

# Black Urban Modernity of the Harlem Renaissance: A Dialectical Negotiation between Urban Individuality and Community in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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## ABSTRACT

Inspired by a photograph taken by James Van Der Zee in 1926 of a dead black girl lying in a decorated coffin, Morrison sets out to write a revisionist history of the Harlem Renaissance, or the Jazz Age, in the 1920s in her sixth novel and the second of her love trilogy, *Jazz* (1992). And, without mentioning, let alone celebrating, the cultural, artistic, social, and even political events and accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance, Morrison offers her own revisionist history of Harlem by depicting the experiences and traumas of migrant blacks from the South. But what is so unique about Morrison's literary historiography of the life of Harlem in *Jazz*? What are the unspoken aspects of the *urban* experiences of African Americans in Harlem? What are the similarities and differences between the social life of the blacks of the rural South and that of migrant blacks from the South in the urban North? How do the urban experiences of the migrant blacks contest and destabilize the popular formulations of urban experiences observed and developed by certain white, male theorists? In other words, how does Morrison represent and conceptualize a distinctive form of urban modernity in the region of Harlem of New York in the context of the Northern Migration and Harlem Renaissance?

In light of Jennifer Robinson's "ordinary-city" approach to urban studies elaborated in her *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (2006), I argue that Morrison's vision of urban modernity, derived from her observations of the black migrants of Harlem in the 1920s, differs *partially* from the understandings of urban modernity of white, middle-class, male theorists, such as Georg Simmel and his followers Robert Park

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and Louis Wirth. Robinson's "ordinary city" approach seeks to dislocate understandings of urban modernity from certain western theorizations on such metropolises as Berlin and Paris. Privileging certain western metropolises as the origins and sources of what constitutes the urban modern leads to a hierarchical, ethnocentric evaluation of cities without being able to appreciate and understand the urban phenomena and experiences of diverse social groups in different histories and geographies. The "ordinary city" approach does not dismiss the importance of the observations of the established western, male theorists, but aims to explore the particular form of urban modernity of every city by dislodging the privileged relationship between the West and modernity. Specifically, instead of focusing only on the possibility and development of a unique form of *individuality* in the urban milieu in the early twentieth century, Morrison in *Jazz* seeks to demonstrate that, as *a racial minority in a white supremacist society*, African Americans in Harlem develop a black urban modernity, *a dialectical negotiation between individuality and community*, which is represented through the narrator's diverse and contradictory observations of the urban experiences of the blacks and also through the struggles of the protagonists, Violet and Joe, who negotiate not only with the traumatic loss of their own mothers and families in their childhood in the South, but also with the unique kind of urban loneliness as well as their gradual detachment from the black communities both in the South and the City during their urban life in Harlem.

**KEYWORDS:** Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992), the Harlem Renaissance, urban modernity, urban individuality, community

# 哈林文藝復興時期的 美非都會現代性： 童妮·摩里森《爵士樂》中都會個人疏 離與社群連帶的辯證關係<sup>◇</sup>

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## 摘 要

童妮·摩里森的第六本小說、同時也是愛的三部曲中的第二部《爵士樂》的創作源起自一張拍攝於一九二六年的照片。此照片呈現一位躺在裝飾過的棺材中供人瞻仰的黑人女孩。摩里森受到這張照片的啟發而嘗試重新書寫哈林文藝復興時期(一般也稱作爵士樂時代)的黑人移民歷史。然而,《爵士樂》一書中幾乎完全未提及哈林文藝復興時期黑人在藝術、文化、經濟和政治等方面的成就和發展,反而著眼於來自美國南方的黑人移民的歷史經驗和創傷。但《爵士樂》一書中所重新書寫的哈林文藝復興時期的歷史有何特出之處呢?這本小說又呈現出落腳於哈林區的黑人移民哪些鮮為人知的都會經驗呢?移民至北方都會的南方黑人移民與仍居於南方的黑人同胞在社會生活上有何相似和不同之處?而這些黑人移民的都會經驗又如何挑戰和顛覆某些白人中產階級男性理論家所觀察和論述的都會經驗呢?簡單來說,摩里森從一九二零年代哈林區移民黑人的生活中考掘出甚麼樣獨樹一格的都會現代性?

藉由珍妮佛·羅賓森在其書《一般城市:在現代與發

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展之間》所揭櫫的「一般城市」概念，本文嘗試論證摩里森在《爵士樂》一書中所呈現的一九二零年代哈林區移民黑人的城市現代性如何與白人中產男性理論家，如喬治·西默與其後繼者羅伯·帕克和路易斯·沃夫所認知與論述的城市現代性有所出入。羅賓森的「一般城市」概念挑戰城市現代性總與某些西方大都會劃上等號的預設。將某些西方大都會的現象和發展視為所謂都會現代性的濫觴和依歸無法真正理解與體會不同社會脈絡下不同社群的都會經驗和現象，反而會發展出一套以西方為中心來評價城市發展的階層化概念。「一般城市」概念並無全盤否定西方白人男性理論家既有的觀察和論述，而是企圖藉由打破現代性與西方被視為理所當然的連結來探索不同城市中所發展出的各樣都會現代性。除了呈現與探索二十世紀初期在都會環境中所發展出的獨特個人疏離經驗外，摩里森在《爵士樂》一書中更進一步體現美國黑人作為白人主流社會中的種族弱勢如何在哈林都會區協商辯證出一種在個人疏離與社群連帶間游移的美非都會現代性。這種特殊的都會經驗在《爵士樂》一書中不僅表現在小說敘事者對於哈林都會區多樣且善變的全知觀察中，也展現在書中兩位男女主角協商南方的幼時種族創傷、都會疏離經驗與黑人社群連帶關係的過程中。

**關鍵詞：**童妮·摩里森、《爵士樂》（1992）、哈林文藝復興時期、都會現代性、都會個人疏離經驗、社群連帶

## Re-membering the Harlem Renaissance

Inspired by a photograph taken by James Van Der Zee in 1926 of a dead black girl lying in a decorated coffin, Morrison sets out to write a revisionist history of the Harlem Renaissance, or the Jazz Age, in the 1920s in her sixth novel and the second of her love trilogy, *Jazz* (1992).<sup>1</sup> Morrison has dedicated herself to re-writing black history since her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The first novel of the love trilogy, *Beloved* (1987), is also inspired by a historical photograph in a newspaper: a black mother's murder of her child. Morrison, in *Jazz*, continues to interrogate the unspoken and unspeakable stories of Afro-American history. Morrison, in her article "The Site of Memory," makes a distinction between fiction, fact and truth by situating her novel writing within the tradition of autobiographical slave narratives. Characterizing her novel writing as searching for a truth from recollection and imagination through the use of her strategy of "literary archeology" (112), Morrison claims that "the crucial distinction...is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth...[b]ecause facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (113). If "fact" can be said to refer to the well-known, grand "History," then what Morrison endeavors to seek in her historical project is to retrieve the lost and hidden "truth" of ordinary people.

