Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism

Hakutani, Yoshinobu

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For African Americans the city has served as a historical and imaginative site of freedom. A crucial signifier in modern and postmodern African American literature, the city has been described in a rich variety of ways as a reflection of American life. LeRoi Jones cautioned against applying simplistic abstractions to African American cities like Harlem when he said that Harlem “like any other city . . . must escape any blank generalizations simply because it is alive, and changing each second with each breath any of its citizens take” (145). For Toni Morrison, the American city has often induced a sense of “alienation” in an African American writer like James Baldwin, but she nevertheless adds that modern African American writing is suffused with an “affection” for “the village within” the city, black neighborhoods which are repositories for life-sustaining “community values” (“City Limits” 37–38). Langston Hughes saw in Harlem the coexistence of affection and alienation: “Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall. Dusky dream Harlem rumbling into a nightmare tunnel” (“Early Days” 60). The perception of the city as a place of strife and conflict is derived from Thomas Jefferson, who warned that the city would breed corruption and injustice: while farmers were God-chosen people, manufacturers were likely to be greedy and materialistic.

Despite the paucity of humanity and love associated with city life, Harlem in the 1920s was full of joy and excitement. In this juxtaposition of alienation and affection, Morrison has found a dialectic vision, an interaction of conflicting emotions that ultimately leads to fulfillment of desire and attainment of subjectivity. In contrast to European Americans’ pastoral idyll in the nine-
teenth century, Morrison’s urban imagination necessarily involves racial difference and struggle. “Romance,” Morrison argues, “offered writers not less but more; not a narrow a-historical canvas but a wide historical one; not escape but entanglement” (Playing in the Dark 37). To her, pastoral idyll was a romantic concept for nineteenth-century European American men, whereas what she reimagines in urban life is a romance for all Americans in the twentieth century and beyond.

Above all, Harlem in the 1920s was a city of paradox to African Americans. The negative aspects of urban life—alienation, antagonism, violence—did not necessarily become negativities in their lives. Because of the inhuman, materialistic atmosphere city life created, Harlemites built within the city a village of community, kinship, and love. The dreams of freedom and subjectivity Harlemites cherished were so powerful that they submerged the frightening characteristics of the city. As Langston Hughes said: “What happens to a dream deferred? / . . . / Or fester like a sore— / . . . / Does it stink like rotten meat? / . . . / Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?” (Selected Poems 268). The Harlem of the 1920s presented itself as a city of contradiction: while it was described as an extraordinarily exciting place with its legendary rent parties, it was also, as Cary D. Wintz has described, “half-buried beneath the filth and garbage of the city slum” (29).

Morrison suggests that because of this paradox, the African American dream of freedom and subjectivity could be achieved only if the racial struggle would squarely be confronted and conquered by all Americans: “The rights of man, for example, an organizing principle upon which the nation was founded . . . [were] inevitably yoked to Africanism. . . . Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities” (Playing in the Dark 38). Without the presence of racial difference, and of slavery in particular, American civilization, a culture known as an exemplar of freedom and democracy, would not have prospered. Granted, the massive movement of African Americans to northern cities in the early decades of the twentieth century created racial problems, but, in so doing, it also stimulated American culture.

In stark contrast to the situation in the South, where African Americans were not allowed to communicate freely with European Americans, the crowded, noisy apartments in the northern cities became hubs of interracial mingling and dialogue, a site where migrant African Americans came in contact with what Richard Wright called “the brisk, clipped men of the North, the Bosses of Buildings.” Unlike southern landlords, city businessmen, intrigued with black people’s life style, intermingled with African American
men (12 Million 100). As a result, the African American man of the industrial North was given a chance to shape his own life. Economically he was a machine, and his production was measured not by his race but by his merit. Despite the severe living conditions in which African Americans were placed, the fierce competition they faced, and the traumas they suffered, the city nevertheless provided them with possibilities for equality and justice.\(^3\) Paradoxically, African Americans, subjected as they were to machine culture, acquired in their urban living the practical concept of independence and subjectivity.

2.

