

Essay

Sounding War: Subverting Jim Crow in *Not Only War* and *Sula*

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Abstract: A sound-studies-centered reading of Victor Daly's *Not Only War: A Story of Two Great Conflicts* (1932) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) sheds light on the sonic realities of WWI, both before and after, for Black soldiers. Both novels, set during and after WWI, utilize music to subvert the codified system of Jim Crow through sonic resistance. The term generative entropy offers a theoretical intervention in the field of sound studies to enable a better understanding and identification of the emphasis both novels place on narrative possibility rooted in sonic and physical spaces of ambiguity.

Keywords: sound; listening; hearing; sonic

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Victor Daly's *Not Only War: A Story of Two Great Conflicts* (1932) offer depictions of World War I that unveil the too-often-ignored shattering effects of both emotional and physical violence on Black soldiers and veterans in the U.S. For enlisted Black soldiers, the brutalities of the war were amplified, both during and after, by the unrelenting forces of racism in America. Read individually, these novels highlight the traumatic effects of racism on Black WWI soldiers and veterans. Read together, they present a more holistic image of the experience of Black soldiers in America. While Daly's protagonist Montie dies in battle, Morrison's Shadrack offers what easily could have been a continuation of his life, continuing the war on the homefront. Had Montie survived, he would have likely suffered a similar fate to Shadrack, wracked with untreated PTSD at the hands of a nation ready to use and discard him like a piece of faulty artillery. Both novels share an investment in foregrounding the sonic elements of America's varied and fraught battlefields.

As the title suggests, Daly's *Not Only War* pictures two conflicts: racism and war. He collapses these conflicts together through two converging soundscapes, one melodious and one jarring, to orchestrate a narrative that emphasizes the incongruencies wrought by American racial and political violence. Similarly, Morrison's *Sula* utilizes music primarily through Shadrack and his attempts at maintaining a sense of agency and coherency after facing the sonic and psychological ruptures of war. The war and racism have left Shadrack dispossessed and displaced, an island of everyone's creation but his own. The tolling of the bell on National Suicide Day offers a chiming cadence of control in the face of racial and political violence. Shadrack demonstrates an effort to sound and sustain a logical tether to his community and to act in service of them. National Suicide Day is both self-serving and altruistic; it functions as a means of maintaining cohesion and control for Shadrack while also offering his neighbors the opportunity to cheat death by beating the reaper to the punch.

While Shadrack seeks clarity after suffering a dismantling and mangling of self, his music and the music of his community creates a chaos that eschews direct control in favor of a liminal indeterminacy: a space where multiplicity offers opportunities for subverting harmful systems. Daly is also concerned with creating such a space. Though the scholarship on *Not Only War* is sparse, those who have engaged with the book often seek to pin down a clear interpretation of the novel; Daly has written a novel that baffles and provokes a desire for legibility. Scholars have read it as both underdeveloped and as



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little more than historical documentation with hints of creative license.¹ These readings are reductive in part because they fail to appreciate the novel's ambiguity as a functioning decision on Daly's part. *Not Only War* resists interpretation through a cacophony of interwoven (and often contradictory) sonic elements—the chaotic symphony of piano, gunfire, and agony-filled groans. Both Morrison and Daly demonstrate an investment in subverting reductive and harmful systems, namely Jim Crow, through what I have labeled *generative entropy*. Generative entropy is the sonically ascribed space where chaos creates opportunity for new and innumerable outcomes that ultimately subvert racist and reductive systems of cohesion. In other words, generative entropy utilizes a cacophonous discordance to generate possibility, railing against systems that violently cohere to destructive and oppressive ends. By creating instances of generative entropy, Morrison and Daly tap into the soundscapes of war to orchestrate a cacophonous subversion and drowning out of America's dominant song: Jim Crow.

2. Critical Listening and Sonic Tradition

By emphasizing the heard rather than the seen, both Morrison and Daly require that their audience be sonically attuned to narrative nuance; their work advocates for critical listening. Listening, by definition, is a more involved practice than hearing. Hearing occurs by virtue of proximity and can be carried out passively and objectively, whereas listening requires intentionality and comprehension: “Etymologically, the Old English word *hlýsnan*, ‘to listen,’ emphasizes this notion of an intentional listening practice, distinguishing the act of listening from hearing. In Modern English, too, while the verb ‘to hear’ usually refers to the sense of hearing, to automatic or passive physiological sound perception, the verb ‘to listen’ connotes more purposeful use of the auditory” (Furlonge 2018, p. 2). Thus, by listening to Morrison's and Daly's novels, the reader, by necessity, must grapple with the crux of generative entropy: inquiry. Nicole Brittingham Furlonge figures inquiry as central to listening and argues that this inquiry emerges from a critical practice that “advocates for listening as an artistic, civic, and interpretive practice that emerges from a place of wonder, curiosity, and *not knowing*” (Furlonge 2018, p. 2; emphasis original). Morrison and Daly create sonically ascribed spaces that are curious by nature as they poke and prod at the undergirdings of Jim Crow, shaking the dominant sound through inquisitive vibrations that simultaneously deconstruct and revise meaning.

