

THE CITY OF LOVE AND VIOLENCE:
HARLEM IN TONI MORRISON'S JAZZ

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Abstract

The essay looks at the various ways in which the erotic dimension is played out in Toni Morrison's Jazz by making reference to the interplay of two major aspects: identity construction and the city, which are set against the background of jazz and blues that underscores the Roaring Twenties in New York City. The city is an environment filled with erotic potential, as it represents a space of the encounter with the other based on exchange and play. This triggers another element closely linked to eroticism: violence. The analysis focuses on these two (the erotic and the violent) in an attempt to show that while putting forth the illusion of freedom and joy, the eroticism only highlights a deeper history of trauma and violence. I also discuss "jazz" as a cultural theme on the one hand, and a compositional device of the novel on the other

Keywords: New York City; eroticism; identity construction; loss; multiple voice narrative

1. Introduction

Written in 1992, *Jazz* is the second novel in Toni Morrison's trilogy on African American life and history, preceded by the much critically acclaimed *Beloved* (1988) and followed by *Paradise* (1998). The trilogy covers approximately one hundred years and has three major wars as points of reference: the Civil War, World War I, and the Vietnam War. More importantly, all novels in the trilogy focus on pivotal moments in black history: from the 1870s, post-Reconstruction era in *Beloved*, to the Great Migration from South to North, the 1920s Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance period in *Jazz*, finally to the 1970s decade and the post-Civil Rights U.S. in *Paradise*. In conjunction with the historical focus, the novels are concerned with the issue of identity construction and reconstruction in different spatial settings relevant to the African American experience: the rural space, New York City (Harlem), and a small town in the Midwest (Oklahoma). They all tackle by now predominant concerns in Morrison's fiction – the relationship between history, memory, and storytelling.

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Even if the subject-matter of *Jazz* recuperates a slice of the past in its reconstruction of the Roaring Twenties, its stylistic treatment is the product of a contemporary sensibility, reflecting the major changes in writing effected by the late twentieth century. One can trace in Morrison's novel most of the concepts of the postmodernist discourse, both in terms of the narrative techniques and in terms of identity: self-conscious narrative, lack of closure, lack of origin, fragmentariness, indeterminacy, selflessness and the blurring of distinctions between fact and fiction are among the most visible.

2. Love and violence in the City

The novel has a clear focus on the erotic; the jazz trope itself is employed as a personification of love, not only as a musical or poetic device. Caroline Brown explains that sexual desire coupled with danger, as well as romantic love and sensual pleasure are the drivers of the narrative, all of them "propelled by the narcotic of freedom, the luxury of asserting the right to choose and shape one's destiny, and, as Morrison maintains, to own "one's own emotions." (Brown, 2002: 629)

At the center of the narrative, the erotic dimension is intimately related to violence, as the plot revolves around the murder of the lover. Violet and Joe live in Harlem and have an unhappy marriage, when Joe starts an affair with seventeen-year young Dorcas. Their love affair lasts only for a few months before Dorcas rejects him; Joe then tracks her down at a party and shoots her. In an outrage, Violet slashes Dorcas's face, at her funeral. Joe's love is described as "one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going" (Morrison, 1992: 3). Love and joy are closely connected to sadness and nostalgia, as well as to brutality and aggression, apparent not only in the act on which the plot centers, but also in the way the city is perceived by the characters and the narrator. These extremes are closely interwoven in the novels' plot, which goes back and forth, in flashbacks and digressions, relating the stories of the protagonists with collateral narrations of peripheral characters.

I will explore eroticism on two different levels apparent in the story: public and private.

2.1. The public eros

Harlem is called "the City" all throughout and develops into a real character that deceives, instigates, attracts and frightens. One can hypnotically fall in love with it, or lose control and give in to anger and violence. In what follows both dimensions will be tackled: the sensual and the violent.

