

WILLOWS IN THE SPRING: A NOVELLA

BY

DaMaris B. Hill

Submitted to the graduate degree program in English  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.

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Co-Chairperson

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Co-Chairperson

Committee members\*

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Date defended: \_\_\_\_\_

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The Dissertation Committee for DaMaris B. Hill certifies  
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Committee:

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Co-Chairperson\*

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## WILLOWS IN THE SPRING: A NOVELLA

### Abstract:

In her lecture on February 7, 2012, Angela Y. Davis summarized the peculiar history of feminism as one that revealed “continuity and ruptures” between individuals, groups, definitions, and ideologies, but it also resonates in spaces of reformation and progress, continuities, and collectivity. For example, racial and economic biases have frequently threatened the stability of the feminist movement. The emergence of Black feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s ruptured the mainstream feminist movement in its effort to acknowledge the inequalities within the second-wave feminism. Black feminism advanced a newer of feminist ideology rooted in the experiences of African American and other ethnically marginalized women that helped to mark the moment of third-wave feminism. This reformation within the feminist movement sought harmony and continuity even as it privileged individual choices, rejecting second-wave ideologies that promoted womanhood as a singular, unitary and undifferentiated experience among all women.

The ruptures and reformation present in feminist history can be metaphorically symbolized as the discordant, multimedical, and harmonic strains present in jazz theory. For this reason, I approached this novella as a jazz composition. Many of the female characters articulate and experience additional forms of oppression, such as racial and/or economic prejudice. Therefore, the voices and actions of all the characters in this novella interact with each other in a way that recreates the continuities and ruptures described by Davis. In turn, I crafted characters and experiences that mimic some of the ruptures present within the feminist movement.

The novella is a bildungsroman that explores the relationships women share in the delicate gestational period of adolescence. It fictionalizes the oppressions and opportunities that emerged as a result of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States. Inspired by the glorious achievements of women in Kansas' history, *Willows in the Spring* is a third-wave feminist ensemble that resonates the harmonies of the jazz era.

## WILLOWS IN THE SPRING: A NOVELLA

### Acknowledgements:

I would like to begin by giving thanks to the Universe for reserving a tiny space for me to grow and create. I would also like to thank the ancestors whom have been preparing me for this work since the beginning. I would like thank my son for patiently supporting me as I took time to nurture this project. I am grateful for the gifts of my two grandmothers, one a wordsmith of wisdom, the other an avid reader and dreamer. I want to thank all of my friends and family members for their encouragement. I would like to thank the entire University of Kansas community, particularly the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and the Department of English. I also like to extend my gratitude to the friendly faculty members that are not members of the aforementioned departments, but were always available to answer questions and offered sound advice. I want to graciously thank the *The Dream Team*; Maryemma Graham, Darren Canady, Giselle Anatol, Monifa Love-Asante, Chris Abani, and Tanya Hart. Thank you.

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## All That Speak of Jazz: An Introduction

In the nineteenth century, Sojourner Truth, in her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” explained to a racist crowd of suffragists and suffragist supporters that her biological Blackness did not negate her identity as a woman or the privileges associated with it. Unfortunately, Sojourner Truth’s compelling speech did not convince all of the suffragists to embrace an inclusive feminist identity. A few decades later the Black suffragist Ida B. Wells Barnett was forced to participate in a segregated suffragist march in which the Black women were expected to march behind their white ‘sisters.’ In the 1970s in the United States, the second-wave feminist movement revamped suffragist feminist ideologies into the forefront of American culture. One way second wave feminists accomplished this goal was to recover and promote the accomplishments and perspectives of women who had been suppressed within the patriarchal historical narrative. Recovery of women’s culture, women’s voices, and the idea of women as historical actors were important political practices for the 1970s and 1980s, but fell short of attending to differences among women because the mainstream second-wavers focused on and organized around their commonalities at the expense of differences among women.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the formal and historically documented Black feminist movement was born. Angela Davis, one of the prominent voices of that movement, comments on this dilemma in *Women, Race, and Class*. In “defense of their own interests,” Davis writes, “as white middle-class women-in a frequently egotistical and elitist fashion-[they] exposed the tenuous and superficial nature of their relationship to the postwar campaign for Black equality.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, New York: Random House, 1981, 76.



that the second-wave feminist movement promoted equality for all women, the racist and classist attitudes that had burdened the suffrage movement persisted in the second-wave movement.

