

“I wanted to live in that music:” Blues, Bessie Smith and Improvised Identities in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*

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The blues women did not passively reflect the vast social changes of their time; they provided new ways of thinking about these changes, alternative conceptions of the physical and social world for their audience of migrating and urban women and men, and social models for women who aspired to escape from and now improve their conditions of existence. (Hazel Carby 26)

To think of ‘woman’ as a set of changes that can be improvised upon exposes the flexibility, variability, and historicity of the category ‘woman’: it does not reduce all women to essentialist expectations of common female culture; nor does it restrict them to roles constructed within their historical cultural contexts. (Sherrie Tucker 262)

Improvised music appears throughout Ann-Marie MacDonald’s first novel, *Fall On Your Knees* (1996); in most cases it is performed by women who use their music to challenge both conventional musical practices and socially prescribed gender roles. Materia, for example, who is crushed by the oppressive, patriarchal authority of her husband James, finds her most profound form of resistance and survival through playing the piano, particularly improvisations. Similarly, Frances, one of her daughters, who works for a while as a stripper at a local speakeasy, destabilizes notions of women as sex objects through her self-consciously performative acts in which she also destabilizes conventions of musical genres.¹ Fairly early in the novel, then, MacDonald identifies improvised music with social resistance: for both Frances and Materia, the self-reflexivity of their improvised performances constitutes a critique of socially imposed definitions of women that they find profoundly oppressive.

The music of Materia and Frances provides an important context for the experiences of Materia’s eldest daughter, Kathleen. Kathleen has, at least initially, a very different relationship with music from her mother and sister. She is her Daddy’s girl, taught by him to reject her mother, particularly her Arabic language, her Lebanese cooking and her experimental music. James is of Scottish and Irish heritage, and he encourages Kathleen to understand herself in those terms. Kathleen is a musical prodigy, and James takes control of her training very early in her life. He is raising her to become a virtuosa classical singer, but when Kathleen goes to New York in the winter of 1918 to receive further training, she finds herself swept up by the lively night life of Harlem, particularly its jazz and blues clubs, and she falls in love with Rose, her African American accompanist, who is also a skilled jazz improviser. It is in this social context that Kathleen’s musical sensibilities begin to share some common ground with her mother’s and her sister’s, as she becomes enamoured with improvised music and experiences its socially liberatory possibilities. The focus of this paper, then, will be to analyse the significance of Kathleen’s transformation in this section of the novel, her relationship with Rose, and ways in which the historical context of Harlem in the early twentieth century, and particularly the figure of Bessie Smith (in the guise of the character Jessie Hogan), contribute to her transformation. I will argue that this section of the novel makes an explicit link between the improvisatory nature of jazz and blues and freedom from socially prescribed expectations for gender and heterosexuality, and consequently provides an important perspective on the ongoing debates about the political purchase of jazz.

It is important to highlight the historical elements that make this time and place so dynamic for women, and that facilitate such a significant transformation for Kathleen. Before moving on to a detailed analysis of the novel, then, I will briefly explore some of the historical context with regard to African American women and music at this time. The character of Jessie Hogan points to the rich history of the great blues women of this era, women who, through their songs, costumes, and improvised lyrics and melodies, explicitly and implicitly tackled issues such as domestic violence and poverty, and challenged normative ideas of black female identity and sexuality. Hogan, the blues singer who profoundly changes Kathleen’s understanding of music—“Sweet Jessie Hogan is a singer. I am not a singer”—is quite clearly modeled on Bessie Smith, whose career was starting to take off at this time. Hogan is introduced as both “The Goddess of the Blues” and “The Empress of the Blues” (523) (Bessie Smith, of course, was known as the “Empress of the Blues”), and she is described as having the same kind of lavish costume and powerful stage presence as Smith. In modeling Hogan after Bessie Smith, MacDonald has highlighted one of the most powerful and well-known women of the time. At the height of her career in the 1920s, Smith was making more money than any other African American, male or female (Albertson 79). She was also a pioneer of blues recording, as she, Ma Rainey and others were the first, male or female, to begin recording that music.