2.1.1. The sensual

In his study on the symbolism of the urban, Roland Barthes characterizes all interaction taking place in the city as erotic, metaphorically, as it is primarily based on play and exchange. The “site of our encounter with the other”, the city is “the space in which certain subversive forces act and are encountered, forces of rupture, ludic forces.” (Barthes, 1997: 200) The metaphorical quality of the urban experience is also derived from its ability to function as a kind of *axis mundi* of social encounter, of the encounter with the other. Harlem is a space that brings the self and the other in a juxtaposition that is based on social exchange and play. This disrupts the comfort of the self, forces the latter to come out into the realm of the other and be subjected to the intricacies this process entails.

The burst of energy and vitality that the city gives off through its streets, the interaction with the urban actors, the city’s commodity culture and, especially, the party halls and dance parlors make up a geography of public eroticism. In these spaces, the “dirty, get-on-down” (Morrison, 1992: 58) jazz music vibrates and brings together souls and bodies in a sensual encounter:

Oh, the room – the music- the people leaning in doorways. Silhouettes kiss behind curtains; playful fingers examine and caress. This is the place where things pop. This is the market where gesture is all: a tongue’s lightning lick; a thumbnail grazing the split cheeks of a purple plum. Any throwaway lover in wet unlaced shoes and a buttoned-up sweater under his coat is a foreigner here. This is not the place for old men; this is the place for romance. (Morrison, 1992: 192)

As a sensual space, the City is open, dynamic, full of vitality and uncontrollable energy, free and ambiguous. It is also an environment where people are “not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves” (Morrison, 1992: 33) and where they can claim their own bodies², while dancing to the jazz music. The City, as Matthew Treherne contends, is a bustling, visually and commercially lively place, perfect for the interplay of subjectivities and in tune with the protagonists’ imaginary. (Treherne, 2003: 201-202)

The freedom one has in the city also makes of it a place of fascination and rule-bending. This dimension of eroticism is tightly connected to the jazz music of the twenties, the city music that “begged and challenged each and every day. ‘Come’, it said. ‘Come and do wrong’”. (Morrison, 1992: 67) It creates a “permanent and out of control” (Morrison, 1992: 35) fascination and an immersion into the

² J. Brooks Bouson, quoting Morrison, mentions that the “jazz and blues also represented the claiming of their “own bodies” and the “ownership” of their own emotions.” (Bouson, 2000: 164)

'newness' of the other, with a tendency towards forgetfulness, both of which pertain to the territory of the erotic. The luring nature of jazz is transferred to the city as well: it becomes a realm of potential freedom while bringing oblivion and blocking self-knowledge.

The ritualistic process of getting ready for the parties, dressing up as well as falling prey to the beauty promise of consumerism emphasizes the fantasy of material ecstasy to which the twenties era succumbed and which the black population coming from the South anxiously embraced. They still formed an isolated ethnoscape within the New York environment and taking it all in as part of the blessings of their life as free people. The sensuality of music and of consumerism, therefore of using one's body for dancing and pleasure and celebrating it with the various adornments that make it more appealing, create an erotic dimension which marks the freedom of the black people coming to Harlem.

2.1.2. The violent

The space created by the sensual music and the out of control fascination of the city is a fluid space of negotiation, freedom, and love. It is also a realm of risk and danger that adds to the erotic undertones of the urban experience.

With their sound and noise, the city streets generate fear and hurt and reveal themselves equally as a site of violence and segregation, and Morrison focuses on the multiple facets through which violence is expressed: racial, domestic and erotic. There is a pervasive and unaccounted for aggression on women that the novel speaks to. Dorcas's aunt and guardian, Alice Manfred, is a telling example of how the city is perceived from this point of view. A look at the newspaper headlines, makes Alice read: "Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Women and girl victims of. Woman commits suicide. White attackers indicted. Five women caught. Woman says man beat. In jealous rage man" (Morrison, 1992: 74).

Alice Manfred wants to get away from the public sensuality and music of the city, which she perceives as threatening. She tries to protect herself and her niece from what she regards as low-class people and their passions; however, while enforcing strict discipline, restraint, and control on Dorcas, she secretly admires the former. If Alice wants to render herself immune to and isolate herself and Dorcas from all the lowdown attractions of the city, Dorcas, on the other hand, wants to enter the alluring and quasi-hypnotic realm of danger, risk, and possibility that the city offers and sees it "as a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete." (Morrison, 1992: 60) This realm is for her a place for the sensual encounter, a space of the meeting with the other that generates triumphs as well as defeats and which is necessary for her self-construction.