The dead black girl in the coffin in James Van Der Zee's photo is actually neither horrid nor wretched; instead, the image is "marked by his characteristic attention to aesthetics: the framing, the lighting, and the composition of the scene engage the viewer in such visual pleasure that the grave subject matter of the photo and its underlying narrative can almost be overlooked" (Peterson 203). What Morrison is at pains to undertake in *Jazz* is

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<sup>1</sup> *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1997) are categorized as Morrison's *love trilogy*, for *Beloved* centers on the love between a mother and daughter, *Jazz* is concerned with the love between a man and woman, and *Paradise* revolves around the love for the community. The particular kind of love relationship foregrounded in each novel, as well as the other sorts of love portrayed in the novels, are both empowering and problematic for the characters. At the same time, each love relationship is also grounded in a specific historical and geographical context. It can be argued that Morrison does not intend to develop an over-arching, universalist understanding and conception of each kind of love, but actually is more concerned with the ways in which each kind of relationship called love is contested and negotiated in the life of ordinary African Americans in a particular phase of Afro-American history. The love trilogy and her other novels are therefore also her literary project of re-membering and re-writing the history of African Americans in America.

to reveal and interpret the story or narrative behind James Van Der Zee's too-refined photograph. In addition, Morrison also addresses the issue of inadequacy of remembering *only* through photographs, for the "collective memory" constructed through familiar and widely disseminated photographs is a "collective instruction" (Sontag 85) and "a stipulating [one]" (86), and "[t]he problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs" (89); therefore, "[t]his remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering" (89).

Morrison may sense the problem of James Van Der Zee's too-refined photograph of a dead black girl as a documentation of Harlem life in the 1920s, and is attempting therefore to excavate and remember the latent past and underlying narrative, in order to understand not only the individual story of the girl in the photograph but also the unspoken experiences of ordinary African Americans in Harlem during the 1920s, the cultural Mecca or the Promised Land for the blacks. And, without mentioning, let alone celebrating, the cultural, artistic, social, and even political events and accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance, Morrison offers her own revisionist history of Harlem by depicting the experiences and traumas of migrant blacks from the South. But what is so unique about Morrison's literary historiography of the life of Harlem in *Jazz*? What are the unspoken aspects of the *urban* experiences of African Americans in Harlem? What are the similarities and differences between the social life of the blacks of the rural South and that of migrant blacks from the South in the urban North? How do the urban experiences of the migrant blacks contest and destabilize the popular formulations of urban experiences observed and developed by certain white, male theorists? In other words, how does Morrison represent and conceptualize a distinctive form of urban modernity in the region of Harlem of New York in the context of the Northern Migration and Harlem Renaissance?

In light of Jennifer Robinson's "ordinary-city" approach to urban studies elaborated in her *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (2006), I argue that Morrison's vision of urban modernity, derived from her observations of the black migrants of Harlem in the 1920s, differs *partially* from the understandings of urban modernity of white, middle-class, male theorists, such as Georg Simmel and his followers Robert Park and Louis Wirth. Robinson's "ordinary city" approach seeks to dislocate understandings

of urban modernity from certain western theorizations on such metropolises as Berlin and Paris. Privileging certain western metropolises as the origins and sources of what constitutes the urban modern leads to a hierarchical, ethnocentric evaluation of cities without being able to appreciate and understand the urban phenomena and experiences of diverse social groups of intersecting identities in different histories and geographies. The “ordinary city” approach does not dismiss the importance of the observations of the established western, male theorists, but aims to explore the particular form of urban modernity of every city by dislodging the privileged relationship between the West and modernity. Specifically, instead of focusing only on the possibility and development of a unique form of *individuality* in the urban milieu in the early twentieth century, Morrison in *Jazz* seeks to demonstrate that, as *a racial minority in a white supremacist society*, African Americans in Harlem develop a black urban modernity, *a dialectical negotiation between individuality and community*, which is represented through the narrator’s diverse and contradictory observations of the urban experiences of the blacks and also through the struggles of the protagonists, Violet and Joe, who negotiate not only with the traumatic loss of their own mothers and families in their childhood in the South, but also with the unique kind of urban loneliness as well as their gradual detachment from the black communities both in the South and the City during their urban life in Harlem.

### **Pursuing Individuality in the City**

Georg Simmel, in his seminal “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), explores the mentality of the metropolitan in the larger historical context of the pursuit of *individuality* in the West. Individuality is further classified into “individual independence” or freedom and “the elaboration of individuality” (Simmel 184). The former was the ideal and goal of the eighteenth century, which witnessed the efforts to liberate people from the oppressive social mechanisms and institutions through political reforms and revolutions; the latter was pursued in the nineteenth century, for more and more people were not content with the claim that everyone is born free and equal, and further sought for everyone’s “qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability” (185). The modern metropolis, for Simmel, is the site where the metropolitan can search for his/her own individuality, or specifically, individual freedom. The metropolitan gradually develops “the blasé attitude” (178) because “the

rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves” (178)<sup>2</sup> result in either “[a]n incapacity...to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy” (178) or “the refusal to react to their stimulation” (179). In addition, the blasé attitude also partly stems from the operations of the money economy, which “becomes the common denominator of all values...[which] irreparably hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability” (178).<sup>3</sup> Under the dominance of the money economy between the people in the city, money functions as the general equivalent of the (exchange) value of the commodities, and thus the value of everything is considered more from the point of its (pecuniary) quantity instead of its quality. The money economy also fosters *anonymity* because through its mediation, the purchaser and the producer do not need to be acquainted with each other in their dealings, as people are in the small town or country (176).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Simmel gives such blasé attitude or “reserve” (179) a positive interpretation, arguing that “[t]his reserve with its overtone of hidden aversion appears in turn as the form or the cloak of a more general mental phenomenon of the metropolis: it grants to the individual a kind and an amount of personal freedom which has no analogy whatsoever under other conditions” (180); that is, it cannot be perceived in the small town or country life. Therefore, for Simmel, the metropolitan can thus find his/her individual freedom or independence, if not further individual uniqueness and

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<sup>2</sup> Simmel echoes Sigmund Freud’s theorization of the external stimuli and the protective shield in the psychical apparatus, further arguing that “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions” (175) cultivate “intellectuality” in the conscious layer, which functions to “preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life” (176). Nevertheless, Freud does not refer to the development of “intellectuality” in the conscious layer. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), develops his theory of the external perception of Pcpt.-Cs. (perception-consciousness layer), memory-traces of the unconscious, the protective shield of the outermost Pcpt.-Cs. and other layers and functions of the psychical apparatus. He elucidates the consequences of receiving external stimuli or excitations, particularly overwhelming traumas, in terms of an economical model, such as energy, libido and cathexis, but he does not refer to the protective shield, resulting from the constant stimuli, as the locus of intellectuality, as Simmel does.

<sup>3</sup> Simmel also employs Karl Marx’s theorization of exchange value and money to argue for the emergence of urban intellectuality, elucidating that “[m]oney is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: how much?” (176).

