed by the arguments and pleas of street-corner speakers, punctuated by the responses of audience members” (Corbould 873). In *Jazz*, Joe and Violet are no strangers to “the Corner” of 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue where those walking by stopped to engage in public discourse (Morrison 223). On a stroll in the city, the two seamlessly “join the crowd listening to the men” lecturing on “the wood box or the broken chair” and Joe even “chimes in at appropriate moments with encouraging words,” in call-and-response fashion (Morrison 223).

Joe’s participation in this brief example of call-and-response demonstrates a type of inclusion and sense of community as he communally listens and freely participates, without explicit instruction, in the speaker’s oration. His “chim[ing] in at appropriate moments with encouraging words,” give the speaker immediate feedback and validation and suggest an insider’s knowledge about the customs and conventions in this form of public discourse (Morrison 223). However, “the practice of lecturing and listening on the streets,” according to Corbould, not only signified community inclusion, but a larger systemic exclusion, as street corner oration “was a means of bringing into public discourse topics and opinions that had little currency in the wider public sphere” (Corbould 873). Furthermore, street corners and call-and-response practices “highlight[ed] how black Americans were excluded from those institutions...that were so

vital to the dominant public sphere” (Corbould 873). Joe’s affirmations to the street orator demonstrate his participation in a vernacular culture—a culture that uses public space to alternatively publicize or make public vocal support for ideas emerging from African American thinkers speaking on the street.

Along with Joe and Violet, the narrator also performs a type of call-and-response through intertextuality. As she describes Harlem’s soundscape, including those “old uncles positioning themselves in the middle of the block to play a six-string guitar,” she shifts the style of narration to re-create the rhythm and musicality of the street musician’s song (Morrison 119). Abandoning the traditional prose line breaks and sentence structures, the narrator signifies a type of lyrical voice to accompany the melody and rhythm of the blues musician. With fragmented sentence structure, the narrator describes the

Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man  
 Everybody knows your name.  
 Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die-man.  
 Everybody knows your name. (119)

The first and third lines represent the lead call, in this instance, commentary about archetypal “men” found in Harlem’s neighborhoods. The repetition of the second and fourth line, “everybody knows your name,” is indicative of the (audience’s) remembered response, confirming the actual identities to whom the archetypes refer (119). Here, Morrison’s narrator represents a type of musical performance through the lyrical or poetic line breaks. Additionally this passage functions as a textual repetition or intertextuality with Harlem Renaissance author and poet, Langston Hughes. The speaking subject in

Hughes' poem, "Weary Blues,"<sup>13</sup> watches an old blues musician on Lenox Avenue singing and playing the piano. Morrison's narrator "re-calls" this poem, or rather responds to the initial call made by the speaker in the poem. Her response, a revision of the blues man in *Jazz's* Harlem soundscape, not only references Hughes' poem, but does so by invoking a performance quality, indicative of the improvisation heard in blues and jazz.

According to Maggie Sale's article, "Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*," in which she analyzes another one of Morrison's texts, "call-and-response patterns...value improvisation and demand that *new meanings be created* for each particular moment" (Sale 42 emphasis added). The narrator's language reflects this value of improvisation in its written form. "Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man," or the repetition and variations of the words "blues," "black," and "man," produce for the reader a variety of meanings and contexts and simulates the improvisation heard in blues and jazz culture (Morrison 119). The narrator first presents to the reader a "Blues man," or blues musician (119). The blues man is re-viewed in new context through the repetition and variation that follows. The addition of the capitalized word "Black," as well as the enjambment of the words blues and man suggest a number of meanings: (1) an African American blues musician, (2) a depressed or "blue" African American man, and/or (3) a bruised and beaten man (119). With the deletion of space between "black" and "therefore," the final and third

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<sup>13</sup> In Hughes' poem the speaker describes his experiences listening to a blues musician, "In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone/I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--/'Ain't got nobody in all this world,/Ain't got nobody but ma self./ I's gwine to quit ma frownin'/ And put ma troubles on the shelf" (Hughes 17-22).

repetition of the words, suggests an African American man who is bound to his “blue” or depressed state because of his race, “Blacktherefore blue man” (119). This version of call-and-response highlights the way in which aural culture values repetition and variation. The repetition of these aurally/orally-inflected narrative devices—narrative voice, point of view, and patterns of call-and-response—signal to the reader a blurring of boundaries, subversion of literary conventions, and disruption within the chronology and structure of the narrative. Morrison’s narrator highlights the narrative devices used to retell this postmodern version of Harlem to participate and perform in the oral performance embodied in the text.

