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Dislocation and Relocation in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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Migration has been central in the making of African-American history and culture and in the total American experience. African American life in the United States has been framed by migrations, forced and free. A forced migration from Africa - the transatlantic slave trade - carried black people to the Americas. A second forced migration - the internal slave trade - transported them from the Atlantic coast to the interior of the American South. A third migration - this time initiated largely, but not always, by black Americans - carried black people from the rural South to the urban North. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, African American life is again being transformed by another migration, this time a global one, as peoples of African descent from all parts of the world enter the United States. This time, the migration of the African Americans is back to the south - a conscious movement from the industrial context of the North for the rural existence in the South. To Bill Ashcroft, the idea of the place is just as constructed as identity itself, and contrary to our understanding of it as just a geographical space, for the migrants or the displaced, it becomes a constant trope of difference in postcolonial writing, a continual reminder of colonial ambivalence and of the separation, yet continual mixing of the colonizer and the colonized. The proposed study attempts at highlighting Toni Morrison's cultural vision as reflected in her novel *Jazz* (1992) by studying the work from the prism of the third Great Migration of the African Americans in the early twentieth century that entails the process of dislocation and relocation. The post colonial critical paradigm of "transforming space" will be adopted to understand the impact of the third Great Migration in the African Americans' sense of the reconstitution and reconstruction of both the individual authentic self and society at large.

. Whether it is referring to the free or the clandestine forms of migration encountered by African Americans, still their creative imagination tries to authentically account tales of the displaced, dislocated lives who still live in the minds of those who carries the burden of history. As such, dislocation and subsequent attempts at relocations however, tentatively become central to the cultural quest of displaced people such as the African Americans. Black Southerners had seen their revolution run backward having celebrated the freedom that accompanied wartime emancipation and the enfranchisement of Radical Reconstruction. Opportunities dwindled, rights were lost, and freedoms shriveled during the last decades of the nineteenth century. New forms of political domination and labor extraction emerged while slavery was not re-imposed. While ex-Confederates and their sympathizers regained their place atop Southern society, black people were stripped of the suffrage thereby locking them in a position of social inferiority and economic dependency. The weight of the debt and the omnipresent threat of violence made escape all but impossible for many black people under such circumstances. Everything changed amid seemingly endless commentaries on the immutability of African American life in the rural South. Between 1915 and 1917, the black belt was depopulated as black tenants, laborers, and sharecroppers fled their old homes. A near majority of black Americans by 1970 resided in the North and the West, almost entirely in cities. Black people yet again, began the reconstruction of their society.

Ira Berlin states “This third great migration dwarfed all previous migrations of black people. It carried more than ten times the number transferred from Africa to mainland North America in the transatlantic slave trade and six times the number of those shipped from the seaboard south to the interior by continental slavers.” (157) Black people took control of the movement north unlike with the forced migrations that had moved their ancestors. But the grand hopes for a better future were tempered by a deep understanding of the historic realities of race relations in the United States. The migrants were not surprised to learn that racial subordination would be as much a part of life in the North as it was in the South although they would be shocked by the intensity, persistence, and novel forms it took. It is observed that African American migrants relocated themselves in the American North and yet this relocation process continued to remind the migrant of the boundaries that circumscribe black people (Pre and Post Emancipation Era in America). These boundaries signify not only the prejudices and restrictions that bar their entry into the mainstream, but also the psychological ones they internalize as they develop in a social structure that historically has excluded them. In the text, *Caliban’s Voice: the Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft (2009), he says:

Places are always in the process of being created, always provisional and uncertain, and always capable of being discursively manipulated towards particular ends. This is strikingly demonstrated in the process by which colonizers construct the colonial space Post-colonized space is therefore a site of struggle on which the value and beliefs of indigenous and colonizer contend for possession. (77)

