

“Here Comes the New”: Individual and Collective Forgetting in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*

Grzegorz Kotecki

University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland

This article examines the problem of individual and collective attempts at forgetting the traumatic past in Toni Morrison’s sixth novel *Jazz* (1992). More specifically, it emphasizes by selected examples psychological and social aspects of willful amnesia which can lend itself useful in helping traumatized (country) individuals to repress painful remembrances, heal mental wounds and build a new identity in a memory-free modern city. Analyzing *Jazz*’s narrative featuring Joe and Violet Trace, with a particular focus put on the expectations and experiences connected with their migration to and life in the City, the article explores via Paul Connerton’s ruminations on cultural forgetting in modern times—delineated in his book *How Modernity Forgets* (2009)—the mechanisms of intentional amnesia used in the process of recovering from personal and social traumas resulting from more recent (migration and urban life) and more time-distant (slavery and racism) ordeals.

Keywords: forgetting, history, *Jazz*, (the) past, Toni Morrison

Introduction

In a 1985 conversation with Gloria Naylor,¹ Morrison revealed that the inspiration for the narrative core of her novel *Jazz* (1992)—the second part of her historical trilogy—came from the story behind James Van Der Zee’s funeral photograph featuring a beautifully dressed young black woman lying in an open satin-lined casket. Morrison illuminates this mesmerizing image by recounting Van Der Zee’s recollection of the circumstances of the woman’s death.² Reportedly, the 18-year-old had been shot by her ex-lover with a silencer-fixed gun at a Harlem party. However, she did not tell anyone that she was badly wounded, and the people around her did not notice it until she swooned that there was blood on her clothes. Surprisingly, the girl refused to be taken to hospital and to call the police, apparently in a wish to let her former inamorato escape unpunished, and thus she bled to death by the next morning.³

Grzegorz Kotecki, M.A., Ph.D. candidate, Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland.

¹ “A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison,” Gloria Naylor (1985). In: Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

² Morrison was familiar with Van Der Zee’s work as she wrote the foreword to his 1978 collection of death portraits called *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, edited in book form by Camille Billops, in which the picture in question and the intriguing story behind it were published.

³ It is interesting to note that while discussing the subject with Naylor, Morrison elaborates on the story, a later impulse for her sixth novel, rather than on the image itself. In this way, Morrison underscores the “narrative quality” of Van Der Zee’s photographs—their potential to narrate stories that make pictures come to life.

In fact, the first few pages of *Jazz* provide the readers in the narrator-observer's voice with almost all the facts concerning the tragic threesome relationship at the heart of the novel. One learns that Joe and Violet Traces' over 30-year-long marriage is on the verge of collapse: Violet, a 50-year-old unlicensed house-to-house hairdresser who has been childless by choice, craves for a baby when it is too late for her to have one, and Joe, an over-50-year old door-to-door beauty products seller who has been suffering because of his wife's physical and psychological separation from him, involves himself in a love affair with Dorcas, a vain young woman of 18 who turns out in the end to be too self-absorbed to cherish Joe's passionate feelings. Most importantly, the readers are told up-front that Joe has shot Dorcas in desperation after learning that she was breaking up with him—only to start a new relationship with Acton, a man of her age—and that Violet, struck by the news of Joe's infidelity, has gone wild, hurrying to Dorcas's funeral ceremony with a knife to slash her bold challenger's dead face. When it might seem that there is nothing more to learn about this cliched story, the narrative takes an unexpected twist. Some time after the incident, when she comes to her senses after the shock of betrayal, Violet decides to find out as much as she can about the dead girl, pushing herself as far as to visit Dorcas's aunt, Alice Manfred, and to bring home a picture of Dorcas that she places prominently on the fireplace mantle in her parlor.

It is important to note that the photograph of Dorcas soon becomes a point of reference for Violet and Joe, as it fuels their need to understand the serious alterations that have occurred in their lives since their arrival from the rural, post-slavery South (Vesper County, Virginia) to the urbanized and modern northern City (apparently New York's Harlem). Thus, both the Traces individually contemplate the portrait during their silent nights to perceive various glimpses of Dorcas in an attempt to find through the different meanings invoked by the picture soothing answers to the questions, worries and uncertainties that keep returning to them in the present. They go back in their thoughts to the past in order to unearth the stories that will eventually make them understand the complexity of their current situation. The problem for Joe and Violet lies in the fact that they have spent most of their years in the City trying to forget, or to push back the past: they attempt to forget the history of slavery, which in *Jazz* is referred to as "the sad stuff," "the bad stuff," and "the things-nobody-could-help stuff" (Morrison, 2005, p. 7) that has taken place in the post-Reconstruction South—this painful story must be buried in the past and finally disremembered in relocating to and starting life anew in the City. However, even though the City initially offers them a memory-free present and a promising future, Joe and Violet realize over the years that the past has come back to oppress them, and that ultimately they will have to deal with "the sad and bad stuff" (Morrison, 2005, p. 7) in order to regain themselves, both on an individual and a collective plane.

