The relationship between nature and culture has been imagined in many different ways and by taking recourse to numerous images and metaphors. *View of Savannah, as it stood the 29th March, A.D. 1734* (Fig. 1), a document that asserted the presence of British colonial settlements on the North American continent, represents a tradition in which nature and culture are depicted as mutually exclusive and ultimately irreconcilable spaces.

The neatly organized and bright space of colonial Savannah is surrounded by the seemingly impenetrable, darker space of the forest on three sides of its rectangular shape, and the river on the fourth side. This bird’s eye view simultaneously performs the representational functions of a map, outlining the
spatial coordinates and the location of a town, and the semiotic function of a landscape engraving, in which the geometry of the grid heralds a brighter, cleaner future, one that lies at the end of a central line (perhaps the prototype of Main Street) cutting into the unorganized forest. In its depiction of urban spatiality – the gridiron pattern of the town’s streets; the town’s prospective eradication of wild nature – View of Savannah epitomizes modern cognitive habits that see nature and the urban grid as diametrically opposed phenomena: where there is one, there cannot be the other. For most of the modern age (which began with the Renaissance) the epistemological difference between nature and culture found its spatial expression in the dichotomy between wilderness and (urban) civilization. First and foremost a space of social, political, and economic organization, the city has also become a symbol for culture’s power over nature.

Over the past two decades, a movement known as new urbanism has taken root in American culture. It started when a growing number of planners, developers, architects, public officials, and community activists realized that “disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society’s built heritage [was] one interrelated community-building challenge.” This statement, quoted from the opening paragraph of The Congress for the New Urbanism’s (CNU) foundational text, the “Charter of the New Urbanism” (1993), indicates a shift away from traditional perceptions of urbanity as liberation from nature towards the city’s recognition as a spatial hybrid emerging from the interaction between nature and culture. Primarily a social and political movement that seeks to shape the face of the twenty-first century American city, new urbanism may also serve as a fitting label for a number of historical, geographical, and literary narratives that reconstruct the city from a decidedly environmental perspective. The appearance of this new mode of response to the city coincides with the emergence of ecocriticism as a new methodological approach to the study of literature and culture from an ecological perspective whose practitioners seek to reveal the moral and political implications of the current environmental crisis. Far from being a critical movement with a well-defined, homogenous methodology, ecocriticism has nevertheless gained in institutional stature, with regular international conferences, professional organizations, and an ever-growing number of peer-reviewed publications. By setting the spotlight on urbanity, the two editors of this cur-

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1 On its website, the Congress of New Urbanism (CNU) describes itself as “the leading organization promoting walkable, neighborhood-based development as an alternative to sprawl.” See <http://www.cnu.org/charter> (accessed 28 June 2010). The four principles of urban renewal in present-day America are listed as “the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of [the United States’] built legacy” (“Charter,” emphasis added).
rent volume draw attention to an area of critical inquiry that had been underexposed during the inceptive years of the ecocritical movement, a condition that began to change with the publication of *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*, a collection of essays edited by Michael Bennett and David W. Teague in 1999. Up to that point, most of the ecocritical work done in the context of American culture was an effort to promote the genre of nature writing as a tool for raising the public’s environmental consciousness. Modern nature writing, in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson, was understood as the kind of literature that most effectively reshapes perceptions of the natural world and of the place of humans in it. Yet as Andrew Ross pointed out in an interview with Michael Bennett, “the literature of conservation – almost wholly devoted to nature worship in the ‘cathedral of pines’ – is persistent in its demonization of the city” (16). In other words, on the heels of raising ecological consciousness comes the allegation that the space inhabited by the majority of the human population is “sick, monstrous, blighted, ecocidal, life-denying, parasitical” (ibid.).

With this essay I want to support the argument that an ecocritical pedagogy must not be restricted to the genre of nature writing, the era of Romanticism, or the tropes of wilderness or apocalypse. In order to advance one of ecocriticism’s core concerns – the reconceptualization of the relationship between nature and culture – literary scholars need to write a critique of what Henri Lefebvre has described as the mental production of space in general, and of urban space in particular.