Just as most of her twentieth-century predecessors focused their racial discourse upon the city, Morrison too uses the city as a trope for freedom. Although the American city in the nineteenth century is known for less squalor and violence than in modern times, it is nevertheless described as a place of conflict and friction. Those who were unable to endure such a social environment sought to live in close contact with nature, as did Ishmael of *Moby-Dick* and Huck Finn, where the Oceans and the River figured as signifiers of nature, peace of mind. In contemporary American fiction, as in *Jazz* (1993), urban living dominates American life; people in the city try to live in harmony or at least are conscious of diversity in the population. Just as European Americans like Ishmael and Huck Finn looked for scenes of pastoral idyll, many contemporary Americans try to find their comfort in urban living.

For Violet Trace in *Jazz*, living in the North “messed up” her own life: not only did it oppress her life but it also prevented her from gaining a sense of identity and individuality. Toward the end of the book Violet agrees with Felice, who declares: “Living in the City was the best thing in the world. What can you do out in the country? When I visited Tuxedo, back when I was a child, even then I was bored. How many trees can you look at? That’s what I said to her. ‘How many trees can you look at? And for how long and so what?’” (207). Indeed, in *Jazz* Morrison poignantly portrays the city of the Harlem Renaissance as a site of freedom and subjectivity, where the African American was free to think and act as a subject in his or her spiritual, economic, social, and political life.\(^4\) In fact, the African American of the Harlem Renaissance was so mobile and interactive with others in the community that the personal vision of life became impersonal, objective, and free of egotism.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993),
Morrison suggested that the city made it possible for African and European Americans to live side-by-side. Through the Africanist presence European Americans learned the truth about themselves, whose goal in life was pursuit of the American Dream, the faith and spirit that “rhetorically repudiated an adoration of the Old World and defined the past as corrupt and indefensible” (48). Just as Jim’s freedom led to Huck’s freedom and independence, European Americans, Morrison emphasizes, acquired the true vision of themselves, the recognition that they themselves were not truly free and that African Americans were “unfree” (48) in a free, democratic nation, a blatant contradiction in terms of the Constitution. It is also ironic that both European and African Americans, who sought individual freedom in rural communities, found it instead in urban life.

To stave off their isolation and boredom in the country, African American women like Violet and Felice seek excitement which the city offers. Their ultimate desire is to satisfy not merely their body but their need for social relationship. Morrison’s discourse of urban life is based on history and conveyed by realism. In contrast to the feelings of conflict and loneliness from which Ishmael suffers at the outset of *Moby-Dick* as he finds himself in “a damp, drizzly November” (12) in his soul, the arrival of spring in Harlem in *Jazz* provides the residents with renewal of their spirit. “And when spring comes to the City,” the narrator sees, “people notice one another in the road; notice the strangers with whom they share aisles and tables and the space where intimate garments are laundered” (117). Although she first finds spring in the city contradictory because it encourages people to buy food when they have no appetite, she finds it natural for “beat bricks” to warm up to the sun, tar to soften when they walk, “the darkness under bridges” to change from “gloom to cooling shade,” and wet leaves and tree limbs to look like “wet fingers playing in woolly green hair” (118). The city even creates a condition in which the residents are made aware of what Richard Wright defines in *Black Power* as Africans’ “primal outlook upon life” (266), an innate philosophy of life based on their awe of nature.¹

Not only does much of the expression and representation in *Jazz* spring up from nature, but Morrison is also always concerned with nature’s social implications. Critics and historians, as she has complained, tend to dilute her realism by attributing her writing to the magical in her work (*Conversations with Morrison* 226). Throughout the story, *Jazz* is replete with images of freedom. At the outset the narrator mentions, for example, that some of the city hospitals employ black surgeons and nurses (7–8). Violet lets her pet birds out when she goes to Dorcas’s funeral with a knife (13). At the midpoint of the story the narrator calls the reader’s attention to wage discrimination for black
laborers in the city as well as in the country: “Rumor was the pay was ten cents for young women, a quarter for men. . . . It all had to be done in three weeks or less. Everybody with fingers in a twenty-mile radius showed up and was hired on the spot. Nine dollars a bale, some said, if you grew your own; eleven dollars if you had a white friend to carry it up for pricing” (102–3). Reflecting on Joe Trace’s love of children, the narrator implies that African Americans’ desire for kinship notwithstanding, they do not want “the trouble” of raising children and that they cannot bear their children’s mistreatment by a racist society (107). Toward the end of the story the narrator’s blending of representations of nature and society continues. For Joe Trace, images of honey, shit, river holes, trout, and flies all evoke his feelings about nature as well as about society. The narrator says: “Nothing stirred and he could not persuade himself that the fragrance that floated over him was not a mixture of honey and shit” (177). In Jazz, not only do the images of nature and society mesh, but society also bears the mockery and wrath of nature.

