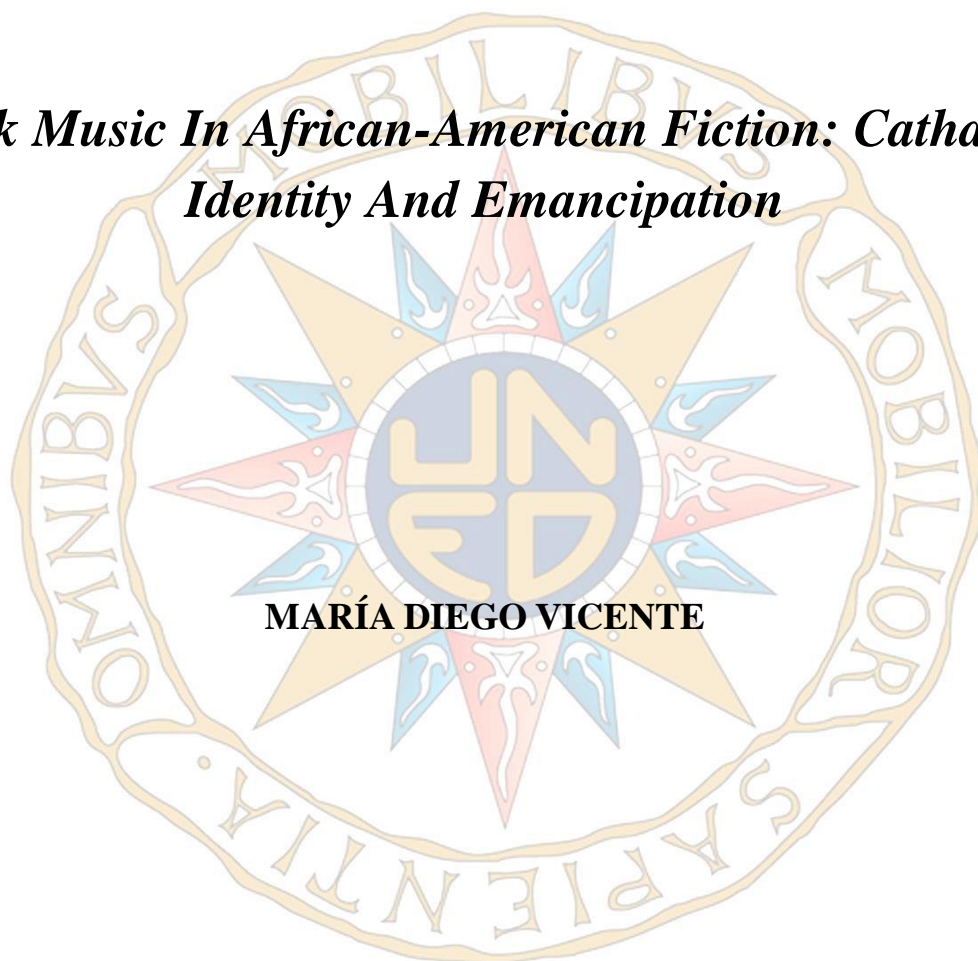




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**MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS Y CULTURALES
INGLESES Y SU PROYECCIÓN SOCIAL**

***Black Music In African-American Fiction: Catharsis,
Identity And Emancipation***



TUTORA ACADÉMICA: Dra. Adriana Noemi Kiczkowski Yankelevich

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To my family, for always listening to my blues. Thank you for believing in the power of my own beat and joining my rhythm even when you do not understand it. This dissertation, alongside the Master's degree itself, has meant a lot to me and has allowed me to recover a voice I always wanted to embrace. As Langston Hughes said, "let life be like music".

Abstract

Black Music in African-American Fiction: Catharsis, Identity and Emancipation.

This study seeks to explore the ways in which black music has influenced African American fiction and how its presence is a further subject matter of their narratives which acts as a cathartic, identity-making and emancipatory identity-making motif. During and after the Harlem Renaissance, the black community of the United States began to freely and shamelessly articulate their thoughts and feelings. This cultural revival, where music was one of the biggest forms of self-expression, shaped the unbound racial and cultural identity of 'The New Negro', both individually and collectively. African American authors James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison purposely set their stories in this urban context where music operates as a healing, defining and freeing tool. In the first chapter, Baldwin's use of music in his short story *Sonny's Blues* is studied as a means of survival, connection and agency, capable of reconciling familiar ties and healing addiction as well as owning and representing the voice of the whole black community. Secondly, Reed's afro-futurist representation of jazz in *Mumbo Jumbo* as an uncontrollable and infectious virus, the 'Jes Grew', embodies a seductive path towards self-definition, ecstasy and freedom with the aim to reclaim African American history. Finally, Toni Morrison's musical allusions in *Jazz* are shown to represent, in an implicit but omnipresent way, a unifying and redemptive motif for Harlem and its people, highlighting thus once more the meaningful and ubiquitous presence of music in their life and art. In order to understand the impact of this historical and artistic landmark, and therefore the influence of music in literature, a combination of the compelling ideas of philosophers W.E.B Du Bois and Alain Locke, writer Amiri Baraka's seminal essays and specific journals on African-American literature and culture were thoroughly employed. As this work argues, black music is a recurrent and symbolic motif used in African American fiction with restorative, liberating and signifying purposes so as to find relief from past wounds, embrace a free *blackness* and proudly reconceptualise the so-called 'New Negro' identity born during the Harlem Renaissance.

Key Words: Black Music, African-American Fiction, Catharsis, Identity, Emancipation, New Negro

Resumen

La Música Negra en la Ficción Afroamericana: Catarsis, Identidad y Emancipación.

Este estudio busca explorar las formas en las que la música negra ha influido en la ficción afroamericana y cómo su presencia es un tema más de sus narrativas que actúa con un propósito catártico, identificadora y emancipador. Durante y después del Renacimiento de Harlem, la comunidad negra de los Estados Unidos comenzó a articular libremente y sin miedo sus pensamientos y sentimientos. Este renacimiento cultural, donde la música era una de las mayores formas de autoexpresión, dio forma, tanto individual como colectivamente, a una identidad racial y cultural sin ataduras conocida como 'The New Negro'. Los autores afroamericanos James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed y Toni Morrison sitúan deliberadamente sus historias en este contexto urbano donde la música funciona como una herramienta sanadora, definitoria y liberadora. En el primer capítulo, se estudia el uso de la música por parte de Baldwin en su cuento *Sonny's Blues* como un medio de supervivencia, conexión e independencia, capaz de reconciliar lazos familiares y curar adicciones, así como de poseer y representar la voz de toda la comunidad negra. En segundo lugar, la representación afrofuturista del jazz por parte de Reed en *Mumbo Jumbo* como un virus incontrolable e infeccioso, el 'Jes Grew', encarna un camino seductor hacia la autodefinición, el éxtasis y la libertad, con el objetivo de recuperar la historia afroamericana. Finalmente, se muestra que las alusiones musicales de Toni Morrison en *Jazz* representan, de manera implícita pero omnipresente, un motivo unificador y redentor para Harlem y su gente, destacando así una vez más la presencia significativa y ubicua de la música en su vida y su arte. Para comprender el impacto de este hito histórico y artístico y por lo tanto la influencia de la música en la literatura, una combinación de las convincentes ideas de los filósofos W.E.B Du Bois y Alain Locke, los ensayos fundamentales del escritor Amiri Baraka y artículos específicos sobre literatura afroamericana y su cultura fueron empleados en este estudio. Como argumenta este trabajo, la música negra es un motivo recurrente y simbólico utilizado en la ficción afroamericana con propósitos reparadores, liberadores y significativos para encontrar alivio a heridas pasadas, abrazar una *negrura* libre y *reconceptualizar* con orgullo la llamada identidad del Nuevo Negro nacido durante el Renacimiento de Harlem.

Palabras Clave: Música Negra, Ficción Afroamericana, Catarsis, Identidad, Emancipación, Nuevo Negro

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. Introduction. | 6 |
| 1.1 Research and Objectives. | 6 |
| 1.2 Methodology and Structure. | 7 |
| 1.3 Theoretical Framework. | 9 |
| a. Terminology. | 9 |
| b. Music in African America culture. | 11 |
| Catharsis. | 13 |
| Identity. | 14 |
| Emancipation. | 16 |
| c. Black Music in Literature. | 18 |
| d. Black Music Nowadays. | 21 |
| 2. <i>Sonny's Blues</i> by James Baldwin | 22 |
| 2.1 Sonny and His Blues. | 25 |
| 2.2 The Brother: Learning to <i>Listen</i>. | 29 |
| 3. <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> by Ismhael Reed | 33 |
| 3.1 An Identity and an Antidote: The Embodiment and Cure of an Ethnic Group. | 34 |
| 3.2 A Revolution in the Name of Freedom. | 39 |
| 4. Toni Morrison's <i>Jazz</i>. | 43 |
| 4.1 Music Is For The (Tortured and Freed) Soul(s). | 45 |
| 4.2 The Identity of a City and its Community. | 48 |
| 4.3 Sound and Silence: Confronting, Releasing, Healing. | 51 |
| 4.4 Objection and Emancipation: The Sound of Freedom. | 57 |
| 5. Conclusions | 59 |
| Bibliography | 61 |

1. Introduction.

1.1 Research and Objectives.

The music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of African-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual, lived lives.

(Jones, *Blues People*)

Although there are many things symbolic about African-American literature, this thesis attempts to explore and analyse in-depth the use of music in three different fictional stories. Given their historical background and a very ancient tradition of oral culture, the impact music had in the lives of African Americans is distinctive and particularly significant. Whilst there has been, indeed, a wide range of academic studies analysing this relationship between Afro-American literature and black music, the vast majority of such works focus mainly on the form and the language which means they generally examine the stylistic or structural use of musical qualities in poems (for example, the jazz poetry). Ramsey, who saw music as “an important part of the materiality of ethnicity” (37) because it involves a wide range of experiences, such as “our class status, our age, gender, sense of location and place, our daily activities, our rituals, rites of passage...” (37), clearly supports this idea. For African Americans represent one of the biggest ethnic groups to live and express themselves through music, their art had to display such emblematic and distinctive connection as well. It seems then reasonable to think that any Afro-American literary work would somehow be, not only related to it, but highly influenced by music. On a similar note, there were other compelling ideas which also encouraged this research question. If we dig deeper, there is a further undeniable feature of African-American literature which goes beyond the so-called jazz poetry: recurrently, writers also used music as a subject matter in fiction. In fact, more scholars have previously noticed this line of work. For instance, Jimoh pointed out that “if music is as influential in the lives and artistic expressions of African Americans as some scholars and cultural analysts suggest, one would expect that it would have an impact on the fiction of black people in the United States, just as it has on the poetry” (26). Music therefore permeated all African American fiction too in the same way it influenced their poetry and filled their lives.

On that account, this thesis departs from two main questions. First and foremost, where? Since Harlem represents one the most symbolic neighbourhoods in their history, it acts as a perfect urban Afro-American setting to describe their counterculture and the best environment to picture such high presence of music, especially during the Harlem Renaissance when black

artists poured out their souls into different and new forms of self-expression which of course helped them in many ways. Secondly, how? Although it is easily discernible that music always served a bigger purpose for African Americans, the history of black music is vast and its effects or literary uses are varied. As such, this dissertation dives into their history in order to explore how black American writers used music in different forms. On one side, music is generally a recurrent motif which supports the authors in highlighting their roots and culture in order to firmly describe and establish their identity and history. However, because music was the best and most recurrent form of self-expression, they also pay attention to its healing, psychic and cathartic benefits. And, lastly, since music helped them gain a sense of themselves, it was used as a rebellious political statement, a recurrent mechanism against any form of oppression in order to fight for what they deserve with agency and self-determination. Thus, this work aims to prove that different authors of African-American fiction employ music as another subject matter which represents a healing, identifying and emancipatory motif.

1.2 Methodology and Structure.

As mentioned above, this dissertation shall offer a comprehensive literary analysis of three different stories which proves the impact of black music in African-American fiction. However, in said study, it will mainly examine or pay attention to three different aspects of black music: (1) its cathartic nature for its aid in expressing and releasing emotions, (2) its emancipatory character for reinforcing important socio-political messages, and, (3) its signifying selfhood for distinctively representing the identity of the whole African-American community.

In order to achieve and prove these statements, this dissertation is divided into various sections. Firstly, the introduction which has presented the research question, summarised the main ideas and indicated the motivations behind it. Secondly, the methodology employed alongside the anticipated objectives are explained. The following chapter includes the theoretical background which shall provide context to the main premise, disclose the current state of art and reflect on different literature reviews which have been useful to properly understand the works studied. It will therefore contain several subsections:

- Before anything else, it seemed important to allude to the terminology used to refer to African Americans and why the nomenclature used is paramount so as to distinguish a first shattered generation (pre-20s) and a second flourishing one (post-20s) which fits into the categories studied. As such, *The New Negro*, a manifesto written by one of the main

philosophers of the Harlem Renaissance movement, W.E.B. Du Bois, will shed some light to the foundation of a new African-American identity which music will then enlighten.

- Secondly, a wide range of African American Studies journals and books have been analysed and included in order to provide a short summary of black music history to understand its presence in African American's lives and culture. This significance is then considered in relation to the three main ideas of the project. Previous theories on each point will be mentioned taking into account how different African American authors and artists have noticed, talked about and proved those connections. Thus, music (in all its forms) is examined in the way it heals, relieves or harmonises; the way it identifies roots, symbolises a race and represents a culture; and the way it provides agency and helps ignite revolutions to achieve peace and freedom. Those three aspects are seen in different articles which provide clarity to the inspiration reflected in African American Literature.
- Two other essential authors, Alain Locke and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), serve as the backbone and fundamental ideas on African Americans' identity, the context during and after the Harlem Renaissance and the impact of black music. Some of their works such as *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, *Black Music* or *The Souls of Black Folk*, are too of great significance for the point of departure of the project. Similarly, Cataliotti's research on Music in African-American Fiction which consists of two different volumes closely linked to this thesis, contributes immensely to the topics here exposed. Likewise, Jimoh's (2002) exposition on 'Blues and Jazz People' in the fiction of Black American authors; Omry's (2008) theory on Jazz Aesthetics or Simawe's (2000) study of music, all three support and provide substantial evidence to this proposal and different examples will considerably sustain the research made.
- Lastly, an abbreviated allusion to the force and footprint of Black Music is given to expose how nowadays it continues to have the same significance.

The last three chapters will explore African American culture as perceived by authors who decided to set all their narratives in the same city, Harlem, and always within a key period in history for African Americans, between the 20s and the 50s. All the stories chosen belong to the 20th century African American Literature and are, in order of analysis: James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues* (1957), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992). In *Sonny's Blues*, I will explore music as a means to restore the relationship between two troubled brothers grieving in different ways and as a symbolic thread which connects a whole race which heals by *listening*. *Mumbo Jumbo* will be studied for its imaginative representation

of jazz and blues in a psychosomatic pandemic which frees the souls of African Americans and brings about a socio-cultural revolution meant to establish a new order. To end, in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, I will analyse all the musical references throughout the novel in order to show the purposeful presence of music in the black community of Harlem as well as the role it plays in fixing a broken marriage of sinners and in empowering the fresh generation of New Negroes.

Finally, a conclusion shall be reached and it will be reflected in a short summary of all the main points exposed and discovered in the literary analyses carried throughout the dissertation.

