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Place Where Voices Resound: Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Shoko OKI

In an interview with Robert Steptó, Toni Morrison talks about her sense of place as follows: "I felt a very strong sense of place, not in terms of the country or the state, but in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town [. . .]" (10). In her novels, Morrison has consistently described black communities in various times since her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which is set in the Morrison's hometown. Set in "the City" which seems to be Harlem in 1926, *Jazz* (1992) shows the development of the theme of creating the place marked by a critical historical event, the African-American Great Migration. It is the movement of African-Americans from the rural South to the industrialized North to run away from the intensified racism and to attain economic freedom. Especially Harlem, where the population of African-Americans expanded rapidly from 1910 to 1930, was believed to be a promised land for them. Then *Jazz* represents the main characters' internal changes along with the experience of migration and their lives in the City they finally reached.

For example, Joe Trace's life is a series of moving from one place to another: he is born an orphan in the South, and burnt out of his hometown, runs "from one part of the country to another—or nowhere" (126), and despite his attempt to buy a piece of land, is evicted from there with the false paper, and on the train bound for the North, has to move "five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law" (127). Joe, who had no place to claim to and had to move incessantly, settles down in the City at last with his wife Violet. After over twenty years of city life, however, Joe becomes a wanderer again when he shoots and loses his young lover Dorcas who reminds him of his lost mother. When he repeats the search for his mother by tracking Dorcas who abandoned him, his past, which he thought he buried in the South, recurs and the City is transformed by his traumatic memory. Meanwhile Violet also

suffers the memory of her dead mother which is materialized in the form of cracks in the street of the City. In this way, the characters' feelings and memory are projected onto the place.

Another part of the historical background of *Jazz* is the Harlem Renaissance, an African-American artistic movement in the 1920s. Morrison describes the City where jazz and blues resound to create the place "in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town." As Eusebio L. Rodrigues points out, various techniques of narrating in *Jazz*, "[t]he harsh blare of the consonants, the staccato generated by the commas [...], the deliberate use of alliteration and of words repeated to speed tempo—all come together to recreate the impact of jazz" (247), and "Morrison used many strategies to make the visual, as opposed to the audible, text resound" (249). In fact, Morrison uses such artful narrative style which is reminiscent of the style of jazz music. Furthermore, against a backdrop of the eruptive self-expression of African-Americans in the Harlem Renaissance era, the audibility and orality in *Jazz* has become the medium of healing the characters' psychic wound which is represented as their loss of sense of place. In this paper, I argue how Morrison describes the process in which the characters transform their traumatic place, where they are forced to be silent, into a space for narrating, and that is, I think, the way she bears witness to the specific era.

1. Private Cracks and 'Mama'

At the beginning of the novel, we see Violet's madness, in the way she attempts to steal a baby in the street unconsciously:

Joe never learned of Violet's public crazinesses. [...] Her private cracks, however, were known to him. I [the narrator] call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. [...] Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street. (22-23)

Violet's "private cracks" represent her solitude and emptiness from the city life in which Joe is her only relative, and her fractured psyche derives from her

traumatic place, a well where her mother, Rose Dear, killed herself: "Violet never forgot Rose Dear or the place she had thrown herself into—a place so narrow, so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her stretched in a wooden box" (100-01). Left behind by her husband with her five children, Rose Dear had her house seized and was turned out of a chair to which she clung till the last (98). Her figure in the narrow hole, where she arrived ultimately, shows her predicament vividly.

As an abandoned child, Violet decides never to have children of her own. When she was forty, however, "[s]he began to imagine how old that last miscarried child would be now" and "mother-hunger [had] hit her like a hammer" (108). Violet's loss of her mother causes her another loss of her child, and turns her womb into "so violent a home" for her baby "[w]ashed away on a tide of soap, salt and castor oil" (109). The problem of the mother-child relationship appears in Morrison's novels repeatedly. For example, there is contradictory motherhood, at once loving and threatening for the child. Eva in *Sula* (1973) typically exemplifies it, and so does Sethe in *Beloved* (1987), whose love is "too thick" (*Beloved* 166) and fatal to the child. In *Jazz*, the absence of the mother and its influence over the child is focused on.