Joe and Violet’s motive to escape from the country was to establish in Harlem their latent kinship and friendship with their neighbors. Early on, the narrator traces their courtship and marriage: Violet chose to marry Joe “for him, helping him escape all the redwings in the country and the ripe silence that accompanied them” (30). As if to create the better of the two worlds, once they arrived in the city they actively sought social companionship but later occupied themselves with organic gardening. While such racial strife as white and black landlords’ fighting over black renters for the high rents was taking place, Joe and Violet were eager to build an uptown urban pastoral of their own. “The buildings were like castles in pictures,” Joe boasts, “and we who had cleaned up everybody’s mess since the beginning knew better than anybody how to keep them nice. We had birds and plants everywhere, me and Violet. I gathered up the street droppings myself to fertilize them. . . . Pay was light, but the tips dropped in my palm fast as pecans in November” (127–28).

Morrison’s representation of urban life as a trope for freedom and excitement also signifies nostalgia for the pastoral idyll people like Joe and Violet left behind as they moved to Harlem. On the one hand, the narrator mentions Violet’s enjoyment of rent parties, a legendary form of exciting social life Langston Hughes vividly portrays in his autobiography The Big Seas; on the other, the narrator depicts Violet as a lonely woman “who speaks mainly to her birds” (24) and who used to enjoy watching trees and birds in the country.

While Morrison makes her signification expansive, she also reverses it. Whether she creates images of peace and harmony out of rural nature or out
of the mood of pastoral idyll retrieved in urban living—her vision of the village within the city—Jazz becomes her deconstruction and transformation of the conventional, predictable discourse of nature, on which nineteenth-century American fiction thrived. Just as Stephen Crane in “The Open Boat” viewed nature as utterly indifferent and often hostile to humankind, Morrison warns the reader: “Nature freaks for you. . . . Spreads the limbs of lilac bushes low enough to hide you” (63). But the city,

in its own way, gets down for you, cooperates, smoothing its sidewalks, correcting its curbstones, offering you melons and green apples on the corner. Racks of yellow head scarves; strings of Egyptian beads. Kansas fried chicken and something with raisins call attention to an open window where the aroma seems to lurk. And if that’s not enough, doors to speakeasies stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman to decide on the key. (63–64)

The negative aspect of nature in view, in turn, enhances the spirit of urban life: a dialectic vision of nature and society underlies Morrison’s urban imagination.

What distinguishes her expression in Jazz from her earlier fiction is paradox. Any reader knows that the city is crowded and polluted, and earlier in the story the narrator says: “There is no air in the City but there is breath” (34). Although rural life can boast open space and natural beauty, to urban residents these images smack of loneliness and lack of human spirit. “I have seen the City do an unbelievable sky,” reports the narrator. “Redcaps and dining-car attendants who wouldn’t think of moving out of the City sometimes go on at great length about country skies they have seen from the windows of trains. But there is nothing to beat what the City can make of a nightsky. It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless” (35). Paradoxically the city, a “deep, starless,” open space, is likely to accommodate what human beings most desire—freedom and love. “Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing,” the narrator says, “such a citysky presses and retreats, presses and retreats, making me think of the free but illegal love of sweethearts before they are discovered” (35). Strangers in Harlem, then, are not really strangers; they may become friends and lovers: “Dorcas and Felice are not strangers at the party—nobody is” (65).

Morrison’s racial discourse in Jazz not only reads as paradoxical; it is also intent upon a deconstruction of Western discourse. At times her description of natural objects expresses a candid opposition to the traditional, hegemon-
ic worldview. Toward the end of the book, the narrator, describing in retrospect Joe Trace’s search for Dorcas, focuses her representation on a tree that is reminiscent of Dorcas:

The third time Joe had tried to find her (he was a married man by then) he had searched the hillside for the tree—the one whose roots grew backward as though, having gone obediently into earth and found it barren, retreating to the trunk for what was needed. Defiant and against logic its roots climbed. Toward leaves, light, wind. (182)

For the reader used to the depiction of nature by transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau or romantics like Hawthorne and Melville, Morrison’s description of the roots growing “obediently into earth” appears quite natural, for such an image conforms to the conventional worldview. On second thought, however, the narrator realizes that the roots “grew backward as though . . . retreating to the trunk . . . against logic,” an action described not only metonymically but critically, with a protesting voice.