In the second half of this chapter, I shift the focus from oral performance embodied by the narrator and narrative structure, to specific sound-images which are echoed in *Jazz*’s soundscape. I amplify the sites in the text which form clusters of sound-images—including aural representations of drumming, silence, and whispered or lowered voices—that resonate in the fiction’s “present-day,” in addition to the fiction’s history/past narrative(s). The repetitions and variations within the soundscape in *Jazz* impress on the reader and characters not only the ways in which sound functions as a narrative device to reflect the social condition within a given space, but also the ways in which sound function as a tool to spread information throughout the community.

Thus far, my reading of *Jazz* has explored the tensions which surface from the disruptions within a narrative structure and the performance oral storytelling in writing. Expanding upon the tensions that arise from the influence of vernacular culture on the postmodern novel, I will explore what can and cannot be sounded in the African

American soundscapes in *Jazz*. Sound-images in the text, as Corbould notes, function as the “membrane through which to explore divisions” and connections which resonate within the African American culture (Corbould 862). Similarly, *Jazz*’s narrator uses sound-images and soundscape to signal the sites from which to explore the relationship of sound and space within the Harlem community. The first sound-image I explore in this chapter manifests in *Jazz* as the pulsing sound of a drum.

*THE VOICE OF THE DRUM*

The sound of drumming, repeated in the text, is deeply rooted in African and African American culture, particularly in terms of speech practices. In African culture “vocal-speaking and drum-speaking are two branches of the same conceptual stream, which implicate the musical stylization of speech. The former is a melodic process; the latter is a melorhythmic process,” according to Meki Nzewi , Israel Anyahuru, and Tom Ohiaraumunna in their co-authored article, “Beyond Song Texts: The Lingual Fundamentals of African Drum Music” (92). Morrison’s narrator extends the African tradition of speaking through drums in her narrative descriptions. The repetition of drum sound-images in the text, in addition to the ways in which the narrator manipulates the conventions of sentence structure and language to mimic the rhythmic beat of a drum, represent a type of “speaking” in African American culture.

In a scene which details Dorcas and Joe’s secret dinner date, the narrator exercises the use of a type of rhythmic speech to represent the “drum” in written language. The sound speech of the drum is represented, for example, when Dorcas reaches underneath the table to “drum...out the rhythm on the inside of [Joe’s] thigh, his thigh, his thigh,

thigh, thigh” (Morrison 95). To re-create the faint sound of a finger tapping a thigh in the loud nightclub, the narrator repeats the word “thigh” to communicate with her elongated vowel sounds, the airiness of the beat and the site of contact on Joe’s body (95). The rhythm that Dorcas beats on Joe’s thigh represents a speech she cannot communicate through direct language. The young girl, “drinking rough gin with that sweet red stuff in it so it looked like soda pop, which a girl like her ought to have ordered instead of liquor,” plays the role of a more mature woman in her relationship with Joe (Morrison 95). The narrator notes how her age shows her inexperience drinking alcohol. Dorcas must add “that sweet red stuff,” also known as Grenadine, to cut the bitterness of the gin (95). For Dorcas, drumming the rhythm on Joe’s thigh is a way to communicate her affection for him, an affection she is not yet equipped to communicate through direct language. Drums sound-images in the text become an alternative form of speech used to represent voice and messages too difficult to vocalize.

The sound speech of the drums is also heard and highlighted during a silent protest parade in Harlem. In *Jazz*, shortly after Dorcas is taken in by her aunt, the two join the community lining the streets to watch the parade. The parade in the text, much like the actual Silent Protest Parade of 1917, was a public demonstration formed in response to the race riots in East St. Louis—and the countless other lynchings that occurred across the country. The unjust crimes, fueled by racist attitudes and institutions, were often met by inaction from the white, dominant public sphere, which prompted a counterpublic demonstration. The silent protest parade depicted in the text reflects the

social response from the Harlem community and the impact such tragedies had on the vocalization of African American identity.