By invoking this celebrated singer, however, MacDonald is also highlighting one of the ironies of jazz history. In spite of the fact that Smith and other blues women were the first to record this music and clearly had a major influence on subsequent jazz and blues musicians, their impact rarely gets fully acknowledged in jazz and blues histories. Eric Porter argues that this omission points to how quickly and profoundly jazz and blues became a masculinized discourse and cultural space:

Scholars have noted the irony of the recorded legacy of the masculine world of instrumental jazz developing out of women's blues music in the early 1920s. Record companies at first had little interest in recording instrumental jazz until its practitioners established their reputations by accompanying female blues singers. But since then, the jazz world has been a male-dominated sphere of activity. Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, there developed a homosocial jazz community, whose ethos of male camaraderie provided refuge from the outside world, a model for behavior on the bandstand, and an ethos for artistic growth in a friendly yet competitive atmosphere. The jazz world mirrored gender inequalities in the broader society, the labor force, and the arts in general. (31)

The allusion to Bessie Smith in the novel, then, acknowledges and reminds us of the political complexities of jazz history, that while it is a music that has deep roots in resistance to racial oppression it is also a music that has always marginalized women, even women who manage to be very successful.

Another significant point about the blues women of this period is that they not only succeeded in a masculine environment, but they also, through their music, articulated an overt critique of gender relations in their society. Angela Davis argues that while these singers have been accused of representing women as passive, and even masochistic, victims of male abuse and violence, a closer look at their lyrics and performances "suggest[s] emergent feminist insurgency in that they unabashedly name the problem of male violence and so usher it out of the shadows of domestic life where society had kept it hidden and beyond public or political scrutiny" (29-30). Davis observes that "the most frequent stance assumed by the women in these songs is independence and assertiveness—indeed defiance" (21). In other words, these women were not merely entertainers with nothing of import to say, nor were they implicitly encouraging women to accept gender inequities of the day. Rather they were openly political and politicized arbiters of social justice, particularly with regard to women's rights. Porter identifies how important these performers and their songs were to African American women of the time:

the song lyrics of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and other singers were a running commentary on issues of interest to working-class African Americans (especially women) during this period. Blues songs spoke of migration and urbanization, natural disasters, work, crime, racial and economic exploitation, freedom, and other relevant issues. Women's blues of the 1920s also critiqued patriarchal gender relations, male violence, and the restrictions of the domestic sphere. Blueswomen told of leaving violent, unfaithful, or inadequate male lovers; boasted of their own sexual prowess and conquests; and affirmed lesbian relationships as healthy alternatives to the confines of heterosexuality. (26-7)

As Porter indicates, one of the important issues openly addressed by these singers was lesbian relationships. Carby argues that the music of the great blues women "confronted conventional expectations of male/female sexual relationships and challenged the narrow boundaries and limits of compulsory heterosexuality" (53). Ma Rainey, for example, is known for her performances of "Prove It On Me Blues," in which she defiantly challenges her listeners to "prove" that she is involved in relationships with women, even as the lyrics make clear that she is. Similarly, Bessie Smith is known to have changed the pronouns to at least one of her songs, "Down Hearted Blues," to make it clear that she is talking about a woman (Nazarowitz). Both women are known to have been quite openly bisexual. In openly and positively addressing lesbian relationships in their music, these women brought a taboo subject into the realm of popular culture, and provided their substantial audiences across the country with alternative ways of conceptualizing their own sexual identity.

The social context invoked by the presence of Jessie Hogan, then, is a powerful backdrop for the relationship between Kathleen and Rose. Bessie Smith was an icon of female strength and independence, a spokeswoman, through her music, for women's rights, and a pioneer of jazz music: she is thereby an ideal role model for two young women, both musicians, who are bumping up against social expectations that limit their sense of themselves. Hogan embodies and proudly asserts a sexual identity that transgresses the cultural norm, and thus enables a discursive space in which the relationship between Rose and Kathleen can flourish.²

In large part, that discursive space is signified by Hogan's improvised vocals, and I will return to that point in a moment. Before I move on to analyse the politics of improvisation in the novel, however, I would like to discuss the problematics of the very argument I am making here, that is, that Hogan discursively enables the sexual freedom of Kathleen. At the same time that Hogan is linked to a very positive representation of lesbian love-making, and thereby forges a link between the music of blues women and a productive resistant political discourse, she is also characterized as an African American woman who, in effect, "saves" a young white woman from feeling constrained by normative ideas of gender and sexuality. Kathleen, who sees herself as white, in spite of having a Lebanese mother, finds the freedom to explore her sexual identity, not at home in Cape Breton, but in an African American cultural space, that is, Harlem and the jazz clubs, and in an iconic blues singer and an African American lover who is also a jazz musician. While the novel celebrates Harlem and the music it produced during this time, it does not (in spite of its attention to the complex race relations of Cape Breton Island) pay much attention to the widespread racism in the U.S. and the discursive constructions of African Americans engendered by that racism.

