Research of any kind can be overwhelming, even for the experts. So how does the average person go about their own exploration of blues and jazz music and dance history? If you’re here on this website, that’s a good place to start to get some guided reading help. But even on this website, there are multiple reading/watch lists, articles, and video lectures. When we don’t know where we should start, it is easy to just resolve ourselves to never doing the reading or viewing for ourselves.

Here are a few steps you can take to make your research and learning goals more manageable.

**INVESTIGATE**

*Decide what you want to learn.*

Rather than just come at the topic you want to learn about in a broad manner, try to narrow down to the specifics, the stuff that you are most eager to learn. For instance, rather than just broadly wanting to know more about blues music, think about what your favorite subgenres are, and then rank those in order, highest enjoyment to lowest (e.g. Chicago blues, Piedmont blues, Delta blues, West Coast blues, etc).

*Explore subtopics within your chosen topic.*

Once you have decided what you are most interested in learning more about, look more closely at that topic. To continue with our example of blues music, if you want to study the Chicago blues, one way to narrow your topic down further would be to look at your favorite artists. Who is singing those songs you come back to time and time again? Write the names of the artists down. Again, rank
them by most favorite to least favorite.

**Look for easily accessible resources on your topic and subtopic.**

Do a basic Google search on your topic. Look at the Blues and Jazz Dance Book Club reading and watching lists for titles that are relevant to your interests. Search your local library for books, films, and music. See what documentaries are available to you on YouTube or other video sites. If you want more scholarly options, see what your local university has to offer (you can often go into the libraries and look at books even without being a student or faculty member; you just won’t be able to take them out of the library). Do a search on Google Scholar to see what articles are out there (be aware that many sources may be behind paywalls, and can be expensive without access via a library).

Remember, you are in control of what you search: to continue our example, if you want to learn more about the music in general, look for books on the sub genre you are interested in most; if you are interested in the artists’ lives, look for biographies, discographies, interviews, etc. You’ll be surprised what you can find without any formalized archives or tools at hand outside of your home computer or local library. If you are having trouble finding information, ask a librarian for help. You can email one at a university, or ask a local librarian. They are trained to be able to find information on many topics, so they should be able to help you find information on yours.

**ENGAGE**

**Decide what you want to read first.**

Sometimes you may feel that you are not qualified to read a book because it has references to other works or history that you are not familiar with. Know that we all feel this from time to time, but it is important to start reading. Choose the books, articles, interviews, or films you want to engage with first, and start. Jump right in! If it makes you feel more comfortable, keep a computer nearby so that you can look up key terms you don’t understand, or just keep a notebook handy to write down those terms, notes, and questions you may have so you can come back to them later. Keeping a list of relevant page numbers, time on a documentary, or time into a song might also be helpful so you can go back to the reference that prompted the writing. If you own the materials you are using, feel free to write in the books or articles you have. Researchers call this annotation, and it is an important part of their process. It helps them engage with the text.

**Look at the index and references.**

When you finish a work, look to see if there is an index and a references section. Sometimes references will be in the form of endnotes or footnotes in each chapter (read them!), and other times they will be at the back, usually just before the index. People who are writing these books are often using a combination of primary research—interviews and firsthand accounts—and secondary research—books and articles. Write down the books and articles that seem interesting to you, and any relevant topics you find in the index. This will help you to continue your research without having to rely on the initial lists and searches you looked at to find a place to start.

**INFORM**

**Talk to people about what you learned.**

One of the most important parts of the research process is to talk about what you learn. One reason this is important is that you are able to help yourself process the information you’ve just read. Another reason it’s that by sharing the information—in person or online—with others helps them start their research or learn more, and also helps create a community of people who are interested in learning about the same topic. You may find that other people have research they’ve done that they are very willing to share with you in return.

You can repeat this process with any topic of your choosing. If you follow these guidelines, you will more easily engage with all the content available to you, and you will feel more satisfied with the results of the research. Who knows, you may eventually find yourself going out on a trip to find and record the stories of the people who participate in blues and jazz!
Chelsea Adams, a PhD candidate in English at UNLV, focuses her studies on African-American literature, blues and jazz music, and black vernacular dance. She writes about minority culture representation in literature. Her dissertation, Literary Movement: Dance and Cultural Embodiment in African American Literature, examines how spatial analysis can determine the process and success of a novel’s cultural performance as well as reveal social commentary made in African-American literature. She also runs the open access project, The Blues and Jazz Dance Book Club. You can find out more about Chelsea and her work at cjuneadams.com.

A Landscape of Slow Drag

Posted on September 1, 2018
It's easy when thinking about a social dance, like slow drag, to think of it as more specific and more narrowly-defined than it is. In learning a dance, we want to understand it, and we may look for clear-cut rules of what defines a particular dance.

But to quote dance historian Richard Powers, when it comes to social dances, "no one was in charge of steps or terminology...Often I see beginners in dance history being over-specific, saying... 'The slow drag looked this way.' But actually what was going on is many different ways of dancing were called that name and one way of dancing would have many different names... It was the perfect mess."[1]

And jazz performer Chester Whitmore said, "You could take a step, and then every 15, 20 years, it changes. The step is still the same step but it changes because the rhythm of the music changes. It was a dance and it was a step."[2]

As we seek to understand the boundaries and definitions of slow drag and other social dances, it’s important to leave room for the variations and differences that could have been part of it. This is particularly relevant for dances like slow drag, which persisted across more than a century, in several different communities, contexts, and to different styles of music.

Since slow drag is one of the more well-documented dances in the blues family, this article explores several examples of slow drag from film, writing, and interviews, to help us more easily understand some of the similarities and differences within slow drag across time and location. The sections of this article are the examples themselves, followed by some analysis by me, and then some concluding thoughts.

**Examples**

What follows is a collection of descriptions and recordings of slow drag. I’m providing the direct quotations and film clips where possible, so you (the reader) can also pick out details and more easily do some analysis yourself.

**1870s, Louisiana:**

"While in New Orleans in 1959, we were invited to visit Mrs. Alice Zeno, the ninety-five-year-old mother of clarinetist George Lewis.... As a girl, let me see, back around 1878, I believe I danced the Mazurka, the Polka, the Waltz, and of course, the Quadrille. I don't
remember the Irish Reel, and I certainly never danced the Slow Drag.’ (In a tactless moment, we had mentioned the Slow Drag, which is danced with Congo hip movements.)[3]

1890-1900s, Louisiana:

“Charlie Love, born later in 1885...recalled playing a different kind of music—‘more raggy’—for less fashionable groups in town, where the Eagle Rock, the Buzzard Lope, and the Slow Drag were the favorite dances. ‘They did the Slow Drag all over Louisiana,’ said Mr. Love; ‘couples would hang onto each other and just grind back and forth in one spot all night.’”[4]

1901, Birmingham, AL:

Coot Grant describes observing people dancing in her father’s honky-tonk in 1901: “I had already cut out a peephole in the wall so I could watch the dancers in the back room. They did everything. I remember the Slow Drag, of course, that was very popular—hanging on each other and just barely moving.”[5]

1901, Birmingham, AL:

Coot Grant describes observing people dancing in her father’s honky-tonk in 1901: “I had already cut out a peephole in the wall so I could watch the dancers in the back room. They did everything. I remember the Slow Drag, of course, that was very popular—hanging on each other and just barely moving.”[5]

Early 1900s, Writer Lived & Traveled the South & St. Louis, Before Settling in New York, NY:

Composer Scott Joplin wrote “Directions for the Slow Drag,” which were choreographic notes for the number “A Real Slow Drag,” the final number of his opera *Tremonisha*:

1. The slow drag must begin on the first beat of each measure.
2. When moving forward, drag the left foot; when moving backward, drag the right foot.
3. When moving sideways to the right, drag the left foot; when moving sideways to the left, drag the right foot.
4. When prancing, your steps must come on each beat of the measure.
5. When marching, and when sliding, your steps must come on the first and third beat of each measure.
6. Hop and skip on second beat of measure. Double the Schottische step to fit the slow music.”[6]

Early 1900s, Traveling Show:

The main characters onstage, portraying an older couple, towards the end of the show: “That’s when they do the slow drag,” says Pigmeat [Markham] “with plenty of grinds, and after that, the Pull It, leaning back and arching their bodies like the breakaway in the Lindy.”[7]

Era Unknown (Speaker b. 1916), Galveston County, TX:

“Up & down the Santa Fe tracks in those days was known as the barrelhouse joints. They danced all night long.... It settled down to the slow, low-down blues, and the slow drag” —Buster Pickens, pianist[8]

1929, Filmed in Astoria, Queens, NY:


Cited as 1925/Published 1961, Info Likely from Harlem, NY Dancers:
"SLOW GRIND. This movement (1925) which is also known as the Slow Drag is a one-step with exaggerated hip twisting.\[9\]

1930s or Later, Likely Refers to Dancing in Harlem, NY:

"A slow drag is...like back in the old days when they made recordings, they would tell—it might say on the recording ‘foxtrot,’ ‘fast foxtrot,’ it might say ‘slow drag’ or ‘slow number’ or something like that.... So you were just doing what we actually called a drag, because all you’re doing is just dragging your feet along the floor.” —Frankie Manning\[10\]

Around 1940s-1950s, Likely Refers to Dancing in Harlem, NY:

"Now when you started doing the slow drag, a lot of times you might use more body movement in your dancing, instead of this [his hands move straight up & down], it’s this [his hands & body move in curves, smoother]. It’s the body movement. You hear the accent. When you start dancing, you’re breathing. When you dance, you breath.” —Sonny Allen\[11\]

Era Unknown/Various Eras, Sources from Chicago and/or San Francisco, Possibly Others:

"It’s a mostly sideways, mostly in-place dance through most of its history, with a push to the side and a dragging of the leg. How big that drag was, how big that push was could be anywhere from four inches to a foot and a half. Sometimes the dance traveled around a lot, particularly in more sort of ballroom areas, where you had the space to travel. But in the juke joints and places like that, it was really sort of an in-the-spot dance.” —Damon Stone\[12\]

Also a dancing example from Damon Stone and Heidi Fite\[13\]

Referenced Era Unknown, New York, NY:

"The slow drag was a very slow motion, moving, and you drag your partner across. It’s really sensuous and it’s really precision. Now that also come from the bodies, real close together. Like in Ballroom, you lead your partner with your chest. This is really low, really..."
You also hear the slow drag of the dance step going side to side. Now that came out of a thing called ring dances or ring circles, which is really out of the spirituals…

"My first experiences with the slow drag was some of the stuff with the Hessians[spelling unknown]. I used to perform with Jim and Marsha Hessian, and they would play all these slow numbers. I said, 'Where did you learn all this?' He said, 'From my mentor.' I said, 'Who was your mentor?' It was Eubie Blake (1887-1983)...around 70, and I got a chance to meet with him...and he said, 'Oh no, the dance isn't slow drag across the floor. And it was really gutbucket, had a bottle of gin in her hand and he'd do all kinds of stuff' —Chester Whitmore[14]

Era Unknown, Mississippi Delta Region:

"This rhythmic source was reinforced by the feet of the couples who packed the steamy room and were performing the blues, also called the slow drag, a name that well describes it…. The couples, glued together in a belly-to-belly, loin-to-loin embrace, approximated sexual intercourse as closely as their vertical postures, their clothing, and the crowd around them would allow. Slowly, with bent knees and with the whole shoe flat on the floor, the dragged their feet along its surface, emphasizing the off-beat, so that the whole house vibrated like a drum."[15]

1962, Chicago, IL:

"When I was a teenager...at Herb Kent's Friday night dance party held at St. Phillips High School...While the music made the couples dance smooth and dignified in style giving them a musical personality, as they travel gracefully around, it was a rhythmic tidal wave of faces that had me spellbound and stuck to that balcony railing. I stood there enchanted by a vortex of elegant movement and enchanting music below my feet. The couples in the center danced their Slow Drag Dance, moving ever so slowly, around and around on themselves. Giving the circle a center of permanence."[16]

1968, Musical Group from Philadelphia:

Among the lyrics from "Slow Drag" by The Intruders, released in 1968: "I like to get close to the one I love, so I slow drag... Hold me close, hold me closer to you"[17]

2012, Harlem, NY:

Lesson & interview from Savoy Ballroom to Blues:

These next examples are secondary (second-hand) descriptions, or examples where it's unclear whether they're first-hand or second-hand.

"Early observers noted the fox trot and one step and dancing to 'the blues.' This latter type of dancing would have been marginally acceptable Slow Drag. Based on a very close-hold technique and writhing hip movements, in a private party setting it tended to be stationary with the girls' arms around the boy's neck and the boy's arms placed around her waist, sometimes sliding onto her buttocks. The dance was otherwise known as Dancing-on-a-Dime, or more recently as the Grind, and the Savoy bouncers insisted the couples keep moving."[19]

[Slow drag was] "a couple dance in which a man and a woman press their bodies tightly together in a smooth bump and grind as they kept the rhythm of the music"[20]

"Slow drag was popular in the southern juke joints and occurred late at night by dancers exhausted from hours of fast-paced dancing. Couples would hold each other tight and slow grind to the slow, erotic music. When moving in any direction, the first foot stepped and the second dragged to join it, illustrating a slow, a delayed sensuality. The couple might move away from each other slightly and then come back in and grind until the end of the evening."[21]

"...the Slow Drag, which originated in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century, where it was danced by couples close together, with..."
Analysis

To start with, here are visualizations I created of some aspects described in these examples, and which examples include which aspects. For a table view of the same information, see here.