<sup>4</sup> The other related characteristics developed from the practice of the money economy are “calculability” (natural science and mathematical formulations), “precision” (pocket watch), and “punctuality” (the stable and impersonal time schedule) (177).

incomparability, in the city, where “the bodily proximity and narrowness of space make the mental distance only the more visible” (181). And simultaneously and ironically, “one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd” (181). For Simmel, although the urban space and its mechanisms seem to offer the possibility for pursuing individual freedom from the constraints imposed by the traditional tribal customs and cultural groups in the small town and country life, he also paradoxically refers to the fact that the gradual divisions of labor “demands from the individual an ever more one-sided accomplishment, and the greatest advance in a one-sided pursuit only too frequently means dearth to the personality of the individual” (184), and reduces the individual to “a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers” (184).

Following Simmel’s elaboration of the urban experiences of the metropolitans, the two founders of the Chicago School, Robert Park and Louis Wirth, further develop Simmel’s notion of urban individuality, but in a less dialectical manner than Simmel. Both of them harbor an ethnocentric, essentialized perspective of what it means to be urban modern from their own problematic and parochial observations of Chicago in the early twentieth century. For Park, being urban modern is to be “free from the sacred order of tribal custom” and “local and tribal cultures” (Robinson 22), and the new social relations therefore transform from “family and kinship networks” to the “relations of trade and work” (23). Jennifer Robinson in her book *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* notes that the problem of Park’s notions results from his essentialized, binary, and irreconcilable understanding of being urban modern in certain western cities and being folk/rural/traditional/ primitive in the past and elsewhere. He not only assumes an essential, dualistic view on both, but also exhibits a hierarchical evaluation of them by regarding the “inevitable” transformation from the latter to the former as a progressive, “modern” development (23-4).

Louis Wirth, on the other hand in his study of immigrant groups in Chicago, concludes that “the cultural practices of ‘folk’ traditions such as those brought to Chicago by East Europeans, Italians, Germans, or Negroes and Jews would not persist in this new environment” (26), and that a “ghetto, like other forms of traditional and communal life in the city” is “destined to disappear in the urban melting pot” (26). Wirth and Park’s ethnocentric stipulations, instead of observations, of urban experiences and cultures are

heavily influenced by their view of what is *modern*, which has been restricted to the ethnocentric privileging of certain Western metropolises and certain features within them. As Robinson points out, such understanding of (Western) modernity is actually problematic and parochial and fails to fully appreciate and acknowledge “the very promiscuity of Western modernity” (19) which is culturally indebted to the avowedly back-then pasts and over-there others. As Morrison’s portrayals in *Jazz* indicate, the experiences of migrant African Americans in the 1920s Harlem cannot wholly agree with the perspectives of what it means to be urban modern favored by the white, male urban theorists.<sup>5</sup> Morrison herself observes a dialectical negotiation between the development of individuality and the continuation of communal life in the 1920s Harlem City.

The narrator of *Jazz* tends to celebrate such metropolitan traits as anonymity, blasé, intellectuality and alienation in Harlem City. In a city crowded with black people, including “foreign-born blacks” (Kahn 251) from the Central and Southern Americas, Harlem “was soon overcrowded as the West Side had been, since few neighborhoods allowed black tenants and virtually all new migrants ended up in Harlem” (253). These migrants with multifarious backgrounds, therefore, are huddled together in an overcrowded area, where people are hardly able to know each other’s background and past. For example, the female protagonist Violet is amazed on being informed that her customers, the “Dumfrey women,” who look like “graceful, citified ladies,” have in fact migrated from Memphis (Morrison, *Jazz* 18). The tendency to maintain *anonymity* in the city is celebrated by the narrator: “I like the way the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it” (8). Even Joe, a salesman of Cleopatra beauty products acquainted with many blacks, assures his neighbor Malvonne that nobody will be disturbed or will discern anything, when he and “his respectable lady

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison, in “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction,” comments on the difference between white and black writers’ attitudes to American cities. Different from Simmel and his followers, she offers a *contradictory* observation of the relation between individuality and cities in her explication of certain mainstream white, male writers. Morrison considers that “the national literature of this country has always deplored the city” (36), because the white male writers perceive that the “mandates of individualism” are presumably curtailed by the cities (36). Defining the white male writer’s “anti-urbanism” as “anti-social” (36), Morrison further explains that unlike urban cities where “society as masses” (37) is coupled with highly developed urbanization (*blight*), industrialization (*automation*), and the philistinism of the capitalist class (*Babbitty*) (37), the village or country “does not intervene or require any limitations on personal freedom or the constant effort to avoid unmanageable minglings with the lower class” (38).

friend” secretly meet in her apartment after Malvonne goes to work on the night shift. The strategy for survival in the City advised by the narrator is to master this urban anonymity: “Mostly it’s making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do” (8). In order to survive in the City, one must not only make best use of *anonymity* to guarantee individual freedom to do whatever one wants, but also try to outwit others. The narrator, on the one hand, celebrates this unique form of urban freedom and anonymity: “Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do” (8-9), and on the other, gives advice on the tactics to ward off the ensuing hazards: “All you have to do is heed the design—the way it’s laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow” (9), in order to be “welcoming and defensive at the same time” (9) in the City, where “any blasé thing takes place” (7).

But how do these urban anonymity and alienation come into being in the early twentieth century? The migration of Violet and Joe to the City belongs to the Northern Migration of African Americans after the end of slavery:

The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the ’80s; the ’90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it. Like the others, they were country people, but how soon they forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn’t love it....There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves. (Morrison, *Jazz* 33)

They have already felt the sensation of love from/for the City when still on the train. The trembling of the train is regarded as a welcoming dance by Joe and Violet, who feel that “[t]hey weren’t even there yet and already the City was speaking to them,” and that it “danced with them, proving already how much it loved them” (Morrison, *Jazz* 32). Like “a million others” (32), they are thrilled by the expectation and prospect of realizing their American Dream, the economic empowerment and upward social mobility, in the urbanized and commercialized Harlem City away from the traumatized, impoverished South. Harlem, the Promised Land or cultural Mecca, seems to promise “[h]ere

comes the new....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" (7). The historical consciousness of Violet and Joe is a linear, progressive kind reminiscent of the temporality of (Western) modernity as understood and promoted by figures such as Park and Wirth, who only regard certain developments in certain urban spaces as the characteristics of being modern and urban, and it is "natural" or imperative that what they consider as the old, traditional and primitive should disappear in the urban milieu. However, what Violet and Joe hope to escape is that which ultimately haunts them in the end. They "forget" too soon "the specter they left behind," and "what they start to love is the way a person is in the City;" thereby "they forgot what loving other people was like" (33). In their eagerness or determination to circumvent the economic hardship and traumatic experiences of childhood in the South, Joe and Violet have migrated to the northern City, and in the process of pursuing individual independence and achievement in the white supremacist city, they gradually lose contact with the original, southern community, and do not get involved in the urban black communities either. Deborah Barnes points out that "cultural estrangement and loss too often accompany the African American's social, economic, and political 'progress'" (284), and they even "lose contact with or have been denied access to native, enculturating, and authenticating communities" (285). In order to flee from their own racial traumas and maternal losses, Joe and Violet simultaneously have forsaken their connections to the southern communities and cultures. During the twenty years after the migration, Joe seems not to make any contact with his best friend Victory, his surrogate father Hunter's Hunter, and his foster family; Violet, as the novel implies, also does not communicate with her other four siblings either.