1.3 Theoretical Framework.

a. Terminology.

“African Americans” / “Black Americans” / “Afro-Americans” vs *Negroes*

Because the nature of this work comes only from African American authors and culture, it is important to underline the significance of the terms used to identify them (and, even more important, why it mattered the way they talked about themselves). African American people connect their roots to Africa and it is by using this term -African American- that they “accent the part of their heritage that is not American” (Painter 4), which highlights the motives behind this thesis. As Amiri Baraka pointed out, “when black people got to this country, they were Africans, a foreign people” (Jones, “Blues” 1). These roots are not only important because they represent overseas customs and desires but because they led them to a very different American experience. Consequently, Baraka referred as “Afro-Americans” to “the first few generations of American-born black people, who still retained a great many *pure* Africanisms” (Jones, “Blues” 7) and “American Negroes” to a later generation, who also inherited all those complexities (7) but already formed a new race shaped by “the African cultures, the retention of some parts of these cultures in America, and the weight of the stepculture” (Jones, “Blues” 7).

The word “Negro”, now acknowledge as “dated or offensive”, was widely used by African American leaders of the Harlem Renaissance movement such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Booker T. Washington or Baraka. However, the Black Power movement¹ of the 60s promoted a rejection towards the word due its oppressive connotations. It was found

¹ The notion of *Black Power* was formally defined by Stokeley Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, respectively known as Kwame Ture and Mukasa Dada later on, in 1967 when they published *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. It was understood as self-defence and self-definition (Painter 293), a break from the past and a new system of values which supported the pursuance of civil rights and equality.

derogatory by authors such as Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) who favoured “black” to express racial pride, accepting too “African American” or “Afro-Americans”. These last terms were activist Jesse Jackson’s favourite because they avoid mentioning their skin colour but still reclaim their African culture (Cobo 4). Accordingly, these three terms will be used interchangeably throughout the project but “Negro” shall be exceptionally used when the work refers specifically to the new conceptual identity formed in the 20s of Harlem, as used by the leaders or authors studied.

The “New Negro”

Throughout history, black people have been, as Locke explains, “something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down’, or ‘in his place’, or ‘helped up’, to be worried about or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden” (Locke 3). Inevitably, The Old Negro did not have any space left to define or explain himself. This tight room where they were confined was explained by W.E.B Du Bois through a state of *double-consciousness*, a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 45), a *two-ness* of conflict. In an interview with Studs Terkel, writer James Baldwin reflected on what being black entailed:

All you are ever told in this country about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and re-create yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact – this may sound very strange – you have to *decide* who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with this idea of you. (qtd. in Clytus, 75)

In order to fight against such perception and find some agency outside of it, they needed “to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (Du Bois 9) and this mergence firstly took place during the Harlem Renaissance. In 1920, New York City witnessed one of the biggest intellectual and cultural movements in history, the Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement. The relationship between the Negroes’ African heritage and the new continent changed helping their identity to be, not only recognised, but embraced as African-American. The Harlem Renaissance meant a revolution in this connection and “African-American histories insisted that Africa had a proud culture and a history that were part of [their] identity” (Painter 14).

This artistic revival turned the Old Negro into a myth and propelled a shift in the black community of the United States, as theorised by Locke and Du Bois, among others. The Old Negro was depicted as someone who accepted black inferiority (Painter 173) whilst this *New* identity “fought back when attacked and proclaimed his pride in his race” (Painter 173). It was then when African-Americans “gained a sense of themselves as members of an international community of people of African descent” (Painter 195). As Baldwin explained above, they *had to decide* who they were and become a *you* unafraid of making white America deal with. It was “a spiritual emancipation” (Locke 3) and it surely opened the doors for what some leaders called *The New Negro*. The designation was coined by Locke in his 1925 work *The New Negro* summarising the embodiment of this new identity where Negroes proudly embraced their culture, race and history, seeking to elevate their social position in the eyes of the White Americans (Ramsey 113).

Just as the Great Migration unlocked new pathways for Southern black Americans aspiring for a better life, this new identity evolved and embodied the intellectual, educational and artistic emancipation African Americans were setting in motion. Thus, the Old Negro was left in the past and the 20s brought forth a new generation, described as “vibrant with a new psychology” (Locke 3) and a new spirit who was “awake in the masses” (Locke 3). Overall, it was seen as a metamorphosis of the contemporary Negro life (Locke 3) now based on a “renewed self-respect and self-dependence” (Locke 4), self-expression (Locke 5) and a “new social understanding” (Locke 9). In the stories read and studied for this thesis, music is analysed as one of the main catalysts which helped all those characters transmute into this new selfhood.

b. Music in African America culture.

It is inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man’s life.

(Jones, *Blues People*)

Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.

(Langston Hughes, *The Negro Artist*)

Although Black Americans lived in a different continent, their African roots and identity remained unmarked after slavery. Despite the efforts, Amiri Baraka noticed how Africans, unlike the rest of America, “were much slower to become Westernized and ‘acculturated’” (Jones, “Blues” 13). As a consequence, pure African traditions -especially the arts- have survived hundreds of years and are nowadays an important symbol of their heritage, customs and identity: “music, dance, religion, (...) the nonmaterial aspects of African culture (...) are the most apparent legacies of the African past” (Jones, “Blues” 16).

The presence and position of music in African Americans’ lives is an extended and central one, dating back to slavery and continuing nowadays. Inheriting a strong oral tradition, African Americans have always held on to the means of expression found in music. The Afro-American “work songs” were in fact the predecessors and origins of jazz, blues and religious black music, such as gospel and spirituals. Those “chants and litanies” (Jones, “Blues” 18) were sung in the American fields where slaves worked. Varied in genres, they used music with different purposes: to endure the dehumanization they suffered, to evocate African gods, to plot escapes from the plantations² or “to incite revolt as well as to accompany dancers” (Jones, “Blues” 19). There were also fishing songs, weaving songs or hunting songs, and they all sung them even if it was forbidden. Inevitably, black people started to play or sing their *blues* very early because, as Baraka explained, “it was one of the few areas of human expression available to them” (Jones, “Black” 2). Black musician and critic Greg Tate referred to this same idea in an old documentary footage: “there’s something very specific about what happened in Black America, where I think the only place, we could be fully expressive was in music” (*Summer* 00:38:50-00:38:58), highlighting once more the indispensable role music played for the black community of the United States, especially under the regime of the Jim Crow laws.

Studied as “race music”³, these different styles of popular music proved a landmark in the lives, culture and artwork of Afro-Americans. As Sullivan explains, it induced “an amazing evolution of sound that has penetrated that racist fabric and pervaded the entirety of American culture” (21). In another words, music was that instrument which “preserved many elements

² It was very common among the community, especially during slavery, to compose “coded slave songs”. They expressed “black anger at ‘the peculiar institution’ and the desire for a life of freedom and free expression” (Peretti 26). This ‘skill’ consisting in encoding multiple meanings in their songs has been called *signifyin’* or *signifying* (Peretti 26) Those coded evolved and continue to shape black music as we know it nowadays.

³ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. (2003) established this concept when he studied the power, relevance and consequence of different strains of black music in generational listeners. These styles were also “marketed and mass mediated in the culture industry as ‘race records’” (Ramsey 3) and, as he explains, the word ‘race’ “represented a kind of positive self-identification among African Americans” (3).

of both African and African American culture throughout the black experience in America” (Cataliotti, *Music* ix), permanently tainting a whole ethnic group.

Black music articulated an alienated cry, which collects, as Jimoh puts it, their “historical discontinuity, alienation, loss, despair, recognition of the incongruity inherent in life” (6). Music embodied thus a discourse which promoted a bigger sense of self-consciousness and clearer self-perception moving African Americans away from the fragmentary identity theorised by Du Bois: “music, then, is expanded and made an important means through which *political-social-historical-cultural ideas* are expressed by African American artists, including writers” (Jimoh 11, emphasis added). The black people of the United States chose an abstract form of expression in order to speak their minds and free their souls.

Catharsis.

Researchers often remark how African American first songs “developed under the harsh conditions of slavery” (Sullivan 21) and it was such desolation what initiated the “unfortunate liberty for Africans to develop a new culture” (Sullivan 21). From ancient Greek, *katharsis* is “the process of releasing strong emotions through a particular activity or experience” (“Catharsis”), especially art. Du Bois had already addressed the importance of their music for its healing effect, derivable from being “the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope” (129). In that sense, African Americans used music as a “catalyst for power, [and] singing the blues provides one a catharsis regarding her or his misery, making life bearable again” (Kirk-Duggan 8).

In ‘Negro cultures’, Herskovits noticed how the “the *therapeutic value* bringing a repressed though into the open was commonly achieved in song” (qtd. in Ottenheimer 75, emphasis added). Courlander too found in the creation of a blues song “a balm or antidote” (qtd. in Ottenheimer 75) which he also referred to as catharsis.

As explained by Cataliotti, the biggest distinction found in African American music is the capacity to express and communicate feelings (*Music*, x). On that account, jazz and blues helped African-Americans vent their frustrations, disappointments and melancholia giving thus “rise to a sense of shared adversity” (Sullivan 26) which somehow nurtured them. In fact, improvisation, or *swinging*, is one of the most symbolic characteristics of Jazz and the reason why black musicians played spontaneously was indeed “to heighten the emotional appeal of the music” (Peretti 87).

Black musicians themselves have addressed too “the personally therapeutic dimensions of music, while others have seen their music as ushering in broader social changes” (Cataliotti xvi). Greg Tate, both artist and writer, discusses the longing of catharsis through music as part of African culture: “there’s this notion of spirit possession that comes from Africa. It’s a part of seeking a certain kind of release and catharsis. This is an eruption of spirit to arrive at an inner peace through being completely expressively open” (*Summer* 00:39:30 – 00:40:05). He dives deeper later on: “with Black musical expression, there’s a certain kind of release and catharsis. There’s also rage, there’s also trauma. (...) The artists connect with the pain (...) there is a primal therapeutic aspect to it. They call it ‘freedom music’ because it’s what freedom feels like” (*Summer* 1:29:55 – 1:30:40). Sharpton agrees with him by defining Gospel music as a “therapy for the stress and pressure of being Black in America” (*Summer* 00:40:00 – 00:40:51).

In the Introduction to *The Songs Became the Stories*, Cataliotti discloses how music grew as a means for “physical and *psychic* survival” (xi, emphasis added), aiming to relieve “the drudgery of forced labor” (xi), “provide hope and drive” (xi) and enable communication or organisation (xi). As Sullivan confirms, they “used music to counter this dehumanization—to boost morale and toughen themselves psychologically” (22). Frequently, we encounter fragmented, oppressed and distorted characters who “realize their sense of identity and their sense of wholeness in the medium of music” (Simawe xxiii). However, the effects of using it were not only for their characters but for the “repressed and rebellious” (Simawe xxii) souls of their authors who many times have also poured out their rage through it. Correspondingly, music becomes healing, freeing and a survival technique (Simawe xxii) both in the imaginary and real world. Simawe also analyses certain representations of music in African American literature and defines it as “orphic music” (xxiii) because of the subversive, anti-establishment and *liberating* attributes music unleashes in their narratives.

Identity.

In his research on ‘The Jazz Trope’, Hawkins clearly stated how “self-definition is the first step to empowerment” (1) and “expression is central to individuality and identity” (2). Thus, music was intrinsically involved “in the processes of African American identity making” (Ramsey 4) since, as proved by its significance, “ethnic identity operates much the same way that musical practice does” (Ramsey 38), both becoming loaded signifiers (38). Accordingly, they claimed *blackness* could never “really exist until it is done, or ‘practiced’ in the world”

(Ramsey 38), that is, through art. As one of the biggest forms of black artistic expression, music has helped African American defining and shaping their culture and identity since the beginning: “in slave quarters and in the cities, music was [already] at the center of black identity” (Peretti 30). This signifier was materialised in 1900 when Bob Cole worked with brothers James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond to produce some songs to be performed in a distinctive African American dialect. From this petition, the famous composition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was born and during the Harlem Renaissance it was known as the “Negro national anthem” (Peretti 53). Artist James Brown sang it again in the 60s: “Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud!”, instilling the identifying sense of power and racial pride Black people needed. As Peretti explains, music was a central tool African Americans used to recall “their rich transcontinental heritage and establishing a healthy and prosperous identity” (Peretti 54).

The impact of black music for their community has always been widely acknowledged and recognised in terms of social, racial and cultural development: “it is the philosophy of Negro music that is most important, and this philosophy is only partially the result of the sociological disposition of Negroes in America” (Jones, “Black” 17). Porter clearly explains how music especially “served as a vehicle for community building and cultural identification” (7). In that way, black music is much more than a genre -or a group of them- since it wanders extraterritorially and moves beyond lyrics and sounds. Since very early, the social identity of black people “seemed to derive from their musical skill” (Peretti 8). Its meaning and presence within the Black community is so symbolic that nowadays it is “not only introduced under the subject of music, but also in history, social studies and politics” (Farley 117). As explained by Baraka, it “*means something*, regardless of its stylistic considerations, [it is] part of the black psyche as it dictates the various forms of Negro culture” (18), leaving a deep-rooted mark in their identity. In fact, its impact was so ingrained in their tradition that Sullivan emphasises how certain African-American expressions and references found in songs were “cryptic to anyone unfamiliar with their cultural context” (27).

In a century of racist propaganda, White America attempted to diminish the achievements of black artists yet African Americans were -and still are- “aware of the music’s function as a touchstone for racial identity” (Cataliotti, *Music* x). Explaining the growth of urban African American society, Porter claims, “black entrepreneurs appealed to racial pride and authenticity as they marketed sheet music and phonograph records” (Porter 7), evidencing their landmark and celebrating a black sign of distinctiveness. African American music reasserted a specific *Negro* speech which emanated specifically “from the experience of simply being African-American” (Sullivan 27). As Hughes understood, music needed to be used as “a

vehicle for distinguishing black culture from the national body”. He stated: “it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white,’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘Why should I be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!’” (57).

Although Jazz and Blues grew in popularity among all America, they became “symbols of black achievement” (Porter 8) and a strong force to support and reclaim their culture and identity. Not only musicians themselves, but intellectuals and writers, as Porter states, also “engaged the role of music in the creation of individualized racial identities” (15). An example he provides portrays author Zora Neale Hurston confessing she felt most *colored* when she attended a jazz concert: “her description of jazz as a catalyst for the creation of racial consciousness that distanced her from white society marks her recognition that this music functioned as a constituent of racial identity at the level of emotional reaction” (Porter 15).

Emancipation.

This idea was early conceived by one the main leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, Du Bois, who considered black musical culture “a vehicle for African American liberation”, as expressed in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (Porter 3). African-American music has been recognised and represented as “independence, autonomy, a certain amount of liberation, and release from the oppression” (Floyd 77). Like many other scholars, Peretti indicates “music also helped African Americans, free people of color as well as slaves, to conceptualize freedom and to explore spiritual and secular self-expression” (7). He adds, “even while the slave owners’ empire seemed unassailable, spirituals and field hollers spoke of freedom and the liberation of souls. Even as laws and social institutions strove to bind human beings as property and deprive them of a social existence, music helped them to re-create semblances of their ancestral communities and to retain their fundamental cultural rituals” (Peretti 30). Certainly, some forms of black music like spirituals, work songs and ring shouts⁴, “mocked white masters [and] were profound expressions of the discontent and rebelliousness that led thousands of slaves to escape the South by means of the Underground Railroad” (Peretti 29).