This first diagram includes examples that specified dancing in one spot:

![Diagram of dancing in one spot]

This diagram includes examples that specified dancing that moved across the floor:

![Diagram of dancing across the floor]

This last diagram includes examples where in-place vs moving across the floor was not specified:

![Diagram of mixed movement types]
Now to dive into some details that I see and find interesting!

**Partner connection**

In both film examples, partners are connected torso-to-torso, and many of the written or spoken examples describe it as a "close" dance, leading "with your chest," and "bodies pressed together." Though not all examples describe the partner connection, I haven't found descriptions counter to that. The exception is this: "The couple might move away from each other slightly and then come back in and grind until the end of the evening." It's unclear if this is a first-hand or second-hand account, or what locations and eras it's referencing.

An interesting detail from both film examples is that you can see one partner or the other leaning back with their belly or lower torso pressed into their partner. The instructor in Savoy Ballroom to Blues even instructs the followers to "push forward, lean back," though their connection is in more of a V (with the follower more on the corner of the leader's chest) than Bessie and Jimmy's more straight-on connection. In slight contrast, Chester Whitmore says, "You lead your partner with your chest...it's with your chest and your whole body," which could imply a more full-torso connection, though that's conjecture. So close partner connection is a trend across examples, but with variety in the details.

Interestingly, the Al Minns/Leon James photo from Ebony is of a solo dancer, and it doesn't mention partnering. The position of his arms could be mimicking an imagined partner, or this could be an example of a solo-step version, versus a partner-dance version.

**Hip & body movement**

Many of these examples describe or show body movement, hip movement, or use words like "grind" which imply hip or body movement. We see this in the examples from 1890s Louisiana, the Al Minns/Leon James Ebony magazine version, and Sonny Allen's and Chester Whitmore's descriptions, and Alan Lomax's. You can see hip and body movement in both film examples, but to my eye, it looks relatively subtle. It’s worth mentioning that both film examples are not in a fully social context—one is for a movie (though portraying a social setting), and the other is a classroom setting—which could affect aspects of the dance being displayed.

**The “Drag” Part**

I see variations in what "drags" in slow drag, across these examples. The 1911 Joplin instance, the interview with Frankie Manning, Alan Lomax’s recollection, and the interview with Damon Stone all mention dragging of the feet. With Chester Whitmore, it’s "how you slow drag your partner back" (emphasis added). In the Whitmore and Sonny Allen interviews, the speakers also often lengthened the word "drag" ("draaaaag") which could imply a dragging of time, a lengthening of the beats.

The Al Minns/Leon James example doesn’t mention any type of drag; in that example the primary name is "slow grind," though slow drag is given as an alternate name.

**‘Across the Floor’ or ‘Barely Moving’**
It seems that there were differences in how much the dance moved across the floor. Some versions moved “across” or “back” (Whitmore, Harlem), some were on the spot “barely moving” (Grant, Birmingham), and some “moving ever so slowly, around and around on themselves” (Allen, Chicago).

A nice laying out out of this difference is made clear in Chester Whitmore’s interview. Whitmore first describes a version where you “drag your partner across” the floor and “drag your partner back,” and then also talks about another slow drag “going side to side,” where Eubie Blake told him it “isn’t slow drag across the floor” (emphasis added). This aligns with the differences that Damon Stone speaks of as well, with versions traveling across the floor in ballrooms and more dancing on the spot in juke joints and other smaller spaces.

**Basic Rhythm**

In these examples, the rhythm for stepping is often not addressed directly. We can see the rhythm in the film examples—St. Louis Blues is a dragged-out (through time) or ‘slow’ step (a step that takes two beats), and Savoy Ballroom to Blues is a drag-step on each beat. There is one moment in St. Louis Blues where Jimmy does a rhythmic variation, with a scoop or loop back, with the rhythm of ‘1 and 2.’

The other examples that do specify rhythm are the Ebony magazine, Damon Stone, and Alan Lomax. Ebony magazine calls it a “one-step,” which could mean either a one-beat step or a two-beat step, based on my encountering that term both formally and colloquially. Damon Stone specifies that the dance keeps one rhythm. Alan Lomax specifies that the off-beat is emphasized (which I’m assuming means the second and fourth beats), but he doesn’t specify how or with what part of the body.

Overall, these don’t seem particularly contradictory. My interpretation is that either there are different versions, some that are always one-beat steps and some that are always two-beat steps, and/or each version could be one-beat steps or two-beat steps varying from song-to-song or partner-to-partner.

**Alternate Names**

In the various descriptions, there are several alternate names offered, including “drag” (Frankie Manning, Harlem), “slow grind” (Ebony article), “Grind” and “Dancing on a Dime” (Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake). It’s also interesting to note than in both *Jazz Dance* by Marshall and Jean Stearns and *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*, the index includes a reference to “the Drag” listed in the index under Slow Drag.

**Overlap with “Grind”**

In addition to the naming overlap with “grind” and “slow grind,” another interesting observation comes when Frankie Manning is describing grinding. During the same interview referenced previously, he says, about grind, “You know what’s so funny, I remember when I was a... youngster...I was at least 15 years old... I remember we used to, when the music started playing slow, first I remember you’d be dancing with the young lady and you’d be trying to get close to her, you know...and she would bend over you, you know. So we were bending back as she was bending over you. And I remember gradually, the dance started straightening up and you was almost bending over her.” You can actually see the first part of this type of interaction happen in St. Louis Blues with Bessie and Jimmy as well, which I find really interesting.

Even when “grind” or “slow grind” isn’t offered as an alternate name, the descriptions sometimes contain the word “grind,” “grinds,” or “grinding.”

**Vibe**

A lot of the examples—particularly in party or juke joint settings—depict this as a couples’ dance, romantic or sexual in nature. Both contexts of slow drag in St. Louis Blues are certainly of that nature as well. Anecdotally, I’ve also heard some elders describe slow drag as romantic or sexual couple dancing, grinding, even a type of foreplay. *Now, how we apply this when we’re in a different dance context* (if we’re dancing with people with whom we don’t intend to be sexually or romantically entangled) *is a separate issue.* But these examples show that multiple people who danced slow drag did so with sexual or romantic overtones. This is a statement of ‘was/is,’ not a statement of ‘should.’

We also have some implications of this being less ‘proper,’ based on Mrs. Zeno’s tone while mentioning the slow drag (“certainly never danced”), the description of it being “marginally acceptable” in the early days of the Savoy, and Charlie Love’s description of this being for “less fashionable” groups.
I do see a slight difference in the descriptions from Whitmore and Sonny Allen—both New York dancers, it might be worth noting. From them, it’s not explicitly stated as a sexual or romantic dance, but Whitmore does describe it as “sensuous” and his addition of “precision” brings a tone of skill-displaying as well, in my read. Manning, another New York dancer, doesn’t address the vibe of the dance at all or give any clues with his tone of delivery.

Overall Thoughts, Impressions, Conclusions, and Open Questions

So how do I, personally, fit all these pieces together in my mind? At a high-level, I think of slow drag as a range of things, from grinding hips slowly with a partner, to sweetly shuffling across the floor while close to someone, to sensual and rhythmic body movement with a partner dragging back or in place—maybe with a touch of showing off rhythmic prowess to a partner. To me, the group overall involves dancing close, some degree of body movement, a range of pulses & ways of connecting to the rhythm, a simple stepping rhythm, and dragging of the foot more as a result of not thinking about it than as an intentional feature. I would not be surprised to find exceptions to these either. Across the group, it seems that many close embrace connections are in scope, as well as many varieties of pulse.

The Scott Joplin example is most different from the others, but also had a very different context, being choreography directions for a stage show. My assumption is that the choreography was more adjacent to the social dance, rather than being a more direct representation of the social dance.

Since there are so many examples that also use the words “grind,” “grinds,” or “grinding” in the description (or as alternate names), I’ve also started thinking of slow drag as overlapping with other dances called Grind. For example, it seems possible that if some people were doing what they would call slow drag, particular a variety with lots of hip-to-hip movement, someone from another place might look at it and say, “that’s grind.” That’s how I’ve started to frame it in my mind, but this is also somewhat of an open question, to me.

I also have a theory on the development of across-the-floor slow drag, specifically at the Savoy. As described by Hubbard and Monaghan, couples dancing slow drag on-the-spot were made to keep moving around the floor by the Savoy bouncers. This seems that it could have lead to some later versions of slow drag at the ballroom, where traveling across the floor was built into the dance, as we see in Savoy Ballroom to Blues and as described by Chester Whitmore, especially since those examples seem later in history. I’d be interested to find examples of across-the-floor slow drag from locations other than New York or from earlier in history.

Concluding Thoughts

It’s out of scope for this article to discuss what ‘accuracy’ means when we’re understanding or executing a social dance like slow drag. What is clear, however, is that we’d be missing out if we were to flatten out the variety that is obviously there across time and place. A more flexible model of thought allows for conflicting or seemingly-conflicting information, offering breadth within our definitions.

If you hear conflicting information about slow drag, dive deeper. See where people are getting their information. It could be that different people have different interpretations of the same information, or they could be learning different styles from different times or places. Or it could be the inevitable game of telephone where information changes as it’s repeated farther and farther from the sources. Whenever you can, go to the sources.

It does not escape me that some people who dance slow drag would find it absurd that I’ve given this level of analysis to a dance that, to them, was slow dancing with your honey. And I heartily acknowledge that point of view. I do think the details are interesting as well, and there is a lot of richness in these details. Since we have multiple examples here, it was also an easy example to show a general framework for understanding social dances—that they have variations, different versions, and can sometimes feel contradictory. For understanding social dances in general, I encourage everyone to look at the details, look at the contexts, talk to people who do or did these dances originally, but to embrace the “perfect mess” as well.

Endnotes


*ibid.* p 67.


*ibid.* Perf. Sonny Allen.


Julie’s expressive dancing and joyful, playful connection are known throughout the country. With a background in performance and solo dance, she is best known for her solo blues, artistic choreography, and seamlessly integrating following with expression. As a teacher, Julie presents material with a caring and often light-hearted tone. She carefully crafts her classes and continuously tailors her material to fit the crowd at hand. Julie teaches regularly in her hometown of Boston, and has taught workshops everywhere from California to London.
In order to make sure we always provide regular, quality content, our website will be moving to a quarterly feature article publication instead of a monthly feature article publication. This will allow our authors more breathing room to create scholarship for everyone, and allow our editor to work more closely with authors to ensure polished products. Thank you for your understanding, and we look forward to bringing you more engaging feature articles in the near future!

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“Inside Nothing:” The Silent Protest March in Toni Morrison’s Jazz

Posted on February 14, 2018

Silent Protest March July 28, 1917

The Massacre and the March

Male drummers and other men mark the end of section. Children begin new section of marchers.

Silent Protest March of 1917

On July 28th 1917, nearly ten thousand African-Americans marched down New York City's Fifth Avenue to protest the feral violence
unleashed on the African-American community during the massacre in East Saint Louis, Illinois on July 2, 1917. Led by the children, followed by the women, and backed by the men, those who participated in the March moved as one, to the rhythms of “muffled drums,” while “20,000 negroes lined Fifth Avenue and gave silent approval of the demonstration.”[i] Referred to as the “silent protest march” by the contemporary newspapers and later historians, not one word was uttered by the marchers throughout the demonstration.[ii]

Perhaps still reverberating in the minds of many of the marchers was the crackling fury of destructive fires, the dull blunt thwack of metal, stone and brick against black flesh, the screech of quickly advancing shoe leather against pavement, the tinkle crash of breaking glass, the explosions, the gunfire, the laughing and jeering of white perpetrators, and the torturous screams of pain, horror, fear and grief emitting from the throats of men, women, children and the aged, who, in one night, were hunted and ruthlessly slaughtered like prey.
While explanations for the cause of the massacre ranged from white reaction to the "influx of undesirable negros," who were perceived as threatening white jobs and homes, to black veteran discontent, the desolation remaining in its wake was uncontestable ("The Massacre of East St. Louis" 221). The East Saint Louis carnage resulted in "nearly two hundred Afro-American [deaths] and six thousand [being] burned out of their houses" (Lewis 10). "Men, women and children were beaten, stabbed, hanged and burned" (Schomburg Exhibit). It was "the worst race riot in American history" (Lewis 9).