Morrison's narrator tells about protesters and voyeurs, unable to articulate "what they meant to say [or] did not trust themselves to say" and how "the drums [vocalized these sentiments] for them." (Morrison 54). The juxtaposition of drum sounds against the quiet audience lining the streets represents the way in which sounds reflect and produce awareness of the social condition and identity created in Harlem's community and spaces. Corbould's analysis of Harlem's community argues that sound also functions in African American culture as a "political act," to signal "[t]he assertion of oneself," and to "resis[t] the 'social death' required of nonwhites in American society" (Corbould 862). The speech of the drums during the silent protest parade affirms the cultural identity of the community silently grieving over the continued violence and oppression exercised on African Americans across the nation. Silent in their pain, rhythm of the drums represents a message incommunicable through verbal speech.

For Alice Manfred, Dorcas' conservative aunt, the drums, "like a rope cast for rescue...spanned the distance, gathering [sic] them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above" (Morrison 58). The voice and speech of the drums, for Alice, communicate the deep connection between those tragedies that struck Alice's family—the violent burning and lynching of Dorcas' parents—and those tragedies that affected nameless "frozen black faces [and] the watchers" on the street (58). The sound-image of drums which remind Alice of "a rope

cast for rescue,” suggests a re-vision of the role of the rope in the African American tradition. Ropes in African American slavery, have signified the binding and/or lynching of slaves; however, Morrison’s evocation of the rope image in association with the sound of drums revitalize the negative connotation in African American culture to symbolize the hope of rescue. The way in which the sound-image of drums embody a sense of hope and connection to the community, is, however, only one character’s interpretation of the beat. For Dorcas, the speech of the drums resonates differently.

Dorcas does not interpret the beat and language of the drums at the parade as an “all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence,” nor as the tool used to rescue Alice and the others from racial violence or urban immorality (Morrison 60). Dorcas heard the drumming on, but as “the beginning” (Morrison 60). Here, Morrison offers the reader diverging perspectives, a meta-commentary, about the role of the narrative. Alice’s understanding of the “all-embracing” (60) sound of the drums suggests narratives, their ability to “claim [universal...] foundations for truth,” as analyzed by Rice and Waugh *Modern Literary Theory* (Morrison 60; Rice and Waugh 308). However, Dorcas’ postmodern perspective suggests that drum speech and narratives provide only a point of entry from which to interpret and reflect on the social conditions their speech echoes. For Dorcas, like the first call initiated in call-and-response patterns, the drums spoke “the first part, the first word, of a command...something she looked to complete” (Morrison 60). Dorcas desires to complete what was started by the speech of the drums,

like the reader/audience who must “make”<sup>14</sup> the text to participate in its revision, emerge from her traumatic past experiences with silenced speech.

*RESISTING SOCIAL DEATH THROUGH SOUND AND SILENCE*

Morrison revisits the way in which silence represents a spectacle in the text, particularly the silence emerging from the community. Silently lining “Fifth Avenue from curb to curb,” the neighborhood watched the “tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking” in their unified march (Morrison 54). The busyness and loudness characteristic of the Harlem streets makes the quieted soundscape particularly surprising. “Silence” in Harlem, according to Corbould, “could also be threatening...in a racial economy in which whites expected blacks to be noisy” (863). The shift from a “noisy” space to a silent space, which “the drums were building for [the Harlem community],” challenges the reader’s expectation for what can and cannot be voiced in the Harlem soundscape (Morrison 53).

A flashback from Dorcas’ past, for example, demonstrates the way in which Morrison’s re-vision of silence challenges the reader’s expectations about what can and cannot be voiced. In the middle of the night, while Dorcas is “sleeping across the road with her very best girlfriend,” her parents are brutally murdered (Morrison 57). The silence of the night is unexpected and alarming when re-viewed in this traumatic context. Although the reader is aware of the absence of sounds related to this urgent situation, Dorcas is left, undisturbed, in her sleep.

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<sup>14</sup> Noted earlier in the chapter, Morrison’s narrator asks the reader/audience to “[s]ay make me, remake me,” her way of requesting the reader/audience re-read the text (Morrison 229).