2.2. *The private eros*

This almost runs counter to the public eros and it points to loss, lack and need – all part and cause of the love and desire for the other. It is felt at an individual level and it implies the need to connect, sending “deepdown”, to what each character is missing and seeking, as opposed to the liveliness and exuberance through which sensuality is expressed collectively. It appears most clearly in the pairs that are formed by the three main characters: Joe, Violet, and Dorcas.

Both Joe and Violet form two different love relationships: with each other and with Dorcas. If Joe found in Violet the strong woman who chose him and who could work the land like a man and withstand the hardships of their life in the South, in Dorcas he found the frailty and sweetness of youth, its sadness and joy, as “you always end up back where you started: hungry for the one thing everybody loses – young loving.” (Morrison, 1992: 120) Both women can be substituted for the mother figure that Joe seeks, as they have different maternal attributes. Violet, on the other hand, finds in the love for Joe a substitute for her childhood dreams of Golden Gray, a mixed-race lad of whom her grandmother used to take care – an image of longing and desire, the innocent “golden boy” that becomes an almost mythical figure around which her vision of cherished identity revolves. Dorcas represents another image of longing for Violet, as her attitude oscillates between hate for the enemy figure and yearning for the daughter she never had.

These can be regarded as clichéd roles, but as Morrison explains in an interview, the cliché is relevant because it is the experience expressed in it that is relevant (LeClair, 1993: 371) and she uses them in *Jazz* to uncover the various contradictions, dislocations and complexities of human identity, and more specifically of African American identity. She problematizes selfhood by using stereotypes and invalidating their mono-focused, preestablished interpretation and shows behavior that can have different meanings and characters with contradictory desires. By this, she avoids essentialism. She does not provide a comfortable account of what African-American identity entails: she investigates its roots and intricacies and exposes the constructed character of what she calls “American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American”. (Morrison, 1993: 38)

“Little of that makes for love, but it does pump desire”, confesses the narrator (Morrison, 1992: 34). ‘Do people love others or just some part of themselves?’ is a question that comes to the foreground repeatedly throughout the novel, in the personal and sometimes blinded quests of the characters. They appear to be looking for something they lost whose traces keep reminding them of the loss: young loving, the mother, the father, a child one never had, safety, the means to heal -- by

insulation -- a broken self. All the quests deeply relate to the construction of identity, to a self that is fragmented, incomplete and therefore always left wanting.

Joe and Violet are both motherless, fatherless children that fled from the South. Their journey to the city represents a form of getting away from pain and suffering and at the same time makes them meaningful to each other as it brings them together in the new, alien environment. There is deep, unacknowledged and un confronted need – a wounded past that one cannot ignore in their desire for each other and in their union. They are connected through their lack but the City proves too treacherous and dangerous, testing them, asking them to forge a versatility of mind and spirit and to “figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time”. (Morrison, 1992: 9) It lures one into its mesmeric fantasy of freedom and wellbeing only to abandon them later in the harsh, aggressive reality of race, class and gender inequality as well as the reality produced by its self-contradictory quality: welcoming and threatening, inviting and friendly, but also unsafe and out of control. The eroticism of the city makes one lose oneself in the other, hungry for what seems to be their most significant loss: purity and youth. Joe and Violet lose themselves in the fascination and confusion the City produces, and the freedom gained turns thus into lack of command.

Despite the dreams and ideals with which it is invested, the city does not provide self-awareness. The black people come to it to recreate themselves, to begin anew. They do find a different way of being in the urban space, one that foregrounds possibilities of making their own money, even if by doing menial jobs, and of enjoying the consumer industry with everything it makes available: from music and entertainment to commodities that render their lives more pleasant and attractive. However, they are left lonely, broken and hollow. One is left wondering if self-reconstruction is really possible in this new environment.

3. Jazz and Blues

Music is an essential element for identity definition and for the way the characters relate to the city. It is a cultural theme as well as a postmodern structuring device in the novel.