The Collective Response

Beginning in 1916, thousands of African-Americans had fled from the South to the North in an effort to escape the lynchings, the town burnings, the segregationist laws, and the manifold economic and social oppressions prevalent in the South. They had hoped for a better life in the North. They had hoped that they were "going to the Promised Land" (Trotter 72). The butchery in East St. Louis reinforced the reality that they had merely changed locations without substantially ameliorating their situations. What could they do? Where else could they go when the North, too, was filling with their blood, exploiting their labor, and defiling their personhood? The Silent Protest March tacitly shouted their collective decision and their answer to the massacre which had occurred: We will stay. We will stand. We will fight.

Toni Morrison’s Jazz
In *Jazz*, the second novel of Toni Morrison's historical trilogy, Morrison enumerates many historical facts without explication. As Peterson notes, "the novel opens in 1926, the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, but it offers for full view almost none of the artistic, cultural, or political milestones that African Americans achieved in those years" (201). Morrison’s approach highlights the significance of the one extra-textual historical event explicated in some detail: the Silent Protest March of 1917. Reading Morrison's novel through the dichotomous, imbricated tools of resistance evident during the March, jazz rhythms and silence, provides the reader with an understanding of some of the agonizing collective and individual incidents which drive the rhythms in jazz music and lie beneath the lyrics. This discussion will briefly explore three of the novel’s main characters, Alice Manfred, Joe and Violet Trace.

Alice’s sister and brother-in-law were killed in the East St. Louis Massacre. They were survived by their daughter Dorcas, who was visiting a friend when her father was “pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death” (*Jazz* 57). Her mother “had just got the news and had gone back home to try and forget the color of [her husband’s] entrails when her “house was “torched” and she “burned crispy in its flame” (*Jazz* 57). Since Alice lives in New York and not East St. Louis, she is depicted as a grieving family member deeply impacted by the type of brutality which was rampant during the massacre. Alice does not actively participate in the March but she joins the observers on the side lines.

Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not. *What was possible to say* was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But *what was meant* came from the drums. It was July in 1917 and the beautiful faces were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them. (53, emphasis added)

It is significant that a distinction is made between "what was possible to say" and "what was meant" (*Jazz* 53). The words that were stated to explain the March, and the protestors’ external response to the violence in East Saint Louis did not express "what was meant" (*Jazz* 53). The drums said "what the graceful women and the marching men could not” say (*Jazz* 53). The drums spoke what was meant.

Jazz Music: Revealing and Concealing

Morrison, in her 1981 interview with Le Clair, states that she uses the “standard English” language “to help restore the other language, the lingua franca,” “the language that black people spoke” (124). She views this lingua franca as analogous to jazz music: “It is open on the one hand and both complicated and inaccessible on the other” (124). The openness of jazz refers both to the product of the performer and to the response of the listener. Something within the nature of the music itself allows a space and an opening for the listener to enter emotionally even while recognizing its complicated inaccessibility.

The *something* which allows jazz, though complex, to provide an emotional space for its listeners, is perhaps found in the impulse of the performer. As Charlie Parker is quoted as saying, “music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn” (qtd. in Cone 5). If we heed Charlie Parker’s insight, and accept that what “comes out of the horn” of the performer expresses his/her experiences, thoughts and wisdom, then some aspects of the performance will be emotionally accessible to the listener and other parts will not, as the performer alone knows the full extent of his/her experiences. Jazz music then is open and closed, revealing and concealing, simple and complex.

The Drum Rhythms: Accessible and Inaccessible
The banner held by the marcher in the foreground reads: The First Blood for American Independence was Shed by a Negro Crispus Attucks.

While the banners held by the marchers disclosed their open protest of the savage violence of the East St. Louis massacre, with questions and statements such as: "Mother, do Lynchers go to Heaven?,” “Thou shalt not kill,” and “Give Us a Chance to Live,” the banners did not express the inexpressible. The drums both conveyed the “love and the hate, hope and the despair” felt by the marchers and created an emotional space for them to move into, a silent, unutterably complex space where speech was inaccessible (Cone 5). What could possibly be said to express their anger, their fear, their hope, and their despair over the brutal display of violent depravity that comprised the massacre?

The Printed Word: Overt and Covert

Without the inclusion of the music from the drums, the words of the banners which waved over their heads and "the slippery crazy words" printed on the explanatory leaflets the Boy Scouts distributed to those observing the March, "seemed crazy" and "out of focus" (Jazz 58). Although Alice was a part of the assaulted community en masse and a sharer in their grief, the words of the "explanatory leaflets" in particular, merely served to cause a "great gap" to "lunge between the print" and Dorcas, Alice's newly orphaned niece. "Alice had picked up a leaflet that had floated to the pavement, read the words, and shifted her weight at the curb. She read the words and looked at Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas and read the words again" (Jazz 58).

Some of the explanations offered on the leaflet seemed to be readily apprehended, "We march because we want to make impossible a repetition of Waco, Memphis,[v] and East St. Louis, by arousing the conscience of the country" (The Negro Silent Protest Parade 2). Yet the statements were also difficult to conceive as a full response to the overwhelming dissolute violence many of the marchers had survived.

As Alice Manfred stood "crushing" the hand of her newly orphaned niece, Dorcas, watching the "cold," "beautiful faces" of the marchers, she was "struggling for the connection, something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words" (Jazz 58). Into the space and "spann[ing] the distance" Alice heard the drums "like a rope cast for rescue…which gathered them up and connected them" (Jazz 58).

Responses to Jazz Music

Reflective Hand Gestures: Open and clenched

The drums, muffled during the March, have the rhythms of the jazz music Alice hears all around her. When played without accompanying melodies or lyrics during the March, the drums serve as a connective, traversing the distance between the slippery words and Dorcas, as representative of the traumatized survivors. While jazz music made Alice "aware of its life below the [dress] sash and its red lip rouge," it also had "a kind of careless hunger for a fight or a red ruby stickpin" which made Alice "hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew" (Jazz 58-9, emphasis added). Alice uses the two different hand gestures to try to balance herself, the open hand reaching for the "safe gathering rope thrown to her...on Fifth Avenue" and the fist clenched in anger when she hears "some [jazz] phrase or other" (Jazz 59). Her hand gestures represent the two contradictory and concomitant realities of
jazz music in the text: "open" on the one hand, reaching for the connective rope, and "inaccessible" on the other, closed into a fist.

Relational Cohesion: Physical Intimacy and/or Emotional Exclusion

While Alice views the drum rhythms as an "all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence, her niece Dorcas views them as a "beginning, a start of something she looked to complete" (Jazz 60). Severely restrained and closely watched by her aunt, Dorcas "thought of that life-below-the-sash as all the life there was" (Jazz 60). The drums for Dorcas were the "first word(s) of a command" (Jazz 60). Thus, by the time Joe Trace propositions Dorcas, she is eager to satisfy her sexual hungers, even with a married man several decades her senior (Jazz 67).

Joe and Dorcas form a strong physical and emotional connection, bonding both through intercourse and through the sharing of their respective painful experiences. They reveal the open aspects of their hearts as well as the parts inaccessible and complex. In contrast, Joe and his wife Violet do not share the inaccessible parts of their hearts with each other in the early or the latter stages of their relationship. Initially, they are consumed by and focused only on their sexual relationship. While their libidinous response is typical for new lovers, when their physical relationship wanes, they do not mature past the superficial into a deeper knowing of each other which matches their initial physical ardor. Hence, Violet is ignorant of the reasons for Joe’s migration to the City after fourteen years of refusal and resistance to its lure. "Violet never knew what it was that fired him up and made him want...to move to the City" (Jazz 107). Joe, in turn, is unaware of what causes Violet’s eventual silence and sexual withdrawal. "Over time her silences annoy [him], then puzzle him and finally depress him" (Jazz 24). The roots of both their responses stem from what I call a central trauma.

Central Traumas: Hidden and Exposed

Morrison chooses to depict both Violet and Joe as wounded souls with, "sadness at [their] center...the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home" (Beloved 140). The "desolation...at [their] center" stems from the impact of a central trauma, which I define as a devastating incident or series of incidents which cause lasting emotional and psychological turmoil or damage. Often occurring when the character was "too young to say No thank you," he/she is initially unable to control its impact (Jazz 211).[vi]

All the other life episodes that are rooted in the pain of this trauma, or somehow remind Joe and Violet of it, continually serve to debilitate them throughout the novel, eventually leading to Joe’s murder of Dorcas and Violet’s attack on Dorcas’ corpse. Thus, while seeking to hide their central traumas from others, the actions which result from the impact and aftermath of the traumas end up exposing the depth of their pain. "Joe’s murder of his young girlfriend and Violet’s stabbing of the corpse as it awaits burial indicate the powerful eruption of their unresolved pasts into the present" (Matus 122).

The core of this trauma has no sound. It has a resonating silence, similar to the participants of the Protest March. While the marchers’ silence was their chosen response to the massacre and used as a tool to counter the volume of the violence which precipitated the protest, silence also surrounds Joe and Violet’s central trauma and is their initial response.

Joe and Violet fill their lives with needful activity and work while actively seeking to suppress the impact of their respective central traumas and hide the pain from each other. The central trauma leaves emotional devastation in its wake. The "inside nothing," which Morrison describes in Jazz, is the desolating emotional aftermath which results from the impact of the central trauma (Jazz 38).

Joe’s Central Trauma

Abandoned at birth by his mother, Joe is adopted as an infant by the Williams family. Although Joe is loved and well treated by the Williams, his stepmother “never pretend[s] that [Joe] [i]s her natural child” (Jazz 124). When Henry Lestroy, a man known for his hunting skills, selects Joe and his stepbrother Victory, to be his apprentices, Joe is indirectly told the truth concerning his parentage. His mother was the local wild woman whom Joe and Victory “were speculating on what it would take to kill...if they happened on her” (Jazz 175). Henry Lestroy ended their banter with "low fire galvaniz[ing] his stare...then he looked right at Joe (not Victory)...You know, that woman is somebody’s mother and somebody ought to take care" (Jazz 175).

Joe then connects and seeks to connect with his mother, Wild, three times. Since she lives in the woods and does not interact with people in a normative way, he only hears her or finds evidence of her presence in each instance. She does not speak with him or reveal
The Personification of the Inside Nothing

Wild is the personification of the inside nothing. A living picture of the assault on African-Americans in general, and women in particular, Wild bears on her body the “traces of bad things; like tobacco juice, brine, and a craftsman’s sense of play” (Jazz 171). Yet her untamed lifestyle, her visible presence yet absence, her wordless communication with the outside world, her selection of a living space, are all decided upon and controlled by her. Although she is perceived as deranged, and more than likely is, it can also be argued that she has taken what others have inflicted upon her and chosen to shape it, living in her own way and by her own terms. Like the marchers, she uses her silence as a tool to turn the controls. She instills fear on those who surround her as they never know when she will appear or what she will do.

As the visible presence of the inside nothing, she bears externally the tacit internal scars that Joe and Violet carry. She can be seen as conveying to the reader much of what remains unsaid concerning the feelings of the inside nothing that both Joe and Violet have. Silent but saturated with experiences, present but ignored as if absent, larger than life but unable to be confronted, the effect of the inside nothing in both Violet and Joe’s lives becomes wild. Joe seeks to suppress his own “speechless, lurking insanity” by working manically after his second encounter with his mother (Jazz 179); but he also “bust(s) out just for the hell of it” by “shooting his unloaded shotgun at the leaves” near to where his mother was (Jazz 181).

Violet’s Central Trauma

Dark silence pervades both Violet and Joe’s central traumas. While the searches Joe conducts for his mother conclude in the dim light of late afternoon, Violet’s discovery of her mother’s twisted body at the bottom of a well, occurs in the darkness of early morning. The wide darkness of Joe’s wood blend into the narrow, confinement of the well Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, chooses for the site of her suicide. Since during their first meeting Violet and Joe talk from evening into early morning, they unwittingly help each other through the most difficult portions of their day. “Never again would she wake struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small” (Jazz 104).

While Joe’s inside nothing drives him to maniacal work, the emotional devastation resulting from Rose Dear’s suicide, Violet’s inside nothing, drives her to increasing depression and withdrawal. Insomnia, spurred by her resistance to the pull of the well, drained Violet’s emotional resources. Though surrounded by family, only her grandmother, True Belle’s, urgings to earn money picking cotton during an abundant harvest, shook her from her home. It is during her time away from home picking cotton that she meets and latches onto Joe. Since during their first meeting Violet and Joe talk from evening into early morning, they unwittingly help each other through the most difficult portions of their day. “Never again would she wake struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small” (Jazz 104).

Jazz gives the reader a glimpse into both the collective and the individual traumas which underlie some early jazz music. The significance in the text of both the response to the East St. Louis massacre and Joe and Violet’s respective response to their central traumas help the reader to glimpse some of the inaccessible aspects of jazz music.

And yet the inaccessible openness of jazz music continues to have resonant relevance today. While the widespread feral violence on display during the East St. Louis massacre has not recurred in the recent past, the antithetical dichotomy of recent racial incidents and the inappropriateness of official responses to judgments, continues to drive both open and inexpressible reactions. Simultaneously, the expanding continuance of the #MeToo outing of predators and exploiters is bringing to light the ongoing impact of central traumas and their prevalence. Although no specific musical form can fully express the inexpressible, Jazz reminds us of some of the depth and scope
of the impetus for the creation of and the need for listening to the music which opens a space for the inaccessible. Jazz music plays on.