The "specter" Violet has left behind, in her process of migrating to the northern City, has a lot to do with her traumatic experiences in the childhood. Violet's mother Rose Dear suffers immensely from her deprivation of household and property due to a paper her husband has signed (Morrison, *Jazz* 98). Andrea O'Reilly amplifies that Morrison regards "traditional conceptions of black motherhood" as "the ancient properties" of the black community ("(Mis)Conception" 126). Rose Dear is abandoned by her husband, who, as the narrator informs the reader, participates in activities of the "Readjuster Party" (Morrison, *Jazz* 100), "a party that favored nigger voting" (138). Her

husband's political involvement may partly contribute to the dispossession of their property and land and further lead to Rose Dear's ultimate suicide. Accordingly, Rose Dear does not become one of the black mothers "who are the cultural bearers, who define themselves in connection with African-American culture and history, and who serve as ambassadors for their people, bring the past to the present and keep African-American culture in the community of black people" (O'Reilly, "(Mis)Conception" 128).<sup>6</sup> Violet witnesses the predicament of Rose Dear, who fails to carry the heavy burden of a black mother in the racist South, and hence determines to "never never have children" because, in this way, "[w]hatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?" (Morrison, *Jazz* 102). Nonetheless, Violet's rejection of motherhood returns and haunts her, as she discovers that "a panting unmanageable craving" strikes her when she is forty years old (107-8). She imagines where her "last miscarried child would be now" (108), sleeps with "a doll in her arms" (129), is accused of trying to steal a baby (20), and even suspects that maybe Dorcas is "the daughter who fled her womb" (109) because "she wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too" (15) despite the fact that she is having an affair with Joe.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on African American women's duty to be a proper mother and cultural ancestor, at the first sight, seems to be another way of confining women to the role of mother and housewife in the so-called private sphere of the home. However, as Hortense Spillers points out in her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," during the time of slavery, black women were forced to have sex, and therefore children, with different men, including black and white, at the mercy of the will of the white male master. The identity of a child's father is often in doubt. As Spillers's article title indicates: a child can be certain of who his/her mother is, but not his/her father. In addition, black men usually could not play the social role, father, for their children, because they, unlike women, were more often re-sold as commodities between different masters. Consequently, black women as mothers had to take the sole responsibility for not only nurturing and caring for the children biologically and socially but also acquainting them with African-American culture, history, customs and mores. The vitality of and insistence on black motherhood, as often seen in Morrison's novels, hence have to be understood in the context of slavery, which resulted in the disintegration of the black family and the transformation of the functions and meanings of black fatherhood and motherhood.

<sup>7</sup> Near the end of the novel, Violet also finds out the impact of the stories of Golden Gray, the mulatto son of Miss Vera Louis, told by her grandmother True Belle, on her psychological development. The relationship between True Belle and Violet is very similar to that between Pauline and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Although unlike Pauline, who assimilates the white ideology and spectacle of female beauty and ideal white domesticity from her "education" in the films during her pregnancy in Lorrain, Ohio in the 1930s, True Belle pampers the beautiful mulatto Golden Gray just as Pauline's adoration of the white Fisher girl. The young Violet, though not receiving harsh treatment from her grandmother, likewise learns the self-denigration of her black self, as she later confesses to Felice, Dorcas' best friend, that "[m]y grandmother fed me stories about a little blond child. He was a boy, but I thought of him as a girl sometimes, as a brother, sometimes as a boyfriend. He lived inside my mind. Quite as a mole. But I didn't know it till I got here" (Morrison 208). Her grandmother apparently fails to play her role as the cultural ancestor for the girl Violet because True Belle becomes "merely a parent or an adult

Joe, on the other hand, also suffers from similar dispossession, displacement and loss of mother in his childhood in the South. Desperate to recuperate “what things felt like” (Morrison, *Jazz* 29) on his first arrival in Harlem and intolerant of Violet’s recent silence, he tries to “lighten [his] life a little with a good lady” (49), who will listen to “things he never told his wife” (36), and even “things [he] hadn’t told himself” (123). Before coming to the North, he has been deprived of his land by the white men (126), and Vienna, Virginia has been burnt to ground, with nine hundred Negroes forced to leave to somewhere or nowhere (173). But, the unspeakable thing unspoken in his life is mainly his search for his presumed mother Wild in the woods and fields in Vienna. He has always carried “the inside nothing” (37), the absence of mother and lack of mother love, until he chooses Dorcas to be his “nice female company” (49), who is the antidote both to his lack of mother love in his childhood and urban loneliness during his twenty-year sojourn.

Due to the racially-inflected trauma—the loss of mother and material deprivation— in the South, Violet and Joe have decided to migrate to the northern City, in order to leave these afflictive memories and experiences behind, and look for opportunities for social and economic upward mobility. Joe, in his first-person reminiscence, deplors that “[i]n 1925 we all had it made. Then Violet started sleeping with a doll in her arms. Too late. I understood in a way. In a way” (Morrison, *Jazz* 129). Violet and Joe have always strived to improve their social and economic conditions ever since they arrived in the City in 1906 on the thrilling Southern Sky train. Their pursuit of and success in attaining individual achievement and independence are indicated in their movement all the way from the more impoverished area such as “Little Africa” (127) to Lenox Avenue. Nonetheless, one of their problems is their alienation from the native communities in the South and their separation from the black community within the City. They tend to cultivate a more pecuniary relationship with their black neighbors and fellows than an emotional and cultural interdependence, as most blacks do in the City.

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and is thereby seen as a betrayer—one who has abandoned his traditional role of adviser with a strong connection to the past” (Morrison, “City Limits” 40). True Belle forfeits her importance as the black ancestor, and rather infuses whiteness as beauty into the mind of the very black young Violet. The devastating impact of Golden Gray affects not only her black self but the other aspects of her life. She chooses to be a hairdresser because of her memories of the stories of rinsing Golden Gray’s hair by True Belle (Morrison, *Jazz* 17); she wonders why Joe chooses Dorcas, but mistakenly concludes that maybe Joe is always looking for “[a] young me with high-yellowed skin instead of black” (97); she even suspects that maybe Joe is but “a substitute” for her “own golden boy” after all (97).