The post colonial space as Ashcroft accounts is transforming in nature and is a construct like identity that affects the subjectivity of the post colonial subject since such a space is a site of struggle and contrary to our understanding of it as just a geographical space, for the migrants or the displaced, it becomes a constant trope of difference in postcolonial writing, a continual reminder of colonial ambivalence and of the separation, yet continual mixing of the colonizer and the colonized. In an article “The Paradoxical Journey of the African American in African American Fiction” by Jerome E. Thornton, it’s been stressed that “the African Americans’ ‘home’ search throughout American history is both a painful and a furious passage.” As one could see Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992) captures an intricately intertwined aspect of African Americans’ sense of relocation in the Northern cities in the early twentieth century. With a variety of thematic elements – such as the mystery of love that involves “jealousy” and “forgiveness” (5), the history of southern blacks’ migration to northern cities and their quest for identity – Morrison effectively reflects upon the characters’ sense of personal dispossession and cultural dislocation. Against a Harlem backdrop, the narrative’s deliberately unspecific, ungendered voice takes center stage in this novel. The “City” with a capital C consistently seems to be doing much more than just encoding Afro-American place. According to James Weldon Johnson, “Black Manhattan,” as he used to call it, shapes up as a space of resistance in which all sorts of cultural practices resurface under oppressive conditions. One observes that the metropolis in 1926, as could be seen in Morrison’s aforementioned novel is “a vast receptacle of actual, historical, vocal, and memorial traces” (Paquet-Deyris 219).

The novel contains narrative constructions and reconstructions which record and represent both the real and false hopes offered by the City. And as it first celebrates the advent of a new era, it has directly commented on the meaning of relocation for "a million others." (*Jazz*

32) The voice's version and invocations of the reader rather ironically contrast with Alain Locke's brilliant evocations of the Harlem Renaissance in his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*:

... I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible-like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one.... At last, at last, everything's ahead.... Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help-stuff.... History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last.... Word was that underneath the good times and the easy money something evil ran the streets and nothing was safe-not even the dead. (*Jazz* 7-9)

As Paquet-Deyris states that this play on "the oral and written language mirrors the structure of the blues and the instrumental variations of jazz" (221). The narrator seems to thrive on pain and on the lyrical laments of all the voices telling tales of woe in the narrative, and its very form captures the unpredictability and riffs of jazz. "The city blues tell the stories buried voices could or would not" (ibid). Even Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, swore she heard a complicated anger in it;

... something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. ... It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house music. It made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about. (59)

In her essay "The Eye of the Story," Eudora Welty defines the sense of place in *Jazz* and emphasizes that it is a "fledgling, tentative one which only timidly herald's *Paradise's* discrimination-safe haven" (350). The City, as a new composite is conditioned by the Great Migration from the rural South which started in the 1870s and climaxed between 1910 and 1930. Derived from James Van Der Zee's eerie collection of photographs *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, the narrative itself unfolds as "a Book of the Dead, a site of traumas forever replayed, revisited by the characters of a new type of black diaspora" (Paquet-Deyris 219). Just like the Middle Passage of slaves across the Atlantic, the City of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s is some sort of "zero moment" in black history. The "disremembered and unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 275) stories of times past can only reemerge as loose fragments patched up by an uncertain if forceful narrator. And the context the narrator provides for these migrants' dreams also precludes any smooth representation of "the glittering city" (35) and its "race music" (79). 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 the capital of black America." (Paquet-Deyris 219) The sense of place was essentially defined by what it could no longer be, and by what it wasn't quite yet. As the narrator says, 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." (7) Some of these dreams however, are endlessly deferred in *Jazz*, quite literally displaced so that they mirror the book's discontinuous narrative sequences.

It reconstitutes the complex journey of black migrants fleeing Southern oppression against the peculiar backdrop of the Northern city, which in turn distills its own violence. But it can also turn into the place of all possibilities if, as the voice specifies, "you ... 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), for "really there is no contradiction ... rather it's a condition: the range of what an artful City can do" (118). The City therefore becomes an acting site of reconstruction, of potential and actual articulation of some traumatic traces of the past. And as the controlling

entity behind the distracted and inscrutable voice, it sends the reader on a frantic, often sterile search for the missing fragments in the characters' lives, eventually providing a discourse of replacement:

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. (120)

One observes that the cityscape is suddenly redesigned and redefined by this unexpected wave of Blacks flooding part of downtown Manhattan and protesting against white violence during the deadly East St. Louis riots of 1917. Taboo-breaking and boundary-crossing become in dissociable. The New York silent marchers cross over to "where whitemen leaned out of motor-cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their palms.... It was where she (Alice), a woman of fifty and independent means, had no surname." They eventually infringe upon the uncharted and unsafe territory "south of 110th Street" (54).