In her lecture on February 7, 2012, Angela Y. Davis summarized the peculiar history of feminism as one that revealed “continuity and ruptures”<sup>3</sup> between individuals, groups, definitions, and ideologies, but it also resonates in spaces of reformation and progress, continuities, and collectivity. For example, racial and economic biases have frequently threatened the stability of the feminist movement. The emergence of Black feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s ruptured the mainstream feminist movement in its effort to acknowledge the inequalities within the second-wave feminism. Black feminism advanced a newer of feminist ideology rooted in the experiences of African American and other ethnically marginalized women that helped to mark the moment of third-wave feminism. This reformation within the feminist movement sought harmony and continuity even as it privileged individual choices, rejecting second-wave ideologies that promoted womanhood as a singular, unitary and undifferentiated experience among all women.

The ruptures and reformation present in feminist history can be metaphorically symbolized as the discordant, multimedical, and harmonic strains present in jazz theory. For this reason, I approached this novella as a jazz composition. Many of the female characters articulate and experience additional forms of oppression, such as racial and/or economic prejudice. Therefore, the voices and actions of all the characters in this novella interact with each other in a way that recreates the continuities and ruptures described by Davis. In turn, I crafted characters

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<sup>3</sup> Angela Y. Davis, “A History of Feminism,” 2012, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the February Sisters, Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. 07 February 2012.

and experiences that mimic some of the ruptures present within the feminist movement. This novella uses jazz composition to illustrate the oppositional perspectives expressed by individuals, groups, definitions, and ideologies.

#### JAZZ IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

The overarching theme in *Willows in the Spring* is the complexity of African American feminist identities in the United States, especially within an institutional framework that values whiteness, wealth, and Western ideologies. Set in the 1930s at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, which is referenced indirectly, the novella also harkens back to the American modernist literary tradition and Modernist values, the novella does not emphasize the gentry class or privilege the perspectives of the wealthy. Instead, the characters include the rural poor, African Americans and other ethnic minorities, immigrants, and vagrants.

Explorations of ethnicity and modernism go well together. However, there are also important modernist writers who challenge all the clichés of ethnic discourse, if not the idea of a marginalized ethnic identity, just as Ellison poked fun at national symbolism in the “Liberty Paints” chapter of his novel.<sup>4</sup> As a modernist work, *Willows* most resembles the artistic aesthetic classified as Afro-modernism. Mark Sanders refers to Afro-modernism as a “claim of historicity, of change, development...social and psychic complexity.”<sup>5</sup> The novella attempts to

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 255.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Leonard, “We Wear the Mask,” *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, Eds. Maryemma Graham and Jerry Washington Ward. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 218.

recreate the complexities that develop when a marginalized group attempts to form their own collective identity, rather than conform to the expectations of the dominant culture.

While reading this novella, it is important to remember that jazz is and always has been intimately linked to the evolving definitions of race and ethnic identity in America, functioning within shifting notions of blackness.<sup>6</sup> This introduction seeks to explain how jazz aesthetic practices aid in a broader examination of the feminist ideologies associated with New Negro and Black Nationalist ideologies. The New Negro philosophies can be associated with the character of Melvina. In contrast, Brenda's actions, thoughts, and utterances can be seen as expressions of suppressed Black Nationalist perspectives within the 1930s African American community. New Negro versus Black Nationalist theories can be recognized as a motif within the context of previous jazz novels. In *Invisible Man* (1952), I see Ellison using the experiences of the narrator to contextually historicize the trajectory of the New Negro ideology and Black Nationalism within the African American experience during the 1940s and 50s. Although *Invisible Man* is not a feminist work, it clearly illustrates how the jazz craft can aid in expressing oppositional or pragmatic ideologies associated with African American culture in the United States.