In other words, Joe and Violet as suppliers of commodities and services, like what Simmel observes, tend to maintain anonymity and alienation in their business interaction with others as customers through monetary exchange—money becomes the “common denominator of all values...irreparably hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability” (Robinson 178). They have been “free from the sacred order of tribal custom” and “local and tribal cultures” (22), and their new social relations with others transform from those found within the “family and kinship networks” to the “relations of trade and work” (23), as Robert Park observes in his urban studies. Furthermore, as Louis Wirth contends, Violet and Joe, like the immigrants in Chicago, cannot sustain their “traditional and communal life in the city” (26), which is “destined to disappear in the urban melting pot” (26). Violet works as an illegal hairdresser, and Joe mainly works as a Cleopatra salesman and claims that “I sell trust. I make things easy. That’s the best way. Never push...I’m there but only if you want me” (Morrison, *Jazz* 122). Although they succeed in attaining material improvement in 1925, Joe also seems to sense their increasing alienation from the black community in the City.

In addition to the detachment from the urban black communities, Joe is as well long separated from his old companions such as Victory and Hunter and the old Virginia wood life. Without the presence of the ancestors and the black community around him, he feels the loneliness of the City that is totally different from that experienced in the woods (Morrison, *Jazz* 129). He reflects that “I changed too often. Made myself new one time too many. You could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life” (129). Dubbing himself as “a new Negro all my life,” Joe transforms the notion of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance in his personal experiences. Donald Gibson offers a detailed interpretation of the concept of “the New Negro” during 1920s Harlem:

The “New Negro” is a special, elite group, more likely to be found at Carl Van Vechten’s place than at a rent party. The ‘New Negroes’ came to Harlem for quite different reasons than did most migrants; they came not for jobs but to participate in a burgeoning, stimulating literary, artistic, and intellectual climate not to be found anywhere else in the world. None of them was forced to the city by relentless economic necessity....These people had to have had leisure to learn to appreciate fine art,

and skills highly enough developed to produce art. They were almost all from middle-class or middle-class oriented families. (45)

The New Negro with a capital “New” is not the ordinary black migrant from the South in pursuit of economic and social upward mobility and success; rather it designates a small group of black artists and intellectuals of better class positions and economic resources. They are not likely to appear in the rent parties held by poor black migrants, except for a very few litterateurs, such as Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman (Gibson 44); instead, they oftentimes participate in the parties supported by wealthy, usually white, patrons. Therefore, Joe’s new Negro with a lowercase “new” suggests a different kind of migrant blacks from the South. The *new* Negro of the City is contrasted to the old Negro back home in the South. The new Negro tries to love the City and forget their traumatic past, that is, their identity as the old Negro. They believe that they can find “their stronger, riskier selves” (Morrison, *Jazz* 33), and “feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were” (35). However, in order to escape the racial deprivation and violence in the South, they simultaneously and ineluctably alienate themselves from their cultural heritages and original communities.

Although Joe and Violet “had it made” (Morrison, *Jazz* 129) in their pursuit of economic and material improvement, their relationships with other fellow blacks are mediated more by money, and they tend to regard things and people from the point of view of their monetary quantity rather than individual qualities. Violet develops the “blasé attitude” (Simmel 178) to other people, as her symptoms of “private cracks” (Morrison, *Jazz* 22) and “public craziness” (22) testify. Nevertheless, they both grow lonely and lost in their city life in their achievement of individual independence and freedom. Violet starts to desire to have her own children, discovering that “a panting unmanageable craving” strikes her, when she is forty years old (107-8). Joe also seeks company with Dorcas to alleviate his feeling of loneliness in the City totally different from that which he has experienced in the woods of the South (129). Moreover, the narrator recalls that “[s]omebody called Dorcas with hooves tracing her cheekbones and who knew better than people his (Joe’s) own age what that inside nothing was like. And who filled it for him, just as he filled it for her, because she had it too” (38). Dorcas’ parents were killed during the riot of East St. Louis in 1917. Although the reasons for the

disappearance of Joe's parents are unclear, it can be surmised that his parents may have suffered racial terror and persecution similar to that experienced by Dorcas' or Violet's parents.

After their twenty-year sojourn in Harlem, Violet and Joe's traumatic memories and experiences of childhood are not really confronted and resolved by them in their busy City life; on the contrary, as the novel reveals, combined with the unique urban loneliness, their childhood traumas are aggravated to such an extent that Violet is immersed in her own silent meditation on motherhood, and that Joe finally confuses Dorcas with his mother and later kills her. O'Reilly, in "In Search of My Mother's Garden, I Found My Own," explicates that "[w]hen he loses his mother this second time, Joe the man relieves the pain and loss he denied and repressed as a boy. Only when Joe truly acknowledges and feels the emotional wounds of his motherlessness is healing made possible" (376). Joe and Violet's healing processes, as the novel further unravels, begins from their gradual association with other people in the black community in the City, especially with Dorcas' aunt Alice Manfred and Dorcas' friend Felice.

### **A Dialectical Negotiation between Individuality and Community in Harlem in the 1920s**

Jennifer Robinson, in *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (2006), first criticizes the perennial, inherent assumptions of contemporary theories of urban studies, especially the Chicago School led by Robert Park and Louis Wirth, in their study of and theorization on Western cities. Robinson characterizes their approach as a *colonial* one because such urban studies always categorize cities in a *binary, hierarchical relationship* by taking the "primary inspiration from cities in the West and...privileg[ing] certain experiences of these places" (1). This kind of assumption can be characterized as epistemological colonization, as the non-Western cities are deemed inferior to the Western ones by taking for granted that the latter are the source and origin of what it means to be modern. It tends to assume the unequal dualism between the West and non-West, modern and non-modern, progressive and traditional/primitive, urban and rural, authentic and imitative, innovative and derivative, individualist and communal, and other dichotomous associations. Recognizing the ethnocentrism of contemporary urban studies, Robinson criticizes the Western assumptions of modernity

inherent in the conception of urban modernity as “the West’s self-characterization of itself in opposition to ‘others’ and ‘elsewheres’ that are imagined to be not modern, an opposition that was strongly reinforced through the mundane practices of colonisation” (4). Western modernity, rooted in the Enlightenment project of modernity, supposes a linear, rational, and progressive historicism, which not only denigrates the developments of the others in other places and times but also renounces its own past and tradition as pre-modern or non-modern (13). However, as Robinson points out, there never exists any pure, authentic western modernity but a “promiscuity of Western modernity” which “proposes a different, cosmopolitan cartography of modernity, one in which origins are dispersed, outcomes differentiated and multiple and the spatial logics those of circulation and interaction” (19). Consequently, in the process of considering western modernity, one cannot simply demarcate it from “both the past and other, supposedly backward societies” (20), and consider that it only derives from certain developments in certain Western cities. On the other hand, Robinson also feels dissatisfied with “alternative modernities” (7) developed by Dilip Gaonkar and other post-colonial scholars because, in such theorization, “the concept of modernity itself has not been fundamentally dislodged from its Western origins, nor even truly proliferated or pluralised in the same way as the experience of modernity clearly has” (17). For Robinson, it is still problematic to always refer to modernity as being equivalent to the West because the modernities of elsewheres do not rivet solely on western sources. Therefore, she concludes that the “concepts and experiences of modernity around the world remain diverse, contested, contradictory and shaped by durable cultural practices, regional and local dynamics as much as by Western, colonial or global processes” (18-9). Her “ordinary-city” approach thus seeks to destabilize the hierarchical evaluations between the cities and their urban developments inherent in the discourses of certain white, middle-class, male theorists. Despite their insightful observations of and elaborations on certain urban experiences in certain Western cities, these theorists still ineluctably privilege certain particular developments and experiences as the very testimony of being urban modern, ignoring the possibility and existence of other particular social phenomena in different urban milieu.