Beyond those hidden messages and abstractions, in the 20s of Harlem music symbolized, “the winds of change and progress that increasingly offered encouragement to African Americans” (Peretti 81). The awakening of the era was so significant that black

⁴ “A slow, shuffling dance performed by African or African American worshippers in a circle, accompanied by sacred singing. An important African cultural survival in American slavery” (Peretti x).

intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance thought equality, social justice and the end of racism could all be achieved with the success of black arts and letters (Ramsey 111). By having the black community of America creating something that was ultimately and distinctively theirs, music became “a form of defiance” (Sullivan 21) in itself, providing lately a medium of “subversion and resistance used for the attainment of freedom” (Cataliotti, *Songs* xi). This energy continued to be sustained in the movement of the 60s as it has recently been shown in the old footage of a Harlem Festival: “these musicians were expressing musically what we were thinking and feeling politically and culturally” (Parris, Summer, 01:31:01). The black community got reunited once again in order to demand freedom and it was music which “helped them to testify against the racial marginalization they endured for years (Sullivan 27) and express significant ideas about freedom and resistance (Jimoh 11). From early 20s to late in the century, music was always “swept up in the great social and political struggles that affected black Americans, such as abolitionism, the Great Migration to the North, and the civil rights movement” (Peretti 2), with new genres becoming implicated nowadays.

During the Harlem Renaissance, and several decades afterwards, the Blues and Jazz black scene dominated a great part of the American cultural life. African-descended artists, such as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday, stopped “being denigrated as social outcasts” (Clytus 71) and instead “signified a black creative ethos that challenged the political status quo and pointed the way toward more liberatory democratic sensibilities” (Clytus 71). Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson also “became racial symbols” (qtd. in Ramsey 113) reassuring the black masses of an attainable change. In challenging racist ideologies, as proposed by James Weldon Johnson, “nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art” (qtd. in Porter 12). In the same way, Joel Rogers openly recognised that black music, as jazz, “played a socially and emotionally affirming role in African American communities, with the potential for transforming American society as a whole” (Porter 17). Thus, most African Americans believed the creation of these aesthetic bodies of expression would help the race in gaining recognition, prestige and freedom. Leader-Picone has also mentioned Royster’s work on *Queer Sounds* and analyses the “liberatory identity performances [he found] within Black popular music” (18) which led to a more independent agency. In the Black radical tradition, such liberation lies, as Fred Morten explains, ‘in the break’, a “space between lines or notes within the narrative that cannot fully be voiced or explained or defined” (qtd. in Leader-Picone 99). In that way, music offered an abstract space where some sort of resistance could finally be voiced.

As Sullivan develops using examples from Spirituals' protest songs, African American music was a rebellion in character. It prompted rallies to fight for civil rights and brought together the masses, becoming so "the catalyst for [the] civic emancipation" (32) of the black people of the United States. Few decades after the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, these dissenting voices are still heard in a newer African American music genre, Rap, which embodies once again a "volatile musical response to a series of transgressions against the African-American community" (Sullivan 35). Even with the passing of years, black music is still a tool against political and social restrictions in the fight for emancipation and justice.

c. **Black Music in Literature.**

Samuel A. Floyd's research piece (1986) collects almost two hundred books on black music by black authors, and this literature, as he notes, began in 1867 with *Slave Songs of the United States* (215), a compendium of African American spirituals. It is, however, worth-mentioning that predominantly white authors dominated the field and it was not until 1878 when James Monroe Trotter became the first black man to write a book about American music, both white and black, (Floyd 215) and 1971 when *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, Eileen Southern's compilation, became "the definite work in the field" (Floyd 215).

Throughout these two centuries, writers and scholars have participated in the increasing number of anthologies and books on black music (of any genre). The majority of these compilations, such as Floyd's work, assemble only a non-fiction selection, that is, they deal with the musical spectrum directly and focus on categorically accumulating specific black songs, genres or singers' biographical information. However, music became not only a subject of research, but a tool to use and an experience to share. This work is more interested, as previously mentioned, on the different ways African American authors have used music embedded in their works as a topic in fiction, rather than a question in research.

It was said before by Cataliotti: "in many ways, the study of African American literature is like learning the words to a song" (*Music* ix). Interestingly, black writers tried to grow apart from music at the beginning of the century. Baraka explained once how "any Negro who had some ambition towards literature, in the earlier part of this century, was likely to have developed so powerful an allegiance to the sacraments of middle-class American culture that he would be horrified by the very idea of writing about jazz" (Jones "Black" 16). For some reason, it was especially harder for women and their "writers like Larsen and Fauset limited their creative universe to the urban black middle class which had silenced and hidden its racial

and cultural heritage” (Manzanas 98). Notwithstanding, following the breakthrough after the Civil Rights Movement, the Harlem Renaissance era was remembered and revived. It has been noticed how, especially during the second half of the century, in the majority of the African American fiction, “particular kinds of music are used as foils in characterization and in theme [and] many of them aspire in their literary art to create an analogue of the condition of African American music” (Simawe xxi). Academics agree that both the meaning and aesthetics of music have largely shaped African American literature (Jimoh 5) and “contemporary fiction by black writers includes characters and themes that have been made by writers who view music as an aspect of their aesthetic and their literary strategies” (Jimoh 20). The uses and appearances of music in their literature are polysemic and heterogeneous, ranging from imitative rhythms in poetry to a whole new character in fiction – be it implicit or explicit.

Differing from traditional anthologies, Robert H. Cataliotti collects a variety of essays -in two different volumes- which analyse music as one of the main artistic representations and source of inspiration to be used in African-American literature. He shows how black writers consistently look(ed) “to African-American music for subject matter, modes of exploring of thematic concerns, and artistic paradigms” (Cataliotti, *Songs* x). The main trigger which promoted this tendency was the impulse to resist oppression, as shown above, which sometimes was found to act “upon through the construction of a written testimony” (Cataliotti, *Songs* xi). Repeatedly, African-American writers found inspiration in their “people’s sorrow and triumph, their wit and determination, their history and future [and] their essential humanity” (Cataliotti, *Songs* xiv). Accessing and using music in their stories was also a way of producing literature “that would have relevance and an immediacy” towards their community (Cataliotti, *Songs* xv).

Twenty years after Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk*, American poetry began to feel the influence both in form and meaning of black music (Jimoh 11). Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, with well-known poems *Weary Blues* and *Memphis Blues* respectively, incarnate the symbolic *Jazz Poetry* of the era where music and literature appeared intimately related. In fact, Hughes was one of the very first authors to demonstrate “a conscious association between African American Blues and Jazz and African American literature” (Jimoh 22), not only in his poetry but in his novel *Not Without Laughter* too. The pioneer of this so-called “jazz poetry” did not only combine the musical and the lyrical, merging authors and musicians and text and performance; but he also alluded the historical and social background which came with it, that is, the community life of African American people, also referred to as “bluesmen and jazzmen” (Davidas 267). This means that Hughes, alongside other *jazzpoets* like Amiri Baraka, Larry

Neal, Michael Harper, Frank Marshall Davis, Sterling Brown or Ronald Snellings, applied the techniques and characteristics from jazz and blues to their literature but always alluded to the social effects it had within the American black community.

Alongside poetry, throughout all the 20th century, the aesthetics of black music spread also through African American's narrative production. As Jimoh has studied and proved, "contemporary fiction by black writers includes characters and themes that have been made by writers who view as an aspect of their aesthetic and their literary strategies" (25). For example, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) has become an epitome of African American studies and a reference to the impact of music due to its use of blues as the character's shield, as Simawe explains, against "his conscience and against the condemning world" (xxiv). Blues becomes for the narrator his "only space of freedom" (Simawe xxiv) and Ellison successfully shows the reader what he used to call a "jazz-shaped reading of some American literary texts" (Jimoh 6, Yaffe 84). Likewise, James Baldwin is one of the most famous writers known to integrate music in his life and literature. Varied in forms and purposes, he explains the impact of black music in different essays ("Many"). Indeed, he recognised once that it was Bessie Smith's blues songs which inspired him to write his first novel (Lordi 31). In *Who Can Afford To Improvise?* (2017) Pavlić analyses Baldwin's copious and diverse interactions of his writing and his music influences in order to teach us some everlasting lessons about racial issues. On that note, Jimoh chose Baldwin's literary use of music as a perfect illustration which shows how "music operates in some African American fiction and in "Sonny's Blues" through a complex of intertextual relations that point to the ways in which music has become a metaphor that collects important life concepts and ideas as the music moves into literature" (203). In recent years, Paul Beatty has been noticed for using music as a novel subject in order to explore "the commodification of Black identity and Black culture through the most popularly consumed African American cultural form" (Leader-Picone 121). In his book *Slumberland* (2008), he dives into the subculture of jazz to transform the concept of *Blackness* and attain racial freedom and authenticity.

However, music has not only been present in male characters since African American female authors were also influenced by their musical heritage. As such, Zora Neale Hurston's protagonist Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) portrays the *blues life and philosophy* (Jimoh 25) of a feminine identity. On a different direction, *The Street* (1946), by Ann Petry, contains a female leader Blues singer, Lutie Johnson, where music becomes an aspiring path towards success and freedom (Jimoh 25). In exploring the feelings of friendship

at challenging times, Toni Morrison describes two different Blues and Jazz characters in *Sula* (1973) and, very differently, the oral tradition of different cultures in *Song of Solomon* (1977).

d. Black Music Nowadays.

Popular music has become a success for some African Americans in the industry, ranging from Quincy Jones or Prince to Michael Jackson or Beyoncé. All of them have always embodied a liberatory racial spirit in their music and lyrics. Especially in rap, also named hip-hop, Sullivan finds and describes a form of empowerment in all types of public and personal spheres -politics, economics and identity-: “exasperated and enraged by socio-political conditions, rappers used their new-found voice to call attention to the inner-city plight, criticize political figures, express ambitions, and promote themselves” (36). In the end, music has always acted and continues to act as a catalyst for racial pride and emancipation.

Over the last year, its significance has also been portrayed in the big screen. Pixar’s *Soul* (2020) portrayed the first black main character in an animated film and his obsessive passion for jazz was used as a plot conduit and identity portrayal. Also mentioned earlier, *Summer of Soul* (2021), a documentary of 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, navigates the celebration of black music in the era and the social and cultural impact it had for the Black Power movement. And the newest streaming platform Disney+ has just released a new series, *The Wonder Years* (2021) which looks back at the aftermath of Martin Luther King’s assassination from the point of view of a black family living in Montgomery where the father is both a music professor and a funk musician. As the youngest son says: “whether we were yelling or laughing, if you turned your head just right, it all sounded like music” (Pilot 00:02:30-00:02:34). Thus, this thesis shall prove how literature sounded too like music.

2. *Sonny's Blues* by James Baldwin

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear.

(Baldwin, "Many" 24)

A true Harlem's boy, Baldwin was born out of one of the thousands of migrant women who at a very young age left the South and migrated North. He always considered himself a writer but took on many manual jobs to help his family before publishing. Similar to his mom, he left the United States to go to Paris, running away from the bigoted racism he found in America. Although his life there was precarious, it was in Paris when he saw himself as published his first novel in 1953. Not only a writer, but a courageous activist, he produced an important collection of essays on race –and racism– which were inspired by the Civil Rights movements and still taken into consideration nowadays.

Music was an early resource in Baldwin's narrative and has been a consistent motif throughout the years. In *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, Michele Elam agrees by swiftly introducing the topic as one of the greatest literary techniques for the writer: "music was also profoundly important to Baldwin as both culturally expressive and politically suggestive. Although Baldwin insisted he knew little about music, blues and jazz refrains and references punctuate nearly all his writings" (13). This inspiration was clear since the beginning when he published his first novel *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. In this semi-autobiography, music was the main "medium to access important cultural memories" (Ramsey 30), such as church and gospel music. Even if he tried to avoid it, his connection and almost correspondence to blues and jazz, conform his "most salient autobiographical and creative resonance" (Clytus 71) and they are therefore inescapable stimuli for his writing. Baldwin has manifested in several occasions the diverse influence music had in his writing: "I would improvise from the texts, like a jazz musician improvises from a theme" (Elgrably). In his own way, he wanted to transfer the effect of music to his fiction: "[he] said that music was his salvation; that he wanted to write the way jazz and blues musicians sound; that he wished he could be as free as Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith and as triumphant as Aretha Franklin; that music, not American literature, was his true language" (Kun 309).

For Baldwin, music served many purposes: "it was a way of confronting, voicing, and grappling with his sexual and racial identities: namely, the identificatory crossings of his

queerness and his blackness” (Kun 309). Analogously, he mirrors this perspective in his characters since they often use music as a way of confronting their own traumas and alleviate those wounds. Pávlíc, who researched this connection between the writer and black music in particular, proved how “music provided a touchstone crucial in what he had to do and what he needed to write” (4). For Baldwin had lived surrounded by music his whole life, it became both a companion and a muse. He thought of music as an escape, a form of exploration and creativity and a way of voicing feelings and thoughts which had been suppressed and unvoiced, for example, his sexuality: “Baldwin valued music’s ability to articulate what he termed ‘things unsaid,’ sounding and negotiating silences through meanings and messages conveyed in sonic hieroglyphs that make audible what for too long has been swallowed up in an oppressive hush” (Kun 314). This idea which connects Baldwin’s identity -or identities- and music has been also observed by Radiclaní Clytus who “links Baldwin’s musical representations to the metaphysical condition of being black in America” (Elam 13), as it has been expressed before in this thesis.

On a similar note, Pávlíc adds that music provided him with “traces of a counterintuitive method of surviving disasters, a method for creating a transformative energy in the person, in people, and in the world” (4). Indeed, Baldwin once acknowledged that “his aesthetic and cultural registers were largely indebted to the uncompromising humanity of ‘jazz musicians, dancers, a couple of whores and a few junkies’ – an affirmation that indicates his affinity for an embattled black underclass and reflects his belief that black expressive culture was intrinsically relevant to black survival” (qtd. in Clytus 71). In an interview from 1980, the writer referred to this rescuing energy again: “I grew up with music, you know, much more than with any other language [and] in a way, the music I grew up with saved my life” (qtd. in Kun 326). This specific gist can be also recognised in some of his characters, like Sonny, whose life is specifically untethered and saved because of music.

Baldwin’s most famous short story, *Sonny’s Blues* (1957), navigates the lives of two -opposed and distanced- brothers: the narrator, whose name the reader never discovers, a middle-class algebra teacher; and the younger, Sonny, a drug addict determined to become a musician. Philosopher Amiri Baraka previously noted how “blues was a music that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his own blues and that he would sing them” (“Classic” 82). If we understand the Blues from both lines, we can quickly infer how the two brothers deal with their own *blues* both separately, “seeking (...) that part of [themselves] which had been left behind” (Baldwin 112), and as a group, exemplified in their relationship and the relationship with their own roots. On one side, Sonny deals with his

weakness, a dependence and addiction to drugs, whilst his brother camouflages a hidden trauma which sets him apart from his lineage and his family. The siblings' bond, presented as distant and fragmented, shall be mended with reciprocal communication, a lesson learnt through music. Eventually, the narrator equally will reconcile himself with his black identity whilst Sonny will attenuate his affliction. Both their ghosts as much as their differences are healed, as Naughton expresses (122), "through musical discourse", individually and collectively.

