Toni Morrison - *Jazz* (1992)

*If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know.* — Louis Armstrong

1) Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris, “Toni Morrison’s *Jazz and the City*” (2001)
Just like the Middle Passage of slaves across the Atlantic, the City of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s is some sort of ‘zero moment’ in black history.

The writer’s attempt to imply or reproduce musical rhythm can take the form of jazz-like flexibility and fluidity in prose rhythms (words, lines, paragraphs, the whole text), such as nonchronological syncopated order, pacing, or tempo. A sense of jazz—the jam session—can also emerge from an interplay of voices improvising on the basic themes or motifs of the text, in key words and phrases. [defining ‘jazz literature’]

3) Toni Morrison, interviewed about *Jazz* (1992)
That was the real art of the enterprise for me: bumping up against the melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth. . . I wanted the story to be the vehicle which moved us from page one to the end, but I wanted the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around it, and through it, as though it were a prism, constantly turning.

Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The “gaze” has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that “looks” to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist.

At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time. There is probably no single fact of Negro American life so little understood by whites. [...] In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other.