In doing so, they offer new possibilities for understanding and operating within a broader and more inclusive American consciousness, a consciousness that is only perceptible to those who push against the Westernized impulse to *see* and take part instead by *listening* to the text as a conscious effort to recognize and participate in the “desire expressed often by African American writers specifically and American writers more broadly for printed language that is as liberated, unmuted, and unmediated as spoken or musical sound is romantically perceived to be” (Furlonge 2018, p. 4). Both writers bring aural and sonic engagement to the forefront of their artistic endeavors. In doing so, they contribute to a legacy of sonic storytelling in the African American literary tradition. Furlonge explains that “[b]y being aurally attentive to these dynamics, these contemporary writers [such as Morrison and Daly], artists, and intellectuals explore the *lower frequencies of representation*, considering the ways in which aural perception can tell alternative stories and amplify sound and difference in new ways” (Furlonge 2018, p. 2; emphasis added). In weaving together texts that rely on both visual and sonic representation, Morrison and Daly delve deeply into the “lower frequencies of representation” to present a narrative that cannot simply be seen, but must also be listened to: stories that speak to the reader.² Specifically, these stories speak, or sonically articulate, Black subjectivity: “In its most influential and foundational texts, sound—whether a spoken or sung voice, talking book or singing drum, the blues, trains, or hambones—functions as a key metaphoric, structural, and epistemic site of black cultural identity” (Furlonge 2018, p. 7).

By engaging in generative entropy through the sounds of Black literature, Morrison and Daly position their texts at the “epistemic site of black cultural identity” to empha-

size possibilities for subverting racism as a system by sounding the multiplicity of Black subjectivity in both the creation of and relationship to sound.

3. Subverting Jim Crow

The haunting echo of “Jumpin’ Jim Crow” violently rattles both *Sula* and *Not Only War*, a lingering presence that seizes the reader’s imagination as Shadrack and Montie navigate a war set to the soundtrack of American minstrelsy. The Jim Crow era began with Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice’s song “Jumpin’ Jim Crow,” for which he garnered fame and success, sparking an era of “entertainment” centered and dependent on the disturbing racism of blackface minstrelsy (Pilgrim 2015, p. 38). At the heart of minstrelsy is exploitation. Well-known music critic Phyl Garland explains that “it has been a part of the American pattern for the originators of black music to be shunted into the background once their creations have been adopted by whites and made lucrative as well as popular” (Garland 1969, p. 12). Blackface minstrelsy is an early example of this white exploitation of Black artists.

Blackface minstrelsy began as a desire on the part of white musicians to mimic and parody Black musical forms, in particular banjo playing. Francesca T. Royster explains that “the banjo was seen by white commentators as primarily an instrument of Black people, until it became a centerpiece of American popular culture through blackface minstrelsy, a parody of Black life performed by white working-class men” (Royster 2022, p. 120). White artists’ performances were seen as inauthentic if they failed to learn from Black musicians. Eventually, this requirement faded and the history of the instrument became whitewashed. The banjo was no longer recognized as an instrument of the African diaspora, but as an instrument of blue collar white men in Appalachia, a misrepresentation of the instrument that persists today (although it is being combated by artists like Rhiannon Giddens and Our Native Daughters). While at first, minstrelsy necessitated connection (albeit exploitative and harmful) it eventually led to separation, a sonic reification of racial boundaries. Jeniffer Stoever argues that “[s]ound both defined and performed the tightening barrier whites drew between themselves and black people, expressing the racialized power dynamics and hierarchical relationships of chattel slavery through vocal tones, musical rhythms, and expressed listening practices marked by whites as ‘black’ and therefore of lesser value and potentially dangerous to whiteness and the power structures upholding it” (Stoever 2016, p. 31). Blackface minstrelsy was a means for controlling Black sound and the narrative surrounding it, diminishing threats to the construct of whiteness by offering what would become, for a time, a dominant representation of Black life and musicality in the popular American imagination.

While the song is not literally present in either text, its implications resound through a history that is both felt and heard, reverberating in the searing racial epithets of Bob’s insidious and fragile rage and the shrieking bullets that leave Shadrack with fiercely fallible hands he cannot bring himself to trust. The characters experience the sonic and literal ramifications of Jim Crow, as the exploitative nature of Jim Crow, both *de jure* and performative, seep into the interactions of Black and white characters. As both Shadrack and Montie demonstrate, a world war does not exempt them from the evils of Jim Crow—a deafening blast set on loop to create a pestilent and parasitic earworm.