Although the content of *Willows* is indicative of American Modernism, the narrative structure of the novel is more reflective of postmodern fiction. Fritz Gysin finds that postmodern authors show a strong tendency to turn jazz into fiction and while doing so address the anxiety of voice as one of the gaps between the two modes of Black performance.<sup>7</sup> In this work, jazz

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<sup>6</sup> Keren Omry, *Cross Rhythms: Jazz Aesthetics in African-American Literature*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Fritz Gysin, "From Modernism to Postmodernism: Black Literature at the Crossroads," Ed. Maryemma Graham, *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 149.

aesthetic practices are a means of demonstrating the ways African American women characters embody, relate to, and perform collect voice or continuity, as well as individual perspectives or ruptures that resonate as dissonance. The narrative structure echoes the tensions between characters and reflects the theories of Meta DuEwa Jones in *The Muse is Music* (2011). In this novella the narrative structure and content of the novel act as a type of performance, a multidimensional process that is political, historical, and aesthetic. It extends beyond the theatrical connotations of performance and includes a more everyday sense of intentional rehearsal and historical process.<sup>8</sup>

#### WILLOWS IN THE SPRING: SETTING IN JAZZ

*Willows*, set in this era, employs the jazz fictional aesthetic because jazz as an art form and an extension of existentialist philosophy, strictly contrasted the classical traditions that gained prominence in the artistic and intellectual communities of the dominant culture. During the 1930s, literary allusions from the European classics were used to affirm and justify the scientific racism that was expressed as eugenic policy. For example, Eugene O'Neill's play *Strange Interlude* entailed many literary allusions to the classical tragedy *Oedipus*, wherein the father is murdered by the son and marries his mother. Since few non-European classic forms of art were documented and even fewer are canonized, the European classics were promoted as the highest artistic forms. Non-European cultural contributions, such as art, were viewed as lower art forms. This artistic hierarchy reflected the social hierarchies of the early twentieth century. Those of European or white ancestry, particularly Nordic descent, were favored over non-

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<sup>8</sup> Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011, 20.

European people. The practice reinforced notions of privilege that placed the values of the wealthy Anglo-Americans at the top of the social hierarchy. Jazz, inclusive of its African roots and improvisational tendencies, embodied the unruliness of the twentieth-century mass-disseminated culture.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, jazz aesthetic practices are relevant because the African American woman's voice is iconic in jazz and American culture.

Farah Jasmine Griffin's research on the Black woman's voice demonstrates the potential for the Black woman's singing voice to be the axis of continuities and ruptures in American culture. The various images of Black women vocalists in American culture, most recently Denyce Graves's performances at the memorial service for the victims of 9/11 in 2001 and 2011 and Marian Anderson's historic 1939 concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, serve as examples that show us the ways the Black woman's voice has been called upon to heal a crisis of national unity as well as provoke one.<sup>10</sup> My attention to voice affirms Griffin's theory that "representations of the [black woman's] voice suggest that it is like a hinge, a place where things come together and break apart." Unconfined by the constraints of Western literacy or formal notations, the Black women's voice has a power not only rooted in its sound, but also in the way it tells the tale and relays the message.<sup>11</sup> Voice, as a characteristic of jazz music, has its roots in the oral tradition of African-American music. The musicalization of speech arose as both

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Johnson, "The Jazz Diaspora", *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, Eds. Mervyn Cooke and David Horne, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality", Eds. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 107.

aesthetic impulse and political impulse, incorporating African customs and expressing emancipatory yearnings.<sup>12</sup>

#### CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES: JAZZ LITERARY COMPOSITION BEYOND THE RIFF

William J. Harris observes that Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed draw on the jazz tradition to expand, modernize, and vitalize the Black literary tradition.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, I seek to expand the jazz and the African American literary traditions into a postmodern space by drawing upon the compositional practices associated with jazz. Therefore as a composer utilizing a jazz aesthetic practice, I had to be very aware of jazz motifs and the intricacies of jazz arrangement and composition.<sup>14</sup> Aligning myself with the theories of Karen Omry, I am using a jazz compositional aesthetic in fiction to suggest that an African American feminist identity is a conceptual construction that negotiates the fluidity, rather than a concrete ideology framed in a historical era. According to jazz enthusiast such as Jerry Coker, traditional jazz arrangement features incredibly detailed writing, including introductions, transitional and/or modulatory interludes, more than one ensemble chorus, few repeated figures, short improvised solos.<sup>15</sup>

*Willows* employs short introductions and interludes in the form of the charge sheets of the incarcerated girls. The ensemble format is present in the multivoiced narrative. It is also present in the short improvisational solos manifest as the individual testimonies in letter or diary form.

The novella quickly progresses from a series of letters that situate Melvina within the framework

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<sup>12</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, New York: Vintage Books, 1998. 167.

<sup>13</sup> William J. Harris, "'How Your Sound?': Amiri Barak Writes Free Jazz", Eds. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 312.

<sup>14</sup> Omry, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Jerry Coker, *The Jazz Experience: A Guide to Appreciation*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983.

of her African American identity, inclusive of her New Negro politics, which are central tenets to a dissonant narrative that eventually leads Melvina to question the ways she embraced this very same politics.

ALL THE SPEAK OF JAZZ: THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF *WILLOWS IN THE SPRING*

Over the course of the novella, the narrative progresses in structural and conceptual complexity, transitioning from an singular story about Melvina navigating an environment that privileged White mainstream feminism into broader narrative that illustrates the varied ways that different characters must negotiate the environment; an easier task for some than others. The narrative action details how the absolutes associated with any collective identity can suppress individual perspectives and result in pragmatic negotiations of collected awareness. Ironically, the progression of jazz from its blues and swing roots through jazz's bebop era also reflect the continuities and ruptures of feminist identity that are evident in this novella. Bebop is classified by its intricate harmonic improvisations that focus on chromatic [same key, different pitch] dissonance and polyrhythms.<sup>16</sup> Dissonance is symbolic of the ruptures in ideologies and the effects of layered oppressions.

Jazz composition consists of *melodic motif development, interval writing, parallelism, polychords and polytonality, improvisation, pedal point, and tension-release principle*. Jazz compositional motifs, also known as idioms, have been extremely helpful in crafting this novella. Once each idiom associated with jazz composition and arrangement has been defined, I will detail how they are used to enhance the narrative content of the novella.

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<sup>16</sup> Omry 62. Chromatic dissonance refers to a progression of semitones that have the same letter or sound characteristics.

MELODIC MOTIF AND DEVELOPMENT In jazz composition the melodic motif development is a sequence of notes. It is usually an organized sequence of single tones so related to one another as to make up a particular phrase or idea. For me, the theme “What is African American Feminism?”—although able to be answered in a plethora of ways—acts as this melodic sequence of notes. The most dominant melody is voiced through the character of Melvina. Brenda perspectives enter the novella as a counter melody. Similar to musical arrangements, in this jazz novella both aspects of melody are underscored, not countered by, the harmonic theme of “What is feminism without acknowledging racial privilege or prejudice, social status, or economic class bias?” Ideally, the harmony would stabilize the melody, creating a sense of structure or rhythmic time. The individual voices and melody are so strong in this novella that the dominant narrative of white, Western feminism—one that in later years will be expressed by second wave feminists, but in *Willows* can be recognized in the voice of the warden, Ms. Krieder—is unstable, a barely visible feminist identity. The suppression and instability of the harmony is to be expected in jazz composition.