“Below that tree,” Morrison finally reminds the postmodern, postcolonial reader, “was the river whites called Treason where fish raced to the line, and swimming among them could be riotous or serene. But to get there you risked treachery by the very ground you walked on.” In Jazz the theme of African American freedom is eloquently expressed by this passage:

The slopes and low hills that fell gently toward the river only appeared welcoming; underneath vines, carpet grass, wild grape, hibiscus and wood sorrel, the ground was as porous as a sieve. A step could swallow your foot or your whole self. (182)

However conciliatory and inviting the white world may appear, it still hides underneath its age-long condescension and complex of racial superiority.

3.

Jazz is intended to be not only a battle against racism but more importantly a blueprint for fulfillment of African American desire. The book demonstrates that only when “the village within” is established in the city will African Americans be able to fulfill their desire. Morrison’s attempt to equate desire with sexuality through jazz is corroborated by Richard Wright’s view of jazz. As Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre have noted: “In Harlem
Richard Wright was familiarly known as ‘Dick.’ He was familiar with black music. Frank Tenot interviewed him for Cahiers a few days before his death” (242). He told Tenot: “Not to be a black bourgeois and to understand that the main gift that jazz has to offer the world today is an affirmation of desire. In spirituals and in Ray Charles—I repeat—there’s the same erotic exultation. This aspect of black music has been denied for too long. The faith of mystics and of most blacks has a sexual ingredient which well meaning people are too timid to dare admit, but which must be proclaimed” (Conversations with Wright 242–43).

Whether one is consciously aware of desire or not, Morrison suggests, one must act upon it. If not acted upon, desire might desert the person. For Morrison, jazz is the best means of expressing not only desire itself but also its insatiability:

I think about what Black writers do as having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. (qtd. in McKay 429)

Violet Trace confides to Alice Manfred: “I’m fifty and I don’t know nothing. What about it? Do I stay with him? I want to, I think. I want . . . well, I didn’t always . . now I want. I want some fat in this life.” Alice responds in earnest: “Wake up. Fat or lean, you got just one. This is it” (110). The initial antagonism between them notwithstanding, their relationship has developed into one of deep kinship in search of the meaning of love, a true understanding of female desire that only women like them, in this stage of life, can share. Morrison urges, through Alice, that one must cling to a relationship of desire, however precariously it may come into one’s life. And, for Morrison, the city is the perfect site to generate and keep fulfilling one’s desire.

With his “wife . . . sleeping with a doll,” Joe Trace, “a grown man,” seeks love in Dorcas, “an eighteen-year-old girl” (129). As his unfulfilled desire and unrequited love seem to satisfy themselves with an act of utmost violence—the murder of his love—so do those of Violet transform themselves into jealousy and violence. Such actions of desire and love dramatized in this novel appear highly predictable, and yet the way in which Morrison represents them is not only metonymic—since Violet’s name signifies desire and violence as Trace’s does search and discovery—but also realistic. Morrison draws on the city as an open space large enough to contain virtue and vice, excitement and frustration: “The husband shot; the wife stabbed. Nothing. Nothing her niece did or tried could equal the violence done to her. . . .
Gambling. Cursing. A terrible and nasty closeness. Red dresses. Yellow shoes.” Morrison sees all these excitements and frustrations powerfully expressed by jazz, what she calls “race music to urge them on” (79).

Above all, urban strife stimulates desire and generates love. To accommodate desire and love, the city must create more space for both the public self and the private world. Paradoxically, urban life, replete with social interaction and public gaze, creates more privacy. The narrator finds fifty-year-old African American women like Violet and Alice to be freer and more liberated than they realize, and she encourages them to fulfill their desire with a man like Joe Trace. “In a group such as this one,” she says, “they could do with impunity what they were cautious about alone with any man, stranger or friend, who rang the doorbell . . .” (71). To these women, Joe is an attractive man both as a private and a public persona. In search of his love, Dorcas, Joe looks for “signs of her, recognizing none” (183), but he finally finds her at a place the narrator calls “a private place, with an opening closed to the public.” Once you got inside, “you could do what you pleased: disrupt things, rummage, touch and move” (184). As public life stimulates desire, private life satisfies it. In this novel, desire and love are metonymically represented as both public and private.