Of particular significance here, given the link between jazz and sexual identity in the novel, is the extent to which African American women were sexualized by the dominant white culture. Porter suggests that racist assumptions of eroticized primitivism and exoticism in African Americans were pervasive in discussions about jazz: "Much of the outcry over jazz had to do with sex. The rhythmic qualities of jazz, the participatory elements of its performance, and the physical aspects of the dancing associated with it spoke of unrestrained sexual energies, which had long been projected onto black bodies by Europeans and white Americans" (9). Certainly the article by Anne Faulkner published in *Ladies Home Journal*, "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation" (August, 1921), expresses her concerns about jazz, concerns that betray a profound racist bias: "Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird chant, accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the voodoo invocers, has also been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality." Faulkner warns that jazz is "an evil influence on the young people of to-day" and that it is leading to "outrageous dances [. . .] in private as well as public ballrooms." The implication here is that jazz is a non-white music that corrupts white youth by encouraging sexual licentiousness.³ Another infamous article of the day was written by Carl Van Hechten for *Vanity Fair* in 1925. Van Hechten was a well-known white patron of African American music during this period, but his considerable appreciation for Bessie Smith reveals the same kind of racist assumptions as in Faulkner's piece, as we see in his description of one of her performances:

She was at this time the size of Fay Templeton in her Weber and Fields days, which means very large, and she wore a crimson satin robe, sweeping up from her trim ankles, and embroidered in multicolored sequins in designs. Her face was beautiful with the rich ripe beauty of southern darkness, a deep bronze, matching the bronze of her bare arms. Walking slowly to the footlights, to the accompaniment of the wailing, muted brasses, the monotonous African pounding of the drum, the dromedary glide of the pianist's fingers over the responsive keys, she began her strange, rhythmic rites in a voice full of shouting and moaning and praying and suffering, a wild, rough, Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, but seductive and sensuous too, released between rouged lips and the whitest of teeth, the singer swaying slightly to the beat, as is the Negro custom:

"Yo' brag to women I was yo' fool, so den I got dose sobbin' hahted Blues." Celebrating her unfortunate love adventures, the Blues are the Negro's prayer to a cruel Cupid.

Now, inspired partly by the powerfully magnetic personality of this elemental conjure woman with her plangent African voice, quivering with passion and pain, sounding as if it had been developed at the sources of the toes, burst into hysterical, semi-religious shrieks of sorrow and lamentation. Amens rent the air. (qtd. in Albertson 106-7)

It is worth taking a moment here to consider whether MacDonald herself is perpetuating this stereotype, as sexual freedom and jazz are explicitly linked in this novel, and one can see some similarities between Van Hechten's description of Smith and the following description Kathleen writes of Hogan:

Silence fell over the whole joint and the impresario stepped up to invoke the Goddess of Blues, "Ladies and gentlemen, the star of our show: The Empress of the Blues. Cleopatra of jazz. The Lowest, the Highest, the Holiest, the Sweetest, Miss! Jessie! Hogan!" [. . .] The curtain parts purple and gold to reveal: pearls and peacock-blue. Fourteen carats wink at every compass point. She starts off in a spotlight and emits a single moan. It goes on for minutes—growing, subsiding, exploding, until you're not sure if she's praying or cursing. She drags her voice over gravel, then soothes it with silk, she crucifies, dies, buries and rises, it will come again to save the living and the dead. People spontaneously applaud and shout, sometimes all together, sometimes singly. La