Endnotes


[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Morrison lists, mentions but does not expand upon some of the facts which convey to the reader the racial hostilities and barriers of the contemporary manifestations of racism for the period. “A&P hire a colored clerk” (7), “the hair of...colored nurses was declared unseemly” (8), “green as poison curtain separating the colored people eating” (31), “welts given me by a two-tone peckerwood” (96), “stores doubled the price of uptown beef and let the whitefolks’ meat stay the same” (128), “the everyday killings cops did of Negroes” (199).

[iv] Many of the banners noted in the New York Times article seemed to have simply stated the truth of the events and the situation in general while also, perhaps, raising the consciousness of some of the onlookers. They did not, therefore, express the inexpressible feelings of the marchers; they were for the benefit of an extra-communal observer. “Your Hands Are Full of Blood,” ”India is Abolishing Caste America is Adopting It,” ”Memphis and Waco, Centres of American Culture.”

[v] Both Waco and Memphis refer to incidents of particularly brutal lynchings. While many other lynchings had also occurred in 1916 and 1917, these two cases were remarkable in the excessive depravity of the mob and the large numbers of perpetrators and observers.

On May 15,1916 Jesse Washington, a 17 year-old farmhand, was accused of raping and killing a 53 year-old white woman, Lucy Fryer. Following his brief trial in Waco, Texas a mob waited outside the courthouse to capture Washington. A chain was tied around his neck and he was brutally stabbed and beaten as he was dragged to a prepared tree. He was covered in oil and slowly lowered over the fire beneath. More than 10,000 onlookers watched this two-hour horror. His remains were then placed into a sack and dragged to Robinson, Texas where his mangled and burned body was hung on a utility pole. http://wacohistory.org/items/show/55


On May 22, 1917 Ell Persons, an African-American woodcutter, was accused of raping and decapitating Antoinette Rappel, a sixteen-year-old girl. Though detectives surmised that a white man killed her and a white man’s handkerchief was found at the scene, Persons was repeatedly arrested for the crime and eventually beaten into making a confession. After a speedy trial in Nashville, Persons was to be escorted back to Memphis by two deputies. However, when the train arrived in Potts Camp, Mississippi, the deputies handed Persons over to a waiting mob. He was chained to a log and burned to death. His body was mutilated after death with many persons taking "souvenirs," his ears, his heart and his head, which was photographed and then thrown at a group of African Americans. http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rhetoricraceandreligion/2016/04/burned-alive-the-lynch-murder-mutilation-and-mayhem-of-ell-persons.html

[vi] I argue elsewhere that each of Morrison’s novels have at least one character who has a central trauma which impacts their present circumstance and situation.

[vii] Golden Gray is the mixed-race son of Vera Louise, a white woman, and Henry LesTroy, an African-American young man. When her parents discover that Vera Louise is pregnant through a “Negro boy,” she is given a “lingerie case full of money” and encouraged to leave home (140-1). Golden Gray is raised both by his mother and Violet’s grandmother, True Belle, the one slave Vera Louise wanted with her when she departed. Light skinned enough to pass for white, he is raised as a white male and never informed of his African-American lineage until he is a young man of eighteen. Once informed of his father’s identity, Golden Grey sets out to find Henry LesTroy and encounters a pregnant Wild on the road. Though initially terrified of her, after she gives birth to Joe and refuses to nurse him, they evidently end up living together in Wild’s hideaway. Joe comes upon their home after his third and final attempt to connect with his mother.
Dr. Caryl Loney-McFarlane is an independent scholar, a Higher-Education Diversity Consultant and a Diversity Fellow at Princeton University. Originally from New York City, she attended Queens College, of the City University of New York (CUNY), where she earned her undergraduate degree in English with a Pre-Med. minor. She continued her studies at Rutgers University, completing her doctoral degree in English in 2007. Her graduate work focused on 20th Century African Diaspora literature with a concentration on the novels of Toni Morrison. Currently, her independent scholarship focuses on racism in American history and its intersection with and impact upon our present-day interactions and relationships. She is the former Senior Program Officer of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, where she directed six higher-education programs for underrepresented populations. Both in her current work as a Diversity Fellow with Princeton and as a diversity consultant, she seeks to aid her clients in their efforts to diversify their institutions and address barriers in racial progress.

**Why We Read**

Posted on January 27, 2018

Our community is full of diverse people with diverse dance interests. So what possesses so many of our community members to read up on blues and jazz? We asked a number of our active readers in the community, and these are their responses.

Fenella Kennedy—Dance Scholar and Instructor, Columbus, Ohio

I've always been a voracious reader. I credit books with getting me through some of the worst patches of childhood and young
adulthood, mostly because they taught me the ethics I needed to conduct myself with grace, strength, and kindness in an often cruel world. Unsurprisingly, I grew up to be an academic, making books and reading an intrinsic part of my life: while I prepared for PhD candidacy I easily read 3-4 books a week, and I still read for pleasure on top of that.

The danger of being an academic is that all your books can come to feel very much the same. Our institutions of higher education are very whitewashed spaces, and disciplinary practices can further shape your reading experience until every author feels like a slightly more educated or elitist version of you and your peers. I think it’s essential to read outside of your discipline, and outside of your culture, to keep your mind open to the validity of all the options out there for living, and to get into the habit of questioning your choices and norms.

When I read about blues and jazz I specifically read for insider voices, not for the ethnographic perspective. I want to love the people who made the music and danced the dances, especially when I see flashes of queerness, or rebellion against the norms, or voices that resonate with and move me. Getting a feel for the conventions of storytelling, humor, and self-presentation teaches me how I want to relate to blues music when I dance it. When I’m researching dances from notation and video it’s important that I approach the steps with a blues dancer’s attitude, not from the concert dance perspectives that I grew up in. I guess books are still teaching me who I want to be in all areas of my life.

Recommendations:

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration – Isabel Wilkerson

Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom – Sarah Jane Cervenak

Ross Blythe—Dance Instructor, Chicago, Illinois

In my experience, our scene is unique in that we emphasize and encourage a level of scholarship I haven’t personally seen in other dance communities. I read books from the Blues and Jazz Dance book club list so I can get a better understanding of the history of blues music, dancing, and culture. Rather than just listening to a lecture, reading several books on a subject helps to provide a fuller understanding of a topic. Some of the books on the list read like a documentary. This happened, then this happened, then over here this trend sprouted. Others are more poetic, striving to convey a feeling and lyricism rather than dates and figures. The totality gives light to a history I wouldn’t have looked into otherwise. The link between music, dance, and culture becomes clearer when reading about the experiences of the community that did this before us, and helps me better frame our place in trying to continue on with these dances in our contemporary world.

Chelsea Adams—English Literature Scholar, Las Vegas, Nevada

As a child, I grew up with a bookshelf in nearly every room in the house, and every shelf was filled with books: history books, religious texts, fictional works, political arguments, biographies, and more. My parents encouraged me to read to learn about the world, and to ask questions when I had them. Perhaps because of such an environment growing up, I’ve always read for enjoyment as well as learning, and it should not be surprising that I took to reading books about not only topics that fascinated me intellectually, but also books about the activities in which I regularly engaged. As I lived in a rural area and worked with plants and livestock, the topics largely included books about animals, traits of different geographical regions, growing plants, and local history. And of course, I always had a love for fiction. By age 14, I was checking out a new book from the school library almost every other day.

When I went to college and decided to become an English major, I continued to take classes that exposed me to new cultures and topics. At the same time, I began dancing—first Ballroom dances, and then West Coast Swing and Blues idioms. As I read more and more African American literature, I noticed that blues music and dances were being regularly mentioned in the fiction works, and I realized that I didn’t know enough about those dances and the music to explain to my fellow classmates and teachers why what I was seeing was important when analyzing the literature. So I did what I’ve always done, and picked up books about what I’m doing to better understand it and explain it to others. And it became an area of professional research for me. Today, I’m still reading to better understand my world and the activities in which I participate.

Elizabeth Lynn Rakphongphaioj Kilrain—Local Dance Organizer and Instructor, San Diego, California

Music and dancing for me have always been about the story. Yes, it’s about self-expression. Yes, it’s about creativity, but the story being told through the music goes deeper than just one person’s interpretation. Growing up as a TCK (third-culture kid), my identity had always been tied to multiple cultures, and not necessarily the land of my birth or the land in which I resided. Attending an international
school also showed me that there is so much more to a culture than what you see on the surface; each culture had their stories, and person had stories that reflected their experiences within and outside of their culture.

That's what blues and jazz are to me. I will always value stories told directly from the mouths of those within the culture, but I also recognise that – without deeper understanding of the contexts and background and experiences from which these stories are told – I can easily miss the nuances of these stories. There are those who have dedicated their lives to gathering stories from people I may never get to meet. Reading provides me access to their work and to the stories I would never be able to hear from the mouths of those who have since passed. Reading also helps me connect the dots between the history and what is going on today in a way that helps me understand the greater context of the blues – beyond the music.

**Aimee Eddins—Instructor and Community Organizer, Denver, Colorado**

I participate in the Blues and Jazz Dance Book Club because it’s important to me to be acting in alignment to my values. I value supporting the work others do through my participation, continually being a learner, and acting in accordance with my values in a way that is visible to others. It takes a lot to create opportunities to learn, come together in community, and engage with challenging topics. When people put together opportunities for these things to happen, I like to support as much as I can by participating.

Communities are made more vibrant through participation from people in all stages of their journey and it’s important to me to continue to show up even as I grow in the relative privilege I carry in the scene. I also appreciate having access to a space where I am supported to continue to learn and where others are there to learn alongside me. I can learn on my own — and I do choose to read, research, and discover outside of the Book Club — and still I appreciate having a space to come to where there are others to dialogue with and learn from. The Book Club is one place where I can deepen my understanding of oppression, music, and history that takes into account the experience of black people in the US. By participating in and sharing the Book Club, I have a greater capacity to influence those around me to investigate and engage with these topics as well.

**Ruth Evelyn—International Dance Instructor, Boston, Massachusetts**

I read fiction because it is a chance to open a door to another world and step in, immersing myself. I get to try on what it would be like to live in another person’s life, experiencing different interactions, living through otherwise unattainable experiences. I believe that reading books where the protagonist is very different from me is vital in my empathy development. Sometimes it means waking up in late-19th century New Orleans as a man. Sometimes it means I’m in England as an old woman.

When I read non-fiction I expand what I know about the world, expanding my ideas and possibilities. In Buzzy Jackson’s "A Bad Woman Feeling Good" I get to read about the impact Bessie Smith made not just with what she sang, but exactly how she sang it- how she shared her soul. It helps me think about art in different ways, and in turn to attempt to express it myself. Overall, I read because it expands my worlds and my ways of thinking about life and the possibilities it holds, making it richer and much more full.

**A Brief Introduction to Savoy Walk**

Posted on December 27, 2017
The Savoy Ballroom—Langston Hughes called it "the Heartbeat of Harlem"—was located on Lenox Avenue, between 140th and 141st streets in Harlem, NYC. If the Savoy was the Heartbeat of Harlem, and Harlem was looked at as "Black Mecca," that places it squarely in the center of the artistic and intellectual soul of Black America from the Great Migration to the Civil Rights Era.

Many bands made names for themselves at the Savoy Ballroom and numerous dances were either born on its floors or rose to national prominence because of the spotlight that was constantly shining on the Savoy. One of those dances was the Walk. The Walk is a particularly interesting dance because it acts as the base movement and techniques of two expressions, one to swing music and one to blues music. Its base movement is related to the Peabody/Foxtrot. The primary difference between the two types of Walk (I will refer to that done to swing music as the Swing Walk and that done to blues music as the Savoy Walk) is that the Swing Walk is a dance which travels in the line of dance (rotating around the floor counter-clockwise) while the Savoy Walk travels within a particular area, not following any prescribed direction or pattern.

Examples of the Swing Walk can be seen here:

More examples of it are in the background in this clip. Pay attention to the traveling dancers:

The Savoy Walk is a "two-step" dance, that is to say, it uses two types of base rhythms: slow steps (one weight change over two counts) and quick steps (one weight change over a single count). It was inspired by the dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, a favorite in Harlem theaters, as well blending aspects of pas de deux with a distinct lindy hopper sensibility for music and love of tricks. The basic rhythmic patterns are Slow, Slow, Quick-Quick, and Quick-Quick, Slow. While these rhythms match the base rhythms in the music they are intended to be embellished, altered, or abandoned as the music progresses, always placing emphasis on the dancer's creative choices.

A particular aspect regarding musicality, as Sugar Sullivan explained to me, was that while the stepping patterns and improvisations were danced to the rhythm section of the music the tricks, the various lifts, drops, turns, and other flash moves were danced off the rhythm section, instead following along with the melodic section of the music. This gives the dance a very interesting contrasting style as it embraces the lyrical type of movements seen in some forms of International ballroom dance and a frequent characteristic of pas de deux, but generally unexplored in other forms of black partnered social dance at the time.