In the City, one can alternately be led astray by the "get-on-down music" and rounded, gathered up by the re-connecting sound of the drums which "spanned the distance" (58). How one fare in the City depends greatly on interpreting the sporadic answers one can wrestle from it. The necessary displacement/repositioning it imposes upon everyone entering its limits rely as much on the inflections of the communal voice as to the individual's capability to find his or her own voice. In some way, the entire narrative is to be declined - in its grammatical sense - as a Migration Series. The voice in *Jazz* has repeatedly reported the social, political, and economic terrorism, which precipitated the great exodus of freed-men in the cities of the North. By offering a glimpse of Joe Trace's gradual Northern migration, the narration also documents his slow access to some budding sense of identity. When Vienna, his Southern birthplace, is burned to the ground, Joe stays around until he's eventually run off the land he's just bought: "Red fire doing fast what white sheets took too long to finish: canceling every deed; vacating each and every field; emptying us out of our places so fast we went running from one part of the country to another-or nowhere.... They ran us off with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed." (126) Joe's fledgling sense of self is irretrievably linked to his own conception of place. Before figuring out where he belongs, he first becomes part of the "nine hundred Negroes, encouraged by guns and hemp, [who] left Vienna, rode out of town on wagons or walked on their feet to who knew [or cared] where" (174).

As Hogue puts it, "the historical backdrop for the unhappy triangle of Joe, Violet, and Dorcas is the Jazz Age, an age defined by African American culture, music, and literature" (176). There is the heady tempo and daring temper of black life in Harlem. There are also the race riots. Jazz reaches from post-WWI Harlem back to Reconstruction, recounting the hardships and hopes. In the Harlem of the twenties, the characters are caught up not only in jazz music, but also in an emerging mass-commodified capitalist American society that objectifies and exploits them. The dead also haunts the characters in *Jazz*, but it is a haunting more by memory. In 1920's jazz-age Harlem, middle-aged and married Joe Trace falls in love with seventeen-year-old Dorcas and then kills her when she rejects him for a younger lover. Trace's wife Violet, after unsuccessfully attempting to mutilate the girl in her coffin, becomes just as obsessed with Dorcas as her husband is. Morrison draws upon history here just as she did earlier in *Beloved* and Joe and Violet's story, therefore, might well be called "keeping a corpse alive," (Harris 329) for that is precisely what they do. Their fascination with the dead is the vantage point from which they

assess their lives, their family history, and their arrival in the City, their dreams, and the failures of those dreams. Joe and Violet become “a community of judgment against themselves; the morbidity of their fascination with the dead never becomes a ‘discussable’ topic because their vision is the primary standard of judgment.” (ibid)

Caroline Brown stresses that *Jazz* is, quite literally, the textual negotiation of freedom through the grammar of the erotic. According to her “the erotic-sexual hunger, romantic love, dangerous desire, sensual pleasure-drives the narrative” in the novel and is never about itself alone, but rather, its extravagance is “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" (629). *Jazz* becomes the process through which its protagonists "own" their emotions. It is the ritual through which those experiences that inform these emotions are reclaimed and thus reincorporated into the psychic fiber of those lives.

One of the central concerns of the novel remains its preoccupation with the notion of “wild.” While “wild” could suggest the wild nature of the thriving City of the Harlem that was quickly transforming the migrants’ lives, distinctively it could also be a dynamic factor that signifies “defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, and silence—all caused by class exploitation and race and/or gender oppression.” (Mbalia 106) Because conditions throughout the U.S., indeed the world, in the 1920s are so oppressive for African American people, there are traces of Wild in everything and everyone. Jazz itself is wild. It is “the dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild“(58). Harlem, the City, is wild as well.