After commenting on the limited understandings of western modernity and alternative modernities, Robinson proposes a different approach to

modernity, especially urban modernity, by calling upon the vision of Walter Benjamin as part of her intellectual sources. Robinson draws inspiration from Benjamin's writings, and concentrates on his broader framework of a philosophy of history which "refuses a theory of progress" (28), and embraces "a dialectical imagination" which "insists on the co-presence and mutual interdependence of concepts of modernity and tradition" (28). The purpose and task of Benjamin in his intellectual career, especially in *The Arcades Project*, is to criticize the economic and cultural conditions of capitalist (urban) society, and to endeavor to offer alternatives to the contemporary culture and city life by drawing inspirations from the so-called traditional, archaic cultural residuals and elements lurking behind avowedly modern inventions. Unsatisfied with "the exploitative and class-divided capitalist urban society" (32), with the phenomena of "commodity fetishism and capitalist forms of urban development" (29), and desiring to transform what he observes, Benjamin resorts to the primitive/folk/traditional/rural elements within the city, and develops a "dialectic imagination" (28), as he recognizes and emphasizes "a constellation of present and past, with the traditional imbricated in cultures of the avowedly modern" in the city (28). He considers the "interplay between modern innovations and traditions to be dynamic and potentially transformative" (28). As Robinson observes, Benjamin sees "not just the backward or irrelevant left-behind elements of social life, but the possibility for a transformative politics" (29).<sup>8</sup> A dialectical thinking between the so-called modern and traditional should be possible if the understanding of modernity is dislodged from certain urban characteristics and social phenomena in certain Western cities, and the other local, indigenous attributes and developments are taken into proper consideration as also part of the modern.

The urban experiences and phenomena of migrant African-Americans in Harlem of the 1920s exhibit "a constellation of present and past, with the

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin's stays in Naples and Moscow reveal to him "the porosity of city life and the interpenetration of different elements of the city" (Robinson 32), and contribute to his incomplete project on the Parisian Arcades, the outmoded urban spaces in early-twentieth-century Paris. Instead of considering Moscow and Naples within the restricted notion of the modern, Benjamin observes the dialectical materialism between the present and past, the modern and traditional, the public and private, the urban and rural, and the self and other. However, as Robinson reminds us, Benjamin still falls short of considering the colonial influences on these European cities, and hence "the coexistence in the city of 'modernity' and its others—colonised, distant, traditional—even if for Benjamin this remains a buried truth" (35).

traditional imbricated in cultures of the avowedly modern” in the city (Robinson 28). The formation of *individuality* is regarded as the attribute of the modern in the urban milieu, while the cohesion of *communal* life is depreciated as the indication of the “not-modern” tradition by the aforementioned white, male theorists. By contrast, Morrison observes a *dialectical* urban development in Harlem of the 1920s, and delineates the specific ways in which a racial minority struggles and lives in a white supremacist city and country. The communal support and relationship do not vanish, as the blacks have migrated from the rural, agricultural South to the urban, industrialized North; quite the contrary, the imaginary and practice of communal life beyond one’s family are *ipso facto* reinforced, and transformed into diverse forms of community with multifarious purposes and styles. Nonetheless, it does not mean that the possibility of the emergence of individuality is suppressed or discouraged in the urban black community. African Americans play a crucial role in contributing to the operation of money economy in the capitalist City, though often in a more exploitative status,<sup>9</sup> and, as Simmel contends, also develop a pecuniary, alienated and anonymous relationship with people in certain circumstances, since during most of the time in their daily urban life, the relationships between people are mediated by money exchange and circulation.

Morrison, in “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction” remarks that unlike those between white,

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<sup>9</sup> In the random elaborations of the attributes of the City, the narrator indicates the better social conditions available to African Americans; for instance, a colored clerk is hired by A&P (Morrison, *Jazz* 7), and Harlem Hospital has not only colored nurses but also a Negro surgeon (7-8). In addition, Harlem during the 1920s is “the good times” full of “the easy money” (9). Nevertheless, such “good times” and their “easy money” are foreshadowed in the novel by the riot of East St. Louis, which is alleged to be caused by either the black “disgruntled veterans,” who are unsatisfied with the continuation of white violence and racism after their participation in the War in the American army (Morrison, *Jazz* 57), or the fact that “the wave of southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live” terrifies the white people (57). In addition, the easy money referred in passing is actually the money owned and circulated by the white people. The circulation of the white money can be seen in the investment on and patronage of the black writers and artists by the white publishing world, owing to “the white world’s budding interest in heterogeneity and its insensitive curiosity” (Kahn 260). Kahn here implicitly indicates the negative implication of the seemingly visible presence and audible enunciation of black arts in the Harlem Renaissance, suggesting that black artists’ voices risk becoming novel commodities consumed by the white consumers only, and their works do not contribute to the improvement of the social status of African Americans (258-60). On the other hand, Harlem also became the site of night entertainments due to its popular night clubs or cabarets, in most of which “[h]igh-yaller chorus girls entertained white audiences in clubs where blacks were not admitted” (Kahn 259); for example, “[t]he famed Cotton Club created jobs for scores of musicians, dancers, singers, waiters—blacks could do everything except watch” (259).

male writers, the relationships between black writers and cities are more ambiguous and unpredictable because “[b]lack people are generally viewed as patients, victims, wards, and pathologies in urban setting, not as participants. And they could not share what even the poorest white factory worker or white welfare recipient could feel: that in some way the city belonged to him” (37). Instead of “the mandates of individualism” (36) proposed by white writers as the criterion for their appraisal of city and country, it is “the village within the [city]: the neighborhoods and the population of those neighborhoods” (37) that is foregrounded by the black writers. As a racial minority existing in a racist society, the black writers and people not only put emphasis on “community values” or “village values” (38) but also the presence of ancestors, who should be “advising, benevolent, protective, wise” (39), have “a strong connection to the past” (40), and “value racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfillment” (43). The ancestor here does not only refer to the specific progenitors in the black family or community, such as biological mothers, but also the black history, cultural practices and local traditions developed in the rural South from the time of slavery, which are closely associated with the ancestral figures.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the white, male urban theorists, who regard the city as belonging to them, Morrison, as a artist of and for her black minority, depicts and explores the tension and dynamic between the pursuit of individuality mostly through economic means and the maintenance of the avowedly traditional, rural community and sociability still practiced in Harlem City. One of the typical characteristics of Morrison’s novels is the representation of the