Like Violet, Joe suffers from the memory concerning his mother, Wild, who, shortly after bearing Joe, disappeared along with Golden Gray, a mulatto orphan. Andrea O'Reilly, who argues that *Jazz* is "a story about the wounding and healing of unmothered children" (368), regards Wild's burrow in the woods as "a pre-Oedipal maternal space", a womb: "Joe goes into the maternal space of 'Wild's chamber of gold' (221) so that he may be returned to the place of his beginnings. Joe longs to discover where he came from so that he may, at last, know who he is" (374). Certainly, there seems to be a positive image of motherhood with a peaceful and tolerant mood in the cave as follows:

Then he [Joe] saw the crevice. He went into it on his behind until a floor stopped his slide. It was like falling into the sun. Noon light followed him like lava into a stone room where somebody cooked in oil. [...] He felt peace at the beginning, and a kind of watchfulness, as though something waited. A before-supper feeling when someone waits to eat. Although it was a private place, with an opening closed to the

public, once inside you could do what you pleased: disrupt things, rummage, touch and move. Change it all to a way it was never meant to be. (183-84)

A cooking smell and warm sunlight gives Wild's cave a feeling of home, and which is unexpected because Wild has been regarded as "a simple-minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanest sow managed: nurse what she birthed" (179). However, "a private place, with an opening closed to the public," self-contained place, indicates Wild's disconnection from the outer world including Joe, which is epitomized by Wild's silence. Joe pleads with unseen Wild for a sign which acknowledges him as her son in vain as follows: "You my mother?" Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing" (178).

Furthermore the following passage suggests that this domestic place, without his mother, means nothing to Joe:

He [Joe] had seen what there was. A green dress. A rocking chair without an arm. A circle of stones for cooking. Jars, baskets, pots; a doll, a spindle, earrings, a photograph, a stack of sticks, a set of silver brushes and silver cigar case. Also. Also, a pair of man's trousers with buttons of bone. Carefully folded, a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy—except at the seams. There, both thread and fabric were a fresh and sunny yellow.

But where is *she*? (184)

The list of commodities including Golden Gray's belongings emphasizes the absence of Wild all the more. Thus the place Joe seeks for is only a vacant hole like Rose Dear's. And the location of the cave warns Joe of danger in approaching this hole; "the ground was as porous as a sieve. A step could swallow your foot or your whole self" (182). Then "inside nothing he [Joe] traveled with from then on" (37) suggests that he has internalized "the hole" within his psyche.

Falling over "private cracks", Violet suffers a kind of schizophrenic symptom, "an independent hand" and "a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own", which suggest that she no longer holds her split self together, and then she comes to be "still as well as silent" (23). Moreover, when Violet lies on

her side in the street or visits Dorcas's aunt Alice Manfred and says, "Oh, right now I just want to sit down on your chair" (80), "Let me rest here a minute. I can't find a place where I can just sit down" (81), she loses a sense of place and is on the brink of Rose Dear's dark hole. While Violet wanders about the street, Alice confines herself in her apartment and closes the windows so that jazz music in the street cannot steal in because she is frightened of the outer world, namely, East St. Louis, Illinois where her sister and brother-in-law were killed in the race riots and Dorcas was orphaned, Springfield, Massachusetts where she was abandoned by her husband and lost him for good because of his death, and now the City where her niece was killed by Joe. Alice and Violet are very different from each other, but they together acquire the ability to negotiate their traumatic place through doing, in Morrison's words, "intimate things 'in place'".

In Alice's room, we see Violet's fractured self mended when Alice sews up Violet's split and frayed clothes. Morrison continues the conversation with Stepto which I cited at the beginning of this paper as follows:

I think some of it [a sense of place] is just a woman's strong sense of being in a room, a place, or in a house. Sometimes my relationship to things in a house would be a little different from, say my brother's or my father's or my sons'. I clean them and I move them and I do very intimate things "in place": I am sort of rooted in it, so that writing about being in a room looking out, or being in a world looking out, or living in a small definite place, is probably very common among most woman [sic] anyway. (10-11)

When Alice, ironing her clothes, refers to the saying that the devil makes work for idle hands in the conversation with Violet (112), she understands the helpfulness of doing the housework to deal with her recurrent traumatic memory like other women; "They fill their mind and hands with soap and repair and dicey confrontations because what is waiting for them, in a suddenly idle moment, is the seep of rage. Molten. Thick and slow-moving [...]. Or else, [...] slips a sorrow they don't know where from" (16). At the same time, the housework is utilized to strengthen a sense of place peculiar to women and reroot them in place. Interestingly, Wild's ability at housekeeping, especially

her skill in sewing which is indicated by the "fresh and sunny yellow" seams of Golden Gray's shirt (184) incorporates her into the solidarity of those women. In the cozy womb-like cave, Wild also needs to mend her self, or maybe Golden Gray's self, for, when they encounter, Golden Gray, who vacillates between being white or black, senses that "an exposed woman [Wild] will explode in his arms, or worse, that he will, in hers" (152). Thus Wild's cave is the place not for nurturing her son, Joe, but for mothering herself at least. And here, we see Joe's loss of his mother which parallels Violet's.