Daly’s soundscapes produce instances of generative entropy in their sonic contradictions as he juxtaposes music with the sounds of war and racial violence. By creating these sonic sites of contradiction, Daly produces meaning in ambiguity. Critical scholarship neglects the novel’s ambiguity. Similarly, the sonic elements of the novel receive little attention. Instead, scholars such as Keith Gandal and David Davis have sought to offer a stable interpretation of the novel’s end. In the final scene, as Montie and Bob find themselves in the physical embodiment of ambiguity, no man’s land, they collapse into one another, perishing together and offering what can be read as a symbol of war’s nihilistic apathy or, as Davis puts it, an “overly sentimental” end that seems to suggest Bob’s ultimate conversion in the face of death (Davis 2010, p. 173). Gandal pushes against readings by

Davis and others who suggest that the novel ends on a “melodramatic” and tidy note, a proverbial end to racism in the face of some larger and uniting impending threat.

Gandal posits that the novel should instead be read more rigorously in line with the historical context of Daly’s experience as a WWI soldier. Gandal reads the ending as “neither idealistic nor fatalistic,” but instead as an effort to “honor those black veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice, some of whom had died trying to save white troops” (Gandal 2017, p. 199). This argument rests on the assumption that Daly’s intended audience was other Black veterans. Gandal goes on to argue that in addition to honoring his intended audience, Daly also “wanted to end on a moment and in a place where blacks and whites were more nearly equal and both vulnerable—not simply in the hell of combat but also in that other social hell into which Montie was born in the segregated South and into which Bob got unconsciously sucked outside of the United States in a foreign country that neither knew nor rejected Jim Crow” (Daly 2010, p. 199). Gandal’s mention of Jim Crow is useful for understanding the mindset of the French and how their differing perspectives further fuel Bob’s rage and impotence. However, the presence of Jim Crow in France is no less potent; the French may not grant it the same credence as white American officers, but in the end it is those same officers who, whether on home soil or not, wield Jim Crow to their favor.

The threads of analysis that lead readers to these two, seemingly logical yet never entirely convincing, conclusions are born from an indeterminate sonic turmoil, a backdrop of clashing sounds that clamor toward an ambiguous end. By following one thread, which might lead one to agree with Davis’s conclusion that the novel ends on a sentimental note, one is forced to acknowledge that other lines of interpretation might negate the reading. In other words, Daly has written a novel that confounds attempts at cohesion; the conclusion leaves the reader feeling bereft of closure, unsure of whether the end is too simple or too complicated.

From the opening chapter to the final moments leading to Montie’s and Bob’s deaths, music and sound work both with and against one another to create a disheveling effect that baffles the ear—the ingredients required for generative entropy. These sounds work in flux to sonically complicate and generate narrative possibility; they are the soundtrack blasting against the pervasive legacy of “Jumpin’ Jim Crow.” In its entirety, the novel presents a musical through-thread, manifesting in a series of parallels between both Montie and Bob, the most overt being their interracial relationships which are both founded in musical connection. Jennifer C. James notes that the novel “appears to engage the two men in a tug-of-war over the female body, whether that body is black or white” (James 2007, p. 176). This “tug-of-war” is set against the sonic history of Jim Crow and functions as a catalyst for generative entropy.

The first instance of music in *Not Only War* is presented in Bob’s relationship to the children of Black tenant farmers. The crux of sonically induced generative entropy lies in its tether to relationships. Music and sound undergird nearly every interaction and relationship in the novel. In the opening pages, we learn that Bob’s positionality to the Black community is foregrounded, in his mind, as one sustained through musical proximity:

As a little fellow, the only playmates that he knew were the Negro children of the tenant farmers on the plantation. Many an evening he had sat in a deep rocker on the veranda of the big house and listened to the distant strains of a banjo or the crooning voices harmonizing the old familiar songs. (Daly 2010, p. 8)

This is particularly telling of Bob’s privileged position in the Jim Crow South. His initial understanding of his relationship to the Black community is forged through a musical tether; he feels connected to them through an appropriation of their sound.

By virtue of its very existence, the music of the Black tenant farmers challenges the hierarchy of Jim Crow, offering a competing song, one that notes and demonstrates the complex history of cultural appropriation and the exploitation of Black musicians in America.³ The “strains of the banjo” and “crooning voices” are the only way Bob is able to read Blackness, something he sees as malleable to fit his own needs. He learns to “strum”

the banjo and uses it for his own benefit, a “chief asset” of his college days (Daly 2010, p. 8). Long before the war, this moment highlights the disposability of Black people in the novel (and in the nation writ large) during the Jim Crow era. They are a sonic tool for Bob, a means to an end, just as they will be for the rest of America in the war. Montie himself points this out later in the novel after experiencing racism in France: “Montie smiled to himself. ‘The world over,’ he thought. ‘A nigger first—an American afterwards’” (Daly 2010, p. 50). This comment comes in response to a French woman’s flagrant aversion to Montie staying in her home, her unwillingness to house a Black soldier despite the mandates of the war.

