

The City Writing in Jazz—Exploring the Intersection of Space, Identity, and Culture

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the representation of the city in Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* with a special focus on the depictions of urban setting, the characters' interactions with their environment and the political discourse surrounding race, migration, and identity in the setting of Harlem during the Jazz Age. Drawing on critical analyses and archival sources, this study attempts to deepen the understanding of the city's influence on characters, and to shed light on the ways in which Morrison engages with the spatial, cultural, and historical dimensions of the city to convey the complexities of African American life in the early 20th Century.

Keywords

City Writing, Cultural Displacement, Identity Reconstruction, Morrison's *Jazz*.

1. General Survey

As a renowned African American novelist, Toni Morrison has received numerous awards, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. Morrison's works are marked by their exploration of themes such as race, identity, gender, and memory, as well as their distinctive narrative styles. Throughout her career, Morrison has published several groundbreaking novels, including *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Jazz* (1992), which continue to be celebrated for their profound impact on American literature and culture [1].

In the novel *Jazz* Morrison unveils the relationship of a middle-aged Black couple Joe Trace and Violet. Due to the economic and political hardships in the rural South, they come to the urban North for a better life. In the City, Joe is a door-to-door cosmetics salesman. He falls in love and has an affair with Dorcas, a much younger woman. When Dorcas decides to break off their relationship and starts seeing another man, Joe becomes jealous and shoots her at a party. Violet, Joe's wife, also struggles with her own emotions and jealousy over Joe's affair. In an effort to confront her feelings, she goes to Dorcas' funeral and even tries to disfigure the dead girl's face. Later, Violet becomes obsessed with learning more about Dorcas and eventually befriends Dorcas' aunt, Alice Manfred.

Throughout the novel, the characters' backstories are revealed, providing context for their actions and motivations. Joe and Violet's pasts reveal their struggles with the trauma of racism, the loss of their families, and their desire to find love and connection in their lives. As the story unfolds, Joe and Violet try to cope with their guilt, pain, and complex emotions. Their relationship is tested, but they ultimately find a way to forgive each other and themselves for their actions. In the end, the couple begins to heal from their past wounds and move forward together. By creating the two main characters, Morrison tries to demonstrate and explore how African American people reconstruct their identity during the Harlem Renaissance and How they cope with their personal trauma and conflicts with the society when living in the City.

In the novel, the city plays a significant role in informing the characters' experiences and interactions, with the urban landscape serving as a backdrop for the complex relationships and

narratives that unfold. Therefore, analyzing how the city is written in *Jazz* can offer valuable insights into the novel's themes and characters' development.

2. The City Image

In the foreword of the book, Morrison mentions a book—*The Harlem Book of the Dead*. “It was the fashion of the day to dress your loved ones in their fanciest threads and take pictures of them lying elegantly in their coffins or being cradled lovingly in your arms” [2, p.139]. James Van Der Zee, the photographer of the book, comments on a photo of a dead girl who is shot by her lover:

She was the one I think was shot by her sweetheart at a party with a noiseless gun. She complained of being sick at the party [...] and they taken her in the room and laid her down. After they undressed her and loosened her clothes, they saw the blood on her dress. They asked her about it and she said “ I’ll tell you tomorrow, yes, I’ll tell you tomorrow. She was just trying to give him a chance to get away. (Morrison foreword)

Morrison was inspired by this photo and applied the girl's story to her novel—Dorcas is shot by Joe. It is also during this historic time that Morrison sets the background of the novel. Harlem, known as the intellectual and artistic center of black awakening, experienced a collective rebirth and became famous as the Harlem Renaissance. “Throughout the 1920s, black poetry, art, dance, literature, philosophy, and other expressions of repressed black genius, suddenly burst into full bloom [...] There might not have been any jazz in Harlem if it weren't for the Southerners [...] Jazz became the heartbeat of the Harlem Renaissance [...] Harlem was becoming one of the major centers of the vibrant new jazz music” [2, p.140]. Harlem is connected to desire both through these historical events—Joe and Violet come to Harlem in 1906 as part of the Great Migration, and the story itself is set in 1926, the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance—and through descriptions of the city itself as an object of and vehicle for desire [3, p.238].

In 1926 “the City” was already much more than just a black neighborhood within Manhattan; it was not even a city within the city, but he capital of black America. And the sense of place was essentially defined by what it could no longer be, and by what it wasn't quite yet [4, p.219]. Harlem is described as a place:

“when all the was are over and there will never be another one. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last” [5, p.7].