Hogan is absolutely silent after the opening sacrament while God descends invisibly to investigate. Then, once He's split and the coast is clear, she spurts like a trumpet till the trumpet can't take it any more and hits her back—they fight blow for blow till she raises her arms and calls a truce. She takes a step off the stage. The audience yelps, the trombone belts a shocked comment and she bursts into her song without words, quadruple time, strutting to the centre of the hall, dancing, the band following her like obedient treasure-bearers—except for piano—the drummer beats on every passing surface, people start clapping time as The Hogan somehow threads her stuff between the spindly tables and throngs of faithful. At the end of that first number she says, "Welcome and good evening," just as though she were an ordinary mortal. Sweat streams from her pearl headband and she flashes her ivory and gold smile. I guess she must weigh a good two hundred pounds. (523-24)

There are certainly similarities between Van Hechten's description of Smith and Kathleen's description of Hogan, with their shared emphasis on sensuality, the lavish costume, the considerable stage presence, and the improvised vocalizations. Furthermore, Rose and Kathleen make love immediately after seeing Hogan perform, which positions Hogan as a symbol of or gateway to sexual freedom.

On the other hand, there are some significant differences between Kathleen's description of Hogan and Van Hechten's description of Smith. Van Hechten puts Smith's performance in the context of what he clearly sees as an exotic, primitive African heritage that leads her to become hysterical and indecipherable, except, of course, as a white man's fantasy of African exoticism. Kathleen's description avoids the rhetoric of primitivism, and, unlike Van Hechten, Kathleen emphasizes the musical genius of the performer. Hogan is characterized as a powerful leader of the band, who can produce a wide range of sounds, including the sounds produced by the men on their horns, and at a tremendous pace. She is a technically accomplished musician, and, in the contexts of racial oppression, a music industry—including the blues—dominated by men, and the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement, her improvisatory style can be interpreted not just as a new kind of music but also as a challenge to established gender and race relations and a celebration of personal power and African American culture.

Furthermore, it is significant that Kathleen's description of Hogan does not objectify her body in the way that Van Hechten objectifies Smith's.⁴ Kathleen emphasizes Hogan's apparel, but not her body. This is interesting in the light of Carby's argument about the political significance of the stage outfits the blues women wore. Carby argues that the lavish costumes that these women were renowned for were calculated forms of resistance to dominant notions of black women's sexuality and lack of social and political power: "Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body, reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire" (18). Kathleen's description of Hogan's appearance evokes the kind of sensual power Carby sees as being a key part of the blues women's identity, and perhaps makes some sense of the notion that Hogan can symbolize an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality.

Indeed, I would argue that the dual emphasis on Hogan's costume as well as her improvisatory skill constitutes much of the political power of this passage. The description of Hogan is almost entirely metonymic: she is described as "pearls and peacock blue." This emphasis on her attire highlights Hogan's stage performance as a self-consciously performative display, an intentional excess of sexuality and femininity. It is, as Judith Butler might put it, a kind of drag performance which highlights the performativity of gender and sexuality and thereby challenges the idea that these are stable and essential aspects of identity. Butler's notion of performativity is particularly interesting in relation to the idea of improvisation as well as drag. If drag disrupts the presumption of essential gender categories by reminding us that we are *all* in drag all the time, as it were, then improvised music can be seen to disrupt essentialized ideas about composition, harmonies, rhythm, tempo, key signatures etc. as well as essentialized gendering of musical styles, instruments, and performance. What Butler says of signification in language resonates in interesting ways in relation to music:

Political signifiers, especially those that designate subject positions, are not descriptive; that is, they do not represent pre-given constituencies, but are empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments of various kinds. No signifier can be radically representative, for every signifier is the site of a perpetual *méconnaissance*; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved. Paradoxically, the failure of such signifiers—'women' is the one that comes to mind—fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. It is what opens the signifier to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification. It is this

open-ended and performative function of the signifier that seems to me to be crucial to a radical democratic notion of futurity. (191)

If one sees notes as signifiers, improvised music can be seen to be highlighting the extent to which notes are, to reiterate Butler's terminology, "empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments" of meaning. Improvised music can draw attention to the failure of music to signify in stable ways, and thus can open up possibilities for "political resignification." As I have indicated above, the two features of Hogan's performance that are emphasized are her costume and her improvised vocals. Indeed, the description strongly suggests that Hogan is not, at this point, singing words, but rather is improvising both melodically and sonically. Drag and improvised music are combined here to offer a complex exposé of essentialized categories of gender, sexuality, race, and music, and the relationships among them.