Her rejection of Montie is mirrored in Bob’s earlier rejection of Miriam and her friend. Early in the novel, Bob finds himself running late and desperate to reach his destination on time. His desperation leads him to reluctantly accept a ride from two Black women, one of whom he ultimately pursues a romantic relationship with. As the women approach on the wagon Bob notes that Miriam is “uncommonly pretty,” and when she offers him a ride to the train station, his malignant admiration quickly turns to violently racist internal dialogue: “What! ride down to the Junction beside two niggers! [...] Hell, I’d rather miss a dozen trains. And she’s got a helluva nerve asking me to ride down there with them, anyhow” (Daly 2010, p. 10). Bob’s immediate anger, followed again by his acknowledgement of her physical beauty, “[s]till she’s damned good-looking—and neat and clean, too” (Daly 2010, p. 10), highlights his privilege. Bob is not grappling with the “damned prejudice” because he has a problem with racism or wants to correct his own racist indoctrination, but rather because the rules of Jim Crow are, at this moment, inconvenient for him. Ultimately, he decides to take Miriam up on her offer, using the war to justify his decision: “Hell, during war-times folks do all sorts of things. It’s an emergency of war, that’s all” (Daly 2010, p. 11). His “emergency of war” (as he runs late for a meeting at the military training camp) allows him to manipulate his Jim Crow sensibilities, while simultaneously remaining firmly rooted in the racism that pervades the Jim Crow south.

Similarly, the French woman reaches the decision to allow Montie and several other Black soldiers to take up residence in her house after her granddaughter’s persuasion. The war, once again, allows for a change to the norm, although a no-less racist alteration. War does not suddenly dissolve racial tensions, but rather casts them in subtly different molds. Gandal argues that being in France places Montie and Bob in a foreign cultural context where the rules of Jim Crow apply differently, creating a jarring experience for both men (Gandal 2017, p. 199). This reading paints Bob in a sympathetic light, a man who is going through his own kind of “hell” in a country where the systems by which he lives his life are shaken. While racism in France may not operate on the same premises as the specifically American model of Jim Crow, racism is present and clearly impacts how Montie navigates his daily life in France. Montie finds himself a guest in the home of the French woman who clearly does not desire his presence. The habits he cultivates while staying there demonstrate that the influence of Jim Crow is still present, a sonic underpinning of his citizenry that follows him to France. He recalls that the “people had told him definitely that their house was reserved for officers—white men—and here he was, not only intruding himself, but bringing three others with him” (Gandal 2017, p. 52). Montie is careful not to attract attention or suspicion as he comes and goes from the house: “For the next three nights Montie came in after everybody else in the house had gone to bed. For the next three mornings he had been the first one out. He had never returned home during the day” (Gandal 2017, p. 52). His caution is a product of his life as a Black man in America, one in which the code of Jim Crow demands his caution to preserve his safety.

Both Montie and Bob are fully ensnared in the rhythm of Jim Crow, unable to escape (or in Bob’s case meaningfully recognize) the encompassing and fracturing nature of racism. It is their relationships to women that allow for a sentimental reading of the novel’s end, a parallel that can seemingly either divide or unite the two men. Shortly after meeting Miriam and reluctantly accepting a ride to the train station, Bob finds himself thinking about the woman and seeking her out on the train. Under the pretense of needing a

smoke, Bob finds Miriam on the train, abandoning the white coach to further indulge his interest in the “uncommonly pretty” woman: “He knew that he had no right to be there. In spite of himself he knew that the ‘emergency of war’ had ended with his arrival at the Junction. But he just couldn’t get her pretty face off his mind” (Daly 2010, p. 14). The two exchange pleasantries as Bob struggles to justify his interest in Miriam, noting once again that “sometimes [the] damn prejudice seem[ed] to have no sense in it all” as he examines her beauty (Daly 2010, p. 14). Bob’s interest in Miriam remains superficial as his frustrations with Jim Crow remain selfish and indulgent.