3.1. Jazz as a cultural theme

Jazz has a contradictory character: it is dynamic, sensual, enriching and it brings people together in an indulgence of the senses, but it also contains a type of freedom that can take them out of themselves – an out-of-control element related to its free expression and sensuality, which can separate people and generate aggression.

If the erotic dimension has violence in its make-up, music hosts both the erotic and the violent. The violent and its connection with the music of the city is again given voice to by Alice Manfred. The hypnotic side of music, its domination, and its meaning as different from joy and sensual dancing, comes out in her relation to it and the middle-class view she adopts. Her response to the suggestive power of music is one of rejection and self-defense against an aggression that triggers reminiscences of past traumas. She represses herself, yet recognizes that the music is connected to something else, something deeper in African American life than dancing and sensuality, “something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in riots.” (Morrison, 1992: 56-57)

Alice sees in music the anger of the out-of-control urge rather than the joy. Contrary to the respectable and repressed life that she lives, she falls prey to the violent ring of music. Thus, the white middle-class perspective she embraces, which regards jazz as “just colored folks’ stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious” (59) starts to falter as she silently confesses to her own feelings of irrepressible violence triggered by the music. Her response is to shut off the windows, cut off all contact with the outside and isolate herself from the dangerous sway of jazz and blues, from the violence, freedom, and lack of command. This reaction contradicts the dismissive perspective she expresses and hence validates the “seriousness” of the music. The city and all its jazz cannot mend a broken self, they can only hide it from itself, wrap it in the veil of desire and deception.

3.2. Jazz as a compositional device

3.2.1. The problematic narrator, storytelling and jazz improvisations

In a postmodern fashion, jazz also represents a *compositional device* for the novel, which is recounted from the point of view of a contradictory, multiple narrative voice, hesitating between character and omniscient narrator, being “both” and “neither” simultaneously. Hence, we have both a confession-like tone of the first person narrative, with lyrical ruminations and undertones sending to the tradition of oral storytelling that Morrison wants to revive in her writings and also the third-person, all-knowing narrative voice, hidden in the unassuming darkness of anonymity. Lawrence Hogue argues in this respect that the status of the classical omniscient narrator is undermined by the element of desire for human contact and relationship that can be felt in the narrative -- this way “*Jazz* humanizes and therefore problematizes the all-knowing omniscient narrator”. (Hogue, 2002: 177) This is not the only element that undermines omniscience in the text. At the end of

the novel, the narrative voice admits to her own subjectivity while being caught in improvising variations on the voice of the city, in reworking a narrative segment circularly, like in jazz improvisations:

It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human. I missed the people altogether. (...) I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. I got so aroused while meddling, while finger-shaping, I overreached and missed the obvious. I was watching the streets, thrilled by the buildings pressing and pressed by stone; so glad to be looking out and in on things I dismissed what went on in the heart-pockets closed to me. (Morrison, 1992: 220-221)

Justine Tally remarks in her study on *Jazz* based on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism that the discourse of the narrator "is full of double-entendre and apparent contradictions, puzzling statements" (Tally, 2001: 132) pointing to its polyphonic nature, which "refuses the authoritarianism of monologic discourse" and putting forth "the metaphor of jazz as a music that emphasizes process over product, a music that Morrison says is never "finalized"" (Tally, 2001: 134) The novel has the power of connecting its characters like the musical segments in jazz music, which becomes a motif and a structural principle.

Storytelling is a way to get to the origins of the self, to the foundation of a community's identity. The stories are broken and shifting, full of repetitions, of going back and forth, just like the jazz riffs whose cadence and improvisational character they illustrate, and like the history of black identity. J. Brooks Bouson mentions in this respect, quoting the author, that the "jazz-like structure", (...), wasn't a secondary thing but was "the raison d'être of the book"; moreover, the "trial and error" process used by the narrator to reveal the plot was "as important and exciting" to her "as telling the story"" (Brooks Bouson, 2000: 164-165)

Storytelling is thus shown in parallel with jazz making, as both of them spring from an original strand of black folk culture³ and both emphasize improvisation and fluidity, inconclusiveness and remaking, denying closure.