I would like to make it clear, however, that I do not see improvisation in and of itself signifying resistance or freedom. While one might argue that any improvised sound is resistant because it eschews the stasis of a pre-written composition, and, in the case of much avant-garde jazz, appears to flout established conventions of music, one might just as easily argue that all improvised music signifies in some way in relation to established musical codes, that one can only interpret it as resistant in the context of musical conventions that we perceive it to be resisting. As Ajay Heble puts it, in his book entitled *Rebel Musics*,

let's acknowledge that any analysis of sound *in itself* is already problematic. For sound doesn't, we suggest, simply signify on its own. A chord or an interval, for instance, cannot, by itself, automatically signify as an expression of noncompliance against oppressions and injustices. Rather, resistant sounds [. . .] need to be considered in the broader context of a set of institutions and practices that serve to reinvigorate public dialogue about the injustices facing aggrieved populations and that facilitate the creation of oppositional sites, formations, and opportunities. (Fischlin and Heble 236)

Heble's point is that sounds become resistant only within social and institutional contexts. George Lewis's take on this issue helps shed light on Heble's argument. Lewis argues that while there is nothing inherently resistant about improvised music, African American improvised music has a long history of articulating resistance to racial oppression that distinguishes it from the experimental "new music" of people like John Cage and Iannis Xenakis:

In the musical domain, improvisation is neither a style of music nor a body of musical techniques. Structure, meaning, and context in musical improvisation arise from the domain-specific analysis, generation, manipulation, and transformation of sonic symbols. [. . .]. For African-American improvisers, however, sonic symbolism is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality as well as form. New improvisative and compositional styles are often identified with ideals of race advancement and, more important, as resistive ripostes to perceived opposition to black social expression and economic advancement by the dominant white American culture. (134)

Lewis's analysis of African American improvised music is a useful way to approach the description of Jessie Hogan. That is, her improvised vocals, seen in the context of African American history and in the context of the racially oppressive America in which she was performing, can be seen to signify resistance to racial oppression. I'll return to this idea below, but first I would like to point to the significance of gender politics as part of the cultural terrain here. Gender politics within the context of race advancement were of primary concern to the blues women, and yet are very rarely considered to be part of the resistant discourse of blues and jazz men. Julie Dawn Smith, for example, argues that while "African-American explorations of freedom in free jazz [. . .] critiqued the function of music in relation to power" (228), they did so in the context of racial but not gender oppression:

Neither free improvisation [European "new music"] nor free jazz, however, extended their critiques to include the aesthetic, economic, or political liberation of women. For the most part, a practice of freedom that resisted gender oppression and oppression on the basis of sexual difference was excluded from the liberatory impulses of male-dominated improvising communities. The opportunity for freedom in relation to sexual difference, gender, and sexuality for women improvisers was strangely absent from the discourses and practices of both free jazz and free improvisation. (229)

Sherrie Tucker makes a similar point, cautioning us to avoid seeing improvised music as a resistant discourse that offers its critique outside of existing discourses and social contexts:

Even the most experimental varieties of jazz, while they may transform how we hear and think and play and conceive relationships, do so not by transcending culture and history, but by signifying within constellations of historically situated meaning. As such, jazz communities are not immune to reproducing hierarchical social meanings of their times and places through musical narratives, divisions of labor, and distribution of prestige, even as they may strive for the new. As Robin Kelley reminds us in his race and gender analysis of 1940s zoot suit culture, “the creation of an alternative culture can simultaneously challenge *and* reinforce existing power relations.” (245)

Both Smith and Tucker argue, however, that improvised music *can* address issues such as gender inequality and compulsory heterosexuality, and that it is important to acknowledge ways in which women have used improvisation to do just that. Smith, for example, focuses on the 1970s all-female free improvisation group called the Feminist Improvising Group. As she puts it, “The impetus to gather a group of women improvisers together into a collective was galvanized by the glaring absence of women improvisers en masse in performance situations” (231). This group, not unlike the women blues singers, explicitly addressed gender issues through a self-consciously performative display of sound and images: “On stage the women appeared in drag, engaged in role-playing, performed domestic chores, peeled onions, and sprayed perfume” (233). The group not only challenged culturally imposed expectations of femininity, but also, again, in the tradition of singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, highlighted the pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality: “FIG used drag to critique and parody the institution of compulsory heterosexuality that existed in society and in various forms of music as well” (235). It is interesting to note here that in the advertisement for Ma Rainey’s “Prove It On Me Blues,” Rainey was featured, according to Davis, “sporting a man’s hat, jacket, and tie and, while a policeman looked on, obviously attempting to seduce two women on a street corner” (39).