PARALLELISM in jazz composition is described as a sense of repetition that adds structure and cohesion to the solos.<sup>17</sup> Within a jazz composition, no two instrumental solos, or “voices,” should enter from the same perspective, and I have incorporated this principle in the character voices of *Willows in the Spring*. Parallelism can create a sense of harmony. It can be compared to a conversation that incorporates varied perspectives in which a consensus may be achieved. Considering that parallelism is expressed as one voice in correspondence with another, Melvina’s conversations with others in the novel become the means of discovering the themes

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book*, Petaluma: Sher Music Co, 1995.



and harmonies in the work. By pitting the voices of the other characters, such as Brenda, in contrast to Melvina's voice, I create a literary expression of jazz parallelism. Melvina and Brenda are in a melodic and counter-point melodic discourse that expresses varied opinions pertaining to the collective ideology associated with African American feminism. Brenda's and Melvina's voices articulate the parallels between the New Negro and Black Nationalist ideologies. For example, Melvina's belief that her Creole heritage, knowledge of Western medicine, and moral fortitude steeped in the ideologies of the social gospel make her superior can be interpreted as similar to the philosophies held by members of the New Negro movement. Similarly, Brenda's use of folk language and racial pride articulate more of the philosophies associated with the Black Nationalist politics of the era.

Multiple perspectives are also referred to as POLYCHORDS OR POLYTONALITY in jazz composition. Polytonality is considered the pairing of two or more chords; it creates a sense of parallelism that may or may not be harmonious, and therefore has the potential to create a certain amount of discordance. The polytonality aspect of the novella is conveyed by the letters written by Melvina, Brenda, and Ms. Krieder. The journal writings of Alice also contribute to the polytonality. At certain points of the novella harmonies attempt to emerge, but as the novella progresses, the polychords become less harmonious and more dissonant. The variedly voiced perspectives of the New Negro, Black Nationalist, and White mainstream feminist grounded in eugenic ideologies struggle to be heard. Unfortunately, the confinement associated with the prison environment privileges the perspectives of the dominant culture, and affirms eugenic ideologies and white supremacy.

The INTERVAL WRITING in composition helps to accentuate the melody and is one of the most pronounced aspects of this novella. Interval writing provides spaces of silence or breaks in the composition in order to demonstrate how all other aspects of the novella relate to the core theme, or melody. The harmonic, melodic, and counter melodic motifs in the novella are reflections of the polyphonic narrative. The converging voices resemble a jazz ensemble. Intervals, moments of silence, are also present in the narrative structure. Intake and medical forms, photos, and other hybrid types of texts are created or manipulated specifically for this novella. They are used to provide narrative in silent spaces. They speak what would otherwise be unspeakable in social contexts or what is unable to be articulated because of trauma or historical suppression. For example, the intake forms provide pertinent information like the age of the inmate, her family history, and the nature of her crime. The forms also give medical history and provide greater insight into the characters' motivations and actions in the prison setting. These intervals also assist me with creating spaces that allow the individual voices/solos to transition into collective melodies or other forms of improvisations.

In jazz composition the PEDAL POINT is a sustained tone. It is often a dissonant, unstable harmony that is present in all aspects of the jazz composition. In the novel the pedal point or unstable harmony represents the feminist principles of the White, middle-class women of the time--principles embedded in eugenic theory. The popularity of eugenic philosophy in the first half of the twentieth-century in the U.S. resulted in public policies that in turn governed the Girls Industrial School of Kansas. The pedal point sound is articulated as the eugenic philosophy that is integrated into every "official" aspect of the novella: letters, medical records, diagnosis and treatment plans, and the Girls Industrial School's policies and procedures. The pedal point