³ Morrison argued in interview with Nellie McKay about her writing and music: "(...) my effort is to be like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold on to it. Sometimes I can reflect something of this kind in my novels. Writing novels is a way to encompass this – this something." (Morrison & McKay, 1983: 426)

3.2.2. Identity and its traces

Philip Page commenting on *Jazz* from a Derridean perspective sees the end fragment as a restatement of the “trace” and of the activity of tracing that represents a strategy of avoiding closure:

If the reader actively participates in the (re)making of the novel, then the narrator/reader relationship exists, and the absolute distinction between the two is dissolved. Only by repeating the book can we avoid its potential dead-end: “The return to the book does not enclose us within the book (Derrida, Writing 294). (...) To trace is to copy, to double, and thus to avoid the death-like closure of completion, thereby allowing for endless readings, endless reader participation, endless re-versions of the text. (Page, 1995: 64)

Protagonists use music in its sensual quality to project a fantasy of what and where they want to be, taking from the music hall, ballroom and nightclub experience its make-believe quality. In *Jazz*, memory is lost. It becomes a trace that leads nowhere, like the elusive traces of Joe’s mother. It exists there as a sign that signifies lack, reminding Joe and Violet of something they lost, without leading to a referent. There is no starting point for the making of selves in *Jazz*, no point of origin; the people are floating selves –always “a new Negro”- shifting signifiers of a wounded subjectivity. The identity of the black people in *Jazz* comes close to the Derridean *différance*, oscillating between deferring and differing, being both at the same time. Identity with Alice, Joe, and Violet is broken. It is a site of trauma and hollowness, pointing to a long history of pain, suffering, and annihilation of the self.

Jazz is not only a metaphor for fluidity and improvisation in the textual construction but also a metaphor for vitality, desire, violence, and anger. It is the blues, the down-dirty pain of life, but at the same time jazz is something that is affirmative, allowing for possibility. It sends eventually to “race identity as contingent and performative” (Albrecht-Crane, 2003: 59)⁴. At the end, the narrator remarks: “If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (Morrison, 1992: 229). This is a statement that foregrounds a denial of closure, leaving the story open to intervention and remaking, while foregrounding a non-

⁴ Christa Albrecht-Crane in “Becoming Minoritarian: Post-Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” uses Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of territorialization and deterritorialization in analyzing the novel, suggesting that Morrison pushes the notions of identity and language to their limits, toward a post-identity. According to her, the city, with its “out of control” dynamics creates ways of evading social control, enabling deterritorialization: a deconstruction of social mechanisms that contribute to identity formation. (Albrecht-Crane, 2003: 56-71)

hermeneutic politics⁵. As the author herself pointed out, it also leaves the reader with the impression that there is more, like jazz music, which never “satisfies and closes”, but “keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord.” (Morrison & McKay, 1983: 429)

4. Conclusion

Jazz tackles the intricate web of desire and violence as well as the contradictions and lack of assurance on which identity is based and, perhaps most significantly, the silent unfronted and uncomforted anger that comes out in relation to African-American identity construction in the space of the New York City of the 1920s. It is an essential metaphor for the city: a fluid space that can be created and recreated continuously, like the jazz rhythm and the improvisations it speaks of. Just like jazz, the city displays a mixture of dramatic and ludic undertones, a burst of vitality and subtle playfulness combined with a certain tension, anxiety, and pain that circumscribe it to a discourse of eroticism on the one hand and to a stylistic and self-reflexive one of continuous remaking on the other. The City has the make-up of a discursive reality as well, of text or of oral history. The narrative voice constructs stories about the City, in the City, and is deceived and/or inspired by it into creating different realities or alternative versions of the same story. It is itself taken in by the city lure, hence the difference between reality and fiction is distorted and imprecise and what comes out are different urban stories in the jazz cadence of the twenties. Ultimately, the city is about language, text, and narrative and the novel explores the way these can reach and interact with sensibilities.

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⁵ Caroline Brown states regarding this: “Characters function within the domain of the non-hermeneutic; the fate of each must, in part, be determined by the readers themselves, a form of improvisation that creates different results in each particular case.” (Brown, 2002: 638)

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