The description of Jessie Hogan, which I discussed above, emphasizes similar connections among sartorial excess, improvised music, and resistance to conventional, naturalized notions of gender, sexuality and race. Like the members of the Feminist Improvising Group, Jessie Hogan is self-consciously performative; her flamboyant costume and stage presence exceed the conventional parameters of a delicate femininity on the one hand, and challenge the stereotype of African American women as primitive and sexually available to men on the other. Blues women, of course, articulated much of this kind of social resistance quite clearly in their lyrics: songs that addressed domestic violence, that celebrated women as sexual beings who may desire men or women, and that critiqued the stereotype of women as being confined to the domestic sphere. What is interesting is that the novel does not focus on those lyrics, important though they are, but rather on the improvisatory nature of the blues women’s performances, which are played out through both their dress and their music. In other words, the political potency of Hogan’s performance is its combination of drag and an improvisatory style that unsettles conventional ideas of music, particularly music performed by women.

The connections we see here among improvised music, cross-dressing and feminist critique are also played out in the character of Rose. When Rose and Kathleen have their first sexual experience together, Rose is dressed in a man’s suit, and they pass as a heterosexual couple while out on the town in Harlem, although they draw stares for being an inter-racial couple. The novel does not invite us, however, to interpret Rose’s cross-dressing as a capitulation to the heterosexual norm. Indeed, we can interpret her suit as drawing attention to, again, in Butler’s terminology, the performativity of gender, and the absence of *any* stable sexual identities or categories. This point is highlighted in the novel by the way Rose dresses during the day. Kathleen is critical at first of Rose’s old-fashioned and conservative clothing: “Someone should do something about her clothes. She dresses in pink, with puffed sleeves, pleated skirts and a hemline one inch above the ankle. Looks like she just came out of church around twenty years ago” (470). Rose’s excessive sartorial femininity parodies and consequently critiques expectations for women to be delicate and sexually modest, and consequently it has the same effect as her cross-dressing: it destabilizes fixed gender categories. Rose simply dons one costume during the day and another at night, and while the evening garb is expedient in that it allows her and Kathleen to be intimate in public in a way that they would otherwise not feel free to be, it also does the important work of critiquing normative gender and sexual identities. Rose’s suit can also be interpreted as a critique of the masculinization of jazz. Porter, in his analysis of the early gendering of jazz as masculine, cites Patrick Hill’s analysis of the “hypermasculine culture” of the jazz scene, which manifested itself in a variety of ways, including dress:

In a world where most working-class black men had few opportunities to safely challenge existing social relations, verbal performances (urban toasts, the dozens, and so forth), sexual play, and “spectacular” sartorial display composed a “masculinist politics of style” that articulated a new urban identity, demanded respect, and critiqued race relations while affirming a gendered hierarchy. The valorization of “bravado” and “brilliance” that was part of this subculture fed into the

improvisational ethos in jazz and ultimately helped to validate black male genius in a society that denied it. (Porter 28-9)

These are telling connections identified here among masculinity, race, jazz, and dress. Porter and Hill are arguing that the political potency of improvised music and “‘spectacular’ sartorial display” as a critique of race relations in America was achieved at the expense of gender relations, as women were given only limited access to a world where both the music itself and the clothing of the musicians were seen not only as profoundly militant, but also as profoundly masculine. Rose’s cross-dressing highlights that political reality by emphasizing the instability of gender categories and the perception of jazz music, and improvisation in particular, as “masculine.” That Rose in the end permanently adopts the persona of “Doc Rose,” a male jazz pianist, speaks both to the gendered inequities of the jazz world, and to the possibilities for critiquing and troubling those inequities.⁵