harmony is most aggressively asserted, however, in Alice's journal entries and sermons. The white supremacist doctrines that are entrenched within eugenic philosophy influence Alice so much that she ultimately becomes victim to the dissonance eugenics creates.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to identify the pedal point within the context of the melody and the COUNTER POINT. The counter point is a coexisting melody that is produced by several instruments that play melodic lines at once. This simultaneous playing can result in a pedal point dissonance, disruption of the harmony, yet the counter point melody is necessary because it makes discontinuities more obvious. In her chapter, "Bebop Spoken Here: Performativity in Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison," Omry discusses the countless literary examples that focus on a process of aesthetic creation as the key to balancing consent and descent and thus reaching a harmonized sense of ethnicity.<sup>19</sup> This is something I strived for in *Willows*. By employing the voices of Melvina and Brenda as melodies and counter melodies, I compose a literary work that attempts to explore and balance at least two divergent perspectives regarding African American feminism in the 1930s, and, perhaps by extension, African American feminisms of today. A sense of continuity and rupture is a consequence of the counter pointing melodies in the jazz literary composition. These divergent perspectives manifest consonance, harmony, and dissonance, unstable or warped harmonies.

Each voice and/or instrument in a jazz ensemble attempts to convey a range of emotion that emphasizes the improvisational solo. The TENSION-RELEASE principle is a combination of high and low tones that convey emotion. In jazz, and in its literary form, it may create a feeling

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<sup>18</sup> This type of destructive obsession with white supremacy and eugenic philosophy is an understated legacy in many of the canonized works in American literature, like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Jean Toomer's *Cane*.

<sup>19</sup> Omry, 86.

of no resolution. A lack of resolution has become a motif in postmodern literature; likewise, in jazz the end of the composition may or may not be resolved as a result of the tension-release principle. In the novella the reader can recognize the tension release compositional strategy within the solo performance of the individual letters. Instances of the characters' victimization and extreme punishments create anxiety and tension for the reader, but these emotions get relieved by comedic anecdotes and the fantasies described by the inmates. The stress on individualized improvisation establishes a narrative tension between the individual and the collective. As each character is situated in the solo position, either in the form of letters or diary entries, she must find a way of making a new statement within the constraints of the collective.<sup>20</sup> The jazz artist uses the tension release principle to create a journey and/or emotional narrative, conveying emotional highs and lows - sadness and happiness.

#### THE VOICES: ICONS AND INSPIRATION

Because Black women's singing is not confined by the constraints of conventional literacy or notations inscribed on paper, the power of the voice is not only rooted in its sound, but also in the way it tells the tale and relays the message.<sup>21</sup> My concerns with continuity and ruptures in African American feminist ideology can be contextualized by Griffin's theories about Black women's voices representing hinges, places where things come together and break apart. An essential aspect of my compositional practice was re-interpreting iconic Black women's voices. Some of the iconic voices that I reinterpreted include Ella Fitzgerald, Cassandra Wilson, and Billie Holiday.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 107.

In the novella, the letters penned by various characters coupled with the influences of jazz vocalists such as Ella Fitzgerald result in a seemingly fragmented structure, and also affect the characters' words and speech patterns. But before I could write and think in a jazz style, I had to steep myself in jazz music—recordings and transcriptions. According to Coker, "In order to know exactly what a recorded jazz artist has played, the student will inevitably need to study transcriptions of recorded solos." He goes on to say that it benefits the student to transcribe the solos himself [herself]. Such activity will develop the ears, attune the senses to all details of the solo (because it is heard more closely and more often), create a deeper understanding of the correlation between sounds and their written notation, importance technique, and build confidence.<sup>22</sup> I had to develop "big ears." Players and listeners (and jazz players are listeners) with "big ears" are equipped to hear and engage complexity [of jazz composition and arrangement] as it happens.<sup>23</sup>

For example, imitation of sound and voice is a jazz motif and stylistic device. It is best exemplified in jazz vocal styles of Ella Fitzgerald to Cassandra Wilson. Ella Fitzgerald was a master at imitating other vocalists. One of her most popular renditions of "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," opens with her singing in her genuine voice, complete with the signature characteristics of an Ella Fitzgerald jazz recording. During the second verse, she imitates Billie Holiday. Fitzgerald achieves this by distorting her voice to slow the rhythm and altering the lyrics of the song, substituting the word 'love' with Holiday's 'chi - chi'. In the third verse of the song, Fitzgerald reconfigures her voice to imitate the deep bass vocals of Louis Armstrong.