Though the details of the relationship between Wild and Golden Gray and what had become of them since then are not told, the reciprocal relationship between Violet and Alice is obvious; while Violet is mended mentally by Alice, Alice feels that "[w]hen Violet came to visit (and Alice never knew when that might be) something opened up" (83) and she later returns to Springfield where her husband's remains were left. Violet and Alice's candid conversation about "what loss is" (87) often is at a standstill, as follows:

"You don't know either, do you?" [Violet]

"I know enough to know how to behave." [Alice]

"Is that it? Is that all it is?"

"Is that all what it is?"

"Oh shoot! Where the grown people? Is it us?"

"Oh, Mama." Alice Manfred blurted it out and then covered her mouth. Violet had the same thought: Mama. Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn't do it no more? The place of shade without trees where you know you are not and never again will be loved by anybody who can choose to do it? Where everything is over but the talking? (110)

Their frank conversation reminds Violet and Alice of "Mama", that is, motherhood which is supposed to offer a child space for protection and freedom. Even though they don't reach an agreement, it is necessary and significant for the two of them to talk and remember their loss in "Mama", the place of their beginnings and endings. Here, Violet, who is losing her husband and is at a dead end, harks back to motherhood which gives the child the first and fundamental human relationship. We can see a similarity in the affair between Joe and Dorcas, for they also talk about their lost mother, and Joe, who is intolerant of

Violet's silence which is reminiscent of Wild's, tells Dorcas things he has not even thought and feels he is "fresh, new again" (123). Like Joe, Violet later finds a newly emergent self in the conversation between Joe and Dorcas's friend, Felice. Felice remembers that Violet uttered the word, "me", like "it was the first she heard of the word" (209). Thus, in *Jazz*, the participants in the conversation confirm their selves through uttering and hearing which are "intimate things 'in place'" as well as the housework.

2. Public Love and the City

The characters' feeling and memory are inspired and shared through the music in the street of the City as well as through their conversation in the room. The narrator says that Joe sympathizes with a blues song played by street musicians as follows: "Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why man. Solonesome-I-could-die man. [...] Joe probably thinks that the song is about him" (119). The song which is reminiscent of the famous one sung by Louis Armstrong seems certainly to represent Joe who laments losing Dorcas and cries openly all the day. Moreover, the narrator compares Joe to a needle of a record player, saying, "Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you. [...] [Y]ou always end up back where you started: hungry for the one thing everybody loses—young loving. That was Dorcas, all right" (120). It is the music to connect mentally the isolated individuals in the City with the public place in this way. As the narrator says, Joe, who is compared to a phonograph needle playing a blues tune, is like a torch singer, wandering about the street in search for his lost love, Dorcas. However, when Joe's remembering Dorcas is superimposed on the description of his search for Wild (180-84), we know that the starting point where Joe returns is actually Wild.

Some critics point out that Wild is Beloved. We can read *Jazz* in connection with the previous novel, *Beloved*, which is the story about the slavery era. There are many similarities between these novels; for example, three women, Beloved, Sethe, and Denver, lock themselves up into their house called 124 to be absorbed in the housework and chat, and a flamboyant quilt they stitch up

represents the eruption of their repressed desire; it is the voices of praying women that reproduces the place for Sethe's rebirth, "Clearing" where Baby Suggs did not preach but "Call" to the audience, and reconciles isolated 124 with the community; Beloved is afraid that her body will literally explode some day (133) (and, in fact, she is said to have exploded and disappeared at the end of the novel); like Wild, Beloved is unidentified through the novel, and the absence of the two of them offer the reader the space for flexible reading. Then our reading is drawn back to the story about the haunted house 124 because of the intertextuality over these novels. Joe regards himself as "a new Negro" (129). This expression is resonant with the title of Alain Locke's book *New Negro* published in 1925, representative of the flow of the public discourse of those days. It is sketched out as follows: "At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. [...] History is over, you all, was everything's ahead at last" (7). However, the traumatic place draws Joe back to the past. His return to the origin of his personal history and the lyrics of the blues song "where-did-she-go-and-why" can be traced back to the origin of the African-American history, slavery, through the search for Wild/Beloved.