Their relationship should have stopped after his “emergency of war” ended, and yet its continuation is made possible by Miriam’s longing for music paired with Bob’s position of power. Once she discovers that Bob could potentially offer her a teaching position, Miriam reveals her interest in music: “If I could get that position, Mr. Casper, in a few years time I could go away and complete my music” (Daly 2010, p. 17). Here again, music is found at the birth of a connection and ultimately is the only thing that sustains the connection, creating a possibility in the narrative that would have otherwise been improbable if not impossible. Whether Miriam and Bob have genuine feelings for one another is a point of question throughout the novel, an example of the ambiguous space clashing soundscapes create. Thus, their relationship is transformed into a site of generative entropy, one in which multiple narrative readings are made possible.

Perhaps Bob and Miriam genuinely have feelings for one another, their sonically ascribed existences converging in an unlikely melody. Or, perhaps they are using one another, their oppositional and yet intertwined soundscapes signaling an inescapable disjunction of interests as Miriam engages in a relationship to advance her pursuit of music while Bob engages in a relationship to satisfy his lust. Either way, any interpretation of the novel’s end is complicated by this relationship. Bob’s “conversion” narrative cannot exist without his relationship to Miriam; the sincerity of their relationship is the prerequisite for moral change. If Bob has not meaningfully challenged the dominant song of Jim Crow in order to invest in a new national sound, Miriam’s music, then the conversion reading falls flat, which would then bolster and justify a nihilistic interpretation of the novel’s end. Daly does not offer his readers answers to this interpretive quandary, instead he asks that they linger and listen at the end of the novel to the sonically indeterminate no-man’s land where they must grapple with narrative possibility.

Daly’s efforts to confound legibility through sonically ascribed ambiguity are further demonstrated and complicated by Montie’s parallel situation. Montie, too, finds himself in a similarly improbable relationship that is brought on by a musical connection. Initially, it seems that Montie cannot escape the dominant song of Jim Crow: a pervasive sonic undertone that guides his movements on foreign soil as the hierarchy reified by song plagues his daily existence. Daly complicates the soundscape that both literally and figuratively accompanies Montie’s movements. While the haunting echo of Jim Crow is ever present for Montie, consistently sounding with every microaggression and blatant instance of racism, he is forced to alter his practices to coincide with a new musical atmosphere, one which challenges racist systems of cohesion. For Montie, this takes shape as a relationship with a white woman, one who prefers his company to that of the white soldiers.

While Montie puts forth his best effort to avoid contact with the white women in the house, he finds himself drawn to the French hostess’s granddaughter, Blanche. His encounter with her is described as a “disaster to [his] plans,” one brought on by music: “When he entered the hall-way the sound of a piano in an adjoining room greeted his ears” (Daly 2010, pp. 52–53). Again, a relationship is founded on music. In this instance, the piano’s notes envelop Montie in a memory, connecting him to Bob in a mutual (albeit differently motivated) desire for Miriam: “Like a flash it carried him back to Buckroe Beach and Miriam” (Daly 2010, p. 53). Blanche’s presence, in particular her music, disrupts the norm. In a moment of generative entropy, the piano subverts Jim Crow to offer a different narrative possibility, Montie’s relationship with a white woman. After agreeing

to teach her how to speak English, Montie learns that Blanche has a distaste for the white American soldiers. She explains that “[o]ne of the white officers stopped [her] on the street in Villaines” and proceeded to ask her “what [her] name was and where [she] lived,” which ultimately led to him further offending her by referring to her as “keed” (Daly 2010, p. 54). Montie tries to “laugh it off,” but her interaction with the white soldier inevitably comes back to haunt him as Jim Crow rears its head yet again.

The white soldier who insulted Blanche, as it turns out, is a friend of Bob’s. In an effort to get the better of his friend who is infatuated with Blanche but too drunk to make his visit to her home, Bob takes it upon himself to visit her and “pull a fast one over” on his friend (Daly 2010, p. 57). Upon his arrival, he too is drawn in by the sound of a piano: “Then he caught the sound of music—a piano” (Daly 2010, p. 57). In response to the piano, Bob remarks that it “doesn’t sound much like the war around here” (Daly 2010, p. 57). Although the comment is meant in jest, Bob highlights the disruptive nature of the music, setting the stage for the most potent instance of generative entropy in the novel. When Bob enters the house to find Montie in the company of Blanche, the warring soundscapes of Jim Crow and the music that resists its codified trappings collide in a seismic narrative convulsion.

Bob and Montie meet face-to-face and are forced to reckon with the implications of the sonic underpinnings that have guided their narratives. Montie, an advocate for what Blanche’s piano signifies—a world in which Jim Crow’s deafening minstrelsy has been muted—is forced to confront Bob whose rage carries the insidious weight of systemic racism. Bob no longer holds his racist thoughts in silence, the weight of his hatred and confusion boils over into a sonic rupture that fills the room with jarring echoes of “Jumpin’ Jim Crow” in their shared sentiment. Bob demands answers from Montie, refusing to believe that Montie would have any right to be in the house as his anger becomes a “white heat” (Daly 2010, p. 59). Bob’s comments and thoughts are riddled with racial epithets, making the scene both uncomfortable and violent in its delivery. He seethes and threatens Montie who is now so angry that his voice appears “choked” (Daly 2010, p. 59). Bob shouts “I had those chevrons put on your sleeve, and I’ll be damned if I don’t have them ripped off again” (Daly 2010, p. 59). In this instance, Jim Crow overshadows the pleasant piano music that had filled the house just moments earlier, but it does not erase its presence entirely.