Set in the 40s of the New York urban capital, the chosen scene is perfect since "Harlem in the 1940s played host to a revolution in jazz" (Peretti 114) and "younger African American musicians made Harlem their base" (Peretti 114). An ideal representation of both the city and the movement, Jimoh considers Baldwin's short classic a "story that provides access to conveniently well-constructed examples of a Blues theme as well as Spiritual-Gospel, Blues, and Jazz characters" (26) while it has also been lauded "as a masterful depiction of the relation of jazz music and the jazz musician to the African-American community" (Tracy 165). Scholars have studied Sonny's journey for years and different points of view which support this thesis have been found. Clark analysed this musical motif as an important part of black heritage and human existence itself (197), whilst Tracy perceives it as an essential web which connects "the harmony and cohesion of the story" (165), an "exploration of complexities of African-American life and music" (165) and "the search for familial ties" (165). Additionally, his writing has been often recognised and acclaimed for "unique musicological insights" (Clytus 70), being *Sonny's Blues* the undisputed groundwork most of the times. On the other side, connections have been made between music as a tight rope which links certain relationships and an honest space to find and define our own selves. For example, Charles Duncan studied the importance of learning to listen as the "foundation of a new emotional base" (8) for the brothers' relationship and Richard N. Albert inspects the significance of jazz and blues images in emphasising the "themes of individualism and alienation" (178) so as to establish one's unique voice. Tsmondo focuses especially on the latest by highlighting the role of Baldwin as a historian "reminiscent of the African griot" (196) who appeals both to "solitary and communal experience, bound at once to tradition and to change" (196). Explicitly and subtly, for Baldwin and his characters at the same time, music becomes the ink which makes the writing possible. This chapter attempts to analyse Baldwin's use of music from different perspectives as well, that is, as a supporting tool in recovery, a therapeutic reinforcement in life and relationships and an identity-making tool for two brothers who find themselves, learn how to understand each other and embrace their origins.

2.1 Sonny and His Blues.

As it has been recalled through African Americans' history, "the blues are considered by many blacks to be a reflection of and a release from the suffering they endured through and since the days of slavery" (Albert 179), acting as a catharsis. This idea struck Sonny himself when he listened to a woman sing and realised "all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that" (Baldwin 133). Consequently, Sonny's suffering, which is rooted in addiction and broken dreams, finds its release through jazz and blues. Peretti found this healing practice common within all black Americans: "for African Americans, music served as a healing self-expression in the face of hostility" (20). Notwithstanding, Baldwin makes it clear that Sonny's distress or "anguish is not only personal but representative for as he looks down from the window of his brother's apartment he sees 'all that hatred and misery and love'" (Murray 356). Thus, Sonny's blues speak for all young African Americans whose dreams might never be achievable and lives might never be safe.

In the years of slavery, black Americans desperately and consistently longed for freedom and, whilst life becomes easier during the 20-40s, after the Great Migration provided a handful of new opportunities, they still had to protest for basic human rights or ask for better living conditions. Tracey already analysed and exposed the "disappointing economic and social conditions of African American urban culture" (693) in the story, as it is clearly expressed by the narrator when acknowledging the "vivid, killing streets of our childhood" (Baldwin 112), "encircled by disaster" (Baldwin 112) and surrounded by a "hidden menace" (Baldwin 112). Certainly, he assumes it is easy for young boys, as Sonny, to "be popping off needles every time they went to the head" (Baldwin 104) considering how it might do "more for them than algebra [ever] could" (Baldwin 104). These conditions are caused by hostile surroundings and a seemingly inescapable fate: they grew up hurriedly, with "their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" (Baldwin 105) and "full of rage" (Baldwin 105) because all they know is "the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them" (Baldwin 105). In *Sonny's Blues*, as Murray explains, it seems "there is no escape from the darkness for Sonny and his family" (354) because his "dreams and aspirations are always dispelled" (354). Whilst his brother managed to superficially escape it and somehow participate of middle-class conformity, Sonny had been recently caught for selling and consuming heroin, without any prospect of a promising future.

The reason behind Sonny's choice to consume drugs is the only attainable escape from all the darkness in his life and surroundings that drugs provide him, as he confesses: "I guess I was afraid of something or I was trying to escape from something" (Baldwin 110). His

suffering is explicitly voiced since the beginning: “I can’t get anything straight in my head down here and I try not to think about what’s going to happen to me when I get outside again. Sometime I think I’m going to flip and never get outside and sometime I think I’ll come straight back. I tell you one thing, though, I’d rather blow my brains out than go through this again” (Baldwin 110). As Bieganowski points out, “for him music, the blues, instead of talking, helps tame the terror of the roaring night. Sonny, in telling his own blues, gains some sense of who he is [because] talking, telling, and playing the blues require a reciprocal understanding that starts with one’s own sense” (73). Thus, Blues does not only play a healing part in his pain, but a signifying picture of his whole identity or persona.

Nevertheless, even with the odds of social inequality against him, Sonny, like Armstrong, is “driven with a passion to escape the streets and attain a life of greater comfort” (Peretti 79). Fighting against his presumable fate, Sonny turns to music and drugs so as to find a healthy release and safe escape. Thus, an analogy between the both drugs and music is drawn consistently throughout the text when Sonny ascribes to music the same feelings he enjoyed from consumption, firstly triggered by a woman’s voice: “her voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes—when it’s in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And—and sure (...) it makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you’ve got to have that feeling” (Baldwin 132). In trying to make his brother understand this parallelism, he reaffirms: “it’s not so much to play. It’s to stand it, to be able to make it at all. On any level. (...) To keep from shaking to pieces” (Baldwin 133). This was early noticed by Du Bois who saw how “music itself carries that message of spiritual striving” (xx), reason why Baldwin himself felt also inclined to music: “they were sounds, black sounds, of triumphant survival where mourning bred transcendence and suffering produced a song that made it possible to continue living” (Kun 315). This image is reinforced at the end, when the narrator describes how “the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them” (Baldwin 131). Holding onto that, and as Goldman points out, “this equation of music and drugs (...) explains why the one could be a positive alternative to the other” (232), which eventually makes Sonny safely choose. When he bets on music over heroin, his brother realises that Sonny is in fact “playing for his life” (Baldwin 126), to make sure his pieces stay together. Lateef referred to jazz as a kind of ‘*autopsiopsychic* music’ because it comes from “the physical, mental, spiritual and intellectual self” (qtd. in Porter 242) all at the same time; a combined experience which interconnects all the senses. Correspondingly, in his anthology *Black Music*, Baraka explains how “jazz was collected among the numerous skeletons the middle-class black man kept locked in the closet of his psyche” (Jones 15), addressing once again the extrasensory and

almost supernatural qualities jazz carries. As such, the practice is so therapeutic to Sonny that it turns psychic, somatic, so mystic that he becomes roughly an ethereal and musical presence: “it was like living with sound” (Baldwin 126), being “loose and dreamlike all the time” (Baldwin 127). Indeed, the blend between Sonny and music is such that both intermingle constantly, becoming a homogenous spectrum. His brother describes this powerful image at the end when he firstly sees him play and realises the basis of his sound comes from his own breath: “Sonny moved, deep within, exactly like someone in torment. I had never thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own” (Baldwin 140). At the same time, he sees “Sonny’s fingers [filling] the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others” (Baldwin 141). Baldwin’s definition of music, or significance for African Americans, is so rudimentary that presumably comes down to two pivotal concept for human beings: breath and life, that is, something innate, essential and divine.

On a different note, music acts as a sheltered home for Sonny. It was similar for Baldwin since, Kun explains, singers like Bessie “provided him with a safe space for the realization and expression of oppositional desires and pleasures” (316). When Sonny tries to explain his brother in what way music helps him, he indeed points out to “the self-knowledge, the self-possession, necessary for authentic blues, for meaningful talk” (Bieganowski 73). Music assists Sonny to lead honest and open conversations with his family regardless of the challenge or the opposition. Although his brother still shows up distanced and closed, Sonny portrays the success of his inner mental and emotional work, allowing these signs of maturity and growth in Sonny’s character extend above his brother’s narrow outlook and harsh judgment:

You walk these streets, black and funky cold, and there’s not really a living ass to talk to, and there’s nothing shaking, and there’s no way of getting it out—that storm inside. You can’t talk it and you can’t make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody’s* listening. So *you’ve* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen. (Baldwin 135)

Through music, Sonny has learnt a lesson which his brother still has to learn: listening and playing music is not only about jazz, blues, the instruments or the songs. Instead, Sonny discloses the secret some do not realise yet: music is about speaking and listening to one’s inner self and the community around you. In fact, Sonny reveals that leading a life of uncommunicativeness was the beginning for his addiction when he said: “other times – well, I

needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to *listen* – and I couldn't find it, and I – went crazy, I did terrible things to *me*, I was terrible for *me*” (Baldwin 136). After many years, he realised all he needed was someone -or some space- to talk and listen, and also being listened to, which he demonstrates later to the narrator: “something told me that (...) Sonny was doing his best to talk, that I should listen” (Baldwin 133). Baldwin himself emphasised the verb *listen* because he yearns for the readers to understand that music travels beyond the sounds and lyrics you let out in the process; when you are open, and it reaches your inner self. In the end, you must be willing to listen both to outer and inner monologues. The New Yorker verbalised this postulation before when he confessed that his decision to recur to blues in particular was because it helped him -and his characters- *articulate* their experiences: “not only ‘because [the blues] speak of this particular experience of life and this state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate’” (qtd. in Clytus 70). This idea on communication and association is explicitly unfolded at the very end of the story, as it will be explained further later, when the brother -and Baldwin-, concludes remarking that many people in fact do not truly ever *hear* the music.

Besides helping Sonny to heal and recover from his addiction, music gives him a voice and a space where he can find his identity and acquire the agency he never really had, especially because the racist society where he was forced to live would always try to take it from him. His determination to follow a dream turns him into a confident decisive young boy: “it’s the only thing I want to do” (Baldwin 122). Contrary to the opinion of his brother, who thought “this would probably turn out to be one of those things kids go through” (Baldwin 122), Sonny redefines himself as a firm owner of his decisions, unwilling to accept an ending he does not want to choose: “people do what they ought to do” (Baldwin 122). Precipitated and inspired by his passion for music, “earnest” (Baldwin 124) as the narrator describes him, “he’s imposed on this his own half-beat” (Baldwin 133). Moreover, Ralph Ellison explained how a jazz and blues musician achieves a “subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice” (qtd. in Albert 176). This moves him apart from the double consciousness Du Bois explained and eventually helps him build an entire identity of his own, as considered by Brown who attested “the role of improvised music in producing African American cultural identities” (Porter 246).

2.2 The Brother: Learning to *Listen*.

When the narrator knows about Sonny's arrest, he is forced to confront his past and reconcile himself with his heritage and his family. Since the beginning, the brother, "whose social assimilation has instilled in him a distrust of anything unconventional" (Duncan 3), shows a constant misunderstanding and disbelief towards Sonny's lifestyle and his aspirations around music. As Omry discloses, "because he has become gentrified, he is not able to relate to the music in the same way that Sonny does" (171). Riley exemplifies this by situating "his discussion of the story in terms of a black-white binary opposition, which positions the narrator as a conformist to the 'white ways' half of this opposition and Sonny on the black Blues culture side" (qtd. in Jimoh 204). Painter has previously pointed out at African American's tendency to avoid embracing their African origins (14), a very common attitude for some before the 20s. Reticent to his own oral legacy, he might hear the music, but never listens to what it is trying to tell him, in the same way he does with his little brother. It is only after the tragic death of his daughter, Gracie, and his inescapable reencounter with Sonny, that his epiphany begins. As much as that unresponsive tendency could have had remained, special and different exposures to music obliged Sony's brother to recognised his own feelings, life story and the representative history of African Americans.

After remembering his mother's passing, the first thing he mentions is the song she was humming that day: "there Mama sat, in black, by the window. She was humming an old church song, *Lord, you brought me from a long ways off*" (Baldwin 116). Music is the catalyst which unveils repressed memories and pushes him to be open and vulnerable so as to heal. When he recalls his father and uncle's accident told by his mother, music surrounds again the scene, as a trigger which is present in every memory: "[your father] was whistling to himself, and he had his guitar slung over his shoulder" (Baldwin 117), and when he was killed "weren't nobody on that road, just your Daddy and his brother and that busted guitar" (Baldwin 118). This image might have driven the narrator's rejection towards music as he frightens the same could happen to Sonny: "I didn't like his friends, and his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that weird and disordered" (Baldwin 127).

All these repressed emotions seem to have led the narrator to distance himself from his brother and his past life. Thus, he shows up resistant to fully listen, as Sonny notices: "I hear you. But you never hear anything I say" (Baldwin 125). Reilly exposes this refusal and even *self-ostracism* in further detail and shows how the Brother is, as mentioned above, distanced from his own roots (57). Unlike Sonny, he has let others impose a different identity upon himself:

Hard as it is to believe, he had never heard of Bird until Sonny mentioned him. This ignorance reveals more than a gap between fraternal generations. It represents a cultural chasm. The narrator's inability to understand Sonny's choice of a musical leader shows his alienation from the mood of the post-war bebop sub-culture. In its hip style of dress, its repudiation of middle-brow norms, and its celebration of esoteric manner the bebop sub-culture made overtly evident its underlying significance as an assertion of Black identity. (Reilly 57)

Once his daughter's passes away, he is forced "to confront the ragged edges of life" (Duncan 4), allowing him to open new lines of communication and empathise with Sonny (Duncan 4). In the following conversation, an emotional transformation is already perceived when the narrator finally "realizes the profundity of Sonny's suffering" (Goldman 232) and recognises "also his own part in it" (Goldman 232): "there stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence—so long!—when he had needed human speech to help him" (Baldwin 134). Nonetheless, it is the last scene at the club when he genuinely enters Sonny's kingdom, as named by Duncan (7). Just at his arrival, music already finds him, portrayed as a remedy to calm him: "I started down the steps, whistling to keep from crying, I kept whistling to myself, *You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days*" (Baldwin 128). But it is while and after Sonny plays that he finally learns to listen, heals from rejection and this musical black heritage "impresses itself upon Sonny's brother and brings him back into the community of his black brothers and sisters" (Albert 179), back to his identity. In one of his essays, Baldwin mentioned this type of mystical correspondence which takes places at the clubs:

They know, on one level, everything concerning each other that there is to know: they are all black. And this produces an atmosphere of freedom which is exactly as real as the limits which have made it necessary. And what they don't know about each other, like who works where, or who sleeps with whom, doesn't matter. No one gives a damn, and this allows everyone to be himself—at the club. (Baldwin, *Essays* 676)

At the beginning, his brother "simply couldn't see why on earth [Sonny]'d want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor" (121), but African Americans have historically "forged a sense of collective identity as they gathered in nightclubs, theatres and dance halls" (Porter 7), in part "to reclaim their bodies as instruments of pleasure after a day's labour and

affirm communal bonds in the face of a racist society” (Porter 7). Lateef already studied the spiritual benefits of playing for an audience in that such occasions allowed the performer to transfer his message (Porter 244). Poet Langston Hughes raised this idea too: “let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” (57). The brother’s closed ears finally open in understatement when he listens to Sonny’s band playing. Thus, in the jazz club, because Sonny’s soul is “attuned to other souls he is capable of giving deep and far-reaching experiences” (qtd. in Porter 244), aiming at his brother’s compressed feelings. In this way, the nightclub scene transcends too the brothers’ differences and “like a jam session, they engage each other, not to destroy, but to produce a wholeness that comes from listening and hearing different points of view” (Tracy 167).