Interestingly, Dorcas “did not hear the fire engine clanging and roaring down the street because when it was called it didn’t come” (Morrison 57). Those institutions charged with maintaining public safety did nothing while the father was “pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death,” nor while the mother “burned crispy in [a] flame” (Morrison 57). The only expected sound echoed that night was the sound of “the whole street...screaming” (Morrison 57). The street cries signal, as Corbould would argue, the state of emergency, but also the type of aural resistance necessary to avoid “social death” in a non-white society (Corbould 862). Dorcas’ response to her parents’ actual death, however, is not a cry of anguish or self assertion, but intentional silence. Dorcas “went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word” (Morrison 57). Dorcas’ silent reaction to the difficult and traumatic loss of her parents is dramatically different than the silent inaction of those responsible for their deaths. Dorcas’ silence creates space in the text for other narrative devices, like the sound of drums, to communicate those feelings she is unable to express directly through her own language.

*DYNAMIC SOUNDS: THE WHISPERING DECRESCENDO*

The dynamics of the sound-images in the text, the way in which sound fades to silence or silence swells to a roar, reflect more than the volume of the soundscape. The most revealing dynamics in the text present as whispers. Whispers heard in the text vary from the sweet, intimate moments “when grown people whisper to each other under the covers,” (Morrison 228) to morose or macabre moments, such as the “whispered conversations [Violet rehearsed] with [Dorcas’] corpse in her head” (Morrison 15). The

nature of a whisper inherently causes the reader/audience to listen/read more closely to sites in the text where language is hushed.

Joe's whispered words in the narrative highlight his search for intimacy. In his hunt for love outside his marriage, Joe finds Dorcas. Following her to an apartment in the city, he "whisper[s] to her through the crack of a closing door" (Morrison 67). The closing door, through which Joe whispers, signals his quickly passing opportunity to romantically entice Dorcas. The whisper also calls to attention the proximity of Dorcas' ear, which she strains in order to listen closely to the sounds beyond the door. And while a whisper to an ear initiates Dorcas and Joe's relationship, Violet's "butcher knife... [which struck] just by [Dorcas'] earlobe" at her funeral punctuates the end of their affair. (Morrison 95). Violet disfigures the site on Dorcas' body, which symbolizes, for her, the intimate connection between the young girl and Joe. Joe's whisper, which spawns tragedy in the Harlem community—both the death and aftermath caused by the misguided love—resonates in the text more loudly with each repetition.

Joe's most resonant whisper in the text becomes the scene and moment which bind him to the gentle sound-image. In a narrative thread from Joe's past, Joe is heard whispering to a woman called Wild while on a hunting expedition in the woods with his adopted brother, Victory, and the most reputable hunter in the neighborhood, Henry LesTroy (also known as Hunter's Hunter). The disjointed timeline re-locates the reader/audience from Harlem to the rural areas of Baltimore, where young Joe is told by Hunter the truth about his biological mother. Joe is burdened by the news that Wild, an "untamed" woman living in woods and existing in the margins of society, could be his

mother. Staying true to his self-appointed last name, *Trace*, Joe follows the “traces” or “tracks” Wild leaves behind to a remote location in the woods. Near a “white-oak tree...[which] grew in unlikely soil—entwined in its own roots,” Joe identifies Wild because of her breathing sounds (Morrison 178).

In the woods, Joe falls “to his hands and knees, whispering” to Wild “Is it you? Just say it. Say anything” (Morrison 178). Joe’s whispered request for Wild to speak or “[s]ay anything,” similar to the narrator’s request at the end of the text—for the audience to “Say make me, remake me”— suggests the need to vocalize one’s relationships in *Jazz*, perhaps, as a means to better understand the self in relation to others (Morrison 178 and 229). The whisper also suggests that Joe must speak in a careful and cautious tone as to not startle Wild, like a hunter carefully approaching his prey. In a prayer-like position, Joe lowers his body and voice to surrender himself to the woman he longs to know. Joe’s whispered question anticipates a response from Wild; however, Joe’s “[w]hispering into hibiscus stalks and listening to [Wild’s] breathing” is met with silence.