By creating a convergence of the interwoven relationships in the novel alongside a cacophonous clash of the sonic tethers that bind them, Daly presents the most profound instance of generative entropy in the narrative: an upheaval of violent systems of cohesion that proffers narrative potential. Daly brings the piano and the virulent undertones of Bob’s outburst together in the final line of the scene: “Miriam’s weekly letter to Bob went unanswered that night” (Daly 2010, p. 59). By referencing Bob’s correspondence with Miriam, Daly brings the narrative full circle, encapsulating this sonic collision in a liminal and discordant space of indeterminacy. The piano music paired with Bob’s resounding rage create an instance of generative entropy by converging all of the parallels witnessed throughout the novel into one moment in time. All of the questions about the varying interconnected relationships are forced together at once in a way that leans into multiple possible interpretations. Daly’s final nod in the chapter to Bob’s failure to respond to Miriam’s letters can be read in multiple ways. Does Bob fail to respond because he feels guilty for his outburst? Or is it simply because his authority was called into question by the presence of a Black man in a white woman’s house, and he now feels no desire to communicate with a Black woman?

This penultimate scene leads into the final and most ambiguous moment of the novel—Montie’s and Bob’s demise in no-man’s land. Because Daly has prefaced the simultaneous death of the two soldiers with the sonic eruption of competing musically ascribed histories, no-man’s land, a liminal space by virtue of definition, transforms into a site of generative entropy where gunfire and the sounds of agony mingle to produce cacophonous sonic and narrative possibility. This confounds the urge to pin down a single interpretation of their death, denying binary interpretations on the part of the reader, nihilistic or sentimental. Instead, Daly creates a scene where readers are forced, even in their pursuit of legibility, to

grapple with a soundscape that foregrounds ambiguity; indeterminacy belies reductive systems of cohesion to bring the reader to the precipice of narrative certainty, only to reveal that they have been standing on an island all along, apt to fall in any direction at any given point. Amid the jarring shriek of bullets, Montie hears the guttural utterances of a wounded Bob, although he does not recognize the man by the sound of his pain: “But the groaning continued, louder, too. It worried Montie” (Daly 2010, p. 66). The *sound* of Bob’s agony prompts Montie to help the man, despite Bob’s blatant disregard of Montie’s humanity. In helping Bob, and ultimately dying for his good deed, Montie’s actions open up a number of readings. Whizzing bullets echo piano keys and notes of change sung against the obscene sonic history of Jim Crow until the final sounds of war, the shriveling and fading cadence of “Jumpin’ Jim Crow” collapses under the weight of generative entropy.

4. The Pied Piper’s Band

Had Montie survived his time in no-man’s land, he likely would have gone on to return to a country that treats him as a nuisance, baggage from the war that is easily discarded but not so easily disposed of. Morrison’s Shadrack presents a likely representation of Montie’s imagined post-war experience. After fighting in France, Shadrack returns to America, not as a war hero, but as collateral damage, a newfound victim of the virtually non-existent healthcare for Black WWI veterans. Hospitalized for what was meant to pass as rehabilitation, Shadrack is confined to a straightjacket for inadvertently overturning a tray and “knocking a nurse into the next bed,” a reaction born from the psychological pain of confronting his “monstrous hand” (Morrison 1973, p. 9). Shadrack’s fear of his hands is indicative of the psychological brutality of war. His sense of self and his perception of his body have been mangled to the point of unrecognizability. Shadrack’s impaired clarity is quelled only by his certainty that he should distrust his hands, a manifestation of his feelings of dispossession: “with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no key [...] he was sure of one thing only: the unchecked monstrosity of his hands” (Morrison 1973, p. 12). Shadrack’s inability to recognize himself, his body, arises from an unnameable experience—the trauma of war.

The narrator describes Shadrack’s experience in WWI as a site of ambiguity, in part due to the sonic turmoil encapsulating Shadrack’s time on the battlefield: “Shellfire was all around him, and though he knew that this was something called *it*, he could not muster up the proper feeling—the feeling that would accommodate *it*. He expected to be terrified or exhilarated—to feel *something* very strong” (Morrison 1973, p. 7; emphasis original). Delia Steverson argues that “Morrison’s use of the pronoun *it* without an antecedent reveals that both the physical and psychological pain that Shadrack experiences is not just unnamed, but incapable of a literal description” (Steverson 2021, p. 150; emphasis original). In this instance, sound functions as the primary descriptor of this feeling; where language fails to describe the unnamed experience, sound grants it context.