In *The Production of Space* (1974; Eng. trans. 1991), Lefebvre famously argued that in order for us to understand the impact of space on the formation of modern cultural and individual identities, we must “discover or construct a theoretical unity between ‘fields’” that are otherwise “apprehended separately” (11):

> The fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social. In other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias. (11-12)

Lefebvre’s call for a unitary approach to spatial theory, as expressed in this passage, explicitly includes the imagination as a space-creating force. But he remains skeptical towards philosophy (the domain of the conceptual, metaphysical imagination) and literature (the domain of symbolic, narrative, utopian, and mythological forms of the imagination) as points of departure for developing a new approach to the theory of space. Against philosophy he holds that although its beginnings “were closely bound up with the ‘real’ space of the Greek city,” this “connection was severed later in philosophy’s

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development” (14). And the problem with literary texts is that “any search for space […] will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about” (15). This suggests that space, in its philosophical and literary representations, is either dissociated from the social and historical realities that otherwise sustain the philosophical practitioner of spatial theory; or, because it is a ubiquitous metaphoric and symbolic presence, space is distorted beyond conceptual recognition and, therefore, useless as a model for a unified theory. Yet Lefebvre does not completely abandon the idea that philosophical and literary texts participate in the production of space, that the space conceived by philosophy and literature, socially abstracted and symbolically congested though it may be, effects the production of “the practico-sensory realm of social space” (15). He observed that the common terms we use to speak of individual spaces (“room,” “street corner,” “marketplace”) “correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute” (16).

This double function of language – to “express” and to “constitute,” to simultaneously represent and produce a reality – is one of the two major theoretical premises on which the argument of this essay is built. The other is closely related to the need to advocate for the literary as a valuable epistemological and pedagogical instrument. Following Jonathan Culler’s *The Literary in Theory* (2007), I take a functionalist approach to the literary as a cognitive tool, a specific mode of theoretical speculation. “Theory,” Culler writes, “is analytical, speculative, reflexive, interdisciplinary, and a counter to commonsense views” (4). The sentence would remain accurate if ‘theory’ were replaced by ‘poetry’ or ‘the novel’.3 De facto Culler makes that rhetorical move when he wonders “if theory is the exfoliation, in the sphere of thought in general, of the literary” (39). The association of theory, the literary, and thought through the arboreal metaphor of “exfoliation” demands closer consideration. While the literary is the ‘foliage’ that ‘veils’ the ‘stem’ of thought, rendering the trunk almost invisible for most of the time, foliage is also vital to the stem’s vitality and robustness. No tree survives without its leaves. At the same time, foliage withers away as soon as it is separated from the stem. It disintegrates and becomes something else, the humus that feeds the tree’s roots. In Culler’s metaphor, theory is not an expression of thought itself. Rather, it reveals a relationship of codependence between thought (or knowledge) and the literary. Based on such a conceptual approach to the literary as a vital element of thought, I propose a reading of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992) as a novel that provides new ‘theoretical’ perspectives on the spatial relationship between nature and culture.

I will develop my argument in three major steps. First, I will trace the place and function of the city in American literary culture. Second, I will offer a reading of Morrison’s *Jazz* that focuses on the narrative production of urban

3 Needless to say, not all poems, or all books sold under the label of the novel, are of the same textual complexity, analytical acuity, reflexive fervor, or interdisciplinary scope.
space and its relationship to non-urban environments. Third, I will position the novel in the discursive context of new urbanism, arguing that Morrison’s narrative carnivalizations of the urban grid support the ecocritical project of reconstructing the conceptual relationship between nature and culture.