In the City they have found a sense of community and a way to be themselves. By casting life in Harlem, Morrison shows how African Americans are dependent upon their hidden histories. Morrison contrasts life in urban America with rural settings to show how the urban milieu robs the souls of identity while allowing for new identities and goals.

The sense of place and displacement is a major theme of the novel. Violet and Joe moved to the City from the South like many others between the turn of the century and WWI. Like others they were motivated to move because of the political and economic hard times in the South and the better life in the North. For the most part, their hopes were realized; Violet settled on doing hair and Joe sold beauty products. For Joe and Violet, the City was wonderful. In 1906 they boarded a northbound train. As they approached the City, it “was speaking to them [...] like a million others, chests pointing, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them” [5, p.32]. When they “danced on into the City [...] they knew right away that perfect was the not word, It

was better than that” especially for a couple who had no children and did not want any, “city life would be so much better without them” [5, p.107].

The City is a distinctive mix of fantasy and reality. The City is also a land of promises and can make their dreams come true:

“I’m crazy about this City. Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It’s the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it.” [5, p.7]

The image of the City Morrison paints with the hard angles of daylight overlapping buildings evokes the feel of a cubist art. When the line of the sunshine hits dark buildings, the image that the City represents is alive with motion which is both violent and beautiful.

The City is also a representation of real and false hopes. With its glamour and fantasy, the City deludes people into thinking they can dream big, and their dreams will be realized in the City as it is a land of promises and opportunities. “All you have to do is heed the design—the way it’s laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow” [5, p.9]. The phantom of the City traps people into its labyrinth, and its inhabitants are obsessed with the illusion that as if they follow the directions and paces of the City, they can ultimately reach their dream destination.

“Round and round about the town. That’s the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you’re free... You can’t get off the track a City lays for you. Whatever happens, whether you get rich or stay poor, ruin your health or live to old age, you always end up back where you started: hungry for the one thing everybody loses—young loving” [5, p.120].

“The City is then, in turn, friend and foe. Paying attention to the City’s design does not exclusively mean understanding and going by its ways and means. It is also to be fought, as a new potential site of terror and wreckage” [4, p.222], for “crackers in the South mad cause negroes were leaving; crackers in the North mad cause they were coming” [5, p.128].

During the twenty years of living in the City, Joe and Violet lose their way. The City deludes Violet into thinking that she can be who she is not: “White. Light. Young again” [5, p.208]. These childhood longings were nurtured by her grandmother’s stories of the little blond Golden Gray. In little Violet’s imagination, Golden Gray was sometimes transformed into a young girl, always living inside her mind. In the City, the stories she heard about golden beauty and privilege began to shape her needs. By the time she realizes the deception, her life is already in a mess. She is a lonely silent woman who longs for a child. Before she came to the City, she “made sense and so did the world [...] she didn’t have nothing but [...] she didn’t miss it” [5, p.207]. At fifty, in the City, she and her world are incoherent. “Twenty years in a city better than perfect” [5, p.111] is not what Violet thought it would be. Joe is correspondingly desolate. Living a routine life with a woman who carries a doll to bed and talks only to a parrot makes Joe feel more lonely. The simple need for belonging finds an expression in Joe’s relationship with Dorcas. With her he is no longer lonely. Joe came to the City in search of his new self together with dignity and spirit, but his quest failed. He and Violet became a childless couple and alienated from community. Violet and Joe are dislocated in what is supposed to be their community. The vulnerability of their marriage reflects their individual vulnerability.

3. The City’s Influence on Characters

For Joe Trace, the City also reflects his internal and external world. Hunting for Dorcas in the heart of the City, Joe merely tries to complete a desperate search for an identity.

“They said the City makes you lonely, but since I’d been trained by the best woodsman ever, loneliness was a thing couldn’t get near me. Dorcas [...] make me know a loneliness I never could imagine in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles, or on a riverbank with nothing but live bait for company. Convince me I never knew the sweet side of anything until I tasted her honey. They say snakes go blind for a while before they shed skin for the last time” [5, p.129]

Joe’s desperate search for a consistent identity alludes to the stages of a painful process of snake’s shedding skin. His search for identity is irretrievably linked to the sense of loss that he acknowledges while looking for his absent mother in the woods of Virginia. Joe’s sense of self is also linked to his own conception of place. Paradoxically, on City ground, the self is at once more sheltered and more exposed. For Joe, as for the others then their “soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around [...] There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves; their stronger, riskier selves.” But on his urban hunting ground they soon forget “what loving other people was like” and treat “language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play” [5, p. 32-33]. As a migrant hunter, he never ceased to fulfill his ultimate mission in the heart of the City. As he tracks down his unfaithful Dorcas, Joe realizes that:

in this world the best thing, the only thing is to the trail and stick to it...something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look [...] if the trail speaks, no matter what’s in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it’s the heart you can’t live without [...] I was rambling, just rambling all through the City. [5, p. 130].