Shadrack may be unable to name or identify his emotions on the battlefield, but the sonically induced turmoil of shellfire offers the scene legibility in chaos, or, at the very least, signifies narrative potential. Shadrack’s unnamed emotion resides within an instance of generative entropy. The gunfire that sounds his experience creates a scene of sonic chaos that promotes multiplicity. Shadrack’s unnamed emotion can be read infinitely because it exists in a space of liminal indeterminacy—a sonic rupture that tears at the fabric of his physical and psychological being. The shredding of singing shrapnel leads Shadrack to desire cohesion that exists outside of the bounds of Jim Crow: the violent felt history that resounds within the confines of the hospital walls, the echo of a system that actively seeks to dismantle and discard the Black veteran.

Once released from the hospital, Shadrack eventually finds himself back in Medallion, where he begins his resistance and becomes a sonic catalyst for generative entropy. Upon his return to the Bottom, Shadrack finds himself occupying a liminal space in the community: “In the case of Shadrack, his madness (his otherness) excludes him from full participation

in the community, while his blackness (his not-otherness) prevents his exclusion altogether out of the Bottom" (Pruitt 2011, p. 122). The narrator explains that "[a]t first the people in the town were frightened; they knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn't have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power" (Morrison 1973, p. 15). Shadrack's power lies in song, in his ability to orchestrate a competing American soundtrack that subverts the prominent historical sonic underpinnings of "Jumpin' Jim Crow." Shadrack accomplishes this by creating National Suicide Day.

Because he operates in a liminal space within the community, Shadrack is uniquely positioned as both insider and outsider to disrupt the sonic undertone of Jim Crow that has plagued the community from its inception. In creating the holiday, Shadrack hopes to establish a sense of control: "It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it" (Morrison 1973, p. 14). Hinton explains that "There, [in Medallion] Shadrack aims to lead the entire Bottom community in a similar ritual process for negotiating liminality, mitigating the debilitating effects of a discordant social structure, and renewing existential certitude" (Hinton 2017, p. 299). National Suicide Day is punctuated by the tolling of a "cowbell" as Shadrack offers his community the opportunity to "kill themselves or each other," cheating death so that the "rest of the year would be safe and free" from its grasp (Morrison 1973, p. 14). In cheating death, Shadrack also undermines Jim Crow, challenging the racism that exacerbated his horrific war experience. By instituting National Suicide Day, Shadrack himself sonically embodies the ambiguity of generative entropy to create narrative possibility as someone who is both "a symbol of death and a life-giving force for the community" (Bryant 1990, p. 734). In other words, Shadrack sustains the community of Medallion through both life and death; he offers them a musically fortified choice.

National Suicide Day becomes an accepted and largely ignored part of the Bottom's make-up, a tradition that is viewed as a spectacle rather than as a serious opportunity. This changes as the novel comes to a close. Just as Shadrack begins to "suspect that all those years of rope hauling and bell ringing were never going to do any good" the community takes him by surprise (Morrison 1973, p. 158). After learning of Sula's death, he leaves his home, dejected, to continue his holiday tradition: "[H]e would invite them to end their lives neatly and sweetly, he walked over the rickety bridge and on into the Bottom. But it was not heartfelt this time, not loving this time, for he no longer cared whether he helped them or not. His rope was improperly tied; his bell had a tinny unimpassioned sound" (Morrison 1973, p. 158). In this moment, Morrison highlights the necessity of community. Although a catalyst for generative entropy, Shadrack cannot accomplish change alone. He needs the support of his community to create tangible change.

Year after year, his bell sparks narrative possibility, but his community must act on said possibility, undoing the isolation wrought on him by the war and Jim Crow to subvert America's dominant and damaging song. As Shadrack tolls his bell, he prompts Dessie to laugh: "Maybe just a brief moment, for once, of not feeling fear, of looking at death in the sunshine and being unafraid. She laughed" (Morrison 1973, p. 159). Dessie's laugh is followed by the most powerful instance of generative entropy in the novel as other citizens of the Bottom follow suit, heeding the call of Shadrack's "unimpassioned sound." Shadrack quickly assumes the role of pied piper, his music offering a sweeping contagion through Medallion:

Upstairs, Ivy heard [Dessie] and looked to see what caused the thick music that rocked her neighbor's breasts. Then Ivy laughed too. Like the scarlet fever that had touched everybody and worn them down to gristle, their laughter infected Carpenter's Road. Soon children were jumping about giggling and men came to the porches to chuckle. (Morrison 1973, p. 159)

What began as Shadrack's dejected tolling culminates in a parade of sound, music born from a community on the brink of a liberating shift. Whether the people of Medallion sought to end their lives in earnest or simply to join Shadrack's orchestra is a sentiment swept up in the chaos of the moment. Shadrack's parade takes on a life of its own, one that functions in fluidity rather than presupposed intention.