**Nature and the Grid: American Literature and the Space of the City**

*View of Savannah* presents wilderness and grid as two historically and ecologically different spaces – the precolonial, precontact ‘natural’ space of indigenous America, and the colonial, Europeanized ‘cultural’ space of modern America. While we may have come to identify it with the production of modern *American* spaces, the gridiron pattern has in fact a much longer, culturally and geographically diverse history. The first urban grids date back more than four thousand years, when gridiron patterns became the tool “for administering natural and human resources” (Higgins 52) in old Egyptian cities. Since then all major civilizations have utilized the grid as an instrument for organizing and regulating various kinds of relationships, including their spatial relationship with nature.4

By the time it arrived in colonial America, the grid did not only represent the principles of efficiency, rationality, and calculability5 but also the desire

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4 The grid made its debut around 2670 BCE in Kahun, an old Egyptian pyramid town whose administrators and bureaucrats created a “highly sophisticated system for administering natural and human resources” (52). No longer “merely reactive” (50) to preexisting architectural and topographical forms, Kahun’s urban grid of streets and alleys was inspired by the patterns on ruled inscriptions of papyrus. Summarizing archeological research, Higgins writes that in Kahun “scribes planned the design and construction of two types of housing units, each intended for a separate social stratum, and each virtually identical to others of its kind. The regularity of these homes carried over to the gridiron of the streets, suggesting a highly regulated relationship between the members of each stratum. In other words, the housing module and the linear grid of the street were coordinated to promote class-based human behavior originating in administration” (52-53). The need for bureaucratic efficiency in the management and regulation of a socially stratified society dictated the application of the grid in the urban design of ancient Egyptian cities, but it was not necessarily the reason for its use in other cultures and at later points in history. In ancient Greece, where geometry was perceived as the principle that defined the order of Nature, the city grid “reflected religious and spiritual principles and motivations” (57), and coordinated axes created “sight flows” (61) that granted “visual continuity with the natural environment” (60). The grid structure in the widely dispersed settlements of the Roman Empire meant predictability: the spatial forms and functions of Roman settlements resembled each other throughout the colonized territories. The European Renaissance, with its “predilection for regular geometry and human scale” (66), saw the grid as a measure to eradicate crimes committed in the dark and winding medieval streets and to foster the development of capitalist commerce.

5 In his essay on “The Grid: History, Use, and Meaning” (1986), Jack H. Williamson links the *modern* conception of the grid to Descartes who defined it in purely geometrical terms as a composite of axes and coordinates on a plane in space. Williamson observes that “with Descartes’s stress on abstraction, the grid’s association with the world of out-
to gain power over nature. Higgins points out that William Penn’s 1683 grid-iron design for Philadelphia can be linked to the fact that he “had witnessed the devastation of London during the plague and fires of the 1660s” and “intended to prevent such catastrophes in the future” (68). The grid’s spaciousness and regularity were perceived as the form that allowed disasters such as those that occurred in European cities to be managed effectively, if not always prevented. Fires could be contained more easily, sanitary conditions controlled more efficiently. Yet neither the idea nor the spatial reality of the grid necessarily mollified existing cultural prejudices towards the city as a space that severely compromises the moral respectability of its inhabitants and the virtuousness of its institutions. Thomas Jefferson, who favored a gridiron pattern for organizing the lands of the Western Territory and as in instrument for preserving the democratic vigor of the Republic, retained his general skepticism towards the city as a space that endangers rather than benefits democracy. During his tenure in Paris he sent a letter to James Madison, dated Dec. 20, 1787, in which he expressed his view that Americans and their “governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural.” Yet “when they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe” (Jefferson 1787). His “Opinion on Capital” (1790), a text that details his ideas for the production of the nation’s most representative urban space, documents Jefferson’s resolve to apply rational principles to the building of American cities: “For the President’s house, offices and gardens, I should think two squares should be consolidated. For the Capitol and offices, one square. For the market, one square. For the public walks, nine squares consolidated” (Jefferson 1790). In Measuring America (2002), Andro Linklater observed that for Jefferson, “the simplicity of the square […] made it democratic” (111). And in Place and Belonging in America (2002), David Jacobson describes the application of the rectangular grid in the production of American space as motivated by the assumption that the “rationalization of the landscape created reasoned and rational citizens, in contrast to the wild and untamed woods and its wild and

er appearance loosens. As the rules elaborated in the Discourse made clear, appearances are suspect, and a problem (or, in visual terms, a field) is to be divided into its smallest component parts. This geometric, reductive operation is, of course, a mental process. The grid thus comes to represent not only the structural laws and principles behind physical appearance, but the process of rational thinking itself” (20). The grid’s inherent value as a code for rationality made it attractive when it came to the territorial organization of the North American continent.