Forgetting in the City—The Repression of Trauma

The focus now shifts to discussing the problem of individual (psychological perspective) and collective (social perspective) attempts at forgetting illustrated in *Jazz*, in which Joe and Violet Trace, similarly to many other migrants of the day, strive to leave behind the burden of their hurtful past experiences in the hope of beginning a new and memory-free life in the City. It should be noted at this point that although the novel's protagonists forget and remember individually, as the readers are mainly presented with the narration of their private stories, they may be seen as a couple representative of the Great Migration which started in the American South in the 1870s and peaked between the years 1910 and 1930. In other words, similarly to a collectivity of historically-documented African Americans who were leaving in large numbers the still racially oppressive,

post-Reconstruction South in order to settle in some of the major, slavery-free northern cities (such as New York, Chicago or Detroit), Joe and Violet travel north from Vesper County, Virginia to Harlem, New York—*Jazz*'s fictional City. Once there, the characters hope to quickly forget the traumatic memories of hardship in the South and crave for a promising future that this modern and industrialized metropolis can offer. Therefore, upon their arrival in the City in 1906, Joe and Violet are two hopeful individuals who do not cast their mind back, but whose thoughts are set on the viable present. Impatiently, they open themselves up to the seductions of the City, which beckons to them with the promise of a life free from painful memories. This is the time when the glittery look and the welcoming atmosphere of the City helps the characters, at least temporarily, to forget their traumatized past.

Indeed, from the narrator-observer's account, the readers learn that Joe and Violet build in their minds an idealized image of the City, even before they arrive in the place. While still in Virginia, and then on their one-way railway trip to New York, the couple is ready to love the imaginary City, hoping for their affection to be returned. In this way, they want to leave their traumatic past, both physically and psychologically, further and further behind, with each mile of the journey bringing them fast towards a new beginning. Thus, Joe and Violet were

entering the lip of the City dancing all the way [...] They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others [...], they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back [...] Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind. (Morrison, 2005, pp. 32-33)

Consequently, when Joe and Violet come to the City, it reciprocates the migrants' affection with its lights, comforting living space and openness, offering hope for the present and myriad future possibilities; the past, and so the old, is to be rejected and forgotten in the face of the new. In the City, the Traces are granted a long-desired chance to explore the individualism enjoyed by city-dwellers: now they can be "themselves" and are ready to work up the courage to meet all the challenges the metropolis can offer them:

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 in. Like the others, they were country people, but how soon country people 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. The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves. (Morrison, 2005, p. 33)

Claiming that (cultural) forgetting is generally characteristic of modernity, Connerton, among others, discusses the problem of movement as transition from one place to another in the context of a modern world or space. He observes that movement or transition can serve individuals as a personal connection and unity with a new milieu, pointing out that a particular and non-substitutable place may, in turn, become a springboard for their rite of passage (Connerton, 2009, pp. 5, 14). In line with the above remarks, it seems reasonable to interpret Joe and Violet's physical movement from the rural and historical South to the urbanized and modern North (spatial transition) as—in psychological terms—the characters' private rite of passage understood as a mental crossing from the memory-laden past to the memory-free present (temporal transition).