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<sup>22</sup> Coker, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Rustin and Tucker, 1.

Again in this verse she chooses to substitute traditional lyrics with masculine gendered referents, adding 'mama' and substituting 'I' with 'Pops', Louis Armstrong's nick-name.

In *Willows*, I chose to model the character Melvina after Ella Fitzgerald. The emphasis on Fitzgerald's ability to imitate others is replicated in the ways that Melvina chooses to embrace New Negro ideology. It is also evident in the letters she writes for Brenda, whereby she imitates her voice. The differences between the genuine and imitated voices are easily identified in sentence structure Melvina is more literate by Western standards than Brenda. Although some of the word choices and content are similar in the letters, the imitated voice of Brenda and her genuine voice contrast dramatically because Melvina's preferences that express the New Negro philosophies infiltrate the imitation letters. Because she has been raised in an all-Black town, Brenda is not drawn to these philosophies; they are irrelevant to her experiences in racial and gendered contexts.

The influence of Billie Holiday's voice in the text is as deceptive as her artistic expressions. Billie Holiday had the ability to sing off-rhythm. She created dissonances with her voice, blending the past, present, and possibility of time and rhythm with her vocal instrument. I refer to this ability as rhythmic fluidity. "She instinctively knew what was the right thing – how to balance faster rhythm with slower...I always looked to Billie as a finished performer, a pro."<sup>24</sup> I agree and pay homage to this skill by contrasting narrative tenses within the context of events that occurred previously in the story and/or the possibility of future events. In the second of the

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<sup>24</sup> Donald Clarke, *Billie Holiday: Wishing on the Moon*, Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002, 157.

novella, I mimic Holiday's rhythmic fluidity. . This rhythmic fluidity became her vocal signature. The letter reads:

October 17, 1936

Mellie,

That raggedy Marshal Thompson keeps coming around offering work to your sister Mary. Promising to pay her good. I tell him every week. Then he asks about you. I tell him you are doing wonderful and that both my nieces are still good girls. I tell him that you are learning and might be able to attend a university to be a doctor. His face wrinkles and his eyes squint. He wants to spit when I tell him this, so I make it worse. I say that you might be too smart for that schoolhouse in that jail and that don't nobody mess with you, because they heard that you knocked a white man out like you were John Henry Lewis. He just says really, because he ain't hear no such thing. I tell him that I don't know how the rumor started, but it's all over the county. Then I ask him about his arm, about how well it's healing. He barely tugged on his hat, sure didn't tip it. Then he thumped off my porch looking like an armadillo. You remember how he walks? Like he some raggedy old cowboy? I washed the steps with holy water when he left, a recipe an old creole nun shared with me when I was going to get married the first time.

Father John tells me to pray for him, but every chance I get I remind him how you branded him with his own iron. Then say that Mary's small, but strong like you. I keep telling him that she don't belong working in nobody's house and he keeps asking. You two sisters got the Gerbeaux curse on you. Beauty. Some men see you and can't leave you alone. I'm thinking I'll have to move soon, over near the river, maybe back over on the Missouri side. Try to get a fancy factory job and away from Marshal Thompson.

Love,

Auntie Lois

The date at the top of the letter adds to the setting of the novel providing historical context. The content of the letter fluctuates between past, present, and future events. I

will illustrate the differences in tense by *italicizing the past tense*. **The future tense will be represented in bold**. The present tenses in the letter will be in standard case. I will use a “\*” to signal tense shifts and rhythmic fluidity.