Indeed Rose’s own improvised music opens Kathleen’s mind to the conception of jazz as a discursive space that enables new epistemologies and ontologies. Kathleen is amazed by Rose’s improvising even before they become involved, and her amazement comes from her inability to define it within familiar musical parameters:

That’s when I heard the most sublime, the most beautiful music. I thought it was Chopin at first, it was that romantic and thoughtful, but I knew it wasn’t quite that, then I thought Debussy, it was dreamy enough but there was too much space in between some notes and not enough between others and time changes that slipped by before you could pinpoint them and sudden catches of achingly sweet melody that would just end like a bridge in mid air or turn into something else, and though there were many melodies, you could never hum the whole thing, nor could you figure out how they could all belong in the same piece and yet somehow they do, and you have no idea how or when it should end. It fact it doesn’t end, it stops. Some modern composer I guess. (470)

Kathleen is faced here with a set of musical codes that she cannot decipher, but rather than reject the unfamiliar music on those grounds, she embraces it, and thereby embraces the possibility of new ideas, new ways of being. She later says of Rose’s improvisations:

Her pieces just start like that—before you know they’ve started, they’re just there and gathering. I can’t talk about it. I don’t know how long the piece went on because, remember when I said about how the time signature slipped and slid around imperceptibly? Well, all of time did that while she played. I lost time. I wanted to live in that music, no, to wear it loose around me instead of skin, and after a while I had this flooding thought that this was Rose just thinking. (484)

For Kathleen, this music is more than simply experimental; it signifies for her a profoundly different way of being in the world, and of understanding herself and Rose in that world.

Tucker poses a series of questions that tackle the larger issue of whether there are ways to imagine women improvisers, as they have existed and, to a great extent, continue to exist on the edges of the industry, challenging oppressive gender roles through their music:

Do models for social transformation exist in those edges of jazz, and, if so, might improvising women’s familiarity with those edges provide such models? Can jazz musicians jam new social relations? Or does even the most startlingly new manifestation of the sound of surprise signify within discursive limits? Can free improvisation exist in an unfree world? Can improvising communities improvise new kinds of communities? (249)

These are useful questions to ask in relation to *Fall On Your Knees*. Can the presence of Bessie Smith in the novel signify possibilities for improvising new social relations, in this case, particularly, with regard to gender, race, and sexual orientation? I would argue that in spite of the terrible fate that awaits Kathleen at the end of the novel, Smith (in the guise of Hogan), as a significant figure in blues and jazz history whose music clearly articulates defiant resistance to social codes constricting gender and race identities, does signify that kind of freedom to imagine, and even create, new communities. The novel does not romanticize this process; Kathleen’s violent rape and subsequent death attest to MacDonald’s sense of social change as an ongoing, often bitter struggle. However, before that violence occurs, and immediately after they see Jessie Hogan perform, Kathleen and Rose engage in joyful, sensuous love-making that gives quick dispatch to the heterosexual imperative of the dominant culture. Furthermore, Kathleen has finally embraced the musical sensibilities of her mother. James dismisses Materia’s music as simply an irritating noise—“*Plank, splunk, splunk*” (24)—but the resistant and recuperative possibilities offered by Materia’s discordant sounds

may well remind us of Jacques Attali's provocative theory of the relationship between music and power: "Thus music localizes and specifies power, because it makes and regiments the rare noises that cultures, in their normalization of behavior, see fit to authorize" (19). Materia, through her innovative improvisations, resists James's attempts to control her; she is producing the kind of "noise" that, according to Attali, punctures established orders, both musical and social, noise that is "*prophetic* because [it] create[s] new orders, unstable and changing" (19). The novel represents improvised music as socially situated—that is not inherently resistant—but politically powerful. All of the women in the novel who improvise—Materia, Frances, Jessie Hogan, and Rose—challenge their listeners to engage with unfamiliar musical codes that have the potential effect of facilitating new social codes.