The relationship between whispers and silence, according to Sandra E. Greene in her article “Whispers and Silences: Explorations in African Oral History,” is rooted in African culture. Green argues that whispered speech is “rendered marginal, removed from public discourse, silenced, and relegated to [hidden/secret] locations” away from the “eyes and ears” of others” (43). Filled with feelings of abandonment and shame about his mother, Joe whispers to Wild to hide his emotions from the men in his company, Victory and Hunter. Greene also suggests that these whispers can have a haunting effect, repeating and appearing throughout “history [to reveal] societal tensions as yet

unresolved” (43). Joe’s attempt to establish a relationship with his absent mother in the woods shows the first instance of broken/dysfunctional love with women in his life. As a result, Joe is bound to hunt for a woman to fill the void left behind by his mother.

#### UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

The unresolved tensions which echo as narrative devices in *Jazz* signal a strong connection to oral performance. Morrison’s postmodern interpretation of the Harlem soundscape re-presents these narrative devices—including narrative voice and point of view, variations of call-and-response patterns, and narrativized sounds—in order to amplify and reflect an unfixed identity which forms and (p)re-forms throughout the text.

Morrison explores the diversity within African American voice through her unconventional narrator. *Jazz*’s narrator rejects singular authorship and engages multiple perspectives by inhabiting the voice of other characters. The narrator also voices postmodernity by disrupting the grand-narrative and interlinking a series of petits récits, or local narratives. The reader, who is merged with the imagined audience, participates in the text’s performance, and as a result, becomes hyper-aware to such narrative devices. The hyper-awareness Morrison achieves in the text re-creates a sense of self-reflexivity and/or double consciousness for her reader. Double consciousness, which persists for African Americans and other minority cultures today, is achieved in the text as the reader/audience looks at herself through the eyes of another. Morrison’s narrator, along with her major characters at the center of the narrative web, Violet, Dorcas and Joe, struggle to settle their unresolved tensions about lost love. The past tensions continue to invade the present as demonstrated by the shift between past and present narrative

threads, which are signaled by the sounds of drumming, silence, and whispers. The repeated and varied sounds and silence in the text suggest that other forms of “speech” in vernacular and oral culture can sometimes communicate more accurately or more effectively, especially when speaking the language of broken love.

## Lingering Sounds: Future Applications for Listening to Harlem Renaissance Literature

*We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily “not-there”; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them.*

—Toni Morrison, “*Unspeakable Things Unspoken*”

The aural qualities within Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* seem to linger and resonate long after the words are read, the pages are turned, and the novels are finished. The ringing sound of bells, the haunting silences heard on the streets, the whispers, the drumming, the onomatopoeia, the call-and-response, and many other sounds and rhetorical devices used to represent oral traditions in Larsen’s and Morrison’s texts, help create an auditory texture in each scene and make concrete the soundscape of Harlem in the 1920s; furthermore, the orality and aurality in these novels provide the reader an architecture for reading and making meaning. This thesis has shown how sound-images and textual soundscapes in *Passing* and *Jazz* provide readers with a point of entry from which to discover themes and tropes central to the African American narrative tradition.

My focus on Harlem Renaissance literature as the site for a close reading of sound began with Morrison’s *Jazz*. Morrison’s construction of language, especially her unconventional narrative techniques and textual representation of oral performance, echoed elements of jazz music and other sounds that were representative of 1920s Harlem street culture, but with a unique postmodern perspective. Her re-vision of Harlem highlighted, or rather, amplified the influence street culture and street sounds had on the communities living in the city, and on the representation of African American voice in

her narrative. With a heightened awareness to the representation of sound and voice in African American narratives, particularly narratives about the Harlem Renaissance, I consulted some of the pinnacle works produced by those contemporary authors emerging from the literary period.

I noticed how some Harlem Renaissance authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Nella Larsen, also incorporated significant aural/oral qualities in their works. The sound-images I discovered in Larsen's *Passing* evoked Harlem's soundscape, and it provided a thematic tie to familiar tropes associated with African American slavery and oppression. The representation of sound in Harlem Renaissance literature reflected, for me, a culture and community that embraced, with intention, aural/oral traditions. The representation of sound in Harlem Renaissance literature also reflected, for me, the racial tensions that emerged during this period, as views about race and racial equality began to change.