Morrison’s exploration of desire in Jazz reaches its climax at the midpoint of the story when spring arrives in Harlem. This timing strikes the reader as natural and spontaneous because spring in the Northern Hemisphere brings renewal of life on Earth. For young and old Harlemites, spring—perhaps a season of emotion just as autumn is a season of intellect—stimulates one’s latent desire. Focusing on Dorcas, the narrator says: “Committed as Violet was to hip development, even she couldn’t drink the remaining malt—watery, warm and flat-tasting. She buttoned her coat and left the drugstore and noticed, at the same moment as that Violet did, that it was spring. In the City” (114). Even children look as if they were crying for love: after a light rain, the “faces of children glimpsed at windows appear to be crying, but it is the glass pane dripping that makes it seem so” (118).

T. S. Eliot, imagining his cityscape as a wasteland, depicted April as “the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (37). Whereas Eliot’s representation, in keeping with the modernist temper, strikes the postmodern reader as overtly depressive—perhaps even cynical and conceited—Morrison reflects the sentiments of earlier American realists like Henry James and Theodore Dreiser as they drew upon urban life. In The Ambassadors James’s voyeuristic gaze reveals, in its climactic episode, the fulfillment of desire by Chad Newsome and Mme de Vionnet as they ride on a boat near Paris in spring,
however fleeting the moment might be. In *Sister Carrie* Hurstwood, who has fallen victim to the economic depression that has hit New York, reminisces about “the blissful spirit” of spring; when he saw Carrie “in the little park in Chicago—how happy he would be!” (316).7

Once the feeling of desire has been evoked by scenes of nature, Morrison’s representation swiftly glides to reflections upon sexuality. As Dorcas lies dying, she is likened to Eve. Joe speaks to Dorcas:

I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart. (133)

Morrison’s allusion is transparent and may strike the reader as contrived, but remarkably the representation immediately glides back to a realistic rendition of human action. Trying to convince Dorcas of his love for her, Joe tells her, “I didn’t fall in love, I rose in it,” expressing a genuinely spiritual and physical action of his desire. It is even more remarkable for Morrison to make her representation slide further back to the origin of its evocation, a realistic description of nature and character. In the same breath Joe tells Dorcas: “Those old people, they knew it all. I talk about being new seven times before I met you, but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped” (135).

Earlier in the story, desire is viewed as natural, arising spontaneously from spiritual and social interactions. “On those nights,” Morrison tells us, “Joe does not mind lying awake next to his silent wife because his thoughts are with this young good God young girl who both blesses his life and makes him wish he had never been born” (40). Just as rest and boredom cause desire to stagnate, an active social life, which signals bodily interaction, generates desire. To many women of Harlem, like Violet, the notion of rest is comforting and peaceful, but they “are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down” (16).

City living, then, creates desire in and love for everyone. The way Morrison draws on this process of creation is not analogous but extensive, not metaphoric but metonymic. When she talks about desire and love, she does so in terms of environment, an image of “blocks and lots and side streets” (9). *Jazz* begins its story with a discourse on the city, in which Morrison’s imagi-
nation of desire and love is reified in what went on in the city of the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s before the great economic depression. “Nobody says,” she declares, “it’s pretty here; nobody says it’s easy either. What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can’t hurt you.” To her the city creates autonomy, and its spirit is contagious: “I like the way the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it” (8). “All you have to do,” she admonishes, “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” (9). One representation of desire in Jazz leads to another in time and space, thereby spreading its impact on the characters involved as the story unfolds. Desire leads to belief: Morrison finds that desire transforms into a sense of individuality and subjectivity.

Once subjectivity has been attained, it generates its own energy and, in turn, influences desire, its origin. Remindful of Ezra Pound’s theory of imagism in his “Vorticism” essay, Morrison’s image in Jazz is not a static, rational idea. Because subjectivity, once achieved, is no longer a passive state of mind, it becomes an active image endowed with desire, its own energy. At the end of this initial discourse on the city, Morrison says: “Hospitality is gold in this City; you have to be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time. When to love something and when to quit” (9). To Morrison, desire, yielding subjectivity, is in turn guided by willpower and judgment. Her imagination of the cityscape in Jazz also influences her treatment of the major characters. The ordeal and dilemma one individual experiences influences another in his or her attainment of subjectivity: as in Pound’s vortex, one’s desire influences another’s and, in so doing, yields subjectivity for one another. At the outset of the story Alice Manfred and Violet Trace appear as victim and transgressor, respectively, but in the end they come to share the same female subjectivity and worldview. As Alice comes to understand Violet’s traumatic childhood, so does Violet sympathize with Alice’s puritanical background. It is only in urban society that dialogue between strangers takes place and makes a crucial impact upon them in building character.