Joe's search for his absent mother in the South begins with hearing Wild's singing voice. It seems to him "some combination of running water and wind in high trees. The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, woodsmen have also heard. [...] Joe thought that was it, and simply listened with pleasure until a word or two seemed to glide into the sound" (176-77). Here, while Morrison shows the reader the Wild's primitive voice which assimilates with nature and is beyond the musical genre, she regards blues and jazz as the music rooted in the African-American history. In an interview with Elissa Schappell, she talks about jazz which was considered at first to be "devil music, too sensual and provocative" as follows: "[F]or some black people, jazz meant claiming their own bodies. You can image what that must have meant for people whose bodies had been owned, who had been slaves as children, or who remembered their parents being slaves. Blues and jazz represented ownership of one's own emotions" (256).

While the blues which mourns the African-American collective suffering frames Joe's personal loss, Alice can distinguish the element which rouses the

bodily sensation and the strong feelings in the jazz music. Though she despises jazz because of its sexual tone "making her aware of flesh and something so free she could smell its bloodsmell" (58), her repressed rage is provoked by a jazz tune coming out of the street; 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). Alice's uncontrollable hand driven by her urge is similar to Joe's gun directed to Dorcas which he regards as his hand to touch her with or Violet's hand grabbing a knife unconsciously to stab Dorcas's body with. Like Sethe's killing her daughter in *Beloved*, their wild actions are the compelling physical responses to pain or rage of losing their beloved and the desperate gestures toward the outer world. While "private cracks" which the characters fall over imprint "inside nothing" upon them, jazz makes space for the hearer to feel their vivid desire to live.

Alice feels her rage elicited by "a complicated anger" hidden in the sensual love songs of jazz, and links it to the sound of drums which she once heard on Fifth Avenue. When she adopts orphaned Dorcas, they encounters with a silent demonstration against the race riot in East St. Louis:

It was July in 1917 and the beautiful faces were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them. [...] Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T. (53-54)

According to Leroi Jones, blues is a vocal music about the personal experience and feeling of African-Americans, and even in jazz, which derives from blues, the instruments imitate the human voice. Originally, the most apparent characteristic of African-American music is "the use of polyphonic, or contrapuntal, rhythmic effects", and it derives from "the fact that Africans also used drums for communication" "by the phonetic reproduction of the words themselves" (25-26). Therefore in the plantation in the slavery, the use of African drums

in the slaves' work songs was prevented, "as the white man learned that drums could be used to incite revolt" (19). Given this perspective, the sound of the drums in Fifth Avenue seems to be rooted in the original African-American music. And it builds the space for asserting the existence of the parading people, who are silenced in the bloody racism, and expressing of their resistance.

As mentioned above, the private conversation between the characters in their room parallels with the vocal music which resounds throughout the public space of the City. Through narrating and sharing her own past with Alice, Felice, and Joe, Violet's self-expressive gesture turns from her "public crazinesses" into her "public love" with Joe which means their casual but affectionate gesture and is described as follows: "The part that touches fingers when one passes the cup and saucer to the other. The part that closes her [Violet's] neckline snap while waiting for the trolley; and brushes lint from his [Joe's] blue serge suit when they come out of the movies house into the sunlight" (229). Citing Nathan Huggins's suggestion that "the Old Negro" within "the New Negro" of Harlem Renaissance implies the self-hate, Nancy J. Peterson argues that Joe and Violet's "public love" recalls Baby Suggs calling the audience to love their own bodies, that is, the collective act of self-love. (215-16) Then Alice's contempt for jazz, which is formed from the public discourse, sermon and editorials, is a kind of self-hate. Nevertheless, she can hear the repressed anger in jazz and listens to the unspeakable things unspoken in the sounds of drums. The emphasis on the bodily sensations makes the reader perceive the historical events as Joe tries to get back his past. When he remembers his early happy life with Violet in the City, he recalls "what it looked like" (36), dates, events, and scenes, but what he wants to recall is "what it felt like" (29).

Furthermore, the narrator's idiosyncrasy makes the reader take part in the role of the narrator, that is, involves them in the process of narrating itself. The narrator has both the omniscient character and the personal attribution; the narrator says that he/she lives in a room somewhere and observes the characters to describe them in detail. Then *Jazz* consists of both the voice of the first-person narrator and the voices of characters, their monologues. Though the narrator speaks in a confident voice, his/her prediction that the

murder recurs among Joe, Violet, and Felice does not come true. When the narrator admits that he/she is an unreliable narrator, saying, "I missed the people altogether" (220), the reader has to look back on the performance and speech of the characters including the narrator, doubting whether he also miss them. In *Jazz*, Morrison reproduces the orality to avoid the fixed and definitive text. And the structure of the narration urges the reader to reread the text and share the memory of the place where voices re-sound.

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