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<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on and existence of the community values and the ancestral figures do not necessarily imply that Morrison and African Americans advocate a bounded community of exclusion and opposition, in order to hinder the encroachment of the white people into various aspects of social life. The imaginary and practice of community can be reactionary, conservative, oppressive and secluded. The aim is to forge a tenacious sense of internal cohesion through rigorous external differentiation. However, the community can also be the site of empowerment and solidarity for the politically and economically marginalized and excluded. Therefore, whether a community is reactionary or progressive for its members or outsiders must be considered from a more nuanced historical and geographical context. As a minority in the white-dominant urban space and society, the black migrants in Harlem develop various forms of community. Though not without parochial confinements, the communities portrayed in *Jazz* are generally empowering for their members economically, socially and culturally, if not politically. The insistence on the ancestral figures like mothers also does not indicate Morrison’s uncritical nostalgia for the authentic and autochthonic Afro-American cultures. But Morrison also does not side with the view that in order to survive, the minority has to adopt entirely the hegemonic ideologies and lifestyles. Morrison is more concerned with the on-going, complex negotiations between cultures and traditions, without relinquishing the native cultures or simply preserving them through superficial commodification and de-contextualized exhibition.

struggle between the black community and the individual black protagonists. In *Jazz* the narrator seems to represent not only the voice of the black City but also that of the black community, commenting, gossiping, and even predicting the deficiencies and aberrations of Violet and Joe Trace. The village or community values depicted by Morrison are implicitly indicated in the descriptions of the City, a self-sufficient Harlem, especially on Lenox Avenue, where Violet and Joe are inhabitants:

[E]verything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable. (Morrison, *Jazz* 10)<sup>11</sup>

The City portrayed by the narrator does look like a Southern village within the big City, where “[u]p in those big five-story apartment buildings and the narrow wooden houses in between, people knock on each other’s doors to see if anything is needed or can be had” or to find out “[w]hose husband is getting ready to go see if he can find a shop open” in the snowbound City (10). The concise description here connotes the intimate interdependence between the black migrants in the City, instead of the alienated and anonymous relationship between the metropolitans, separated from their cultural or native communities. In addition, many organizations or societies are established, including the religious institutions and political unions such as the “Salem Women’s Club” (4), the “Civic Daughters,” and the “National Negro Business League” (69). When the aunt of Dorcas, Alice, mediates on those who are “the unarmed women” (78) but unlike her vulnerable niece Dorcas, she thinks of

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<sup>11</sup> The racist inequality is implied by the absence of a high school education for blacks during that time, and the young female character Dorcas has to go to other districts for education (6). The continued low levels of literacy suggests that Harlem life is not as good as usually presumed. A prosperous area without a bank also hints that the money invested is largely from white people, and that the ownership of most of the City is not held in the hands of black people, who are instead forced to pay higher rents for impoverished living conditions and who, as Morrison points out, are not regarded as the owners of or even participants in the City.

the unarmed women who “swell their little unarmed strength into the reckoning one of leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods designed to hold or withhold, move or stay put, make a way, solicit, comfort and ease” (78).

Moreover, the parties referred to are not only the parties thrown by the white literary patrons or the more commercial night clubs but also the “rent parties” (Morrison, *Jazz* 28) among the black immigrants, who are forced to pay exorbitant house rents. Donald B. Gibson informs us that “Langston Hughes celebrates the rent party in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, telling us that when he was in Harlem (during the twenties) he went to a rent party almost every Saturday night. He says that they were not always occasioned by the need to pay the rent but were sometimes held for fun” (43), for “blacks had been edged out of their own clubs and that rent parties were the place where blacks could feel at home” (Kahn 260). Similar to “the juke joints” (Morrison, *Jazz* 10), originally the southern country clubs for the black sharecroppers or workers to assemble to dance, sing, drink and gamble, the rent parties in the Harlem City continue to function as a peculiar social institution not only for fun but also for the mutual empowerment between the blacks, who help each other to pay exorbitant rents, or introduce boarders to each other. Gibson further remarks the significance of such practice among the Harlem blacks:

“Fun,” in the environment of Harlem in the 1920s, meant feeling support from and relatedness to other people; feeling that one belongs somewhere in the family, somewhere in the village, somewhere in the city, somewhere in the world....Rent parties meant literally the introduction of “strangers” into one’s home—into one’s “small” apartment (since rent parties were usually held in apartments) and into the intimacy of small spaces. Rent parties had the effect of reducing the size of the largest city in the country...The rent party was a summoning up of the past; a re-enactment and conflation with urban life of the black village experience in the American South and Africa. (43-4)

The rent party therefore embodies the typical village value within the big City for the black immigrants in Harlem during the 1920s. Morrison, in “City Limits, Village Values,” observes that “Harlem, the closest thing in American

life as well as literature to a Black city, and a mecca for generations of Blacks, held this village quality for Black people—although on a grand scale and necessarily parochial” (38). Morrison like Gibson elaborates the peculiar cultural characteristics of Harlem, and her portrayal challenges the assumptions of what it means to be urban modern in the early twentieth century as proposed by the Chicago School, whose proponents certainly consider such village quality of immigrant African Americans as the very evidence of their being non-modern or pre-modern. But the representations of the experiences of migrant African-Americans by both Morrison and Gibson connote the dialectical negotiations between the so-called urban individuality and rural communal value in the Harlem City of the 1920s.

Although the village within the city contributes to the everyday life of the blacks in Harlem, it also ineluctably forms a parochial group which, much like the small village or country expounded by Simmel, regulates and supervises the relationships between people and the deportment of each member. The black Harlem in the 1920s therefore possesses the metropolitan characteristics explored by Simmel, Park and Wirth, but also the communal qualities and associations depicted by Morrison and Gibson. Its ambivalence and contradictions are grasped by the *Jazz* narrator, who later reflects that “[t]hat’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; that you can jump into thicket because you feel like it” (Morrison 120). Morrison therefore draws upon a dialectical imagination in her revisionist writing on 1920s Harlem, noticing the “co-presence and mutual interdependence of concepts of modernity and tradition” (Robinson 28); that is, individuality and community, and thus presents a complex and contested urbanism.