As it was depicted before, Sonny’s struggle, like music, is not individual but communal: “The Blues function as an art of communion (...) expression in which one uses the skill he has achieved by practice and experience in order to reach towards others” (Rilley 59). As a result, Sonny’s music brings on undisclosed thoughts and repressed feelings his brother was hiding: “as the narrator listens to his brother’s blues, he recalls his mother, the moonlit road on which his uncle died, his wife Isabel’s tears, and he again sees the face of his dead child, Grace” (Murray 357). The brother confronts his suffering in a collective experience -the club and the band’s performance- and finally understands that, as Murray states, “the essence of Sonny’s blues is not new; rather, it’s the age-old story of triumph, suffering and failure” (357) of a whole race (or even humanity). The brother perceives the band’s message in the same way when Creole plays:

He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For while the tale of how we suffer, how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. (Baldwin 141).

As Baldwin affirms, “the artist’s struggle (...) must be considered as a kind of metaphor for the struggle, which is *universal and daily*, of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings” (qtd. in Clytus 72, emphasis added). The music always tells the same story but does it in the way a new generation needs to hear it.

In the end, it acts once again as a healing prompt which “allows Sonny to deliver both himself and his brother through his own creation and performance, reuniting the family in a way that nothing else could” (Tracy 169). In essence, Sonny’s expressive blues function as a key metaphor of both a band-aid and a cultural celebration. Reilly agrees by saying it “repairs the relationship between the two men who have chosen different ways to cope with the menacing ghetto environment, and their reconciliation through the medium of this Afro-American musical form extends the meaning of the individual’s Blues until it becomes a metaphor of Black community” (56). As Jimoh explains:

The narrator comes to realize his connection to Sonny's Jazz because he recognizes his Blues life within Sonny's music: ‘It was beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did ([Baldwin] 122)’ (Jimoh 206).

Furthermore, there is a claimed sense of advocacy for a “necessity of African Americans’ self-awareness of the context of their own cultural forms” (Tracey 693). In fact, the story has been sometimes reviewed as the “story of the narrator’s dawning self-awareness” (Murray 355), rather than celebrated as Sonny’s journey. As it has been analysed, the brother, “through his own suffering and the example of Sonny, is at last able to find himself in the brotherhood of man” (Murray 357), reminding the black community of the importance of communion, not only to celebrate their music, but to tell their story through art. It is him who “discovers the value of a characteristically Afro-American assertion of life-force”, finding an artful mode of expression which does not only help him heal, but recognise his true identity. Because of their understanding of Jazz and Blues, Jimoh claims, both Sonny and his brother acquire a sense of triumph “from personal strength of character” (214) demonstrating in the journey “a Blues process of singular voices finding a way to live within the context of a shared problem” (215). In the end, Baldwin manages to represent what Baraka once said: “*Blues* means a Negro experience” (Jones, “Classic” 94).

3. *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed

What we play is life.

(Louis Armstrong)

As Ted would say

let them go to heaven

or let them go to hell.

When I die, I want to go to jazz. (...)

When I die, I will go straight to jazz.

(“When I Die I Will Go To Jazz”, Ishmael Reed)

Being a child of migrants who moved North during The Great Migration, Ishmael Reed was born in Tennessee but raised in New York and grew up highly influenced by *jazz poets* and *beatniks* such as Langston Hughes or Theodore Joans. He has composed songs which have been recorded and performed by different famous musicians and he was acclaimed SFJAZZ Poet Laureate. Alongside figures like Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde or Maya Angelou, Reed supported and took part in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 60s and 70s. Embodying a message of Black Power and Black Magic, they all used arts to inspire their community. His talent and competence were so powerful and respected that, as Reginald Martin shows, he “arises as a central figure in the new black aesthetic movement” (1). Although he has received dissenting criticism from academia, he still defends his position in that the way he writes is a true African American tradition and aesthetic (Martin 2).

Mumbo Jumbo represents a backbone for this tradition because, as it has been studied, “in the course of the narrative, Reed constructs his history of the ‘true Afro-American aesthetic’” (Martin 100). In other words, as Cataliotti posits, Reed “spans the history of African-derived artistic sensibility in a kind of whirlwind post-modern jazz solo (“Songs” 3). *Mumbo Jumbo* is an afro-futurist and post-modern text published in 1972. Thought-provoking and parodic, it celebrates black culture and exposes Western civilizations in a satire which travels through centuries of history, intertwines fiction and reality and engages with magic. Through humour, Reed critiques “Western concepts of self and identity” (Jessee 127) in an attempt to construct *black-selves* and black identities. The novel honourably appeared in critic Harold Bloom’s famous list on The Western Canon as part of The Chaotic Age (Harold 565), alongside other African Americans authors previously mentioned such as Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison or Zora Neale Hurston, and the two authors also studied in this thesis, Toni Morrison and James Baldwin.

In an era that consistently opposes the Black versus the White –the Hoodoos versus the Atonists–, Reed presents a fictional breakthrough within the Harlem Renaissance. An outbreak is now spreading through New Orleans on his way to New York. It is an epidemic, known as the Jes Grew, which causes affected people to act “outside of socially conditioned roles” (Martin 85). For instance, white people are surprisingly ‘acting black’: “dancing half-dressed in the streets to an intoxicating new loa (spiritual essence of a fetish) called *jazz*” (Martin 85). This pandemic is the symptomatic manifestation of the black arts, identity and history, which is rapidly advancing and disarranging the systematization of the West. The main character, Hoodoo detective Papa LaBas, is searching for *the Text*, a liturgy which reinforces the Jes Grew so that it becomes indissoluble. However, LaBas and his people need to confront the Wallflower order and the Atonists who stand against any unconventional form of being and acting and will make everything they can in order to stop the Jes Grew and keep, or restore, a fully Western order.

3.1 An Identity and an Antidote: The Embodiment and Cure of an Ethnic Group.

The novel accompanies the reader on a journey to the 20s, the nicknamed ‘Jazz Age’, which was so significant for the black community of the United States. Reed highlights this importance in a straightforward manner at the beginning of the novel: “It’s a new age. 1920” (64). However, this part of the story is known to have been concealed, leaving African Americans unable to *perform and dance, in other words, to be and express themselves*: “1920-1930. That 1 decade which doesn’t seem so much a part of American history as the hidden After-Hours of America *struggling to jam. To get through*” (Reed 16, emphasis added). In choosing this setting, Reed manages to employ the biggest “African-American creative output” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 5). Additionally, he includes the symbolic presence of figures of the movement which quickly typify these New Negroes and their psyche, building on the characteristics of such revolutionary era. References include: James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, W.E.B Du Bois, Louis Armstrong or Bessie Smith. The recurrent appearances of real-life African-American musicians and writers provide Reed’s text with the new, genuine and distinct identity of such generation.

Notwithstanding, mentioning some of the greatest artists of the epoch did not seem enough to properly establish their identity and history, so Reed found a *psychic*⁵ *plague* (Reed 17) which shall lay the foundations of this black magic. Belonging to the Demonic Theory of Disease (Reed 5), the *Jes Grew* is found in the first pages colonising New Orleans and wending its way towards New York and Chicago. Jessee precisely points out at how Reed chose “an attitude, rather than a substance; a form, rather than a content; a characteristic which plays a part in [his] vision of individual and collective identities” (128). Mishra, who researches this ‘virulent jazz counterculture’, agrees by saying all the different characters “adapt to the current discursive flows of history and politics, as they are weaved into the Jazz fabric of Black counterculture [and give] rise to new, empowered vision of cultural identity” (6).

In the theoretical approach of this work, we mentioned the roots of black music were found in slavery and Reed alludes to the origins of the *Jes Grew* in the same manner: “*Jes Grew* carriers came to America because of cotton” (Reed 16). Historically, as it has been previously mentioned, black culture “has been the primary ‘carrier’ of this fluid energy, this ‘epidemic’ that has ‘enlivened the host’ ever since Osiris danced in Egypt” (Jessee 128). As Reed claims, the Negro “seems to be its classical host” (17). Notwithstanding, this time the author creates a more open background for the *Jes Grew* to expand and go beyond its classical enclaves. In the end, “although the music that carries the healing of *Jes Grew* sounds different in different parts of the world, it carries the same cure and has the same effect on its people, dancing the dance of liberation” (“Reed” 756). As Hawkins noticed, “music serves humanity and seeks to build a bridge of understanding” (146) and the *Jes Grew* definitely aims at that reconciliation in a new continent.

In the text, the reader finds a context where the epidemic is spreading in the same way the Black Arts began to emerge in the Harlem Renaissance: out of a necessity to reclaim their history, identity and liberate themselves. As Peretti exposes in his *History of African American Music*, “in the 1920s, there was plenty of new and exciting black sacred music (...) to appreciate” (128) and the *Jes Grew* is that sweeping, infectious and inescapable ‘disease’ which carries all that new and exciting *black-ness*. By dissecting the African culture within the Western civilization, the *Jes Grew* becomes more explicitly “a healing agent for the Negro communities of the 1920s” (“Reed” 755). Reed’s exposition of such binary dichotomy emphasises the need for black artistic experiences further. The writer’s purpose is, as Cataliotti

⁵ Reed’s meticulous use of “psychic” to specify the character of the *Jes Grew* supports the premise of this work since the aesthetics are not so much external but internal: feelings, awareness, consciousness. It refers to the soul and the spirit of African Americans’ roots and how it reflects in both their outer and inner worlds.

mentions, “about illustrating that there is and always has been an African-American cultural tradition” (“Songs” 3) and this is a perfect example of doing so. In the book, both PaPa LaBas and his colleague Black Herman seek “to reveal, preserve and extend this manifestation of African cultural traditions in America” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 4). He expands on this idea by saying the Jes Grew consists of many “characteristics of cultures which have evolved from the experience of the African Diaspora” (“Songs” 8), such as the dances and jazz sounds from African dance. Thus, they will try to sustain the Jes Grew because it encapsulates the roots they were once forced to suppress and the new approaches towards self-expression that they found in the American continent.

Both aspects are reflected in the symptoms of this agitational and contagious illness, that is, we see the customs, attitude, personality, lifestyle and even jargon of African Americans. The *Jes Grew* is an abstract and detailed embodiment of a whole race, culture and history, which “stands in opposition to the Western way, the urge to control, to categorize, to exclude and set binary oppositions” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 4). On the contrary, the Jes Grew is presented as a liberating and healing manifestation full of “sensuality and spontaneity; (...) a celebration of life in song and dance” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 8). In short, the psychosomatic identity of a whole ethnic group is anatomised. Different examples are given in the book: they would say “stupid sensual things”, be in a “state of uncontrollable frenzy”, “wriggling like fish”, doing “the Eagle Rock and the Sassy Bump” or “lusting after relevance” (Reed 4). Further details are provided about new cases as they appear:

he was shouting and carrying on like any old coon wench with a bass drum
he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa’s interior
he felt like the Kongo: Land of the Panther
like deserting his master
he felt he could dance on a dime
shank bones, jew’s harps, bagpipes, flutes, conch horns, drums, banjos, kazoos
speak in tongues (Reed 5)

These musical argot and characteristic modes of free expression encompass jazz, among other genres, and are now manifested through the different symptoms of the epidemic. As it will be examined, “music is essential to the progress of the Jes Grew and New Orleans is a wellspring for African-American music” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 9). Vividly explained by Louis Armstrong and quoted by Reed in the text, “*the spirit hits them and they follow*” (7). Reed uses

these musical references as a shovel in narrative to convey the identity, spirit and soul of African Americans.

Moreover, these frenetic rhythms and the language used to describe them remind us of the idiom of jazz. For example, Mark A. Sanders explained a very similar aura about a jazz poem by Langston Hughes titled “Negro Dancers” which conjures up these images. He points out that the pace, lines and repetition of jazz rhythms all “replicate the kinetic intensity of dance hall jazz. Both form and statement fuse as they express joy and abandonment (ultimately, freedom and its attending connotations), and thus the power and potential of this urban folk form” (Sanders 108). By personifying jazz into the Jes Grew carriers’ testimonies, Reed succeeds in illustrating such a stimulating mood in a narrative approach which often focuses on dancing. Forward on, they continue to verbalise the same atmosphere: carriers would “dance manias inundate the land” and it forces people to do “the Charleston the Texas Tommy and other anonymously created symptoms of Jes Grew” (Reed 64). The Jes Grew is thus specifically referred to as an “epidemic contagiousness of jazz” (Reed 64).

All these *jazzy* references persistently highlight the correspondence between music and their race and culture. Although Abdul rejects these ancient roots, he still recognises something all of them agree on: “something that is basic, something that has been tested and something that all of our people have, it lies submerged in their talk and in their music” (Reed 38). The connection to music is strong that, as they explain, even if the New York police tries to wipe it all out, “it will find a home in a band on the Apollo stage, in the storefronts” (Reed 40). Because of Reed’s use of music as a thread which connects every scene, the reader takes part in some parties with that “good music” (41), hears “banjos strumming” (42), “a piano recording plays Jelly Roll Morton’s⁶ ‘Pearls’ (50) and remembers –or gets to know– Irene Castle, real-life famous dancer who promoted jazz and other Afro-American music genres to dance. As described, people are seen dancing to “Jim Europe’s ‘Black Devils’, the first jazz band to play on 5th Ave.” (Reed 47).

Antagonist Hickie Von Hampton also reflects on this correlation when he states that “Jes Grew absorbs Black as Black does Jes Grew” (Reed 80). The Hierophant, leader of the Wallflower Order, also accepts such connection when one of the androids shows him a record named “The Whole World is Jazz Crazy” (Reed 144). Surprised, he asks him: “how did you become so familiar with this Jazz?” and the android confess its origin: “you told us to keep an

⁶ He belongs to an important generation of New Orleans jazzmen, being considered the first true jazz musician and composer. See more at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jelly-Roll-Morton>

eye on Jes Grew, sir” (Reed 144). Correspondingly, in the book, jazz and blues are also presented in the manifestation of loas. Such music is described being played during a healing ceremony where Earline, PaPa LaBas’ daughter, participates and discovers “it’s a loa that Jes Grew here in America among our people. We call it Blues” (Reed 127). These artists are implicitly referred as an “emergent Jes Grew expression” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 11) which comes uniquely from *their* people. To a certain extent, Reed shows us how jazz and blues musicians “have created distinctive African-American forms that enable them to give voice to the ineffable spirit of the novel’s (dis)embodied hero, Jes Grew” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 12). Hence, the Mumbo Jumbo professionals use music as part of their rituals to heal their clients and scare the spirits away. As a matter of fact, when people are aware of the effects of the Jes Grew, they convincingly confess to be “attempting to catch it” (Reed 117).

Nonetheless, the meaning behind the Jes Grew is not a secret anymore. In fact, its legacy continues and it must be shared, in the same way they have done with their traditional oral customs. Accordingly, at the end of the novel, Papa LaBas briefly summaries what the Jes Grew is about to new university students in his annual lecture on the pandemic: “The Blues is a Jes Grew, as James Weldon Johnson surmised. Jazz was a Jes Grew which followed the Jes Grew of Ragtime. Slang is Jes Grew too” (Reed 214). Before that, and in agreement with Lindroth’s analysis, the Jes Grew is early on identified by Papa LaBas’ partner Black Herman as a ‘black artistic genius’ whose one distinguishing feature is the improvisation that stems from jazz (229):

You ought to relax. That’s our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own (...). I think we’ve done all right. The Blues, Ragtime, The Work that we do is just as good. (...). What it boils down to, LaBas, is intent. If your hear’s there, that’s ½ the thing about The Work (...). Doing The Work is not like taking inventory. Improvise some. Open up, PaPa. Stretch on out with It. (Reed 130).