In this regard Jefferson’s thinking resembles that of John Locke, who preferred the term “common-wealth” over “city” as the name for the democratic and independent “society of men” he envisioned in his Two Treatises of Government (1689). Although etymologically related to civitas, Locke cautioned his readers that city in English does not signify the same things as its Latin ancestor. He does not elaborate on the meaning of “city” in seventeenth-century English, but we can safely assume that he had in mind a combination of Christian doctrine (the City upon a Hill but also the city as cesspool of vice) and the experience of cities as emerging centers of England’s economic, social, and cultural life.
untamed progeny” (95). Yet in spite of the grid’s reputation as the most rational and democratic form of producing space, and contrary to the fact that most American cities are built on a grid pattern, the rejection of the city remained a constant in the American cultural imaginary. In a letter in 1800 to Benjamin Rush, a Pennsylvanian physician and one of the nation’s Founding Fathers, Jefferson declared that he “view[ed] great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man. True,” he further elaborated, “they nourish some of the elegant arts, but the useful ones can thrive elsewhere, and less perfection in the others, with more health, virtue & freedom, would be my choice” (Jefferson in 1800). During the following two centuries, writers (at least those who represented mainstream American culture) did little, if anything, to challenge the anti-urban sentiments embedded in the Jeffersonian concepts of a democratic society.

Urban spaces have been a trope in American literature since the days of the early republic. But most writers did not perceive the city as a space of American self-creation and self-representation. The city experience of Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* is dominated by disease, crime, and mistrust. Edgar Allan Poe’s city in “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) is a gloomy space populated by noblemen, merchants, and attorneys as well as gamblers, prostitutes, and pickpockets. The foreignness of such a place is highlighted by the identification of the city as London. In Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) the town is a place of social control, contrasted with the forest as the location of the (female) body’s liberation from the moral and religious constraints of the Puritan community. The poetic power of his language and the lyrical energy radiating from his fiction find their main source in the symbolism of natural environments. When representing urban space, Hawthorne’s language does not lose its poetic intensity, but it underwrites the author’s quintessential aversion against the city, which, in “The Gray Champion” (1837), he described as a “paved solitude” and the home of “despotic rulers

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7 In January of 1819, a few months after the founding of the University of Virginia, Jefferson reported to his former secretary, William Short, that the university was ready to hire seven professors, “the ablest that America or Europe can furnish” and who “will give us the selected society of a great city separated from the dissipations and levities of its ephemeral insects” (Jefferson 1819). Clearly, Jefferson was not willing to give up the “elegant arts” entirely. The idea of the city as the pivot of education and as a gathering place of great literary, scientific, and philosophical minds was of more than rhetorical appeal to him. But when it came to the city as a real space of lived social and political experiences, Jefferson’s rhetoric remained dismissive throughout his entire life. It is an historical irony that by advocating the grid as the tool for creating the plots that could be worked by the independent farmer-citizen, Jefferson also provided the blueprint for building American cities. As landscape historian J.B. Jackson observed, with a few notable exceptions, “the cities built in the United States until late in the nineteenth century all conformed to the grid system; all were Jeffersonian” (Jackson 4). For Jefferson and his peers, the perfect geometry of the grid, a composite structure of equally sized modules, became “the symbol of an agrarian Utopia composed of a democratic society of small landowners” (op. cit. 5).
[...], all magnificently clad, flushed with wine, proud of unjust authority, and scoffing at the universal groan" (864).