The City turns into some “nondescript space which needs to be conquered and claimed all over again” and also “serves as a backdrop to the development of Trace’s new self, but it can only provide a painstakingly conquered and necessarily redefined freedom” [4, p. 225-226].

This delicate balance between the inside and outside is exactly what Joe Trace seems to have lost. He is on a space he can hardly identify anymore. He loses touch with the City which had defined and confined him. His inner emptiness imprints itself on City territory. As he literally and figuratively hunts on urban ground, Joe crosses geographical, physical, and mental boundaries. The traces of loss from which Joe has suffered originated in Wild’s “chief unmothering” (167). “In a strikingly circular, self-referential way, he’s the trace he’s looking for all over the City. Or rather, the city, for it suddenly becomes a small, silent town, reversing the usual process by which the town gives way to the City” [4, p. 226]. Dorcas then functions as pretext, a first textual or sexual trace which eventually leads him to his fuller and more adult self.

Joe’s sense of abandonment again occurs to him when he finds out Dorcas’s betrayal. He kills her as he cannot bear the endurance of not being claimed. Morrison does not portray Joe as an immoral figure. Shooting Dorcas is the exception in his life. Before and after, Joe is

“A nice neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. The kind you let in your house because he was not dangerous, because you had seen him with children, bought his products and never heard a scrap of gossip about him doing wrong. Felt not only safe but kindly in his company because he was the sort women ran to when they thought they were being followed, or watched or needed someone to have the extra key just in case you locked yourself out. He was the man who took you to your door if you missed the trolley and had to walk night streets at night. Who warned young girls away from hooch joints and the man who lingered there. Women teased him because they trusted him.” [5, p.73].

With Dorcas he is kind of paternal but not like an indulgent father. He is more like a wise and generous lover. He brings her gifts, confesses his doubts and fears. With Violet he is also affectionate. By the time Joe finds Dorcas, his marriage is routine, lonely and silent because Violet only speaks to her birds and there is no intimacy. Joe cannot remember the way their life used to be when they were young and in love. He recalls events, “but he has a tough time trying

to catch what it felt like” [5, p.29]. Despite Violet’s distance, Joe continues to care about her. His passion for Dorcas does not threaten his affection to Violet. He would never intentionally hurt Violet.

Morrison does not provide explicit reasons for Joe’s violence to Dorcas. It is not the ordinary passions of violence. Actually on the evening that he kills Dorcas, Joe feels and thinks very little. The hunter inside him emerges, and he follows Dorcas’s trace instinctively. The search is pathetic, hopeless and sorrowful. For five days he traces her movements. Finally he tracks her to a crowded apartment where she is dancing with a new, younger lover. At that moment Joe’s “rambling [...] rambling all through the City” [5, p.130] is over. He has the gun and he follows his instinct, but he believes it is the hand with which he wants to touch her.

Joe loves Dorcas before and after, unable or unwilling to leave her as Dorcas urges him to. Joe tracks to help her clarify their need for each other, to help her realize that he is “a mild man” (183) who “know[s] how to treat a woman,” who “never would mistreat one. Never would make a woman like a dog in a cave” (182). He needs her acknowledgement that he belongs to her. But like Joe’s mother—the naked woman who lived wild in the caves and woods of Virginia while he was growing up, Dorcas abandons him and does not claim him. In searching for one Joe also searches for the other. “The trail across the streets of New York becomes, in Joe’s mind, the viney, treacherous Virginia woods where he hunted the woman who was said to be his mother, in order to be granted a glimmer of recognition. Joe never finds his mother” [6, p.88]. However, he does find Dorcas, but she also chooses not to give or receive his love. “Perhaps shooting Dorcas discharges the pent-up misery and humiliation of his past” [6, p.88].