Not only does Black Herman describe the way black music works, but also alludes to the so-called oral African American tradition again and how it will keep on being passed on: “I’ll bet later on in the 50s and 60s and 70s we will have artists and creators who will teach Africa and South America some new twists. It’s already happening” (Reed 130). As our dear PaPa LaBas convincingly believes, the tune of the Jes Grew shall always come back. In conclusion, as Mishra also proved, it is clear this new jazzy pandemic leads to “an optimist

vision for an inclusive future with an empowered, multicultural Black identity inspired from Jazz, voodoo and Afrofuturism” (13) which ensures “that the Self-Other divide is made redundant as the Black subject is no longer treated as the Other” (13). Thus, their musical culture allows them to reject and heal themselves from the ‘DuBoisian’ concept of *doubleness* and reaffirms their own personal identity, both individually and collectively. As it was postulated in the novel, “The Negro should be the Negro and not an imitation White man” (Reed 147).

As Cataliotti argues, and as this analysis has shown, “music both influences the compositional approach and is the subject of his narrative” (“Songs” 6). *Mumbo Jumbo* is not only a *jazz solo* in form, but a text inspired by a strong musical culture which seeks to show such impact. It is clear that Reed’s language and arguments both set music as one of the biggest manifestations of the plague but which has a meaning behind it. He imbues “his written text with the sound and spirit of African-American oral expression” but emphasises, not only on their historical and signifying connection, but the “distinctive *feeling* of African-American music” (Cataliotti, “Songs” 7). The specific focus on feelings is important from the point of view of African spirituality and their cathartic practises. Ironically opposite to an epidemic, the Jes Grew results in a liberating psychic manifestation which unchain the souls and helps African Americans freely express themselves. On a similar note, every trait of the Jes Grew is deeply connected to the lives of black Americans and supports them in finding the agency required to recover their history, strengthen their roots and reaffirm their identity.

3.2 A Revolution in the Name of Freedom.

“Don’t you understand, if this Jes Grew became pandemic it will mean the end of the Civilization As We Know It?” (Reed 4)

The Jes Grew is called a plague but it really is, as put by PaPa LaBas, “an anti-plague” (Reed 25) because that “end of the Civilization” is what African Americans need so as to be entirely free. Our Mumbo Jumbo protagonist understands more than anyone else what the Jes Grew really means: “I know what it’s after; it has not definite route yet but the configuration it is forming indicates it will settle in New York. It won’t stop until it cohabits with what it’s after. Then it will be a pandemic and you will really see something. And then *they* will be finished” (Reed 25). The use of music to fight oppression links back to a message from Ishmael Reed himself: “what remains consistent in the reports on jazz is not the ultimate dislike of the music, but the political and social dislike of the black population” (qtd. in Hawkins xxiii).

Somehow Reed takes advantage from that idea and decides to put black music in the centre of a revolution which goes against any form of discrimination, oppression and prohibition. For example, black music comes back in the form of the *Jes Grew* to stop conceptions such as Abdul's from escalating: "it's the 1920s, not 8000 B.C. These are modern times. These are the last days of your roots and your conjure" (Reed 38). The epidemic comes to life in order to fight certain Western archetypes which attempt to continuously ignore and bury the Black Arts.

In relation to this, Papa LaBas, who always was conscious of the situation, mentions there is "some secret society molding the consciousness of the West" (Reed 25) and people, like Abdul, who resemble fascism (Reed 40). Likewise, Newspapers like the *New York Sun*, paid by the Atonists, are also said to "devote so many column inches per month to the glorification of Western Culture. 'The most notable achievements of mankind'" (Reed 57), acting as a hindrance to the *Jes Grew* expansion. On the contrary, any type of black artistic expression, such as Afro-American painting, is described "by the Atonistic critic as 'primitive', at best 'charming' and 'mostly propagandistic'" (Reed 57). In order to challenge these views, they need to keep feeding the loas –voodoo gods identified with music– and, as Mishra enunciates, PaPa LaBas shows us how if a loa is kept nurtured and fed, it will attain "the release of the human spirit/soul from the hegemonic constructs of the Atonist culture" (13).

Since the opposition need to gather more types of distractions, The Wallflower Order started the war against Haiti "in hopes of allying *Jes Grew* symptoms by attacking their miasmatic source" (Reed 64). Notwithstanding, because Haiti resists and "becomes a worldwide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom" (64), the *Jes Grew* and its carriers have to follow its example. In order to fight such fascist premises and emancipate from these western discriminatory boundaries, the *Jes Grew* "must find its Speaking" (Reed 34), its Text and liturgy, and there are people willing to help in this search and revolution. The community comes together to make the *Jes Grew* stay and their heritage to spread through their streets. As Herman firmly declares, "there will always be those who will risk the uninformed amusement of their contemporaries by resurrecting what we stood for" (Reed 40). PaPa LaBas also recalls their resilient and celebratory character as part of their lineage: "we've been dancing for 1000s of years, Abdul (...) It's part of our heritage" (Reed34). Herman agrees with him by saying it is "something so deep in the race soul" (Reed 34) but is endangered and, as he recognises, currently being prohibited. As a consequence, African American men and women are seen protesting in the best way they know and the Atonists reflect their objection in their creed:

Look at them! Just look at them!

*throwing their hips this way, that
way while I, my muscles, stone,
the narrow of my spine, plaster, my
back supported by decorated paper,
stand here as goofy as a Dumb Dora.
Lord, if I can't dance, No one shall.*
(Reed 65)

The prohibitions continue and a Plague edict is made where the focus remains the same:

Do not wriggle the shoulders.
Do not shake the hips.
Do not twist the body.
Do not flounce the elbows.
(Reed 93)

To help suppressing the virus, Hinckle Von Hampton is trying to create a Talking Android who will wipe away the Jes Grew by trying to manipulate and convince the J.G. carriers of the wicked character of the pandemic. As they explain: “he is supposed to work within the Negro to refine it. For this he needs a Talking Android; a Human Vaccine who will make Jes Grew seem harmful to the J.G.C.s; make certain that they don't pick up on it” (Reed 137). That specific use of “seem” proves once again how the Jes Grew is, as seen and understood by Reed, the opposite of harmful. In spite of Von Hampton's plan, he still recognises the strong power the biggest carriers of the J.G. have because, according to him, they are the ones who own its Text and will then show more resistance: “14 J.G.C individuals scattered throughout Harlem for now. Only I can call it and anthologize it. Janitors, Pullman porters, shoeshine boys, dropouts from Harvard, *musicians, jazz musicians*”, (Reed 69, emphasis added). He feels somehow intimidated by “these New Negroes or whatever they call themselves” (Reed 102). Supporting this resistance, we find full of dance metaphors and rebellious musical acts against repression and intolerance. The Jes Grew is becoming uncontrollable and irresistible. Just like the Black Artists started to express themselves in the Harlem Renaissance, this new virus is helping them voice out or dance away their feelings: “a woman would be arrested for walking down a New Jersey street singing ‘Everybody's Doing It Now’” (Reed 21) and even “the kids wanted to dance belly to belly and cheek to cheek” (Reed 21). The assiduous lootings are in fact propelled and fuelled by singer Ethel Waters who sings

“that da-da-strain” (Reed 105), jazz bands which played “papa de-da-da” (105) and street saxophones which keep on encouraging the rallies (105).

As we advance in the story, the pandemic keeps on growing and Reed recurs to an Isidore Witmark and Isaac Goldber’s *From Ragtime to Swingtime* quote to show the way jazz, like the virus, was invading it all:

[Jazz] sped up the tempo of things. Whether it was a cause, or the effect of a still more general cause, is here beside the point. Once the new musical spirit had come, it rapidly spread into the daily—and nightly!—activities. It was not long before the old type of musical comedy began to appear outmoded. “Pep” was heard in the land. Once we had “ragged” words; now we “jazzed up” everything. (qtd. in Reed 115)

In the end, Abdul, who represented the Black Muslim Nationalism and his so-criticised monotheism, summons The Text and also translates The Book of Thot. Insensible to it all, he burnt them because, as Reed proved throughout the novel, Abdul never understood the true values of the Jes Grew, that is, he would never support the polyvalent, experimental and gifted culture of African Americans. Thus, Papa LaBas hesitantly accepts that his “words were unprintable but its tune irresistible” (Reed 211). Somehow, Reed hints us with the growing confidence of a communal group. The Jes Grew “as a text refuses to be mastered or contained” (Hogue 157) and African Americans refused to be defined, suppressed and held down by others. However, PaPa LaBas still provides the reader with a prophetic ending: the Jes Grew shall return, alluding to the 60s-70s Black Arts and Civil Rights movements, and it will create a new, very own text. In a way, as Martin puts it, “*Mumbo Jumbo* is itself the Text, and it appears in 1972 as a direct, written response to the assertion that there is no ‘black’ way of doing things” (93). It represents the past and the upcoming ‘Negro Awakenings’: “the 20s were back again. Better” (Reed 218) and *Mumbo Jumbo* is the proof.

4. Toni Morrison's *Jazz*.

From a similar background to Baldwin and Reed, Morrison's mother was from Alabama but her family moved north when she was a child. Morrison was then born and raised in Ohio, although she lived in New York since the 60s where she became the first black female editor at Random House. She decided to write formally later on and published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. Morrison's literature focuses on the experience of being black in America, especially women and it is still relevant nowadays. Her legacy as a writer, professor and editor continues to live on.

Morrison grew up in a traditional African-American family where the oral culture was pivotal. She has recognised the impact music had in her life and the life of African American, especially women, several times over the years. After the great Nina Simone was honoured and remembered one year after her passing, Morrison commented on her loss for words:

All I could think of was 'she saved our lives' (...) she led us to believe—with little true to life evidence to support it—that we could do it: fight injustice rather than suffer it; survive loss; come to terms with betrayal; be brutally honest; disarmingly tender; have regrets minus apology; and not just taste the fullness of life but drink it down. (Brooks, *Pitchfork*)

In a very short paragraph of her impressions in Simone's anniversary, Morrison summarises many points made in this dissertation: the way music –and artists themselves– found a way to make black Americans believe that they could do –and be or become– it all, regardless of hurdles. In 1992, she publicly recalls playing music all the time in her house (qtd. in Pici 372) and in an interview from 1993 on *Jazz* she mentioned once again the purpose music served for the community, and in this case, her family: “it was not entertainment for us, you see” (“Morrison interview”), implying there was always something else to take from it. She specified how it meant both “information and a support system” which powerfully influenced her (“Morrison interview”). This enormous oral heritage consequently inspired and impacted, of course, her writing. As Pici states, “whether that music is slave work songs, spirituals, gospel, or the blues, and whether the vehicle she uses to convey this musical experience is content, language, form, or a blending of all three, the musical motifs are unmistakable in Morrison's writing” (373). Thus, “Morrison might well be viewed as a literary musician” (Pici 397), a symptom clearly perceivable throughout all her artistic work. Morrison, Berret confirms, “accompanies the actions and dialogues of her novels with a sound track of gospel songs, folk tunes, standards, and blues, and many of her characters sing, hum, or whistle their

way through scenes of joy and trouble” (268). Ana M^a Manzananas exemplifies the impact of music in Morrison’s literature by shortly summarising its different appearances in some of her most famous novels⁷:

Music (in the form of jazz) gives expression and meaning to Cholly Breedlove’s dangerously free existence in *The Bluest Eye*, redeems Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* as he listens to the blues song which codifies his family’s mythic history; and it is almost subdued in the pages of *Beloved* as if to mark the forgetfulness of the past the characters have imposed on themselves. After *Beloved*, (...) *Jazz*, Toni Morrison’s sixth novel, gives resonance to the African-American historical/musical memory of the twenties. (97-98)

Jazz was published in 1992 as the second novel of Morrison’s famous trilogy between *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1997). Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature one year after publishing the novel and *Jazz* is particularly famous for the use of a compelling stream of consciousness which feels as an improvised piece of jazz played by different musicians. As Gallant Eckard considers, “jazz is the mysterious narrator of the novel (...) [which] improvises on itself, utilizes the language of music and syncopated rhythms, and sings classic blues themes of love and loss” (11). Although Eckard does not pay attention to music as a topic, the author recognises the presence and techniques of jazz in the language used by Morrison: “words such as murmuring, stream, breaks, cord (chord), rehearsing, rest, listen, play carry jazz meanings” (16). On a similar note, Pici also finds a ‘swing feeling’, polyrhythms, riffs and a call-and-response way of communication in the novel (375-378), analysing once again jazz as a linguistic practice instead of a character or theme itself. Hence, different authors examine several –and sometimes unconnected– uses of music in the story but all of them agree in its omnipresence and magnitude. Such mergence of narrative and music was for Morrison the only way her fiction could “do ‘what music used to do’ for her people” (Berret 267). In this case, this chapter attempts to examine black music, more specifically Jazz, as a subject matter in Morrison’s *Jazz* novel where it acts as the defining psyche of the New Negro’s City and the healing chord which restores relationships.

⁷ The presence of music in these novels in particular, alongside *Tar Baby*, has been analysed more in-depth by Anthony J. Berret, referenced too down below in the Bibliography.

4.1 Music Is For The (Tortured and Freed) Soul(s).

Set in the 20s of Harlem, following the aftermath of The Great Migration and with a similar approach to Baldwin's in *Sonny's Blues*, Morrison also explores a troubled relationship, in this case, a marriage. Joe and Violet Trace are a married couple in their fifties absorbed by the passionless activity of a *silent* routine. From rural Virginia, they once were children of South African Americans who decided to move North when they grew up in order to start a new life. Although both of them seemed devoted to one another at the beginning, their lives are now traced by memories they can barely remember and words which remain undisclosed. As in *Beloved*, they are haunted by ghosts and traumas from the past. One October morning in The City⁸, their marriage becomes "that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue" (Morrison 6), and the couple more secretive if possible. Joe, who had to deliver to Alice Manfred's house some of the beauty cosmetics he sells, meets her future young lover, Dorcas. From that moment, the eighteen-years-old girl unconsciously acts as the breakpoint of Joe's and Violet's mortified souls and their passionate romance turns into a crime scene.

Jones expands on this damaged marriage by saying Morrison shows us "the fracturing of human psyches, souls, and bodies in slavery" (481) and its consequent reconstruction: "moving from the violence that wounds the self to a reconstructed identity that heals, that allows one to negotiate life in a full and vital way and to love" (Jones 481). This is specifically interesting for the hypotheses of this project because, as Jones states, "the metaphor for the process of attaining this fullness, this love, is jazz" (481). Manzanos also illustrates how the roots from Africa, revealed through these musical genre and culture, serve to release every suppressed emotion (99) and to palliate the damage in doing so. Not only does Morrison picture music as an innate part and symbol of the identity of the emblematic City of Black Americans and its people, but also emphasises its purpose to express, relieve, heal and unite.