Unlike Hawthorne, who found most of his material in America’s colonial history, Melville responded to cultural and individual experiences with the modern city. The protagonist in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) is a man who is first trapped in the nineteenth-century version of an office cubicle, then disappears in the great unknown of a city that erases nature as well as human beings. Searching for Bartleby in the streets of New York, the narrator eventually finds him in a prison yard resembling the “heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung” (Melville 45). The structural form of this sentence, in which the cycle of botanical life is squeezed into the syntactical space between two commas, mimics the theme of human existence in the geometrical space of the city’s grid. The allusion to pyramids, those monuments of death, further amplifies the trope of contrasting the organic and the architectural, wild nature and urban civilization. Melville’s New York emblemizes prevailing nineteenth-century fears about the city as a space that jeopardizes both the American ideology of self-reliant individualism and nature (the space from which the self-reliant individual emerges). In its entirety, the text of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” provides the poetic image for an observation Ralph Waldo Emerson had made more than a decade earlier: “In New York lately, as in cities generally, one seems to lose all substance, and become surface in a world of surfaces” (165). At the time, New York was on its way to becoming a “new metropolis” (cf. Spann 1981), growing steadily in population and expanding in space, a process that was accelerated by the segmentation of the land into a gridiron pattern of streets and building lots.

With the city’s spatial expansion grew the anti-urban sentiments among the nation’s leading intellectuals. In contrast to their African American contemporaries, many of them slaves for whom the city was a space that provided a greater degree of freedom than the plantation, the white writers of the American Renaissance countered the increasing influence of the city on the shaping of American culture with a rhetoric that celebrated wild nature, and a narrative structure that followed the pastoral logic of retreat (into nature), but often forsaking the second part of that dualism – the return of the regenerated self to the city. Henry David Thoreau’s Walden (1854), a nonfiction account of life in a solitary hut by a forest pond, is the most prominent example of mid-nineteenth-century literary anti-urbanism. Published a year after Melville’s “Bartleby,” Thoreau presents Walden as a place of calm and contemplation, a pastoral landscape still in touch with human culture but at a safe distance from “restless city merchants” (191) and an environment where life follows the rhythm of machines and markets rather than the sun. For Thoreau, urbanity means mechanization, industrialization, rationalization, and self-distancing from nature. In Walden, the city is at times an organism, brashly feeding off the land (“All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city.” 191); then again it is a
machine that transforms nature into useful commodities (“Up comes the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the woolen.” ibid.). But most of all, it is a bookish place of “readers” rather than “seers” (187), and an environment detrimental to the development of the intellect: “up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them” (191). While the urban grid is not an element that appears on Walden’s narrative surface, the concepts and ideas it embodies – rationalization, control, and the transformation of nature into property – are the targets of Thoreau’s cultural criticism.

Among the writers of the American Renaissance, Poe and Melville were perhaps the only ones who were simultaneously horrified and fascinated by the city as a modern social, economic, and cultural space. Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” is a narrative that produces the spatial presence of the city by dint of its flâneur-narrator whose wanderings and observations literally plot the story. In Melville’s Wall Street story the geometry of urban modernity is represented metonymically, in the narrative’s core symbol of the office as a room without a view and a space that is defined by the solid architecture of brick walls. Poe and Melville differ from their contemporaries (Emerson, Thoreau) in that they both wrote at least one story each that anticipated modes of representing urban space that will come to dominate the literature of modernism. But like their contemporaries they perceived city and nature as mutually exclusive spaces.

For Heinz Ickstadt, author of an essay on “The City in English Canadian and US-American Literature” (1991), the writers of the American Renaissance represent the first of five aesthetically distinct yet historically intersecting modes of “fictional responses” (165) to the American city. One can also understand these modes as paradigms of the literary production of urban space in America. The writers of the first paradigm, who see “the concept of individualism as sanctioned by nature” (165), simply turn their back on the city, as do the New Yorkers in the opening chapter of Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851). Their fantasies and desires are nourished by the unruly ocean, not the ruled geometry of the city. It is out there, in the wild open space of the sea, that they hope to find themselves, not in the “lanes and alleys, streets and avenues” (Melville 19) of the city. We can still hear echoes of nineteenth-century anxieties about the devastating effects of urban spaces on the self in the late twentieth century, in, for instance, Paul Auster’s City of Glass (1985). The novel begins with the narrative voice describing New York as “an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps” that always leaves Quinn, the detective/writer protagonist, “with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the