The paragraphs below offer a discussion of the City in *Jazz* in light of the trope of the modern urban space as a repository of forgetting for Joe and Violet, who stand for many other black migrants of the day attempting to disremember the past at the individual and collective level. Joe and Violet's coming to the City is heralded, and

their later enthusiasm connected with beginning a new life there amplified, by the narrator's participating voice which comments excitedly on the nature of the City: how strong and solid and promising it is, and how much Joe and Violet will treasure it when they succumb, like the other new-comers, to the City's welcoming embrace. It is also a place where individuals, including both the narrator and the migrants, can dream their unrestrained future dreams. The narrator thus exclaims:

I'm crazy about this City [...] A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it [...] I'm strong [...] top-notch and indestructible—like the City [...]. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. (Morrison, 2005, p. 7)

The words of the narrator quoted above may also be read as signaling her announcement of the coming of a new epoch, one free of memory and free of history. It is a voice full of vibrant expectation, joining and strengthening the migrants' desire to forget in the modern city. Moreover, it is a call to break away from the past and an encouragement to dream future dreams in a dawning fresh milieu:

Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting around thinking future thoughts about projects and bridges and fast-clicking trains underneath. (Morrison, 2005, p. 7)

Discussing modern urban transformations of American and European cities in the early 20th century, Connerton remarks that the world of the late 19th century was obsessed by the burden of the past: the cities of that period displayed an architectural fabric full of ornamentation, with their streets and buildings thus invoking the metropolises' historical past and preserving memories, even when, as in the case of Chicago, they had no past. To contradict tradition or history, Connerton further observes, the urban fabric of the modern era, thanks to the invention of new building materials, providing lightness, openness and speed, became one of steel, concrete and glass. Connerton also emphasizes that it is especially in Berlin at the beginning of the 1930s where such transience of urban topography is most clearly visible: many of the city's buildings had been stripped of their historical ornaments, its streets had become "unhistorical" in nature, and the images of its squares, company names and enterprises had been drastically transformed. Thus, Connerton concludes by asserting that the German capital of the day can be seen both as a metropolis that in particular effaces all memories, and as a place in which one can quickly forget (Connerton, 2009, pp. 118-119). Considering the above remarks, it is interesting to observe that the city which *Jazz*'s narrator describes with such awe and agitation, as the above fragments aptly illustrate, is full of sound, hectic movement and top-class modern architecture. In this context, the City can be seen as post-historical in its rejection of the past and welcoming the future through its highest-developed architectural design. In a similar fashion to Berlin, the City is ready to help the migrants forget the bygones and eradicate their hurtful remembrances by offering them a memory-free as well as history-free space to live.

Moving away from the post-Reconstruction South to settle in the northern metropolis, a transition that serves as a rite of passage for the novel's protagonists individually, and for other migrants of the day collectively, gives Joe and Violet a range of possibilities connected with their life choices: now they can decide about who they want to be and what they want to do in a spacious urban environment. It is worth mentioning here that in the past Joe was a hunter in the Vesper County woods, and, like Violet, he used to hire himself for hard physical work

in the fields. Whereas in the rural countryside of Virginia both the Traces were usually forced to do heavy manual labor for others, presently the City lets them take up less arduous jobs. Moreover, the modern urbis is apparently ready to support them, take care of them, and, embracing their present dreams and desires, it may well become a safeguard for their viable future, as the following fragment illustrates: "Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do [...] 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" (Morrison, 2005, pp. 8-9).

Leaving country life in favor of urban living alters Joe and Violet's social and economic condition, which results over time in their forgetting of their rural roots. As Connerton further explains, drawing on the example of France during the Third Republic, the introduction of new road and rail networks which linked the previously either inaccessible or poorly accessible peripheries (here: the deep country) to the modern center, turned peasants (here: villagers or country folk) into citizens (here: city dwellers) who had to partially forget their former peasant status to learn their new social roles (here: new city jobs and urban living status). Finally, referring to Ernest Renan's terminology, Connerton points to this phenomenon as a shared amnesia or a collective forgetfulness (Connerton, 2009, p. 49).

Indeed, Joe and Violet, like many other migrants to the City, quickly forget their rural past; formerly country people, they soon become part of the new social fabric of the city. A profound change occurs in their behavior and their way of living. Thanks to forgetting their past and unwanted thoughts, the couple can now begin life anew, synchronizing its pace with the fast-pulsating beat of the City. With the grim memories of Virginia temporarily disremembered, the protagonists are free to enjoy the present and reach forward with their clear and untroubled minds:

There is no air in the city but there is breath, and every morning it races through [them] like laughing gas brightening [their] eyes, [their] talk, and [their] expectations. In no time at all [they] [forget] little pebbly creeks and apple trees [...] [They] [forget] a sun that used to slide up like the yolk of a good country egg [...] at the bottom of the sky, and [they] [don't] miss it, [don't] look up to see what happened to it or to stars made irrelevant by the light of thrilling, wasteful street lamps [...] No wonder they forget pebbly creeks and when they do not forget the sky completely think of it as a tiny piece of information about the time of day or night. (Morrison, 2005, pp. 34-35)