Shadrack himself does not anticipate this reaction. The force of generative entropy “frighten[s] him” as he is met with his neighbors’ unprecedented “glee,” but still, he continues “singing his song, ringing his bell and holding fast to his rope” (Morrison 1973, p. 159). As Shadrack continues with his invitation his following grows: “Everybody, Dessie, Tar Baby, Patsy, Mr. Buckland Reed, Teapot’s Mamma, Valentine, the deweys, Mrs. Jackson, Irene, the proprietor of the Palace of Cosmetology, Reba, the Herrod brothers and flocks of teen-agers got into the mood and, laughing, dancing, calling to one another, formed a pied piper’s band behind Shadrack” (Morrison 1973, p. 159). Those who choose to answer Shadrack’s call appear to have succumbed to a “curious disorder,” a “headless display” that others who “understood the Spirit’s touch which made them dance, who understood whole families bending their backs in a field while singing as from one throat, who understood the ecstasy of river baptisms under suns just like this one, did not understand” (Morrison 1973, p. 160). This is indicative of the ambiguity of Shadrack’s song, even to some members of his own community. His tolling bell offers a chiming sonic rupture, one that originates from his unique experience as a Black veteran. Shadrack’s desire to help, to challenge and disarm Jim Crow, is born from a place entirely bereft of cohesion: a site of trauma that compels him to help his community defeat the terror of unexpected death that has haunted him for years. Rather than defeating death himself by committing suicide, Shadrack continues to live for the sake of his community; he lives to convey his message through song.

As his parade arrives at the tunnel, the site of their collective frustration, National Suicide Day culminates in a brief moment of silence—a direct confrontation of the racial hierarchies that have ordered their day-to-day lives in the Bottom. The narrator explains that “[a]t the mouth of the tunnel excavation, in a fever pitch of excitement and joy,” Shadrack’s followers find themselves “silent for a moment” (Morrison 1973, p. 161). This silence is broken as the momentum of generative entropy takes hold again, this time resulting not in music, but in the sonic crash of a system being dismantled: “[L]ed by the tough, the enraged and the young they picked up the lengths of timber and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns [...] Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (Morrison 1973, p. 161). In their anger, the people of Medallion issue their own sonic attack, crashing and hammering against the tunnel, and “in their need to kill it,” their need to “wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far . . . ” and ultimately lost many of their lives (Morrison 1973, pp. 161–62). In this moment, Shadrack’s song culminates in the physical and metaphorical deconstruction of Jim Crow: a battle waged in the aftermath of WWI, claiming victims in the name of progress. Morrison requires her readers to, first and foremost, listen to National Suicide Day, bearing witness with our ears as well as our eyes.

Both Morrison and Daly require that we attend to their novels as sonically attuned readers, to hear the story beneath the printed words. By doing so, we are opened up to the “lower frequencies” of narrative, as Furlong suggests, promoting a more robust understanding of their work. The visual qualities of narrative are amplified and made more lucid when we listen to what the words are saying. When we fail to do so, we miss the liminal and indeterminate spaces of the texts that offer up narrative possibilities existing externally and against the codified system of Jim Crow. In other words, Morrison and Daly present texts that must be listened to for the sake of understanding. This holistic approach acknowledges the capacity for Black literature to speak, sing, cry, and laugh, emphasizing the ability of literary sound to generate new possibilities and sociocultural critique. By grappling with generative entropy, we engage with a new mode for critically listening to sonically ascribed spaces in Black texts, cultivating narrative possibility from seemingly discordant sound.

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Notes

- ¹ Kieth Gandal, David Davis, and Jennifer C. James offer the most thorough critical engagement with *Not Only War*.
- ² Furlonge borrows this phrase from the final line of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Ellison 1952).
- ³ Scholars and artists today like Rhiannon Giddens are prioritizing a reclaiming of the banjo's history to revise and correct the misrepresented (or entirely ignored) influence of Black artists in American musical traditions (Greenmentch 2017). The banjo is an instrument largely associated with white, rural, working-class musicians of Appalachia. This association is a result of the instrument's white-washed history. In truth, the banjo is an instrument of the African diaspora, brought to American soil by enslaved Africans and appropriated by white musicians. The narrative of the banjo and its role in bluegrass and folk music has largely been misconstrued by documentation carried out by folk music collectors like Cecil Sharp.

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