The story bounce back and forth through the intertwined lives of the few Africa American characters she depicts. On one side, Joe Trace is barely the shadow of an unloved and abandoned child who finds himself being defined by others rather than determining his identity by himself. Although he was later adopted by a new family, he still embodies a reflection of the *Old Negro* identity, marked by the double-consciousness W.E.B Du Bois conceptualised. He accepts and wholly assumes this part of himself, so much that he counts his

⁸ The novel is set in Harlem, although Morrison never specifies the place. She decides to simply capitalise the word in order to represent the personification of an abstract entity with her own personality. The city is the neighbourhood of New York but The City, as she calls her, is another character in the novel. It sets the motion of the narrative and defines the characters.

many personalities: “And I thought I had settled into my permanent self, the fifth one, when we left the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa (...) and moved uptown” (Morrison 127). He generally follows a path drawn by others and his relationships -especially with women- are patently affected by his parents’ absence in his childhood. Not even in his new family he felt as a whole, or fully accepted: “Mrs. Rhoda named me Joseph after he father, but neither she nor Mr. Frank either thought to give me a last name. She never pretended I was her natural child” (Morrison 123). Joe did not learn what love was and he did not fall in love with his wife, but when Dorcas came into scene, he experienced it for the first time. As Jones exemplifies, “he tells us that he never chose Violet; she chose him” (484). Nonetheless, Dorcas, a jazzy Harlem girl, represents the first decision he makes when it comes to love. In the book, the narrator notices how this choice is the one thing that somehow made Joe felt free: “because he selected that young girl to love, he thinks he is free (...) free to do something wild” (Morrison 120). Later on, he confesses and agree with the narrator who knows him so well: “Dorcas, girl, your first time and mine. I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that’s the one for you. I picked you out” (Morrison 135), just like we pick songs. This freedom is exemplified and/or reached once more by music, as if Dorcas was a jazz song, “he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town (...) You can’t get off the track a City lays for you” (Morrison 120). However, Dorcas is just a finite moment in his search to heal and become an entire being.

On the other side, Violet, later on named *Violent*, is a troubled and apprehensive woman whose life used to consist of taking care of a flock of birds. Since the very beginning, we are introduced to her despicable act: “when the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church” (Morrison, 3). Not much empathy is paid to Violet, but the reader can easily infer that her actions come from the same place Joe’s steps emerge: a lack of love. While Joe is afraid of Dorcas leaving him one day, Violet is afraid Joe does the same to her: “I was bound to meet my Joe Trace don’t care what, and do what you will or may he was my Joe Trace. Mine. I picked him out from all the others wasn’t nobody like Joe (...) I just had to keep hold of him any way I could” (Morrison 96-97). Both Joe and Violet show a possessive attachment towards a second person which stems from past traumas from their childhoods. When she was a child, her mother, Rose, “jumped in the well and missed all the fun” (Morrison 99) and later on, we also learn Violet’s father, who spent her childhood coming in and out of their lives, disappeared for good when Violet was already in The City. Thus, Violet’s parents were both gone in her adulthood and all her life revolved especially around Joe and her birds. In short, both Joe and Violet, grew up

imagining what love could be but only knowing what the lack of it means. Rubenstein also found in this a significant reason for Morrison to use music, as jazz and blues, in order to mourn this loss, not only in the name of Joe and Violet, but a whole race:

Morrison's lament on the 'absence of love' has both broadened and deepened in its expression during the course of her fiction, coming to represent the experience of loss felt not only by individuals who have been separated from parents, spouses, lovers, or children, but by an entire group whose members have been scarred, directly or indirectly, by a legacy of cultural dislocation, personal dispossession, and emotional (if not actual) dismemberment. (150)

The dramatic tone of the novel comes then not as a surprise to anyone and the connection between life and death is, as it has always been for them, soon accepted as one and the same. Like Violet's grandmother, True Belle, exposes, they should pray: "Thank God for life (...) and thank life for death" (Morrison 101).

The last one of the trio, our murdered girl named Dorcas, is an eighteen-years-old girl based on a funeral picture Morrison saw in real life. Dorcas does not differ from our married couple in age, but in that she is full of life and resonance, just like *The City*. When Toni Morrison talked about her character, she said that she "wanted this young girl to have heard all that music, all the speakeasy music, and to be young and in the city and alive and daring and rebellious" (qtd. in Pici 374). In this case, music is the foundation where Dorcas' personality is placed. Going against her puritan conservative auntie, Alice Manfred, Dorcas succumbs to the power of music because of its elusive and connecting sensations. Right before she is shot at the party, Joe describes the floor as being full of a crowd "locked together by the steam of their dancing and the music, which would not let them go" (Morrison 130). Dorcas' character is consistently identifiable through music. Joe mentions buying her many phonograph records (Morrison 134) but we also discover that, not only does she love dancing and listening to music, but she sings in the choir (Morrison 94, 131).

On this contrast between two different generations and their opposed views towards jazz, it has been "argued that Morrison is using the subject of jazz music in her novel as a metaphor for the ever-changing conditions of African-American life in the 1920s and as a reflection of the perpetual human struggle between right and wrong" (Pici 382). Dorcas is a more independent and freed woman who has been surrounded by more liberating practises, influenced by a new identity. She "dances well (...) and she is provocative" (Morrison 66), and the connection with music is natural, innate among the youngsters: "Dorcas and Felice are not

strangers at the party –nobody is. (...) The right record is on the turntable now; she can hear its preparatory hiss as the needles slides toward its first groove” (Morrison 65, 67). As much as Alice tried, Dorcas knew a different life and the “knotted around Dorcas’ neck frayed till it split” (Morrison 68).

Dorcas is definitely an excellent representation of the new African Americans’ identity and the pleasure and signifying character they found in music. However, she serves a deeper function and means something different for our married couple. For Joe, the love of his life; for Violet, the daughter they once lost. Thus, she sways between the answer to one question: “was she the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled [Violet’s] womb?” (Morrison 109).

4.2 The Identity of a City and its Community.

Before Morrison, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison already established connections between music and the lives of working African Americans in Harlem (Yaffe 91). After World War I, Harlem became “the destination for hundreds of thousands of working-class southern black migrants” (Peretti 66) and they brought their music with them. After The Great Migration and especially during The Harlem Renaissance, the link between Harlem and black music grew and writers started to show their surroundings and the atmosphere of the ‘Black 20s’ in their literature. This connection between music and its circumstances and/or background have been analysed by Jimoh who defines music as a “site where historical as well as social-political-cultural experiences of black life are located” (Jimoh 203). Similarly, Tracey (1998) analysed the cultural implications of African music, especially the transition from blues to jazz and consequent meaning for the city of Harlem and its people. Balshaw, who specifically researched the urban aesthetics of the Harlem literature, showed how Rudolph Fisher, among others, used Blues in his novel *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932), to give the reader “not a simple expression of the truth of the tale so much as one way of reading the urban scene and the puzzle or urban black identity” (41) appreciating thus “the embedded vernacular histories that music carries” (41). Likewise, Morrison herself recalled again how “music was everywhere and all around [during my childhood]” (qtd. in Pici 398). In that way, reading Morrison involved experiencing the “omnipresence” and “malleability” (Pici 398) jazz and blues had in her life, as it happens in this text.

The City represents an urban space which embodies the spirit of every African American. It was a symbol of hope and such hope was always symbolised by music, sounds or

dance. Everything was in the music: as Morrison believed, “the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather. From freezing too hot to cool” (Morrison 51). Black music in ‘the New World’ contained, as Corbould states, rhythm which was “that one thing they could never shake, that would always prove someone was black, if they should try to “pass” for white. Play a drum nearby, and they would start quivering with the effort not to break into dance. African music—specifically, rhythm—was contagious and unable to be contained. It was like blackness itself...” (185). Alain Locke had also mentioned this spontaneous innateness before. Firstly, he agreed that rhythm is one persistent characteristic which “made and kept the Negro a musician by nature and a music-maker by instinct” (qtd. in Spencer 20). Secondly, he argues that it is always present within since it “can be carried without the rest of the music system; so intimately and instinctively is it carried” (qtd. in Spencer 21). In projecting such mundane and accidental moment, Morrison addresses once more the innate oral tradition who conforms, not only Harlem’s, but African Americans’ identity.

Right at the beginning of the novel, Morrison swiftly defines the symbolic character of the city: “a colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone (...) clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women” (Morrison 7-8). It can be argued that immediately she sets the dramatic tone of the novel and presents love and music as two liberatory forces -or performances-, especially for African-American women, most likely alluding to our (female) protagonist(s). This is related to an idea she once expressed where she wondered how the lives of singers like Bessie Smith or Aretha Franklin would have turned out if women had been forbidden to sing (Cobo 12): “¿serían soportables el silencio y el peso de los roles impuestos?” ([Would it be bearable the silence and the weight of the roles imposed?]). In fact, in the first pages of the novel, Morrison swiftly hints at Violet’s appeal to music, concretely jazz: “when spring came to the City Violet saw, coming into the building with an Okeh record under her arm...” (Morrison 6), being music the first thing to call her attention about Dorcas. Okeh Records (*Okeh*) is an American label which was characterised by a majority of African-American musicians in the 20s and still nowadays promotes Jazz, R&B and Blues, that is, generally black music genres. At the end of the novel, Violet is pictured carrying an Okeh record again (Morrison 197). Moreover, Dorcas’ close friend Felice typifies this analogy when the narrator tells us she “stopped by Felton’s to get the record [her] mother wanted” (Morrison 205) and that Felice herself “still buys Okeh records at Felton’s” (Morrison 222) after the tragedy. Once again, Morrison clearly shows how every character, impersonating

all black Americans from Harlem, is somehow called, influenced and impacted by their music. In this case, an album record is the beginning of such dramatic interaction.

This frequent interrelation between music and the different characters always acts as a revolutionary catalyst which generates action and communication in the novel: “Violet invited her in to examine the record and that’s how the scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began” (Morrison 6). Morrison regularly accentuates the continuing interdependence and impactful character of music within African-American people’s identity, culture and lives. Another dramatic scenario where she highlights -or even overemphasizes- the significance music always had for her community comes depicted by a woman who was babysitting her little brother but whom she left alone -with a stranger, *our* Violet- because all she cared about was buying a new jazz record: “she left the carriage, empty except for the record she dropped in it – the one she had dashed back into the house for and that was now on the pillow where her baby brother used to be –” (Morrison 19). The policeman who tried to help her judged her for that precise reason: “you left a whole live baby with a stranger to go get a record?” (Morrison 20). For a minute, *The Trombone Blues* carry the heavy weight of an infant and just a music record lies where a baby should be. There is nothing which separates music from African Americans’ lives and personalities; it defines them and determines every step they take. This has also been claimed by other scholars who state that Morrison uses music both as “a form of re-appropriation of lost (appropriated) cultural creations” (Rubenstein 149) in that she firmly “reclaims a distinctly and uniquely African-American tradition” (Rubenstein 149). Morrison challenges “Fitzgerald’s popularized vision of and notions about music in the Jazz Age” (Pici 392) by retrieving the African American musical tradition. In doing so, she brings back “the uncanny ability jazz once had in joining a people together by dynamically reflecting the African American imagination and black experience in general” (Pici 394). After reading *Jazz*, readers understand that it was always a black music genre which goes beyond Gatsby’s parties. Morrison wanted to accentuate the interrelation between jazz and its black people from Harlem.

Although Morrison never specifies the genre in the novel, she steadily alludes to the musical ambience of the City and our New Negroes. Different references have been commented on, but several examples fill the pages all throughout. The streets of Harlem are *jammed* with Black Americans who, for example, count on “seeping music that begged and challenged” (Morrison 67), “race music to urge them on” (Morrison 79), “pat on to the sooty music” (Morrison 133), reminisce over songs like *Wings over Jordan* or *Lay my body down* (Morrison 94). It has also been noticed how she describes “the clarinets that wail, the drums

that pulse - sometimes ebulliently, sometimes sorrowfully - beneath the surface of the characters' lives" (Rubenstein 153). The City's music -and consequently its life- "radiates from Victrolas, glides off rooftops, and ricochets between building of the City, infecting the soul of everyone it reaches" (Pici 393). Close to the end, she narrates a longer jazz scene, both linguistically and thematically, which sugar-coats the atmosphere and underlines one more time the incessant musical identity of Harlem in its 20s:

Young men on the rooftops changed their tune; spit and fiddled with the mouthpiece for a while and when they put it back in and blew out their cheeks it was just like the light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind. You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played. The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not lowdown the way they love to do it, but high and fine (...) That's the way the young men on brass sounded that day. Sure of themselves, sure they were holy, standing up there on the roof tops, facing each other at first, but when it was clear that they had beat the clarinets out, they turned their backs on them, lifted those horns straight up and joined the light just as pure and steady and kind of kind. (Morrison 196-197)

Morrison, as other authors have been done before, pictured a City that was always "characterised more by its low-brow authenticity (in music and dancing) than by its complicity with bohemian white culture" (Balshaw 48). As Cobo Piñero posits, the characters in *Jazz* enjoy the music which conforms the soundtrack of the novel and the City itself (129). She eulogised Harlem so accurately and warmly that scholar Maria Balshaw found in *Jazz* an exemplary urban text (123) to study the city, with music being one of the blueprints.

4.3 Sound and Silence: Confronting, Releasing, Healing.

Jazz is a novel, as many has said, about *crevices*, the fissures within the different relationships and characters' psyches. The story fluctuates between two poles: music and quietude, sound and silence, and both are frequently paralleled to the same meanings. Joe and Violet, who seem as if they doubtfully were once happy with each other, "were drawn together because they had been put together" (Morrison 30). However, a happy recollection from their shared memories is drawn by the tapping sounds which made them dance in a big migratory movement. Whilst travelling North in 1906, both were infused with a feeling of nervousness and fear for the unexpected and it was precisely the rhythm of the tracks which brought them some ease as "they danced on into the City" (Morrison 107):

The train shivered with them (...) and the trembling became the dancing under their feet. Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the baggage rack above his head. He felt dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same. They were hanging there, a young country couple, laughing and tapping back at the tracks. (Morrison 31)

In a train that was filled with colored people, they are not distinguished by the color of their skin, but by the traces of their oral culture. Corbould explains how this distinctive trait was a key factor in *becoming* African American: “making noise, in particular, whether through music or other sorts of sound, was considered to be an African trait, distinct from the visually oriented mainstream American public” (12). Cullen Rath’s exploration on Early American soundscapes illustrates how instrumental sounds have been widely used to construct identities such as African Americans’ (96). As some have pointed out, “Morrison—as she did in *Song of Solomon*—fulfils the impulse to construct a bridge between the African-American oral and literary tradition” (Cataliotti, *Songs* 131). This scene is particularly important because by taking place exactly at the entrance of the City, the reader is able to discern the optimistic spirit that came with Harlem – a willingness to tap, sing, dance, move, because they found a place which loved them:

They weren’t even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them” (Morrison 32).