A glance of Joe’s life experiences makes more sense of how he ends up like this. According to Dickson-Carr, Joe Trace undergoes seven changes in his life. His first change was the moment he named himself, after being born the son of a mentally disturbed woman “Wild” and being told his parents “disappeared without a trace” [5, p.124]; the second change occurred when he trained himself to be a man; the third change was when his hometown, Vienna, Virginia, was burned to the ground in a race riot, and then he met Violet; the fourth change was when he and Violet migrated to the City; the fifth was when he fought for the right to live “uptown” in Harlem; the sixth was the 1917 race riot in Harlem; and the seventh was when Joe marched with the 369th Regiment up 7th Avenue when they returned from fighting in France during WWI. Each of these events echo different phases that pushed African American communities and individuals into modernity. The first is a representation of the long, arduous process African Americans underwent to name themselves after being stolen from Africa, a continent ironically defined as “wild”. Joe must name himself because he must create an identity and align himself with the idea of “manhood,” which means being independent and free, the same freedom African slaves sought. The third and fourth changes encompass the upheavals of Reconstruction and this century’s great migration, while the fifth resembles the continuous interracial struggles along class lines. It is the process of breaking down the color and class lines, the realization that emerged before and during the Harlem Renaissance that most African Americans shared common causes and origins. To that extent, it also approximates the unifying factor of the modern Civil Rights movement. The sixth may best be understood as the violence that explored in the 1960s as African Americans saw the promises of the Civil Rights movement being undermined and withered by governmental inaction, while the seventh devetails simultaneously with the militancy that marked both the Harlem Renaissance itself and African American cultural politics in the 1960s and 1970s [7, p.174-175]. His changes not only reveal the transitory and contingent nature of African American history and identity but also point towards critique of that history itself.

4. The Role of the City in Shaping Identity

Violet, the protagonist in the novel, is a most challenging character who has a contained craziness and tries to keep her life in balance. In consequence, she is constantly caught up in her loose lunacy. She can stop at the coffin with her knife raised, but before she is wrestled to the floor by ushers; she can stop on her way to an appointment and sit in the street. She is tormented by a “renegade tongue yearning to be on its own” [5, p.21]. Sometimes she has no control over it, and she hears speech that is without context or rational meaning. She is fearful of these times and retreats into silence. Over time she only feels safe when speaking to the caged parrot in her apartment.

Before she came to the City, Violet was not always pathetic. Her days were not haunted by her craziness. As a girl and young woman in Virginia, she had hauled hay, broken cane, chopped wood. As a married woman in the City,

She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician. She liked, and had, to get her way [...] She had butted their way out of the Tenderloin district into a spacious uptown apartment promised to another family by sitting out the landlord, haunting his doorway. She collected customers by going up to them and describing her services (“I can do your hair better and cheaper, and do it when and where you want”). She argued butchers and wagon vendors into prime and extra (“put that little end piece in. you weighing the stalks; I’m buying the leaf”). [5, p.23].

By the time she is fifty. Violet is transformed from “nervy ambition to cracked silence” [6, p. 90]. For a long time Violet seems to exist on two levels: first, in relation to the people from her community, and second, in relation to herself. Coming to terms people, those closest to her, is a process less painful for Violet than coming to terms with herself. Violet seems to be searching for space in which to define her subjectivity, and that is why she chooses to explore her immediate reality rather than to adapt to it. Her subjectivity is depicted from different aspects of her relations with other people as well as her own changing attitude toward body and soul. Thus she is being constructed as a subject in the ways in which she acts and reacts in the various stages of her controversial relationship with her husband, in her almost paranormal relation to the dead girl Dorcas, and in her dubious relation to other women.

Violet’s parrot who automatically says “Love you” also represents a caged and treated as loved object. The bird reminds this Violet of her own caged self, misused by habit, feeling otherness both in the family and in her community. When she sets the parrot free, Violet also expects herself to be freed and released.

Violet’s shifts through life are also shifts through her relations with other women. Violet explores the power of relations rather than accommodates to people or let herself be assimilated by these people. It seems that in the relations especially with women, she finds it a difficult task of living in one’s own community in which, she loses and constructs her identity. That is why Violet says openly, “Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing” [5, p.24].

Morrison introduces Violet as an extremely unconventional black woman. She is called by men and women in her community “Violent,” who fits perfectly well into the group of strong, willful black women characters. In comparing herself as a girl growing up in the South to Joe’s mistress, Dorcas, violet says, “I was a good girl her age. Never gave a speck of trouble. I did everything anybody told me to. Till I got here. City make you tighten up” [5, p.81].