There are examples of this type of musicality from this clip of The Spirit Moves (note: the music that is being played in the clip is not the song the dancers are dancing to, but it is representative of the overall style of music they were dancing to):

The aesthetic elements of the Savoy Walk involve a rise and fall of the traveling dancer which acts as the primary expression of pulse primarily caused by a flexing at the ankle and knee. The torso and hip movements roll and twist as personal styling helping the dancers accent and embellish musical elements. The follower lags within the space created by the leader's movement allowing them the ability to create a stronger energy transfer as the follower moves later within the space of the lead, or can more firmly engage their core and frame muscles reducing the lag in the partnership, but in both cases the follower is driving their own movement take the cues from how the leader transfers momentum. The articulation of spine, independence of arm movements creating an asymmetric look between the
top and bottom half of the body and between the partnership both give a strong sense of Youthfulness and vigor. Savoy Walk is an excellent example of assimilating European movement concepts and expressing them through a Black American cultural lens.

Damon has been dancing his entire life, starting with vernacular Jazz/Blues first taught to him at the tender age of six by his grandmother. After nearly a decade of learning at the heels of his elders, he went on and eventually studied a score of different dance forms until coming full circle in 1995 to focus primarily on the history and styles of Swing and Blues as his family danced them with a special focus on the Southern styles from the Mississippi Delta region. He has studied the development of vernacular Jazz/Blues dance across the United States learning from a number of the original dancers. He is largely regarded as one of the foremost authorities on Blues idiom dance, a long time board member of the Northern California Lindy Society, former member of the California Historical Jazz Dance Foundation, and has been interviewed as a dance historian in documentary and for radio. Damon has been a featured instructor at camps, festivals, and workshops across five continents. To learn more about Damon and his work, visit http://damonstone.dance/.
Joe McQueen, jazz saxophonist, is Ogden, Utah’s King of Jazz. Part of a travelling jazz band, McQueen got stuck in the city in 1945 after the bandleader skipped town and took all their money. He and his wife stayed in Ogden, and he has played jazz there ever since. At 98 years old, he still actively plays jazz in the community, and next month, he will be inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. What follows are excerpts from a transcript of the lecture he gave to a graduate class at Weber State University in Fall 2015, transcribed by Chelsea Adams. We intend to highlight information that is less widely known and published.

On the Great Depression

I had the experience of growing up during the big depression, which we talk about a recession now, it’s nothing like that was. I see people where I live across the street from me, and I see people coming over there with boxes and baskets of food and all that stuff, you know, so there are so many places that people can go now and get food and things like this, and just about everybody you see has an automobile and all that stuff. But I remember, I’ve seen lines of people standing with a tin cup trying to get a cup of soup, and sometimes the line wouldn’t be taken care of and people would go without, and that would be the only meal they had all day long. So when people start now telling me about talking about hard times, I say take that to somebody else please, because I don’t want to hear it. Nowhere in the world it could be like it was then. Can you imagine cutting a yard that’s as big as half of this campus all day long for one dollar and a sandwich? There was no such thing as a power lawnmower. But that’s really helped me out because I’m as strong as an average forty-year-old and I’m 96. I attribute that to exercising, playing the horn, and the work that I’ve done during my life.

People don’t get a chance to do the things that I had to do to survive. And well, my mother died when I was fourteen, my father left when I was five, and I lived with my grandparents, and they were old, and I had to drop out of school at 11th grade so I could help them. So there are so many things that people now take for granted that it’s just supposed to be, but it wasn’t so back then. You know, when the big depression hit back in 1929, I was 10 years old. All my teen years was during that big depression, and it was something you wouldn’t want to try to go through. I’ve seen ladies up and down the highway with three or four kids just trying to find a place to sleep and food and everything like this. I used to go and my uncle gave me a 22 rifle, and I would go to a place out there, a place my step dad worked for a company that had forty acres of pecan trees, and those pecan trees, they had a lot of squirrels out there. And I have killed as many as forty squirrels in one day and given them to people in the neighborhood so they could have something to eat. Then there was another guy in the neighborhood that killed hogs all the time, and I’d go with him, and he gave me different parts of the hog, and those people would roll over each other trying to get some of that food to eat. And people have no idea about tough times, so I come up here to talk about music, but I have to tell you about all this stuff. It’s what happened.
And in Oklahoma where I was raised, they'd have those dust storms. And two or three times I remember when one of those dust storms were over, we'd shovel the dirt out of the house because the houses weren't very tight back down there then, and after you shoveled as much as you could you'd take a broom and sweep. There was no such thing as a vacuum cleaner. You didn't have those things back then, and then after we got all that out we'd take the rug and put it on the clothesline and beat it out the best we could with brooms and things. So people right now don't have any idea about how good they have things. They have everything handy for you to live with. So be thankful. Thank the good Lord that it's happening to you that you live in this time rather than back there.

To my idea, it was a learning experience for me, and I'm glad to be able to tell people about what happened. You can read about something but there isn't anything, the best teacher is experience. If you experience something yourself, somebody can tell you about the same thing, but if you experience it yourself, you know more about it than anybody can tell you about it, you know. When you go through an experience like that, they had what was called dust pneumonia, and a lot of people died from that. My grandmother was a pretty smart old woman. She'd tear up bed sheets and we'd tie them around our face and things and stay inside and block as many holes as we could to keep as much dust out as we could, and not breathe as much as we could. And that was a terrible time.

And I've seen rabbits, people were killing them with sticks and things like this, and they'd kill those and eat them. To this day I don't eat rabbit and I don't eat squirrel, but I killed a lot of them for other people. Rabbits were eating up everything in sight, you know. You couldn't have a garden back then. Rabbits would come out and clean out your garden in one night. So it was, that's another thing that was bad. Let's go to music.

On Discovering the Saxophone

Well, one thing why music is important to me is because I love music. It's been a part of my life since I was fourteen years old. I had a cousin, I think he would tell you, Herschel Evans, and his mother was my dad's sister, and he was visiting his mother and I went down to visit her, she was my aunt, and he came home and he had his horn on the bed, and I had never touched a saxophone before. But he was outside smoking, and I picked up the horn and started making some kind of noise and he came in the house and told me, asked me to tell him what I'd done.

And I said I have no idea, I said, it's the first time I ever handled a horn. So he said, well, I'm going to show you to run a C Major scale and see what you can do about it. So he did it a couple of times, and then he gave me the horn, but he said wait a minute, you've got to have a strap.

Anyway, he showed me how to run a C Major scale and I did it, and he said to me, Joe don't lie to me. Don't tell me you never had . . . and I said, I'm not! This is the first time I've ever had my hand on a horn. So he said to me, Well, I'll tell you what, you're a natural. You
quit that football and basketball and play music, and you can do that when you get to be an old man. How true he was! He had no idea, and I didn’t either. Because he died when he was only thirty years old. And so I’ve been playing since I was fourteen, and I started working in the band when I was sixteen, so music has been part of my life all my life.

There was only one time in 1969 I had throat cancer, and I was off playing the horn for about a year, but then I think it was about 1970, because I had the operation in ’69 in July. And two young men that live not too far from here, the Mayliss brothers, and another guy that is still here, introduced me to them and told them about me playing the horn, and they started insisting on me trying to play.

I said, well I haven’t played my horn in a long time. And he said, let’s go try. So I got my horn out and at first, I tell you what, if you don’t play those things for awhile, these aren’t very good, you don’t have no strength in your lips to get a decent sound. So that’s why you have to practice, practice, practice. So I got my horn and messed around and said, see, what did I tell you? And they said yeah, but we know you can play. So they just kept on talking to me until I finally started back practicing on the horn, and they had to engage me, so I did. I played those two engagements with them.

And that started me back to playing, back in 1970. And during the same time I was right up there on Weber State campus teaching auto mechanics. And uh, I’ve been playing the horn all the time since that time and before that time. And I’m 96 and still doing it.

On Playing Music
Well, I'll tell you something else like I said at my church. I don't read music. Musicians ask, how do you play those things if you don't read music? I can hear. I can hear good. My guitar player, I think you met him, I had a CD playing in my van, and he said, we need to play that. And I said yeah, okay.

And he said, well, when we going to rehearse?

And I said, why don't you take it and listen to it? I've already got it.

He said, What do you mean?

And I say, I just heard it.

When did you hear it?
I say, I heard it just then.

He said, What? You telling me?

I said well, if you want to get to taping it, come down.

And he said, I can't do that.

Incidentally, this guy named his little boy after me. And so that's what I say. The good Lord blessed you in so many different ways. I always had a problem reading music. Until this day I can't read music and I don't try. But I can play dang near anything I can hear. And the thing about it is with me is when I play what I hear, I play what I feel. And that's what people who talk about, about me playing music. Most the stuff that I play, you can take that to the bank. It's all coming from here.

In high school I was faking just like I do now. The teacher had me trying to play a bass tuba, and I was going by what I could hear. We were playing marches. And I would blow what I thought it should sound like. The music teacher came up one day and said, Joe.

And I said, yes sir.

And he said, you weren't playing that march quite right.

And I said well, maybe I wasn't, but I was playing what I thought I heard.

And he said, well, why don't you read the music?

And I said, because I can't read it. I tried it and I can't read it. And I tried reading music a thousand times. I've been up there, and I don't have, there's something about reading music to me, is I don't have enough time to really apply myself to read it because as soon as I get to trying to read the music, if I hear two or three notes of that thing and know what the tune is, I'll go ahead and play it by ear. And I don't know, just all my life it's been that way.

I go down, my pastor asks me sometimes to go down and play in the church, and I go play some of those hymns, and I can hear them when they sing and I take my horn and play them. And that's all, the good Lord just gave me that talent.

I can play tunes right now that I played in high school. Yeah. Like I'm saying, and here's the reason. These guys tell me about me teaching, and I say I'm not teaching. But they say, you teach all the time. You tell us how to do it and play this, that, and the other. We didn't get that in school. We tried to learn like that but we can't do it. That's why we're trying to learn with you. But the good Lord just gave me something. I can hear something, and it just pops into my head, and I've been playing the horn long enough, that I can just go in and play it, and it's something I never called.

Don, Don was my drummer for 25 years, and Don was always talking about, you sure played something great tonight, and this and that. And I said well if you heard it then I'm glad you heard it because you might not hear it again. You know, I play whatever I feel in a given time. Some little tune, like one on this CD, I play the same tune, you probably wouldn't hear me play it like it's on that CD. I play something different ever doggone time. And just because, like I said, I don't read the music. When people play music, there were some guys in the band down there that could read anything, but if you took that music out from in front of them you might as well take the horn away from them. They couldn't play without the music. Oh my God, I say, how happy I am I don't need it. Really.

Help from Ray Brown

You know what I can do that most of these other guys can't do? I can play in almost any key. Keys don't matter to me. Sometimes I tell them guys, we will be playing the tune in one key, and Joe will be starting out in another key. You know, so that's another thing I say, the good Lord just blessed me with a talent that most people don't have, and I thank God every day for the talent he gave me.

The reason I can do that, I don't know if you have heard of Ray Brown, he was one of the greatest bass players in this country, he dead now. But I had two cousins down in California and they cooked a lot of food and had a piano and everything, and musicians walked down there because they could go down there and rehearse and all that stuff. Well Ray Brown and Oscar Peterson and Ed Thigpen were down there, so I went down there and they told them about me playing the horn and they wanted me to come, let's play something. And I said, I can't play with you guys. And he said oh man, come on over and play some blues. So we played blues, and I said, well, I can
play blues in this key and that key, but I don't, you know.

And Ray Brown took me off to the side and he said, let me show you something. He had a piece of manuscript, and he said now, you start off right here on this note and you be playing it in B flat and move right on down and play it in this key and this key.

And I said, I don't read the music.

And he said, well, you know what that starting note is, that's it.

And I said, that won't work with me.

And he said, yes it will. So you try it. He said, then you'll find sometime that there's one tune that I play all the time, it's called C Jam Blues. You would think it would start on C but it starts on A.

There's a difference but I know, I can hear where that thing starts. I can get the starting note on just about any tune and go on and play it.

Duke Ellington and Jimmy Rainey

One of the greatest drummers we had, he couldn't read music, but he could play. There's a lot of people who couldn't read music, but they could play. They played by ear.

I had a drummer who Duke Ellington wanted to know how I ever got in touch with him. And I said, we were raised together, and his name was Joe Dehorney but Ma Rainey named him Jimmy Rainey. And I have pictures where he's on there. I'd say Jimmy was 5'7", 5'8". I think he weighed 140 pounds at the most, soaking wet. But he was hard as nails and that guy could keep a tempo like you could not believe. And we used to play fast tempos, and he would do it and chew that gum. That tempo's not going to drop and if you think it's going to drop, you crazy! He played carnivals for a lot of time, and they played all that fast stuff for carnivals, and he was a good tap dancer. Duke, we had a session one time on 25th Street and Duke Ellington was there, and we was playing one of them up tempos, and Duke was sitting up there waiting on the tempo to drop. Pretty soon he turned around and looked at me and said, where did you get that drummer from?