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8 Ickstadt actually speaks of “five different phases” (165), a terminology that emphasizes historical chronology rather than aesthetic structure. These periods are the eras of romanticism, naturalism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism. However, Ickstadt admits that “such a linear history of the genre is highly dubious” and that “there is always a continuing of, or a returning to, preceding models of narration” (168), which is why I use the term “mode” in my summary of his model.
Auster’s protagonist refuses to succumb to the “temptation” of a “bright May morning” and its “call to wander aimlessly in the air” by “positioning himself with his back to the window” (41) and opening a book about the myths of Paradise and Babel. Joining ranks with Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme, the two writers Ickstadt chose to represent his fifth paradigm, Auster’s city is “less an identifiable geographical unit than a linguistic and semiotic space, a network of self-referential signs and systems of communication” (Ickstadt 168). For Ickstadt, the postmodern practice of approaching the city as structural inspiration, and no longer as “theme and object,” constitutes “the most radical and most complete response of the literary imagination to the overwhelming presence of the city” (168). At the end of the twentieth century, postmodern novelists continue the Romantic tradition of perceiving the city as a space that has the power to obliterate the individual self; but their narratives no longer offer the flight to nature as a possible route of escape from such a destiny.

Ickstadt’s three remaining modes can be regarded as aesthetic milestones on the way from Romantic towards postmodern literary and intellectual approaches to the city. What these modes have in common is the elimination of (nonhuman) nature from the realm of the city. The writers of the second paradigm, among them William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, replace the “old dichotomy of Nature vs. City” (166) with a new dichotomy of urban interiority vs. exteriority, protected vs. unprotected spaces; and they fictionalize America’s social and cultural anxieties about the dissolution of traditional hierarchies by juxtaposing “the civilized space of the living room or the salon” with “the chaotic movement of the city street” (166). Ickstadt draws on Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) to illustrate the third mode of literary responses to urbanity in which the city replaces nature as the mythic center of the American Dream. As “object and agent of desire” (166), Chicago and New York “appear as a truly new world” (166), one that offers “an inexhaustible promise of fulfillment” (167). The writers of the Lost Generation, most of them literary modernists, represent Ickstadt’s fourth mode. The city is now perceived as “a complete technological environment as well as an expanding semiotic field” (167). John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), the quintessential modern American city novel, is a narrative collage of urban discourses (“popular songs, brand names, advertisements, newspaper headlines,” 167) and a textual hodgepodge of social characters and cultures. The experimental character of the novel’s narrative structure, the telegraphic style of its sentences, and the author’s refusal to
focus on one protagonist (not counting the city itself) reflects the fast pace of the city and the ephemeral character of the modern urban experience. Nature is not completely absent from this environment – one can hear the chirping of sparrows above the roofs, occasionally smell scents of the sea wafting through the streets, see “a bright runnel of water in the ditch, flowing through patches of grass and dandelions” (Dos Passos 109) – but images of nature signify what is far away, unreachable, residual, or merely a memory of the past when Broadway “was all meadows” (227).

In The Day of the Locust (1939), Nathanael West addresses the defeat of nature by the city through even more poignant imagery. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere, West’s Los Angeles is a city in which natura naturata exists, though barely, in “the remains of a cactus garden in which a few ragged, tortured plants still survived” (West 89). More often, it is a simulation or imitation of the “real thing” – “a lawn of fiber,” “a cellophane waterfall,” and “cardboard food” (131). Read against the background of Manhattan Transfer, West’s relentless metaphors of agony and artificiality expose the inherently pastoral character of a simile like Dos Passos’s “birchlike cluster of downtown buildings” (229), a rhetorical figure in which trees bestow poetic qualities on architectural objects. Through the use of metaphor, Dos Passos seeks to preserve the presence of nature (as well as the literary authority it enjoys in the American cultural imaginary) in the textual space of the city. Yet ultimately, and much like West, he sees city and nature as existential counterpoints. There is one major difference though: while Dos Passos still believes in the possibility of turning one’s back on the city and finding a better life elsewhere (although not necessarily in a more pastoral environment), the nature-culture conflict in West’s novel finds its only dénouement in the apocalyptic demise of the city. Manhattan Transfers ends by zooming in on Jimmy Herf, hitching a ride on a furniture truck that would take him “pretty far” (360) away from the city. The Day of the Locust ends in scenes of a violent mass riot, an event that provides the painter-protagonist Todd Hackett with the images that allow him to finish a canvas called “The Burning of Los Angeles.”