It is in the City that encroachment on another’s territory is more tolerable, whether the territory is a different organization or a woman’s spouse. The City can also in turn frame and release its inhabitants. It functions both as some open and closed ground. “A city like this makes me dream tall and feel in on things” [5, p.7] and the city “does pump desire” (34) and because of that,

becomes what its inhabitants desire. Morrison suggests that the desire was to be “more like the people they always believed they were” (35)—to find, in other words, the subjectivity they always knew they possessed.

In terms of the relationship between Violet and Alice, Morrison makes it unlikely comfort and friendship for both of them. Alice Manfred, Dorcas’ aunt, is a strong, responsible woman who tries to be a good parent and raises Dorcas too strictly in order to protect her from the City that encourages everyone to lose control. After Joe kills Dorcas and Violet almost disfigures her dead niece, Alice does not want anything to do with the lunatic wife. Violet comes to visit Alice, not to apologize for anything, but to find what kind of girl her husband chooses over her. Between Alice and Violet, “no apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary [...] But something else was--clarity [...] The kind of Clarity crazy people demand from the not crazy” [5, p.83]. Because Violet has lost so much: peace of mind, focus and direction. She has little to fear from hearing and speaking truth. With Violet Alice can be “impolite. Sudden. Frugal” [5, p.83]. But mostly she can be honest with Violet. With Violet, she can not only see her niece’s lie with Joe, but her own deception. She can no longer pretend to be different from other women who are enraged by a husband’s betrayal. She reluctantly remembers the repressed violence against another woman in her own married life. She did not repress her potential violence but she did have murderous dreams. From Violet, Alice learns that “internalized violence is dangerous because it is turned, not outward toward patriarchy, but inward, toward the self, and outward toward other women” [8, p.486]. Alice gets to know Violet with their similarity and mutual compassion.

Perhaps when responding to Alice, Violet remembers her mother Rose Dear who could not bear the burden to raise five children after her husband left and threw herself into a well. Violet does not contemplate suicide when Joe left her, but she is confronted with dilemma, should she leave Joe or should she find a lover? Should she try to repair her marriage with Joe? Alice advises her to “mind what’s left to you” [5, p.113] as “little bitty life” is too “small and quick” [5, p.113] to do anything less.

Violet and Joe fix what is wrong in their lives and continue on together. Joe comes to understand that although he had been in love twice, he did not know how to love anybody. He would not waste a third opportunity. Violet realizes that sleeping with a doll to satisfy her hunger for a baby and permitting herself other acts of lunacy have a high price. When she awakens from self-induced oblivion, “her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter” [5, p.109] she longs for. In the future she will mind what is left for her. Joe and Violet find love again and live a life that they can “stay home figuring out, telling each other those little persona stories they like to hear again and again [...]” [5, p.223].

Their problems and crises they went through could merely be the consequence of any long marriage after years and years of sameness. But Morrison implicates the City in Joe and Violet’s failures. In essence, they are betrayed by the City’s wonderful promise and fantasy. At last Morrison signals their recovery as a new affection for each other and for the City:

They walk down 125th Street and across Seventh Avenue and if they get tired they sit down and rest on any stoop they want to and talk weather and youthful misbehavior to the woman leaning on the sill of the first-floor window. Or they saunter over to the Corner and join the crowd [...] Once in a while they take the train all the way to 42nd Street to enjoy what Joe calls the stairway of lions. Or they idle along 72nd Street to watch men dig holes in the ground for a new building. [5, p.223]

5. Conclusion

In a word, with an insightful examination of the themes of cultural displacement and identity reconstruction in the context of the urban landscape of Harlem during the Jazz Age, the novel demonstrates the significance of city writing in conveying the complexities and challenges faced

by African Americans as they navigate the spaces they inhabit. By engaging with the dimensions of urban experience and the impact of the city on identity formation, Morrison illustrates that the city is not merely a setting but a driving force behind the characters' actions. Thus, the city works as a catalyst for the development of the novel's themes and plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' lives, identities, and relationships. Ultimately, by depicting characters' healing from their past traumas with the power and support from friends and community, Morrison attempts to show and explore how African Americans can establish their community as a way to reconstruct urban space as well as their identities, and how they cope with their personal traumas and conflicts with society in urban life and gain redemptive power from their African American culture.

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