I say, well, I've been playing with him since we were kids.

And he said, I can't believe that guy, man! That tempo's still up there and he hasn't dropped it a bit.

And I said, nah, he won't drop it. I said, you sit here and listen to him.

And there were a lot of guys getting big money from drumming. But Jimmy Rainey was kind of like me. Jimmy couldn't read a note as big as this bottle, but he sure played drums and his timing was excellent, you know.

Who He Played With

Well, some of the best ones I can name is Charlie Parker, he was one of the greatest alto saxophones. And Dizzie Gillespie, one of the greatest trumpet players. Count Basie, he wasn't one of the greatest piano players, but he had one of the best swinging big bands. Of all those big bands going, if you heard Basie's band you know right away it was Basie. Herschel played with Basie, and Lester Young. I've got a reed in my horn case that Lester Young gave me. Plastic reed I can't use it, but he gave it to me, and a lot of guys, like I said, the guys that I really enjoyed playing with, we never played a job with them, we just jammed with them, and that was Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown, and Ed Thigpen.

That was the best trio that I think I've ever heard. And that Oscar Peterson, he was amazing! How big he was, great big hands and things, but on that piano, he was so fast, God Almighty he played good. And Ray Brown, he had beat, and then Ed Thigpen was another Jimmy Rainey. He was a heck of a drummer. They were pretty good. But I played with a lot of bands that I enjoyed playing with. A lot of musicians. There were some musicians that I played with that some other people probably never heard of. There was a little old guy, died out in Arizona, Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five, he played a kind of, I don't know what kind of style it was that he played, but it was really a swinging style of music. He played alto saxophone and sang a lot.
Breaking Down Segregation

I was right here, you people might not know this. But I’m one of the guys who broke down that stuff here in Utah, where everybody couldn’t go where I played. If they didn’t let everyone come in where I played, I wouldn’t play there. And I’ll attribute all that to Annabelle Weekly, who was one of my best friends, and she was in the car with me when I had the wreck down there, and she died and I didn’t. That’s why I say you never know what’s going to happen. And when I told her that I was playing in a place, and I had two friends who came out there, and this guy told me they had to get out, told me to tell them. And I said I’m not telling them anything. I said, if you want them to get out, you tell them.

So he told them get out, and I told the people in the audience, I have an announcement to make when we get through playing. So I guess everyone was going to stay and see what I had to say. And we got to, and I had two guys playing with me, a drummer and a bass player, and the bass player’s wife and children were there and the drummer had some people there too. And they were two white kids. And they said man, let’s quit playing. And I said no, we’re going to play the job out. We’re going to get through playing. If we play the job and he doesn’t want to pay us, I’ll get the police and make him pay us. But anyway, he paid us, but I told the people, my announcement is that we won’t be back here ever again. I won’t be back here again ever. We will be playing somewhere but we won’t be here.

So I went and told Annabelle. I still have the key to the Porters and Waiters Club that she gave me, and she said, you go down and open up downstairs anytime you want. You just let me know in the daytime so I can prepare food. She had a restaurant upstairs. I started out with one night, and I wound up playing every night in the week, because every night was like this, jam-packed. And I had never heard this term in my life before I went down there, one of those young white kids told the cops to come down there and break things up. They didn’t want all this mixing of the races and things down there, so they was going to break it up. And this one kid got up and say, I’m free, white, and 21, and you can’t tell me where to go and what to do. Here come another one, and another and another and another, the girls, and they was all up at the door in them cops’ face and they didn’t know what to do. They just stood and looked.

They went up and told Annabelle, and she said, what you want me to do? People come down here all the time and everything like this. So they saw they couldn’t break it up, and from there, that’s what started breaking down that color barrier right here in Ogden. It was in 1963.

So then, some of those guys I’d been playing for, the going rate was $10 a night. You played four hours for $10. But Annabelle told me Joe, you can have all the money on the door. You’ll have to get somebody down there, down the stairs to take tickets and someone up the stairs to sell tickets. And I said, I’ll have guys on the bar down there. She had a license for liquor and selling food upstairs and drinks downstairs, so she gave me all the money on the door. And God, I was making more money on the door. At fifty cents a head, that place would hold about 250 people. And then I raised the price up to seventy-five cents and then to a dollar and it was still that way every time I opened up. And when others wanted me to play at their place, I’d say, are you going to pay me the kind of money I make down here? Are you going to let everybody come in your place?

And they said, we’ll let everybody come in our place, but paying you that kind of money . . .

And I said, why would I want to play for you when I can stay down here and make this kind of money?

They finally found out if they was going to get Joe McQueen they was going to pay some money to get him. And that still goes. I do not play for nothing.

On Serving People

Try to see if you can figure out somebody to help anytime you can. If you can help someone, help them. You might see someone you don’t think, don’t look down on people because they don’t have what you have. They might not be as clean as you are, they might not be, but they’re still human beings. And it wouldn’t hurt you to help them if you see they’re needing some help. And I don’t care who it is with me, I try to help them in a minute, still, to this day. And my wife used to tell me on the highway, you’re going to get enough of those people down the highway, you don’t know if they might . . . and I said, well, you think like you want, because I’m going to stop. And uh, I have stopped on the highway a lot of times and helped people because I know a lot about cars.

I worked on cars until I was eighty years old. I had my own garage. When I got eighty I could get down but it was hard getting up. So
that’s when I put it down. But I’m going to tell you this story about helping someone. I was on my way down, my aunt was ill, and I was going down to see about her, and I stayed overnight in Lyman, Colorado. When I got up in the morning it was so cold you couldn’t believe how cold it was, and they said it was around ten below, and when I left out of Lyman about fifty miles over and was still in Kansas, there was a guy on the highway and I could just see him shaking. He had the hood up on the car. It was a ’47 Cadillac. I remember exactly what kind of car it was. And he had the hood up but he didn’t know what the heck was wrong. And so I was in my truck at that time and I pulled up and backed my truck up and said hey, go and get in my truck so you can get warm. I left the motor running. And he had his wife and two kids, and they was all covered up with blankets.

And as soon as I looked under the hood I saw what was wrong. On those automobiles, they have vacuum lines that do a lot of things under the hood of the car. And on those ’47 Cadillacs it was, we called them tomato cans but they were vacuum cans, and it was about eight inches long and about four inches around. On each end there was a lever on it that plugged the lines. One of those levers had come off and the door underneath the dash that let the heat in wasn’t opening because that vacuum wasn’t in, and as soon as he went and got in my truck and got his wife in there, I put that hose on there and got in the car right away. The heat came. And I went to the back of my truck because I always carried tools and tape and I taped those things up and I sat in his car a little while because in just that short period of time I was out there, it was terrible.

And that guy was a friend of mine until he passed. He lived in Evanston, Wyoming, and he was on his way to Oklahoma City and I was on my way to Oklahoma, and so he followed me all the way to Oklahoma City and he told me when I got ready to come back, to call him and he’d meet me out there on the highway. And I said I don’t know exactly when I’m going back. And he said, well, I’m going to stay down here until you call me. He gave me a number to call and said, when you get ready to come back I’ll meet you out there. I’m going to follow you all the way. And that guy used to have a big garden up in Evanston, and he’d come all the way down from Evanston and bring me all kinds of vegetables and things.

See, that’s, it never bothers you to help people. If you see somebody you can help, help them, and the good Lord will tell you, love thy neighbor as thyself, you know. And that’s a statement that kind of throws a lot of people because you say, well, people don’t think about it, just in regular terms they think I’m not going to buy my neighbor a car. I’m not going to buy my neighbor a new suit. That don’t mean for you to do that. It mean you do everything else you can do to help them. They might need you to come and help them. Maybe they might need to go to the doctor and they don’t have a car and you have. They might need to go to the grocery store or something. Anything you can do to try and help somebody, that’s what the good Lord meant when he said to honor thy father and mother. And love thy neighbor as thyself, and all those things help you. They really do. I’ll say that all the time because I know I’ve lived by that code all the time and I’ve never had something that I needed someone to help me that somebody didn’t come and help me.

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Claudia’s Blues: Blues, Jazz, and the Affirmation of Self in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye

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Toni Morrison’s much acclaimed debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), examines the devastating effects of white supremacist values and aesthetic ideals on an African American community living in Lorain, Ohio in 1941. Perhaps more importantly, the novel also explores alternative aesthetic modes that form the basis for new ways of imagining racial identity in the post-Civil Rights era. Specifically, while Morrison’s novel reflects a blues impulse in its tragic-comic affirmation of Claudia MacTeer’s childhood experiences, it utilizes jazz aesthetics, specifically the techniques of “riffing” and “quoting,” as the means to extend a pointed cultural critique of the ideology of whiteness.

By “blues impulse,” I am referring to the creative reconceptualization and ironic re-presentation of pain (the tragedy of loss, of injustice, of mere bad luck) that allows such pain to take on not only a new meaning, but also a new ontological value. As the novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison has observed, “the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (129). The blues impulse, in other words, seeks to find transcendence not in the detachment and abstraction of an “objective” explanation of tragedy, but in the rich density of subjective understanding that results from one’s protracted engagement with and creative reconceptualization of pain. Consequently, it is not merely the individual’s own painful experience that is altered through the blues impulse; the individual’s interpretive frame is also transformed. As Houston A. Baker puts it, the blues impulse offers new “interpretations of the experiencing of experience” (7).

Morrison explicitly highlights this interpretive potential of the blues during an early scene in which the narrator fondly recalls listening to her mother sing while cleaning house. Claudia explains that the “greens and blues in [her] mother’s voice took all the grief out of the words and left [her] with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet” (26). Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, the tragic-comic perspective of the blues impulse allows the narrator to cultivate both a space of intimacy in the recollecting of her own painful experiences in childhood and a broader affirmative perspective on racial identity that challenges dominant social norms and values. In another scene, for example, the adult narrator looks back on an episode of childhood illness, locating in the experience a complex array of emotions, contradictory perspectives and interpretations. Notably, the scene initially emphasizes the child’s perspective: Claudia’s discomfort in a drafty room (“Once I have generated a silhouette of warmth, I dare not move, for there is a cold place one-half inch in any direction” [11]); her absorbed fascination with the strangeness of her own bodily excretions (“the puke swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet—green, gray, with flecks of orange” [11]); and her emotional and intellectual confusion as she attempts to understand the source of her mother’s anger (“My mother’s voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia. . . . My mother’s anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness” [11]). For the child, Claudia, the experience is painful largely because of her lack of control and her limited understanding. She does not, cannot, as a child, comprehend the fear in her mother’s tone or the frustration behind her mother’s words. For Claudia’s family, like most families in her community, life amounts to an existential struggle, a “peripheral existence” (17). As the narrator explains, “Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about . . . on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses, and hang on, or creep singly up into the major folds of the garment” (17). It is only retrospectively that the adult Claudia can “squeeze” from her childhood experience a tragic-comic lyricism:

But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark
as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. . . . And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die. (12)

In this exquisite passage, we witness the dilation of interpretative possibilities. Pain is not divorced from love, but, as “fructifying,” is its material condition of possibility. Morrison does not attempt to resolve or relieve the child’s earlier experience of anguish through sentimentalism; on the contrary, the extended use of depersonalizing synecdoche in the passage is meant to distill the experience of love as a physical act. In Claudia’s blues, the initial ambiguity of linguistic expression gives way to the ontological density of physical tenderness: the explicitly auditory and tactile images “feet” and “hands” are experienced by Claudia as presences, the self-evident truth of “somebody . . . who does not want me to die” (12).

The emotional complexity of the scene of Claudia’s childhood illness effectively challenges the anemic white ideal of family represented by the Dick and Jane reading primer that opens the novel. Moreover, I would argue that this scene, like many others in the novel, codifies the blues impulse as a strategy for the ontological affirmation of blackness, more generally. If, as Ellison argues, the blues impulse is principally characterized by the commitment to working through painful experiences in an effort to find transcendence in tragic-comic lyricism, then it also implies a concomitant belief that psychic and somatic sources of pain may be powerful indices of one’s being. Morrison seems to suggest this idea when she describes the old women who come to visit Cholly’s Aunt Jimmie, women who give voice to a “threnody of nostalgia about pain” (157).

They licked their lips and clucked their tongues in fond remembrance of pains they had endured—childbirth, rheumatism, croup, sprains, backaches, piles. All of the bruises they had collected from moving about the earth—harvesting, cleaning, hoisting, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking—always with young ones under foot. (138)

For these women, the various pains they have endured persist in memory as vital markers of their presence in the world and irreducible evidence of their “Becoming” (138). Painful experiences thereby form the phenomenological fabric onto which the patterns of memory, history, and identity are woven. By emphasizing the blues impulse as an affirmation of the ontological value of pain—and the complexity of human experience more generally—Morrison aims to critique oppressive ideologies that limit the scope of human experience and expression in the name of spiritual transcendence or aesthetic beauty.