Nonetheless, the experiences of Joe and Violet initially seem in contrast to the black urban life depicted by the narrator. They, as mentioned before, maintain a pecuniary relationship with other people, and have grown detached from both their indigenous community back home in the South and the black communities in the City. They suffer the unique urban loneliness, which is observed and amplified by Simmel, and are further afflicted by the past traumas in childhood, especially the maternal loss, but resort to different strategies to confront their own problems. Joe, after his twenty-year struggles in the City, is finally close to the dream of upward mobility and individual autonomy. Working in a hotel and as a salesman of Cleopatra beauty products

within the black community, he is generally perceived as “[a] nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man” (Morrison, *Jazz* 73). Although he considers that Violet and he both “have it made” (129) in 1925, he also senses something has already gone awry in their life in the City. Joe is more aware than Violet of his maternal loss and the cost of his years-long estrangement from the black communities during the years in the City. His personal memories of the past and the consciousness of a historical connection to the South have become tenuous:

For when Joe tries to remember the way it was when he and Violet were young, when they got married, decided to leave Vesper County and move up North to the City almost nothing comes to mind. He recalls dates, of course, events, purchases, activity, even scenes. But he has a tough time trying to catch what it felt like. (Morrison, *Jazz* 29)

In order to psychologically work over his maternal loss and urban loneliness, he develops an affair with Dorcas, who also suffers from bereavement on the death of her own parents. Joe not only feels mutual sympathy with Dorcas, but also eventually projects his own grievance of not being able to track down his mother on to Dorcas, who like his mother eschews his effort to achieve physical and emotional unity. Accordingly, Dorcas as well as Violet are Joe’s substitutes for his lost mother, with whom he instinctively desires to rejoin, though he never has had any genuine contact with his alleged mother Wild after he was born. At the same time, his trysts with Dorcas can also be looked upon as an effort on his part to forge a more affectionate relationship with the people around him in the City. Nevertheless, owing to the intricacy of his attitudes to Dorcas and the extramarital nature of their relationship, he does not further cultivate cordial relationships with other fellow blacks, not even with his friends Gistan and Stuck in the City (Morrison, *Jazz* 123). In other words, Joe’s attempt to build a different relationship with people, other than a superficial, monetary one, does not proceed to foster a communal relationship with other metropolitan blacks; quite the contrary, the possibility of cultivating a communal relation in the City becomes tenuous, after he kills Dorcas at a public party.

Although Joe is more perceptive of his own problems of the past and the present, he is still bogged down in them, after his earlier endeavors to free

himself. On the other hand, though much slower than Joe to recognize the sources of her own psychological problems, and while not taking any efficacious measure to tackle them, Violet is the one that actually seeks communal support and empowerment through her sisterhood, or maternal relation, with Dorcas' aunt Alice Manfred after Dorcas is murdered by Joe. In her contemplations of the reasons for the betrayal by Joe and the seduction of Dorcas, Violet actually figures out nothing, but instead, finds out the causes for her long-standing psychological disorder and depression in the company of Alice Manfred, who functions more like her mother/ancestor. Alice, instead of trying to figure out the relationship between Joe and Dorcas, instructs Violet that “[y]ou got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it” (Morrison, *Jazz* 112). Violet then perceives that they “had become so easy with each other talk wasn’t necessary,” and observes to Alice that “[y]ou iron like my grandmother” (112). Violet, in the end, through the accidental company of a “benevolent, instructive, and protective” ancestor-like figure, who “provide[s] a certain kind of wisdom” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 343), which helps her to discover and understand the reasons for her mental anguish and symptoms, recuperates her memories of her mother Rose Dear and her grandmother True Belle in the racist South under the Jim Crow Laws.

Violet also attributes her forgetfulness of her childhood to her twenty-year sojourn in the City. She once tells Alice that “[e]verybody I grew up with is down home” (Morrison, *Jazz* 111), and near the end of the novel in the company of Felice, she laments that “I messed up my own life....Before I came North I made sense and so did the world. We didn’t have nothing but we didn’t miss it” (207). Violet, in her association with the ancestor or mother-like figure Alice as well as later Dorcas’ friend Felice, not only gradually re-members “That Violet” back in Virginia, but also recognizes the hidden and suppressed black “Me” that has long been neglected in her busy and struggling Harlem City life. Near the denouement of the novel, although Violet and Joe have not yet participated in the black gatherings, or gotten involved with black urban communities of any kind, the association between Felice, Violet and Joe seems still to promise the reconciliation of Violet and Joe with their traumatic past and the possibility of transforming their home from the seemingly private, secluded sphere to the locus of communal love and mutual interdependence with other blacks in Harlem, as the piano sounds from elsewhere gently breeze and penetrate through their once dismal

apartment.

However, it is noteworthy that Morrison does not encourage self-indulgent nostalgia for the lost personal or racial past and history; nor is she likely to promote a secluded and exclusive black community away from the white people. She pays great attention to the historical and cultural predicaments of being a racial minority in the white supremacist society, uncovering the development of communal affiliation within the urban milieu which may empower an individual migrant black both emotionally and economically. Her dialectical portrayals of the urban experiences of the ordinary blacks of Harlem in the 1920s stems from her own familiarity with the unspoken and unspeakable life stories submerged within the grand history of the Harlem Renaissance. Violet and Joe develop their peculiar urban individuality with its elements of anonymity, alienation and blasé attitude in their everyday interactions with other people, which are mostly mediated through monetary dealings. However, they also gradually suffer the distinctive urban loneliness, which is exacerbated by their traumatic maternal loss. At the same time, they also grow detached from the black communities both in the South and the City. But, as the novel discloses, they eventually not only recognize and confront the sources of their psychological problems, but are also consoled by building affectionate relationships with Alice and Felice, which may promise the possibility of further communal association with other migrant African-Americans in diverse black communities in the City.

## Conclusion

Morrison, in her article “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” expresses her notion of an ideal artist, who “could be genuinely representative of the tribe and *in it*...an artist [who] ha[s] a tribal or racial sensibility and individual expression of it” (339). Morrison’s peculiar notion of individuality is not the familiar one of Western white culture, which seeks the attainment of individual freedom and further individual incomparability in a given society or community. To be an artist or writer of a minority in a racist society, for Morrison, is not to be a singular voice that exists above or beyond the community, but to be someone who explores distinctive ways and strategies to express the unique, excruciating experiences and histories of the suppressed community. In *Jazz* Morrison re-investigates the renowned history of the Harlem Renaissance from the perspectives of the individual histories of

commonplace black immigrants. However, their stories are not their own individualist stories but the ignored and forgotten versions or dimensions of that much celebrated phase of black history. Morrison, as a writer for and of African Americans, re-members the inconspicuous lives of the immigrant metropolitans of Harlem, and ultimately constructs a black urban modernity of Harlem, which shares some salient features of the white, male, middle-class experiences and accounts of urban modernity, but also differs partially from the latter too. Just like the autobiographic slave narratives of her literary predecessors, Morrison attempts to write her own revisionist history, a “singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race” (Morrison, “Site of Memory” 104-5).

Re-writing the Harlem of the 1920s, Morrison dislocates the understandings and concepts of urban modernity from certain western ethnocentric assumptions, exploring the interplay between individuality and the communal practices and values in the City. In addition to the urban attributes and phenomena remarked by the narrator, the experiences of Violet and Joe, in their struggles to deal with the maternal loss of the past and the urban loneliness of the present, unravels a dialectical re-negotiation between the formation of individuality and the attachment to communities. Indeed, Morrison’s revisionist historiography or “literary archaeology” seeks to re-address the dialectical relations between the so-called past and present traditional and modern, individual and communal, urban and rural, and other seemingly contradictory dualisms, excavating the complex dynamics of the negotiation between cultures and traditions in the Harlem City of the 1920s.

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