In Morrison’s characterization, desire is also treated dialectically. In the beginning Violet becomes jealous of Joe’s desire for Dorcas, but later Violet feels as if she is falling in love with Dorcas. To Violet the city functions as a site for inspiring desire in her life, that is, her love for an “adopted” daughter named Dorcas: “Not realizing that, bitch or dumpling, the two of them, mother and daughter, could have walked Broadway together and ogled the clothes. Could be sitting together, cozy in the kitchen, while Violet did her hair” (109). Whether Violet will be able to revive her love for Joe is unclear toward the end of the book, but they do continue to live together. At least,
Violet’s desire for Dorcas is reified in retrospect. For Violet, desire was disguised as jealousy when Dorcas was alive, but it has now resulted in love for the woman she used to hate.

It is Morrison’s urban imagination that has transformed desire into love. The city creates an open space large enough for love and hate to coexist. The most powerful vehicle to convey all these conflicting emotions and experiences in urban life is jazz. It is the jazz music reverberating in the city of the Harlem Renaissance that enables Morrison to challenge and erase the traditional oppositions of love and hate, success and failure, happiness and sorrow.

4.

Not only does Jazz concern African Americans’ fulfillment of desire, but Morrison’s ultimate intention is to inscribe in the memory of the Harlem-Renaissance city their achievement of subjectivity. “My project,” Morrison has stated, “is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (Playing in the Dark 90). To destroy European Americans’ racial prejudice and condescension and to establish their own individuality and autonomy, African Americans must create a discourse in which their life is envisioned not as a sociological case study but as an imaginative subject matter. The racial discourse in Jazz, as Morrison argues in Playing in the Dark, will not only enrich contemporary American culture but make her writing analytical and critical rather than polemical and political. “All of us, readers and writers,” she concludes, “are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes” (91). Her reimagining of the Harlem Renaissance in Jazz enables her to demonstrate African American subjectivity.

Her plan to use jazz music as a metonym for African American subjectivity is foregrounded by a quotation, the book’s epilogue, from “Thunder, Perfect Mind,” The Nag Hammadi:

I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.

At the beginning of the book the concept of subjectivity is contrasted with that of objectivity, a view of African Americans as the racial object. Using the
sound of jazz as a sign of subjectivity, Morrison says: “A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things.” It is the jazz music of “the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one” that inspired Harlemites to achieve their subjectivity. Not only does the African American woman “dream tall”; she feels “strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible.” But she notices that “[b]elow is shadow where any blase’ thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women” (7). Just as the sound of sorrow and frustration is conveyed by the blues, that of joy and hope is expressed by jazz.

In Jazz Morrison creates Violet, the central character, portrayed in the beginning as a naive, inexperienced African American woman but in the end as one who achieves her subjectivity. As if in a female Bildüngsroman, Morrison traces Violet’s development through her battle of life. As the story begins, Violet appears as a trope for shadowy women of unrequited love, frustration, and sorrow. Through her ordeal, however, she begins to realize that Dorcas, her archrival, is much like herself: she has failed to understand the values of independence and individualism.

Violet also gains her identity by confronting her other rival, Felice. To Felice, Dorcas is a woman who has succeeded socially but failed to establish autonomy in her life. As Felice tells the narrator, Dorcas “was always talking about who was good looking and who wasn’t. Who had bad breath, who had nice clothes, who could dance, who was hintty” (200). By contrast, Felice was an individualist, a type of African American woman Violet should have emulated in her girlhood. “I didn’t have a lot of friends in school,” Felice recollects. “Not the boys but the girls in my school bunched off according to their skin color. I hate that stuff—Dorcas too. So me and her were different that way” (200–201). Felice’s recollection of Dorcas’s social life is ambiguous because it is not clear whether Dorcas, like Felice, detested the way in which social life among African Americans was determined by their skin color. But at least Violet becomes aware that her husband’s desire for Dorcas is partly motivated by the fact that Dorcas is lighter in skin color than Violet. It is Felice who finally makes Violet realize that Violet, like Dorcas, is a social conformist. “My life,” Violet is quoted as saying. “I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else” (208).