Throughout The Bluest Eye, the ideology of whiteness is associated with a disavowal of complex emotional experience, and specifically, the attempt to discipline the body and the mind into conformity with a set of unrealistic, arbitrary, and oppressive standards. The character Geraldine, for example, represents a pathological adherence to the white (supremacist) ideal. Geraldine and women like her are said to live their lives in a state of somatophobic hyper-vigilance against what they perceive to be signs of threatening bodily excess, or what the narrator calls “Funk” (83): “Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies” (83). A generic description of unruly and abject corporeality that “erupts,” “clings,” “drips,” and “crusts” is applied, finally, to its concrete manifestation in the black female body (“they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair” [83]). When identified in the bodies of women like Geraldine, such generic instances of funkiness—the dreadful funkiness of passion . . . of nature . . . [and] of the wide range of human emotions” (83)—become legible as the peculiars markers of race. The disturbing implication for Geraldine is the impoverishment of her inter-personal relationships (notably with her husband and son) and the cultivation of racial self-loathing. Geraldine’s fear of bodily excess and her concomitant desire for corporeal containment have both resulted from and have been translated into unstable codes for deciphering and maintaining racial identity in relative proximity to whiteness. In Geraldine’s anxious formulation, “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (87).

Earlier in the novel, we are presented with the initial stages of this “conversion” into the ideology of whiteness as the discipline of hyper-cleanliness. Specifically, Claudia recalls being forced, as a child, to bathe in a zinc tub in preparation for wearing a new dress: “no time to enjoy one’s nakedness, only time to make curtains of soapy water careen down between the legs. Then the scratchy towels and the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt. The irritable, unimaginative cleanliness. Gone the ink marks from legs and face, all my creations and accumulations of the day gone, and replaced by goose pimples” (22). The symbolic implications of the scene are unmistakably linked to the loss of self-expression, the devaluing of corporeality (in all of its forms), and the consequent narrowing of the interpretive potential for the experiencing of experience” (Baker 7), both for oneself and within one’s community. Throughout The Bluest Eye, the blues impulse may be viewed, broadly, as essential to what Craig Hansen Werner calls the “individual expression and the affirmative, and self-affirming, response to the community” (xxi). Furthermore, according to Werner, we may view the novel’s interrelated “jazz impulse” as an elaboration of the blues impulse, in that it “provides ways of exploring implications, of realizing the relational possibilities of the (blues) self, and of expanding the consciousness of self and community through a process of continual improvisation” (xxii). If The Bluest Eye imagines new, affirmative terms for conceptualizing blackness, terms which emphasize the dignity of embodied existence, emotional courage and complexity, and the lyrical expression of pain, it locates these terms of self-affirmation within a broader, improvisatory cultural critique.
In the opening of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison quotes the 1940s Dick and Jane reading primer and then "signifies" on the text by repeating the same passage two more times, first without punctuation or conventional capitalization, and then without any spacing between words. The original lines, "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty" is finally rendered, almost illegibly, as "Hereisthehouseisgreenandwhiteisaredoorisverypretty" (Morrison 4-5). Morrison’s revision of the original work both shatters the textual surface and puts into question the ideological perspective that it represents. Though the words of each version remain identical, the collapse of the grammatical structures induce parodic significations based upon the tension between form and content, signer and signified. The staccato, declarative statements that initially provide a window into white suburban security and promote the ideal of the nuclear family, dissolve, like the breathless notes of a careening saxophone solo, into the frantic articulations of a maddening and unrealizable desire. Throughout the novel, Morrison employs similar techniques to critique some of the more insidious elements in white supremacist ideology, particularly those that promote whiteness as the ideal of beauty.

Morrison explores the pathological cultural fixation on whiteness and its detrimental effects on African American girls, in particular, by introducing the child star Shirley Temple as a central figure or riff whose symbolic implications are examined through multiple repetitions and inversions. The riff is deployed soon after the introduction of Pecola Breedlove, a girl whose family had been put “outdoors” by her father, Cholly. Looking back, the adult Claudia explains that while Pecola and her sister, Frieda, “gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (19) on a cup of milk and “had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was” (19), she “hated Shirley” (19). A central riff “quoted” from popular culture, the image of Shirley Temple on a cup of milk represents both a consumable image of white desirability (symbolism later reiterated in the image of Mary Jane candies [50]) and a kind of doppelgänger that interferes with the narcissistic development of Claudia’s ego. Crucially, Claudia’s jealousy stems not from the fact that Shirley is “cu-ute,” but because the culture’s adoration for Shirley seems to coincide with or necessitate her own displacement and invisibility. The narrator explains: "[I] hated Shirley . . . [b]ecause she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing and chuckling with me" (19). For the young Claudia, who views racial features as simply the markers of familial belonging, Shirley’s dance with Bojangles represents a vexing disturbance in expectations, namely the exclusion of herself from her own mirror image.

As the foundational riff which concretizes the violent psycho-social process at the heart of white supremacist ideology, then, “Shirley Temple” encompasses both (particular) image and (universal) concept. It is not simply that Claudia hates this particular child actress; rather, the narrator explains that the initial aggressive response to the experience of displacement leads to the cultivation of a “hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world” (19). By elaborating on this riff, Morrison attempts to make visible the psychic “conversion” (23) process whereby this outward aggression is redirected and ultimately introjected within the ideological fantasy of white supremacy. If, from a psychological perspective, Shirley Temple may be viewed as Claudia’s threatening image-double, the plastic “blue-eyed Baby Doll” (20) doubles Shirley Temple as a fetishes icon of whiteness, embodying what the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek has referred to as the “sublime object” (18) of ideological fantasy. Claudia’s inability to find meaning in the doll beyond its inert surface characteristics—the “hard unyielding limbs,” “bone-cold head,” and “starched gauze or lace” (20) of its dress (a dress reminiscent of the one she, herself, is sometimes forced to wear)—reflects the fact that she has not yet been successfully interpellated into the network of ideological codes that privilege “whiteness” as a transcendental signifier. Although Claudia intellectually understands that “all the world had agreed” (21) on the desirability of the doll, she does not yet identify with and consequently cannot comprehend that desire. Her destruction of the dolls may be viewed, therefore, as an unsuccessful attempt to uncover the elusive “sublime object” that she believes gives the doll a hidden, intrinsic value. Inside the doll, however, Claudia discovers only more extrinsic features—the “mere metal roundness” (21) of the disk that produces the doll’s sound, “like the bleat of a dying lamb” (21).
Although the Shirley Temple/blue-eyed Baby Doll riff undergoes many subsequent parodic repetitions and inversions throughout the text, it is in the image of Pecola’s baby, the product of an incestuous rape by her father, that its form is finally shattered. Claudia imagines the baby’s “living, breathing silk of black skin” (190) in contrast with the “synthetic yellow bangs” and “marble-blue eyes” (190) of the plastic doll, thereby painfully evoking resemblance through dissemblance. More importantly, Claudia’s desire for the baby to live—despite the horrific circumstances of its conception—reflects what Werner describes as the “expanding the consciousness of self and community” promoted by the jazz impulse (xxii). Reflecting on her reaction to the tragedy, the adult Claudia recalls: “I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (190); however, she also recognizes her own responsibility in Pecola’s tragedy, admitting “We honed our egos on her” (205). Ultimately, Morrison suggests that the significance of the aesthetic impulses of blues and jazz exceeds the affirmation of the individual’s own experience of pain in the face of oppression. The forms of selfhood that these impulses make possible offer, in addition, a powerful source of ethical awareness and concomitant sense of accountability within the community itself.

Works Cited


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A Dog Named Blue: Song as Patrilineal Legacy in August Wilson’s Fences

Despite his acknowledged personal failings, Troy Maxson, the protagonist of Fences (1987)—August Wilson’s celebrated drama of the mid-twentieth century black American experience—emerges as a heroic figure: one who does the best he can under untenable circumstances. Having been driven from home at fourteen after sustaining a brutal beating from his abusive father, Troy recovers his filial connection to the man who knocked him senseless, resolving his ambivalence towards him through the perpetuation of his song. The song, which celebrates the virtues of the hound dog Blue, is classic masculinist sentiment in its memorialization of the unconditional devotion and obedience of the creature so commonly styled “man’s best friend.” When Cory and Raynell, two of Troy’s three children, sing the song together after Troy’s death, they are not only connecting to one another through a shared childhood memory of their own father, they are also remembering and reifying his value of the characteristics, exhibited through the idealized attributes of Blue, that bolster Troy’s sense of himself as a man.

Blue’s song sentimentalizes the symbiotic dynamic between a country-dwelling man and his faithful dog, a dynamic that comes to typify the sort of hierarchical partnership men would like to replicate in their other relationships. Troy’s wife Rose censures his hypermasculine prerogative of treating her like a dog, a pattern of conduct he mockingly invalidates by pretending to expect her to respond as a dog ideally would when he calls her, but her playful banter functions as a tacit acceptance of the paternal bequest of characteristics and behavioral tendencies that eventually undermine the sanctity of their marriage. The song of Blue, then, functions as symbolic of the Maxson legacy and of the preservation of core masculine values, refined through the generations as the social climate enables a fuller range of outlets for black male subjectivity. Blue’s song thus entails a theatrical response to a two-fold anxiety: it serves as a means of reinscribing and reinforcing tradition, and simultaneously represents modes of honoring that tradition while resisting its detrimental implications.

The song, a paean upon the beloved Blue, praises the dog’s reliability as a hunting partner: Blue skillfully chases a possum up into a tree, desiring nothing more than approval in return for the faithful performance of his duty. The lyrics of the song then envision Blue gleefully trapping more possums in trees within the biblical settings of the Promised Land and on Noah’s Ark. This idealized image of
canine delight in being of service to his master contrasts sharply with Troy's insinuation that Rose resists such devoted attentiveness in the fourth scene of Act One:

TROY: (Calling.) Hey Rose! (To BONO.) I told everybody. Hey, Rose! I went down there to cash my check.

ROSE: (Entering from the house.) Hush all that hollering, man! I know you out here. What they say down there at the Commissioner’s office?

TROY: You supposed to come when I call you, woman. Bono'll tell you that.

(To BONO.)

Don't Lucille come when you call her?

ROSE: Man, hush your mouth. I ain’t no dog . . . talk about "come when you call me."

TROY: (Puts his arm around ROSE.) You hear this, Bono? I had me an old dog used to get uppity like that. You say, “C'mere, Blue!” . . . and he just lay there and look at you. End up getting a stick and chasing him away trying to make him come.

ROSE: I ain't studying you and your dog. I remember you used to sing that old song. (1.4)

This customary triangulated exchange among Rose, Troy, and Troy’s best friend/co-worker Bono exhibits a number of issues meriting exploration. Foremost, Troy opens this excerpt by defensively repudiating Bono’s preceding observation that Troy had singled out Alberta, later revealed to be the mother of his illegitimate child, to boast of his professional triumph in securing a promotion from garbage collector to truck driver. Troy claims that he "told everybody," not just Alberta, and that his primary reason for going to the neighborhood watering hole she frequents was simply to cash his weekly paycheck. Regardless of whether or not Troy is being truthful, the fact remains that he does not choose his wife as the first person with whom to share his successful challenge of the segregationist hiring policy. Instead, his first impulse is to use the news to impress his girlfriend. Next, Troy attempts to enlist the support of his best friend to establish the appropriate ground rules for interplay between husband and wife. Electing to mediate his feigned dissatisfaction with Rose’s objection to being summoned like a house pet through Bono, instead of addressing his wife directly, removes the dispute from the realm of marital discord to the arena of competitive male bravado. Troy is not openly taking issue with his wife’s behavior, so much as displaying to Bono the control he exerts, as he believes every man should, over his "woman." Finally, Troy compares Rose’s spirited resistance to the "uppity" attitude of a recalcitrant dog.

When Troy suggests that his fruitless efforts to make Blue comply with his will ultimately result in his becoming enraged and “chasing him away,” it makes for a provocative analogue to his conduct towards Rose: Troy's frustration with his compromised control as breadwinner and responsible patriarch results in his subconscious anger and retaliation against the people who demonstrate unconditional devotion to him. Troy's perception of the assault on his masculine authority makes him lash out all-inclusively—he distances himself from Bono in becoming a driver isolated from the camaraderie of the men at the back of the truck; he ridicules his eldest son Lyons for being childishly unable to establish a steady means of self-support; he betrays his younger brother Gabe—a combat veteran wounded in World War II—by authorizing his being committed to a mental institution; he undercuts his son Cory's ambition by refusing to permit the youth to be considered for an athletic scholarship to college and then kicking him out of the house; he indelibly wounds Rose by first having a clandestine extramarital affair and then callously continuing it for months after he can no longer avoid informing her of Alberta's pregnancy.
Rose and Troy, image courtesy of the Marin Theatre Company

Rose takes issue with the way in which Troy satisfies his own needs at her expense—the accusation she hurls at her husband is "You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving!" (2.1). Rose's words are doubly painful to Troy because of the secondary significance of her deceptively straightforward claim: not only is she saying that Troy is emotionally insensitive to her needs as a person apart from her function as his wife, but she is telling him that he is a self-serving and insensitive sexual partner, and this cuts to the heart of how Troy defines his masculinity. Troy, however, chooses to understand her allegation only in material terms, and he responds in similar fashion to when he takes Cory to task for imagining that he provides for his son primarily because he "likes" the boy (1.3). Troy cannot abide any insinuation that he shirks his financial obligation to ensure that his family has a comfortable home and enough to eat, so he insists that Rose retract: "You say I take and don't give! [. . .] I done give you everything I got. Don't you tell that lie on me" (2.1). Willfully or not, Troy misunderstands Rose completely; she never says that he does not give, but only that he also takes, and does so without fully appreciating the harm he does to those from whom he takes—specifically, she herself. Troy's failure to listen to his wife in this instance is emblematic of the divide between them. Rose's clear articulation of her recognition that she is being taken for granted serves as the basis of her emotional withdrawal from their marriage.