Connerton points out that mass migrations of the modern era, both between and within countries, have often entailed the forgetting of local roots, even though the process to some extent has been moderated by continuing family ties in the place of origin. Thus Connerton sees the history of mass migration as part of the history of modern forgetting (cultural amnesia), and particularly of forgetting places (Connerton, 2009, p. 135). Indeed, because of migrating from the Virginia backwoods to the hi-tech city, which profoundly changed their mindset and lifestyle, Joe and Violet quickly forget their rural roots and their Virginia homes. And even though the countryside landscape of the South may seem domestic and attractive, with its pebbly creeks, apple trees, and starry skies (Morrison, 2005, pp. 34-35), it must be disremembered in the city for these images also bring back bitter memories. In other words, the formerly created personal and collective recollections now need to give way to the new ones forming in the present.

At this point it seems advisable to go back to the narrator-observer's words about country people who soon forget the past in a city once they fall in love with it (Morrison, 2005, p. 33). In the early pages of *Jazz*, the

narrator remarks that the City "backs and frames" its dwellers, regardless of who they are or what they do (Morrison, 2005, pp. 8-9). It is interesting to observe that the modern metropolis not only precipitates forgetting, but it also promotes individualism and forms personal desires; it both supports and leads individuals through its "laid out design" (Morrison, 2005, p. 9). In this context, a city/City dweller might be compared to a needle placed in a record's groove while (the) music is being played. Similarly, if one is set in motion around the city/City, seen as the record, they circle at some speed between the subsequent grooves, viewed as the city's/City's districts of novel possibilities, and, not needing to remember the by-gones, forget the world outside. Within this framework, jazz, embodied here by a jazz record, can be characterized as modern fast-paced, syncopated improvisational music which, by its very nature, induces forgetting rather than remembering.

Later in the text, the narrator tellingly explains the present and future ramifications of the new-comers' precipitated forgetting and promoted individualism in the modern urbis, as illustrated by the passage below:

And in the beginning when they first arrive, and twenty years later when they and the City have grown up, they love that part of themselves [stronger, riskier] so much they forget what loving other people was like—if they ever knew, that is. I don't mean they hate them, no, just that what they start to love is the way a person is in the City. (Morrison, 2005, p. 33)

Still a little later, the narrator describes the migrants' overwhelming desire to forget and change, which is reflected in their fascination with the city/City that is "permanent and out of control" (Morrison, 2005, p. 35), and then remarks that "if they [the new-comers] have their way and get to the City, they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were. Nothing can pry them away from that; the City is what they want it to be [...]" (Morrison, 2005, p. 35). It should be noted that all the fragments quoted above aptly illustrate the present situation of Joe and Violet in the City, marked by the complete identification with the city, leading to egocentrism and willful forgetting.

Forgetting in the City—The Return of Trauma

Notwithstanding the fact that *Jazz*'s protagonists, as has been demonstrated, seem to have found in the City a long dreamed-for haven after their troubled years in the South, the readers soon learn that Joe and Violet's present memory-free life proves only temporary. To explain this, one should, once again, turn to Connerton, who observes that the years preceding the First World War have been marked as the greatest period of mass migration in recorded history (in the last 15 years before 1914 almost 15 million people arrived in the United States), emphasizing the fact that those years saw individuals also migrating from country to city and from one region of the same state to another. Connerton concludes by adding that mass migration resulted in many traumatic experiences among the migrants (Connerton, 2009, p. 134-135). In line with the above remarks, the focus of the analysis will now shift to these fragments of the narrative, in which the main characters, after 20 years of living in the City (1906-1926), are faced with a series of adverse psychological consequences connected with a migrants' life's trauma, which, reinforced by the return of their disturbing Virginia memories, leaves a significant mark on Joe and Violet's present mental condition.

After their initial enthusiasm about and admiration for the metropolis and its seemingly limitless possibilities, strengthened by hopes for a safer racist-free as well as trouble-free future and a joint attempt to forget the painful past, the next two decades of living in the City see some gradual changes in the protagonists'

behavior. Most importantly, at the beginning of their city life, the young Traces shared their joyful days with each other and preferred to act together, but over the passing years they have become more individualistic and closed themselves within their own private worlds. As a result, they seem now to have forgotten how to love each other and how to live with each other, focusing primarily on their new selves and their individual needs. This altered attitude to life and to each other makes the presently middle-aged Traces feel more separated one from the other, both physically and emotionally, as the narrator bitterly observes: “Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the City, they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting together like the ground was a dance-hall floor” (Morrison, 2005, p. 36).