October 17, 1936

Mellie,

That raggedy Marshal Thompson keeps coming around offering work to your sister Mary. Promising to pay her good. \* *I tell him every week. Then he asks about you. I tell him you are doing wonderful and that both my nieces are still good girls. I tell him that you are learning and might be able to attend a university to be a doctor. His face wrinkles and his eyes squint.* \* He wants to spit when I tell him this, so I make it worse. I say that you might be too smart for that schoolhouse in that jail and that don't nobody mess with you, because they heard that you knocked a white man out like you were John Henry Lewis. He just says really, because he ain't hear no such thing. I tell him that I don't know how the rumor started, but it's all over the county. Then I ask him about his arm, about how well it's healing. \* *He barely tugged on his hat, sure didn't tip it. Then he thumped off my porch looking like an armadillo.* \* You remember how he walks? Like he some raggedy old cowboy? *I washed the steps with holy water when he left, a recipe an old creole nun shared with me when I was going to get married the first time.* \*

Father John tells me to pray for him, but every chance I get I remind him how you branded him with his own iron. Then say that Mary's small, but strong like you. I keep telling him that she don't belong working in nobody's house and he keeps asking. You two sisters got the Gerbeaux curse on you. Beauty. Some men see you and can't leave you alone. \* **I'm thinking I'll have to move soon, over near the river, maybe back over on the Missouri side. Try to get a fancy factory job and away from Marshal Thompson.**

Love,

Auntie Lois



Present, past, and future tenses are present in nearly each of the letters in *Willows*. This fluid tense structure is in direct contrast with the permanence asserted by the fixed date that is the first marker of the page. This serves two purposes. One purpose is to manipulate the tension – release principle, crating emotional highs and lows within this short improvisation. The other is to artistically render the off-rhythm vocal style of Billie Holiday. If my technique is working correctly, the reader begins to ignore the fixed dates and enters the rhythmic fluidity of the novella, whereby the reader becomes an active participant in the ensemble.

#### CONCLUSION

My interest in the fictional representations of women’s lives and experiences show the influence of a number of twentieth century writers. Lucille Clifton was among the first. My master’s thesis *Knowing: Lucille Clifton and the Great Mother’s Guiding Light* was based on her work. Clifton and other writers arranged collections of short prose writings to express diverse perspectives and to create individual portraits.<sup>25</sup> Although Clifton did not identify as a jazz writer, there are a few similarities between the narrative structure of *Willows in the Spring* and Clifton’s work, *Generations* (1976). *Generations* and other writings by African American women express narratives of community and collective identities. The aesthetic choices regarding these narratives help Clifton and other writers to convey the concept of community to their audiences.

Jazz writers such as Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin present a chorus of African American

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<sup>25</sup> The expressions of community in the feminist literary tradition are also reflected in *Freedom in the Dismal* (1998) by Monifa Love-Asante, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) by Ana Castillo, and *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison.

artists riffing and harmonizing on the shifting conceptions of ethnic identity across the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Gayl Jones's jazz novel, *Corregidora* (1975), emphasizes a female jazz singer as the protagonist. Although these characters are not jazz singers, they seemed to speak to me in song, a series of choral harmonies and scattered melodies. In her novel *Jazz* (1992), Toni Morrison transposes the fictional jazz riff, an improvisational technique, to position Wild, the Black woman who has abandoned a subjugated life in civilization for a self governed life in the forest, embracing self reliance over a subjugated role in society. I often daydream about the conversations Brenda and Wild might have. Along with Ellison, Jones and Morrison have served as models for this work.

Jazz music almost always accompanied the creative process of this work. The creative collaboration make me fantasize about the ancient times when lyric was both music and word. My fantasies carry me into daydreams where I am being instructed by Sarah Vaughan; she is schooling me in bebop philosophy. In these daydreams she teaches me to read my audience like print on the page. She makes me note the similarities, saying their eyes be the same. They are dotted pupils floating in white space like ink on a page. She tells me to look for the notes between notes and once I find them, show them to the world. This is the aim of my work.

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<sup>26</sup> Omry, 163.

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