Early in the story Felice is introduced as a friend of Dorcas’s, but toward the end she assumes the role of inspiring Violet with subjectivity. At first, Felice is seen carrying “an Okeh record under her arm and a half pound of stewmeat wrapped in pink butcher paper in her hand although the sun is too hot to linger in the streets with meat” (197–98). Regarding her as a lazy girl, the narrator ironically remarks that her “arms are full but there is nothing
much in her head” (198). To the reader, she seems a young woman interested only in contemporary music. Defying logic and common sense, she appears to possess a mind of her own. It is little wonder, then, that toward the end of the story the narrator thinks: “Now she is disturbing me, making me doubt my own self just looking at her sauntering through the sunshafts like that. Climbing the steps now, heading for Violent [Violet]” (198).

One of the salient characteristics of jazz music is the expression of happiness rather than of sorrow, as Felice’s name itself implies. More importantly, however, jazz is used in this novel as a means by which African Americans are inspired to achieve their subjectivity.

“Jazz, as Morrison has recognized in her work, has a thematic as well as a technical impact on the listener—on both a fictional character and a novelist. As the story unfolds in Jazz, Morrison explores the various events in which subjectivity finds its expressions and representations. Initially she focuses on the courtship of Violet and Joe. Tracing their country backgrounds in the South and their recent arrival in Harlem, she merely points out: “They were drawn together because they had been put together, and all they decided for themselves was when and where to meet at night” (30). For them subjectivity does not simply mean freedom from racial oppression in the South; it is a sign of creation and progression, the twin actions that urban mood and urban music are urging upon them. “Joe and Violet,” Morrison remarks, “wouldn’t think of it—paying money for a meal they had not missed and that required them to sit still at, or worse, separated by, a table. Not now. Not entering the lip of the City dancing all the way.” Paradoxically, lack of space in the city creates more action and generates more desire: “Her hip bones rubbed this thigh as they stood in the aisle unable to stop smiling. They weren’t even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing.”

The rhythm of jazz represents an undulating movement that urges the listener into progression instead of regression. “However they came, when or why,” Morrison emphasizes, “the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around” (32).

For Alice Manfred, the sound of drums she heard from a marching band in progress down Fifth Avenue on the Fourth of July, 1917, became a sign of liberty and pursuit of happiness, “a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence” (53). To many of the listeners of the drums, however, the sound remained a sign, not an action, a natural objective image, not a Poundian subjective image as mentioned earlier. It is ironic that the drums
could express “what the graceful women and the marching men could not” (53). As Alice marveled at the cold, quiet black faces despite a typically warm, sticky, but bright summer day, she was deeply moved by the power of the drums. The drums, she saw, were building a space into which the cold, quiet, beautiful black faces were moving. “The drums and the freezing faces hurt her,” Morrison says, “but hurt was better than fear and Alice had been frightened for a long time” (54). Alice herself now learned how to conduct her own life and, in turn, help others:

Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T. The hurt hurt her, but the fear was gone at last. Fifth Avenue was put into focus now and so was her protection of the newly orphaned girl in her charge. (54)

The sound of drums has the effect of urging on a mature, middle-aged African American woman like Alice to seek liberty and happiness, but more importantly it inspires her with a sense of individuality, responsibility, and altruism.

By contrast, for young women like Dorcas and Felice, the impact of music on their actions is illusive and paradoxical. As they dance to the music, they “believe they know before the music does what their hands, their feet are to do, but that illusion is the music’s secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates” (65). What Morrison calls “a City seeping music” is urging them to generate a spirit of adventure, as if to say there will be nothing to lose but everything to gain: “Come,” the music says. “Come and do wrong” (67). Jazz, an urban music, has the power of changing Dorcas’s private self to her public self: Dorcas is likened to a swollen fish, an airship floating like “a private dream” (67). The spirit of liberty and autonomy felt by young and old women alike is contagious: “Even the grandmothers sweeping the stairs closed their eyes and held their heads back as they celebrated their sweet desolation” (67–68). Throughout Jazz, female subjectivity signifies not only racial freedom but also courage not fear, audacity not stoicism, involvement not isolation.