As mentioned above, Joe and Violet’s marriage after the 20 years spent in the City has morphed into an almost silent relationship of two self-centered individuals. Indeed, the novel’s present narrative, set in the spring of 1926, finds the 50-year-old Traces living in their Lennox Avenue, Harlem apartment, leading, as if, two parallel lives—both partners preoccupied with their private matters. After their uphill social and economic struggle, which marked their first phase of living in the City, presently the Traces focus on their jobs that have changed from harder and less paid to lighter and better paid in the last two decades. This allows the couple to enjoy a markedly higher financial and living status than they had at the start in the City. However, spending most of his working days with women, with the passage of time, Joe keeps paying less attention to Violet, who becomes more and more quiet. In effect, the couple starts to live in an almost silent apartment, each of the spouses immersed in their own thoughts. After two decades in the City, life transforms into a mundane reality for both the Traces. Each of them tries to cope with the present life’s daily routine in their own way: they close themselves in their separate, “private” worlds and, focusing on their individual selves, they seem to be forgetting about the other’s wishes and needs. Disconnected from the past, the characters are set on their daily routines and their minds are mostly present-oriented. Moreover, their formerly lively conversations have now become almost silenced. This lack of interpersonal communication and affection between the spouses can be aptly illustrated by the fact that Violet has a parrot that she speaks to, and which answers her “I love you” (Morrison, 2005, p. 24). In consequence of this scarcity of feelings and understanding between the couple, amplified by urban life’s wearying monotony, Violet sinks in an emotional torpor and drifts away physically and mentally from her husband; she escapes into her “private theater,” in which she begins day-dreaming. Living beside his quiet and detached wife, Joe feels lonely at home. As the narrator observes:

Violet shuts up. Speaks less and less until “uh” or “have mercy” carry almost all of her part of a conversation [...] Violet is still as well as silent. Over time her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him. He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back: “I love you.” (Morrison, 2005, p. 24)

As a way of completing the Traces’ present-day picture, it seems important to recall the fact that the couple has no children, for they decide not to have them when they come to the City. (Another psychological problem underlying Violet’s childlessness surfaces up here). For this reason, it might be assumed that the protagonists’ marriage has lacked those specific and multi-layered, interpersonal bonds characteristic of a full family model. Instead, as pointed out earlier, Joe and Violet’s relationship emerges in its current phase as one permeated by a sense of individualism and self-centeredness. Overall, the characters’ current mindset is the result of the changes, both internal and external, that have taken place in their married life during the past 20 years in the City, ones that

finally made them come to the point at which they became a "barely speaking" couple (Morrison, 2005, p. 36) on the verge of physical and emotional separation. As a result of the physical and emotional detachment of his wife, Joe involves himself in a clandestine, and ultimately fatal, romance with young Dorcas—a fact which connects the analysis back to the summary of *Jazz*'s main story outlined in the Introduction.

Conclusion

This article sought to investigate the problem of individual and collective attempts at forgetting the painful past in Morrison's *Jazz*. The analyzed examples of such attempts are clearly traceable in the novel in the context of a series of the protagonists' motivated desires to repress their psychological and social traumas. Based on the example of Joe and Violet Trace—particularly on the analysis of the early expectations and the later hardships of their migrants' life in the City—and drawing on Connerton's thoughts on the sources and mechanisms of cultural amnesia characteristic of modern times, the article demonstrated how one's purposeful relocation from his or her rural and memory-replete place of origin, associated with harrowing life experiences, to settle in a modern and history-free as well as memory-free city can help individuals and, on a larger scale, collectivities to forget, though temporarily, their hard and troubled past.

References

- Connerton, P. (2009). *How modernity forgets*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Jazz*. London: Vintage (2005).
- Naylor, G. (1985). *A conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison*. In D. Taylor-Guthrie (Ed.), *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Peterson, N. J. (2001). *Jazz and collective rememory*. In N. J. Peterson (Ed.), *Against Amnesia: Contemporary women writers and the crises of historical memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Taylor-Guthrie, D. (Ed.). (1994). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.