The conflict that alienates the Maxsons from one another is rooted precisely in their failure to recognize and come to terms in a mutually affirmative manner with the painful ghosts of their pasts. Wilson's philosophical epigraph to the play provides a guide to the life lesson encoded within:

When the sins of our fathers visit us
We do not have to play host.
We can banish them with forgiveness
As God, in His Largeness and Laws.

Neither Troy nor Rose recognizes the "sins of [their] fathers" for what they are; as a result, they fall victim to the conviction that they can prevent the "visit" from occurring in the first place. Rose's preoccupation with the fence for which the play is named is symptomatic of her desire to construct a barrier the "sins" cannot permeate; the healing that would result from "banish[ing] them with forgiveness" is never undertaken. Instead, Troy and Rose use their relationship as a means of escape from the aspects of their ancestral legacy they have been indoctrinated to believe are constitutively flawed.

Wilson perceived the 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning Fences as a departure from his own artistic vision of "ensemble murals" in which no single character emerges as the principal (Watlington 89). According to Wilson himself, "Fences was the odd man out, in the sense that it was not the kind of play I wanted to write. But all of these people who were used to theater kept trying to tell me my work should be something different" (qtd. in Watlington 88). "Something different" entailed what Dennis Watlington describes as "a more commercial, conventional play, with one main character and others supporting him" (88). In Wilson's conformity to what he regarded as a prescribed
Rose perceives such irregularities of parentage as undesirable, something from which she would like to protect her own children, yet she elects to become a second wife to a man who already has a son in his late teens when she marries him—a decision that effectively contradicts her ostensible objective. This disconnect between what Rose claims to want in her life and the choices she makes in actual practice illustrate both Rose's subconscious attraction to the familiar and the play's endorsement of her receptiveness to what she had been conditioned to regard as improper. Much of the action of the play can be understood as the aftermath of the violence performed on the black family by the effort to adhere to cultural values imposed by white hegemony. Even Troy's infidelity, in his mind, results from the restiveness born of prolonged conformity to the inflexible expectations placed upon the male head of household. *Fences* depicts the Maxson family fracturing under the pressure of the attempt to manifest the standardized outcomes of middle America despite the lack of access to comparable resources.

The familial fracture is healed only after the death of Troy, who, as Kim Marra observes, remains stolidly unrepentant of his affair and its progeny. Troy's defiant insistence that "A man's got to do what's right for him. I ain't sorry for nothing I done. It felt right in my heart" (86) ... reflects his utter self-absorption in his desperate and futile quest for manhood and inability to take the hand that Rose tried to extend to him across the now gaping gender divide" (Marra 149). Rose's strength and insight emerge at the resolution of the play because she alone, "who has suffered so much because of her husband's cruelty, infidelity and thoughtlessness, understands the true nature of the relationship between father and son. Like her creator [Wilson], Rose recognizes the necessity of acknowledging the pain of the past in order to embrace the future" (Gordon 24). The restoration of the Maxson family happens through Rose's justification of Troy to their son Cory, who has just returned home on the morning of Troy's funeral after a protracted seven-year absence, and through the resurrection of Troy's song, his own father's legacy to him, when Cory and Raynell—who shared a home for no more than a couple of months in Raynell's infancy—forge a bond by singing it together before they leave for their father's service. Rose's agency in mending fences, so to speak, between her son and his dead father reinforces her significance in holding their family together. She counsels Cory to release the residual resentment poisoning his life: "Whatever was between you and your daddy ... the time has come to put it aside. Just take it and set it over there on the shelf and forget about it. Disrespecting your daddy ain't gonna make you a man, Cory. You gotta find a way to come to that on your own" (2.5). Rose challenges the masculine protocol, one to which Troy had wholeheartedly subscribed, that demands triumph over an adversary in order to demonstrate masculine self-worth. Troy's violent altercation with his son that precipitates Cory's expulsion from the family home effectively reenacts his own adolescent physical struggle with his father that precipitated his 200-mile trek to Mobile, Alabama, upon his recognition that "the time had come for me to leave my daddy's house" (1.4). In a performative display of his acknowledgment to his elder son Lyons that despite his father's deeply problematic interpersonal skills, "he felt a responsibility toward us," Troy recuperates his connection to his father through the perpetuation of his song (1.4).

Both Troy and Rose admit to conceiving of a conventional marriage as a site of refuge from the more uncertain and potentially annihilating outcomes that might have befallen them otherwise. Rose encounters Troy when she is thirty, relatively late in her life by the standards of the era she inhabits, and only after she "had done seen [her] share of men" (2.5); she willfully overlooks his shortcomings in order to secure her dream of marital and maternal fulfillment. Troy reveals, however, that his life's dream does not necessarily accord with Rose's idealized vision of domestic security through home and family. Reverting to the familiar device of his baseball idiom, Troy declares in his defense of his sustained affair with Alberta that he thinks of the nearly two decades he has spent with his wife as commensurate with developmental stagnation—he tells Rose that his relationship with her was secured when he "bunted" to achieve a respectable life without testing the limits of his capability, and that before becoming involved with Alberta, he had "stood on first base for eighteen years" (2.1). The disintegration of their nuclear family is complete when Rose and Troy become estranged in the house they continue to share after the revelation of his infidelity, and when Troy replicates the life-altering event of being physically assaulted by his own enraged father by forcibly driving his seventeen-year-old son Cory out of the house's front yard and telling him that when he comes back to collect his belongings, "They'll be on the other side of that fence" (2.4). Troy violates Rose's desire to construct a safe and welcoming space within which her loved ones can dwell, accepted unconditionally, when he demarcates the boundary of his own domain by exiling their son outside of the constructed barrier.
Their different appreciations of the significance of the fence represent a fundamental conceptual division between Rose and Troy: while Rose yearns for a protective symbol of mainstream domestic stability—the quintessential white picket fence of the American suburban ideal—Troy strives to create an aggressively enduring testament to his masculine power to conquer and leave an indelible mark on the world in which he lives—demonstrated by his insistence on using weather-resistant "outside wood" rather than the soft pine Bono recommends (2.1). As Missy Dehn Kubitschek has noted in her discussion of the oppositional gender roles dividing the couple, the disconnect underlying the emblematic conflict between Troy and Rose is "derived from their unconscious acceptance of an implicitly Eurocentric view of separate male and female spheres" (184). Troy's appropriation of the male domains of work, competitive sport, and the public space of the local watering hole conditions him to believe that his movement within those spaces is exempt from Rose's scrutiny and influence.

The psychological distance from home and family Troy develops as a result creates a situation in which, as Michael Awkward observes in his discussion of Troy's repudiation of Cory's complaint that his father never seemed to "like" him (1.3), "Troy's economics of duty . . . leaves him poorly equipped to deal with the emotional demands of intimate personal relations. '[D]oing right,' in such relations, is not merely providing clean sheets and nourishing foods, but also demonstrating an intense concern about the psychic welfare of those for whom one has assumed responsibility" (220). Such intensity of concern is not within Troy's capacity, as he acknowledges when he admits that the defining moment of his life was when he "got to the place where [he] could feel [his father] kicking in [his] blood and knew that the only thing that separated [them] was the matter of a few years" (1.4). Such a recognition of affinity means that Troy is not "banishing" the sins of his father, in Wilson's parlance, but absolutely "playing host." On the other hand, what Rose advises Cory to do in the final scene of the play demonstrates the potential of banishing those sins with forgiveness. After affirming that Cory's character replicates that of his father, that Cory is "Troy Maxson all over again," she insists that whatever his faults may have been, Troy meant to bequeath to Cory the "best of what [was] in [him]" (2.5). When Cory sings Blue's song and it develops into a duet with his half-sister—the fruit of Troy's infidelity—he demonstrates his coming to terms with that painful betrayal, forgiving Troy, and celebrating the memory of what was best in him. By purging the anger against his father rather than allowing it to serve as an excuse to concede to a perceived irresistible fate, as Troy did, Cory models a progressive version of masculinity, making productive use of his patrilineal legacy.
Dr. Licia Morrow Hendriks is an associate professor of English at The Citadel. Originally from San Jose, California, she attended Duke University, where she earned her undergraduate degree in English with a minor in Public Policy Studies. A summer literature course at Oxford University inspired her to pursue a graduate degree in English. She entered the University of Michigan's doctoral program in English Language and Literature, and was awarded her Ph.D. in 1999. Her first book, entitled Black Family (Dys)Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Fannie Hurst (Peter Lang, 2005), examines representations of maternity and domesticity in novels written during the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to freshman- and sophomore-level service courses in composition and literature, she teaches upper-division and graduate courses in African American Literature, survey courses in World Literature, and special topics seminars for the college's Honors program. She is currently working on a manuscript project subtitled “The Anglo-American Fetishization of Black Female Domesticity.” Her scholarly interests encompass the race, class, and gender issues manifested in literary representations of people of color.
It is a privilege to write the first post for the Blues and Jazz Dance Book Club website!

In 2014, I realized that I had been listening to blues music and doing blues dance for 10 years with a regrettably limited understanding of the culture that gave life to this art form—the African American experience in the United States. One of the best ways to learn about the history and culture of a people, even for someone that grew up in my same country, is to read the literature. I reached out to friends and colleagues with more education, and I was delighted to see how easily they recommended an extensive list of reading material for me.

Interestingly, I found that reading alone was less satisfying. Perhaps this is because this is a dance and music that I regularly share with my friends, community, and even dancers around the world. It led naturally to a desire to share my discoveries and inspirations with other blues and jazz enthusiasts.

A unique and exciting aspect of the blues community is that it is not limited to one city or geographic region. Dancers and blues and jazz music enthusiasts exist across the US and around the world. It is lucky that we are able to use the Internet as a platform to reach all of our worldwide community to share in our learning.

Another stroke of luck was meeting Chelsea June Adams, who is everything I could ask for in a book club leader. Chelsea is an English academic who specializes in 20th century American literature, and an African Americanist with a focus on the blues and blues idiom dance in literature. She has published on literature and social justice topics, taught literature, and taught blues dance. As you can imagine, she is far more qualified than I am to lead the discussion and engage our readers and community in the intriguing nuances and themes that flow through black literature and through blues music and culture.

I hope together we can read, learn, discuss, experience, and be inspired by a deep dive in to this rich, diverse, and fascinating culture that lives right here at home.

Happy reading, happy listening, happy dancing.

Best,

Sara Cherny
Sara began blues dancing in 2001 in St. Louis, and has been on the leading edge of the blues dance community since then. She first became involved in cat herding ... ahem, event organization in 2003 with STLBX and Cheap Thrills All Blues Weekend, and her latest achievement is the formation of Big City Blues Studio, providing blues classes and events in the city of Chicago. Sara is passionate about helping the traditional forms of blues dance persist across generations, and is proud that the annual blues dance festival bluesSHOUT! has earned its place as the world’s premier blues dance event.
Welcome to the Blues and Jazz Dance Book Club! Our goal is to help people to engage with the history and culture of blues and jazz music and dance. Please subscribe to our website to be the first to see updates, new feature articles, our latest discussion questions, and more. And if you like what we do, please consider donating to the cause by purchasing swag or via our donation page! About. New to blues and jazz research and looking for tips to get started? Check out what our Book Club Administrator has to say about how to dive in. Read more Blues and Jazz Research for Beginners. Recent Feature Posts. Blues and Jazz Research for Beginners. A Landscape of Slow Drag. Feature Article Announcement. Book Club Navigation. Home. About. $$Dance Clubs, Dance Studios, Jazz & Blues. (626) 590-6539. 200 Grand Ave. "A wonderful venue for learning and practicing swing dancing. I just finished a four-week beginning..." read more. 20. Biscuits & Blues. 340 reviews. $$Jazz & Blues, Dance Clubs. (415) 673-8067. 1601 Fillmore St. Lower Pacific Heights. " been around for over 80 years and has borne witness to a slew of excellent jazz and blues. I've..." read more. 30. Mad Noise. Electronic / Dance. Punk / Ska. Indie. Jazz / Blues. RnB / Soul. Country /