Both Henry Louis Gates' work in linguistics and Clare Corbould's work in cultural and sound studies helped me establish the political implications of expressing sound in African American culture and literature, and provided the theoretical underpinnings from which to construct my argument. Gates and Corbould examine the ways in which African Americans tended to privilege sound over sight, and how foregrounding sound in Western culture often signals a political act. For example, in Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, he describes that "[p]recisely because successive Western cultures have privileged written art over oral or musical art forms, the writing of black people in Western languages has, at all points, remained political, implicitly or explicitly,

regardless of its intent or its subject” (Gates 132). Gates shows how African American literature both participates and challenges traditional Western narrative conventions, in part, through signification and intertextuality.

Corbould’s work focuses on written representations of African American sound in Harlem. White audiences writing about African American sound sometimes described it as unfamiliar or unpleasant noise. Corbould’s article, “Streets, Sounds, and Identity in Interwar Harlem,” notes that “[a]ccessing sound through the written word means privileging those accounts left by the literate,” who “tend[ed] to be an elite” or educated class (Corbould 862). Corbould suggests the production of sound in interwar Harlem created opportunities for unity and division, both among the communities producing (African American) sound, and the communities listening to (African American) sound. Both Gates and Corbould suggest that sound, which helps express African American identity or voice in writing, remains a political act. Gates and Corbould, Morrison and Larsen, and the many other authors and critics referenced in this thesis expand our understanding of how African American voice and identity is constructed and articulated. These texts also create space in the literary canon to expose and reflect the systemic power of racial oppression, past and present, which helps change how we view race in our culture.

#### *FUTURE APPLICATIONS FOR RE-SOUNDING THE WRITING OF HARLEM*

A sound-based approach to literary studies has expanded my reading of sound from a sensory detail that enhances a scene to a rhetorical strategy that communicates issues of privilege and power. Sound in literature allows us to hear/view language that

cannot be directly spoken to the reader. Michael Bull and Les Back state in their introduction to *The Auditory Culture Reader*, that by “thinking with our ears” we create “opportunities” to construct meaning (Bull and Back 3). In a larger work using the concepts in this thesis, and by thinking with my ears, I would like to explore other genres which engage in written and spoken forms of narrative. For example, I anticipate that a comparative examination of African American drama would be an exciting site for sound studies and literary analysis, precisely because the genre implies an imagined performance of the written word. Langston Hughes’ play, *The Mulatto* (1930), and Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), while not set in Harlem, both take inspiration from the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes, of course, an author whose name is synonymous with the Harlem Renaissance as a writer of the period, and Hansberry, whose title references a line from Hughes’ poem, “A Dream Deferred,” both examine familial relationships and raise questions about race.

Poetry analysis is also another opportunity to apply the principles of this thesis while thinking with my ears. The Harlem Renaissance poets, such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Bennett, and others, explore sounds of African American culture, both inside and outside Harlem’s city limits. The postmodern companions to the Harlem Renaissance poets that I would like to analyze are those authors of spoken word. Poets such as Saul Williams, Jessica Care Moore, Gil Scott-Heron, the Last Poets, and others, are known, especially, for the oral performances of their works—performances which, sometimes, include musical accompaniment. The

performance, both real and implied in spoken word, provides an opportunity to enhance our relationship, as auditors, to oral performance in African American writing.

The voiced sound-images, soundscapes, and narrative devices that repeat throughout African American literature, especially in the novels I analyzed by Larsen and Morrison, inform us about the context and social condition during which they were written. The representation of sound in Morrison's and Larsen's texts not only inform, but also refer us to previously explored tropes, themes, and practices that originate from other texts popularized in the tradition. The sound-images and soundscapes also suggest the lingering effects of systemic oppression on the (re-)articulation of African American identity in written narratives. I have argued how the representation of tropological sound and oral performance in writing, particularly when repeated in new contexts, creates new meaning for new rhetorical situations. Sound, like African American voice and identity, is not fixed. African American narratives re-act and adapt to the constantly changing social, political, and economic conditions in Western culture, as well as the ideologies therein produced. This thesis has shown how sounds in African American narratives help us to examine the construction of literary identity—an identity that reflects a strong connection to the past; equally important in this thesis, is the way in which the literary construction of sound allows us to explore our own relationships with the systems of oppression which are exposed in these narratives—systems of oppression which continue to shape the construction of African American identity today.

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