Notes

¹ The following description of Frances indicates the improvisatory nature of her performances:

Frances is a bizarre delta diva one night, warbling in her thin soprano 'Moonshine Blues' and 'Shave 'em Dry'. Declaring, an octave above the norm, 'I can strut my pudding, spread my grease with ease, 'cause I know my onions, that's why I always please.' The following Saturday will see her stripped from the waist up, wearing James's old horsehair war sporran as a wig, singing, "I'm Just Wild about Harry" in pidgin Arabic. (292)

Frances's strategic performances, which denaturalize any number of social categories—gender, ethnicity, musical genres, conventions of musical performance—are reminiscent of her mother's improvised piano sessions, played when she is feeling particularly overwhelmed by James's authority: "lately she'd begun playing whatever came into her head whether it made sense or not—mixing up fragments of different pieces in bizarre ways, playing a hymn at top speed, making a B-minor dirge out of 'Pop Goes the Weasel', and all with the heavy hand of a barrelhouse hack" (23). Like Frances's singing, Materia's piano playing challenges musical conventions—the tempo at which one should play a hymn, the key in which "Pop Goes the Weasel" should be played, and the expectation that one piece and style of music will be played in its entirety. James is so threatened by Materia's performances that he locks the piano and forbids her to play; his reaction suggests that it is more than just his aesthetic sense that is discomfited by her music. He does eventually let her play again, but this time he demands that she play "exactly what was put in front of her" (36).

² Candida Ridkind makes a similar argument for the significance of actor Louise Brooks as a symbol of alternative sexuality for Frances: "The textual representation of Louise Brooks as an icon who signifies a new era and alternative sexual performances draws on images of her physical appearance, Frances's specular exchanges with those images, and coincidences between Brooks's and Frances's performances of sexuality and desire." (46-7)

³ Faulkner implicitly asserts a difference here between jazz and other kinds of music, and Porter argues that there were indeed racist assumptions built into the distinctions made between jazz and other musical genres, particularly classical music. Porter further asserts the racist link between black bodies and the cultural production of art when he cites Lawrence Levine's point that "the very ideas of 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow,' which entered common parlance at the turn of the century, originated in nineteenth-century phrenology. Highbrow culture, then, was often coded or explicitly defined as white or Anglo-Saxon" (8).

⁴ Interestingly, though, as Angela Davis points out, many artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance did not approve of jazz and blues, seeing them as unsophisticated musical forms that fed white racist stereotypes of black people as primitive, brutal, and sexually voracious. She cites Alain Locke, one of the key intellectuals associated with the Harlem Renaissance, describing the current status of African American music:

It is time to realize that though we may be a musical people, we have produced few if any great musicians,—that though we may have evolved a folk music of power and potentiality, it has not yet been integrated into a musical tradition,—that our creativeness and originality on the folk level has not yet been matched on the level of instrumental mastery or that of creative composition, and that with a few exceptions, the masters of Negro musical idiom so far are not Negro. (qtd. in Davis 150)

Langston Hughes, of course, was a notable exception to this pervasive opinion on blues and jazz during the Harlem Renaissance. He saw the blues, and Bessie Smith in particular, as being a crucial voice in the articulation of opposition to the oppression of black people and of a range of black experiences, and that it was black intellectuals who most needed to hear those voices: "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" (qtd. in Davis 151).

⁵ Rose's decision to become "Doc Rose" and cross-dress on a permanent basis is reminiscent of Billy Tipton, the jazz musician who, upon his death, was discovered to be female, to the surprise of his former wife and children. Marjorie Garber takes issue with the way in which Tipton's transvestism was quickly normalized by the press and by his family as a necessary means to making a career as a jazz musician: "Whatever discomfort is felt by the reader or audience . . . is smoothed over and narrativized by a story that recuperates social and sexual norms, not only reinstating the binary (male/female) but also retaining, and encoding, a progress narrative: she/he did this in order to a) get a job, b) find a place in a man's world, and c) realize or fulfill some deep but acceptable need in terms of personal destiny, in this case, by becoming a jazz musician" (69). Garber goes on to reject this kind of narrativizing, arguing that it reinscribes "'male' and 'female,' even if tempered (or impelled) by feminist consciousness, reaffirms the patriarchal binary and ignores what is staring us in the face: the existence of the transvestite, the figure that disrupts" (70). See also Ajay Heble and Gillian Siddall for their analysis of Billy Tipton and the masculinization of jazz: "Nice Work if You Can Get It" in Heble (141-165).

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