Violet’s attainment of a sense of individualism and independence is more complex than Joe’s. As he makes himself a subject, always trying to do what he desires for himself, he also wants Dorcas to be herself. Joe wishes that Dorcas would want to be a subject as well and gain her own identity, but she
wants to be an object of male desire, what her lover Acton wants her to be. 
Violet now admits to Felice that Violet while young has been unable to attain 
her identity as a subject. Violet used to wish she had been whiter, lighter, 
younger than were her competitors so that she had been more attractive; she 
used to regard herself as an object of male desire. Her jealousy of Joe’s desire 
for Dorcas and her violent attack on Dorcas’s dead body transform her into 
one who understands the true meaning of individualism and independence. 
When Felice inquires her about how she has rid herself of an image that was 
not the real Violet, she replies, “Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed 
her” (209). If Joe’s subjectivity means self-centeredness, egotism, and self-
love, then Violet’s subjectivity signifies self-mastery, altruism, and kinship. 

More significantly, Violet’s achievement of subjectivity suggests that 
Morrison’s heroine has acquired a sense of transcendence. She has succeeded 
in transcending the traditional, sexist limits of regarding self either as a sub-
ject or as an object. Her new state of mind is akin to the state of nothingness, 
one of the doctrines in Zen philosophy. This enlightenment in Zen, which 
transcends even the consciousness of self, yields the state of nothingness. The 
state of nothingness, however, is not equated with a state of void, but it is 
instructive in that it has the function of cleansing the subject of egotism. 
Because this state of mind is free of self-centered, materialistic, and sexist 
desire, it is often likened to the spirit of nature.

Another doctrine in Zen calls for its follower to “kill Buddha.” To attain 
the state of nothingness, one must annihilate not merely self but more impor-
tantly the self relying upon Buddha. Although Morrison’s characterization of 
Violet toward the end of the book does not directly concern annihilation of 
Buddha, Violet’s achievement of subjectivity bears a close resemblance to the 
doctrine of self-annihilation as prerequisite to attaining the state of nothing-
ness. When Violet says, “Then I killed the me that killed her” (209), she 
means that she annihilated the old self to create the new one. Following Zen 
doctrine, one might argue that by both “the me” and “her,” Violet means the 
old self. “I,” the new self, then, signifies the state of nothingness. One might 
also construe what the old Violet, whom Morrison calls “Violent,” has relied 
upon in her marriage as meaning Joe Trace. If Violet had relied upon Joe as 
her God, or Buddha, one might interpret her achievement of subjectivity in 
terms of Zen enlightenment.

Whether Violet’s transcendence of subjectivity will lead to her happiness 
for the rest of her life is beyond the scope of the story. But the ending of the 
story clearly suggests that Felice has also achieved a sense of individuality and 
subjectivity. Although the narrator says, “I saw the three of them, Felice, Joe 
and Violet, and they looked to me like a mirror image of Dorcas, Joe, and
Violet” (221), the reader well remembers that Felice and Dorcas are developed as antithetical representations of female subjectivity. From Dorcas’s tragedy, Felice has learned that she no longer wants to be an object of male desire as Dorcas was. It is debatable whether or not Felice at the end of the story is inclined to emulate Violet’s transcendence of subjectivity. Zen teaches its followers that the state of nothingness will lead to happiness and peace of mind. It is also of interest to conjecture the motive behind Morrison’s naming her Felice, “Happiness.” By contrast, Dorcas represents a young African American woman who has fallen victim to male subjectivity. Morrison must have marveled at the love triangle of Dorcas, Joe, and Violet, pitted against that of Felice, Joe, and Violet; in fact Dorcas’s tragic death led to Felice’s happy life. The naming of Dorcas is also interesting, perhaps ironic, for it suggests a biblical allusion to selflessness as well as to altruism.

Morrison’s ironic representations of Violet, Felice, and Dorcas notwithstanding, Joe Trace remains the most undeveloped character. By tracing Joe’s background, however, the reader can discern his inability to see himself, let alone others. Joe has turned out to be an African American man who, despite his struggle to fulfill his desire and attain his happiness, fails to transcend the limitation of the outdated tradition of male subjectivity. For this reason Jazz does sound postmodern and parodic. Joe is one character who has made himself victim of the patriarchal, sexist, and self-centered concept and practice of subjectivity.