It is a place where people think they can do what they want and get away with it. I see them all over the place: wealthy whites, and plain ones too, pile into mansions decorated and redecorated by black women richer than they are, and both are pleased with the spectacle of the other. I’ve seen the eyes of black Jews, brimful of pity for everyone not themselves, graze the food stalls and the ankles of loose women, while a breeze stirs the white plumes on the helmets of the UNIA men. (8)

Toni Morrison’s work offers a fresh reading of African American history through the prism of the ‘great migrations’ that made and remade African American life. One can see migration and the reshaping of communities to their new environments as central to the African-American experience, an experience that calls for a process of cultural revisionism, of redefining history and historical memory, and of confronting the past in innovative and constructive ways that are intentionally self-reflexive. The sense of dispossession involved in a quest for self-identification and location in a multi-cultural context is translated into works of fiction that refracts a symbolical questioning of identity along with a rejection of the imposed stereotypes and a search for the authentic within the worlds of texts. As in-house editor of *The Black Book* (1974), Morrison says:

She had gotten tired of histories of black life that focused only on the leaders, leaving the everyday heroes to the lumps of statistics. She wanted to bring the lives of those who always got lost in the statistics to the forefront – to create a genuine black history book ‘that simply recollected life as lived’ (816-17).

The author follows the spirit of *The Black Book* and chooses to write about the “ordinary Negro” and her characters are a small-time, unlicensed hairdresser and a sample-case man named Violet and Joe respectively. Indeed, it could be pointed out, there is a sense of foregrounding the ordinary lives of African Americans in the novel by making the public events go muted and back-grounded. The novel is, therefore, a history of Harlem that is “interested in the

improvisation of lives out of a painful past rather than concerned to represent a glorious moment of cultural awakening” (Matus 128).

The grand hopes for a better future were tempered by a deep understanding of the historic realities of race relations in the United States. The migrants were not surprised to learn that racial subordination would be as much a part of life in the North as it was in the South although they would be shocked by the intensity, persistence, and novel forms it took. Many of the stories in the novel qualify initial impressions of the City and this is evident when the narrator admits: “I’m crazy about this City. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. ... - like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything’s ahead” (7). Such a euphoric initial impression changes when the novel shows that history is never over. The threat of dispossession lingers in Harlem for Joe and Violet and this is evident from the incident where, they face hostility from their neighbors with lighter skin when they first move to Lenox Avenue.

For the characters to truly reinvent themselves, the author emphasizes the need to come to terms with the losses of the past. As such, Joe looks back on his life of dispossession and forced reinvention and states: “You could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life” (129). Elsewhere it is noted that the narrative voice recognizes the pull of romantic love as “the thing worth doing,” driving every human subject (63) and as Rachel Lister puts it, it is this “hunger, expressed through the persistent, unanswered declarations of Violet’s parrot, which drives the characters to make skewed judgements” (59). Whether it has to do with Joe’s desire to sustain the rush of romantic attachment that provokes him to shoot Dorcas, his “necessary thing” (28) or Dorcas, who is intoxicated by the idea that a woman’s instincts and emotions can be governed by love and passion, no matter the consequences for her sense of selfhood – the novel is richly imbued with instances of impulse-driven actions. What happens to Joe, Violet and Dorcas is a convergence of unresolved, old hurts and unsatisfied hungers that well up from the past. In one way, the novel, like the music itself, does not limit itself to one narrative.

Undoubtedly the novel gestures continually toward the possibility of connection and collaboration. It could therefore be inferred that Morrison’s history of the jazz age attempts to express and assimilate the pain of the past, but also to acknowledge the power and agency of its inheritors to make and remake it while recognizing the dynamic patterns in which the great migration transfigured and transformed African Americans lives and their sense of subjectivities and identities produced through the conditions of racism and oppression specific to the first three decades of the twentieth century.

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