Related to this convention of musical sounds, Jones identifies an open space of possibilities about jazz when she says it “is about individuals and/in community (...), about *sound and silence*, about *voice and break*” (488, emphasis added). Joe and Violet’s relationship, for instance, is frequently marked by silence, sometimes ironically noisy (Morrison 28). Different moments reflect this throughout the whole book: one, Joe admits to Malvonne that the silence and quietude, the lack of communication, was the main problem within his marriage: “but the quiet, I can’t take the quiet. She don’t hardly talk anymore, and I ain’t allowed near her” (Morrison 49). Apart from being a clear sign of their identity, Morrison links any evocation or scene with music to feelings of happiness, healing, intimacy and freedom, whilst silence in the novel represents trauma, distress and damage. All the hopeful

and pleasing feelings are accompanied by music – be it in sounds or songs. The train-danced episode is not the only time Morrison expresses this correlation. When men are said to be ‘satisfied’, “for balance in pleasure and comfort” (Morrison 50), they are also known to sing: “...and the company of satisfied men. They make the women smile. The tunes whistled through perfect teeth remembered, picked up later and repeated at the kitchen stove” (Morrison 51). These idea links back to Morrison’s mother and her culture. When she talks about jazz and riffs taking place in her house, it informed her about her mother’s emotional or psychological state: “I woke up to the sound of my mother’s voice and it was information. I knew her mood” (Morrison, “Interview”).

Twenty years after that special musical moment in the train, the narrator explains us how the situation evolved: “they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance-hall floor” (Morrison 36). When they had music and sounds, the relationship seemed to flourish, but once they let a sense of muteness filled their house, the secrecy and repulsion invaded it all. One on side, Violet began to lose herself and the current impossibility to have children only made it worse. She invested all her time in taking care of the flock of birds which were the only ones permitted to hear her voice: “over time her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him. He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back: ‘I love you’” (Morrison 22). On the other side, after the fall of 1925, Joe conceded the possibility of tapping, dancing and listening to music to someone else. Once again, when music appears in scene, there is always some sorts of a possibility, a remedy, a slice of hope. It was Dorcas, Joe’s new young lover, who manifested her desire to practise such love for music so their relationship could prosper and gain some security: “I just want to dance with you” (Morrison 39), she asks and continues, “if you don’t want to dance, we can just sit there at the table (...) by the lamplight and listen to the music and watch the people” (Morrison 41). The sounds and dance which once made Joe and Violet laugh, now were a condition for a new relationship to show some commitment.

Opposed to these views, Alice Manfred, Dorcas’ aunt, shows a dissenting attitude towards music because of its revolting and brand-new connotations: “...the dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild. (...) It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law” (58). She even thinks that “lowdown music (...) had something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger” (Morrison 57) over the race killings. However, the portrayal of that Silent Negro Parade of 1917 in the novel clearly

favours the intense sound of drums as a means to bring all black men and women together as a community fighting for freedom and justice. Music becomes not only a release but a support system as it was for Morrison: “then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned in the distance, gathering them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and her brother-in-law the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above” (58). Alice, who had lost her sister and brother-in-law in those riots of East St. Louis was somehow able to feel them again, even if she was unaware at that time.

Both Dorcas’ and Alice’s perceptions about music are very different because of the experiences they relate it or connect it to, but from both perspectives it can be inferred that music serves a bigger purpose than entertainment. For Alice, music is a rope which connects her to her lineage, her people, her culture, and makes her confront and release past traumas which she still needs to work on. For Dorcas, it meant the beginning of a new different life. Belonging to a new generation, for Dorcas, music was easily the new panorama which infused the Harlem Renaissance and began to assemble and constitute her own African American identity, a distinct *selfhood* marked by the sounds she heard when she was nine years old: “the drums she heard at the parade were only the first part, the first word, of a command. For her the drums were not an all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence. She remembered them as the beginning, a start of something she looked back to complete” (60). Music made Dorcas a vow that night – it would always be present, as the footprint which bonds and epitomise the Black American community. As the narrator says about the city, a new order -and a new identity, the New Negro- was ahead: “at last, at last, everything’s ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help-stuff” (Morrison 7). Both Dorcas and the narrator’s voice celebrate, as Rubenstein claims, “the era of the ‘New Negro’ along with the emergence of opportunity, cultural pride, and *vibrant new musical idiom*” (152, emphasis added).

Because Alice was driven by her sorrow, she tried arduously to “privatize her niece” (67) and when Dorcas turned seventeen, the narrator claims, “her whole life was unbearable” (61). Be that as it may, music was the heroine which proved to rescue Dorcas, or anyone in the City, and help them mitigate the pain: “doors to speakeasies stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman to decide on the key (...) The City is smart at this (...) and good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own” (64), being the City moans its music and immersing sounds. This was the

closest equivalent to a Paradise for Dorcas and others like her. It inaugurated the freedom African Americans longed for, a new lifestyle, a new personality. As Ana M^a Manzanás indicates, “Dorcas, orphaned by the East St. Louis riots, defines herself not through the racial anger implicit in the music, but through the sensuousness the music evoked” (102). It was always an escape for the new youth. As Morrison pictures in the dance-hall, while they all listen to music, the “spirit lifts to the ceiling where it floats for a bit looking down with pleasure on the dressed-up nakedness below (...) Dorcas is satisfied, content (...) The music bends, falls to its knees to embrace them all, encourage them all to live a little” (188). She insists, even if there were a “moment of doubt, the music will solve and dissolve any question” (188). The extent of presence of music in Dorcas’ life is consistent until her very end when she is shot by Joe at the party and a woman’s voice singing a familiar song is her only focus: “The record playing is over. Somebody they have been waiting for is playing the piano. A woman is singing too. The music is faint but I know the words by heart” (Morrison 193). When Morrison introduced the character of Dorcas, she made sure her whole aura was connected and impacted to music. We learnt that music was the beginning of everything for Dorcas and at the club it becomes also the end. In the last minutes of Dorcas’ stream of consciousness, we can see music was her companion until her very last breath: “Bright. Listen. I don’t know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart” (Morrison 193), claims as she dies.

After that party, Joe and Violet Trace add one more tribulation to their collection of wounds: someone’s death and the haunting remembrances. It is not surprising, however, to detect Morrison using music again as a tool to lessen the pain and dilute the memories. There is a key tender moment for Joe in the novel when a musician is singing in the street while he cries. As in a theatrical performance, Joe embraces the melody and hears his emotions being accurately described. The singer, with his peg leg “stretched out comfy [and] his real one (...) carrying both the beat and the guitar’s weight” (Morrison 119), comforts Joe with a sense of reciprocal understanding when he sings:

Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man.

Everybody knows your name.

Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die-man.

Everybody knows your name. (Morrison 119)

The omnipresent narrator tells us Joe “probably thinks that the song is about him” (Morrison 119) or, at least, “he’d like believing it” (119), in an attempt to make some sense out

of his affliction and heartache. In some way, the bluesman who sings about a lonely man provided Joe with some comfort which made him feel less solitary. However, this therapeutic assistance of music does not only help Joe feel accompanied, but both Joe and Violet feel in unison again. When Felice visits them to tell Joe everything that happened after he shot Dorcas, she senses and witness a change of air in the ambience. It is Felice the one who discovers what kind of medicine and therapy Joe and Violet Trace need to move on:

Somebody in the house across the alley put a record on and the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be looking at them doing that. (Morrison 215)

After that intimate moment, Joe –still unknowingly of the real answer– mentions their place needed some birds in order to defy the quietness which invaded their house. However, Felice, as any young girl of the era would have noticed, added: “and a Victrola (...) If you get one, I'll bring some records” (Morrison 214-215). She knew, as all of them did later, that music was everything their marriage really needed: “so if neither food nor company nor its own shelter was important to it, Violet decided, and Joe agreed, nothing was left to love or need but music” (Morrison 224). This is a reminder of Gilbert Bond's claim on Jazz as being “an improvised reworking of the familiar which depends upon everyone knowing the original reference sound [and] when it works, it sounds as natural and intimate as two lovers who don't have to finish sentences” (qtd. in Jones 487). After everything they went through, Violet and Joe Trace were able to understand each other in that musical space where every mistake was from the past and the City danced with them again, just like they did once upon a time on a train which was going North. Furthermore, the silence that once bothered them has become now a room for new music, new sounds and the commodity of not needing to utter words so as to understand the other. Just like Blues and Jazz represent a connection between two friends, Nel and Sula, in Morrison's *Sula*, music represents the remedy which reconstructs Joe and Violet's marital obstacles in *Jazz*. As Morrison herself once said “the art form that was healing for Black people was music” (qtd. in Omry 21), and she patently demonstrated it this novel.

4.4 Objection and Emancipation: The Sound of Freedom.

Although some has been previously mentioned, a very clear way of looking at the way music helped them to free African Americans was recurring to it in protests. Morrison did not miss the opportunity and, when the reader is introduced to the character of Alice Manfred, she drives the attention to the *Silent Parade* from the summer of 1917. The streets of Manhattan were filled with black American men, women and even children who marched peacefully in an attempt to, on one side, mourn the deaths of African American victims of a race riot which took place that year in the US and, on the other, demand justice and take action against discrimination and racism. Organised by the NAACP⁹ and some of the flyers would read: “we march because we want our children to live in a better land and enjoy fairer conditions that have fallen to our lot” (Maranzani) among others. The strategy of the protest was to let silence speak but the truth is, as Morrison reveals in the book, that the -attempted- hidden message was given through the music, implied within the drums:

Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marvelling 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 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. (Morrison 53)

She insists later on, “what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the dreams said for them” (54). As it was done often, they relied on music and sounds to voice their feelings. To communicate, state or declare, every sentiment they had hidden for so long. Thus, Morrison understands how the drums *created a space for them to speak* (53, emphasis added). This was recognised by famous singer Nina Simone herself: “when the civil right thing came up, all of a sudden, I could let myself be heard about what I’d be feeling all along” (What Happened, 00:45:30-00:45-41). After becoming full of rage and indignation due to the bombing event from 1963 in Alabama, she wrote one of the most famous ‘protest songs’, “Mississippi Goddam”. She found a bigger purpose in her music and named those songs “civil rights music” (00:52:00).

⁹ In 1909, a group of activists (W.E.B Du Bois among them) founded and established the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and it still works nowadays to tackle and dismantle racism and inequality. See more at: <https://naacp.org/>.

In a way, the impenetrable sounds and music used in the protests made characters like Alice Manfred recognise their traumas, face the violence they had just been witnessing and confront it; and helped others, like it happened to Nina, voice everything they had been suppressing for a long time. Music strengthened the revolution and ignited the black people of America. In the end, although she struggled to recognise it, Alice achieved too some sort of release and progress: “the drums and the freezing faces hurt her, but hurt was better than fear and Alice had been frightened for a long time” (54). She stopped being scared, although more music would be needed to stop her from being sorrowful.

This small detail from the book shows only the anticipation of future movements where music and sounds were used in protests. Throughout history, it has been noticed how a great number of black people employed and “transformed versions of black church-and sometimes popular-music in protest against Jim Crow racial exclusion and tyranny in the United States” (Jimoh 104). Peretti claims that it was the Jazz Age in particular which “signaled the real beginning of popular music’s role as a weapon for community pride and activism among urban blacks” (93). Especially the black artists in the North “became increasingly angry and activist as they became swept up in the growing urban movements against persistent racism and inequality” (Peretti 120). As the scholar recounts, “from the beginning, the grassroots civil rights movement used music to foster community, solidarity, and fortitude” (Peretti 143), leading later on to the well-known ‘freedom songs’, which resulted on a “key tool for building solidarity and instilling courage in the activists” (144), just like the drums supported the frozen faces Alice Manfred saw parading in 1917.

5. Conclusions

Taking into account the history of African Americans, their deeply-rooted connection to an oral tradition and their social, political and cultural blossoming during and after the Harlem Renaissance, this dissertation has attempted to show how music is a consistent motif in Afro-American fiction which represents mainly three different ideas: (1) that black music has always been a symbolic constituent of African Americans' identity and strongly embodies their ethnic group, (2) that the effects it unleashes and the feelings they release turn music into a cathartic resource which eases their *blues* and helps them heal, and, lastly, (3) that their political statements were delivered through sounds and music in an attempt to strengthen their emancipatory and revolutionary messages in a tough fight for Civil Rights and freedom. These ideas have been explored and analysed in three different stories with similar settings: *Sonny's Blues* by James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*.

In *Sonny's Blues*, it has been explored the way Baldwin recurs to jazz and blues to exemplify the power of music in reconciling two brothers from Harlem and to help them overcome their own traumas. Sonny, a heroin addict dreaming of becoming a musician, finds in music a cathartic tool that allows him to heal from his suffering, find his own voice and reclaim individual agency. On the other side, his brother, a conservative algebra teacher, undergoes an inner transformation where music consistently acts as the main catalyst. Repeatedly forced to confront his past, he faces and releases suppressed memories and fears after learning how to really *listen*. In doing so, he reconciles with his black roots, mends the relationship with his younger brother Sonny and find relief from past burdens. Hence, Baldwin celebrates black music and finds in it a literary motif which represents a cathartic, defining and liberating tool, capable of healing past wounds and familiar *dissonances*, as well as shaping the New Negro identity and consolidate the African American community and its cultural roots.

In the second story, it has been argued how, in order to recover African American history, Ishmael Reed creates the Text of The Jes Grew, a psychic pandemic spreading from New Orleans on his way to New York, which threatens to end with the current Western civilization in an attempt to bring back a magical *blackness* celebration. Representing an *anti-plague*, it is characterised by jazz, dancing and other African ancient traits which help its carriers to free themselves, release suppressed emotions, liberate their souls and rebel themselves against the fascist opposition. Thus, *Mumbo Jumbo* embodies the musical and euphoric identity of Afro-Americans who willingly want to catch this new virus and give rise to the New Negro generation. This Afrofuturistic text shows us PaPa LaBas and his helpers aiming to preserve this Jes Grew for its powerful effects in the black American community and

it reassures us that, even when its Text has been burnt down, new black artists and musicians will continue to *play its tune* in the future.

Finally, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* analysis portrays music as an inherent and omnipresent being in the lives of African Americans and their City, resulting in constant references which turn it almost into another character. Furthermore, after paying attention to Violet and Joe's tumultuous and silent marriage, it is exposed how they communicate better when they are surrounded by music or sounds. In the end, after everything they have endured (and the crime they have committed), we learn that music is the last glimpse of hope in their lives. As such, their relationship is restored when they manage to dance to some records together one more time. On a similar account, although Joe's young lover Dorcas' ending is not as fortunate, she embodies the empowered and self-defined New Negro identity which is always fuelled and heightened by music. Lastly, an emotive recalling of some 20s protests against race riots subtly proves how the power of sound is always a resource to reinforce socio-political messages in the fight for freedom.

In all of them, the presence of music is equally significant and, although the three authors evoke those messages in a very different style and through diverse topics, the statement remains the same consistently. They are all developed in the same urban spaces of Harlem and at the most meaningful decades for the black community of the United States. Both Baldwin and Morrison use music as a means to reconcile relationships through the healing process of individual traumas. At the same time, they all picture music as a symbolic oral tradition shared within families and passed on through lineages. In the three stories music is a thread connecting the lives of African American characters where it represents both the symbol and the practice which helped them find the agency needed to define themselves, giving birth thus to the New Negro individuality. Lastly, our three writers reaffirm the emancipatory effect of music since they all engage in protest songs and the strong communicative message music sends when played in the fight for civil rights.

Thus, the three novels and writers are perfect examples to support this thesis and its arguments in that African American fiction is indeed fuelled by the presence of music and its characters reflect that in their connection to it. For African-American authors, music is indeed a recurrent and inspiring subject matter with several purposes, as mentioned, defining, healing and liberating. As Baldwin claimed in his short story, music is "the only light we've got in all this darkness" (141) and black authors firmly knew that.

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