In his essay, Ickstadt shows how the phenomenon of the modern city shaped the thematic and narrative structure of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novel. The epitome of modern cultural, social, and spatial

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10 On the ferryboat that takes him across the Hudson River to the mainland, Jimmy spots “a brokendown springwagon […] stacked with pots of scarlet and pink geraniums, carnations, alyssum, forced roses, blue lobelia” (Dos Passos 359). He finds the “rich smell of maytime earth […] of wet flowerpots and greenhouses” enticing and considers asking the driver “where he is going with all those flowers” (ibid.), but then stifles the impulse. While this image evokes the possibility of escape from the city into a more pastoral landscape, even if it is only for a brief moment, it seems odd that the wagon actually transports the rich, organic objects from the city to the countryside, and not vice versa.
experiences, the city became an important catalyst for literary innovation. But can the novel also stimulate new modes of seeing and knowing the space of the city? The following reading is based on the thesis that *Jazz* is a novel that unwittingly but effectively contributes to new urbanism’s project of putting nature back into the grid of the American city.

**Jazz: The Trace of Wild in the Urban Grid**

Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* is the second in a series of three novels in which the author investigates the cultural spaces, psychological legacies, and mythical dimensions of African American history since the nineteenth century. The first novel, *Beloved* (1987), examines the traumatic experience of slavery and is set in the Kentucky/Ohio borderland. *Paradise* (1999), the third novel, probes the effects of the civil rights era in an all-black, small-town community on the edge of the American heartland in Oklahoma. *Jazz* (1992), the center piece of the trilogy, focuses on New York City, one of the major destinations for those African Americans who left the rural South during the era of the Great Migration.

First and foremost, the novel is a jazzed-up literary blues about a love triangle, its tragic ending, and the melancholy of its memory. On the first three and a half pages Morrison presents us with the entire story: Violet, a woman of “fifty, but still good looking” (4), “used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue” (3). Violet’s husband, Joe Trace, “fell for an eighteen-year-old girl [Dorcas] with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” (3). Joe was never held legally responsible by the law “because nobody actually saw him” (4) shoot the girl. But Violet punishes him, releases the birds from their cage, embarrasses herself at Dorcas’s funeral by desecrating the dead girl’s face, starts visiting Dorcas’s aunt, curious to find out more about the girl who lured her husband away, and finally goes out to find herself a boyfriend. Joe endures all this and pays no attention to his wife’s love affair. At the end of this account, the nameless narrator reveals that she expected the Traces’ home “to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day” (6). But with the arrival of spring the Traces’ lives and home are revitalized – by a young girl who enters “the building with an Okeh record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper” (6). Violet invites her into the apartment, and that, the narrator concludes, was “how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom” (7). Strangely enough, this presumably second shooting is an obscure comment on an

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11 Towards the end of the novel the reader finds out that Joe did not kill, but only wound-ed Dorcas, who ends up bleeding to death because no ambulance would respond to “colored people calling” (210).
Nature in the Grid

event that will remain absent from the rest of the narrative. Yet it functions as
the rhetorical equivalent of the blue note, that flattened third in jazz that
produces the musical pathos of impending tragedy and lingering melancholy. It is this story, developed along a bass line of passion that sustains a
multivocal conversation about trust and betrayal, exaltation and moodiness,
love and jealousy, that best explains Morrison’s choice of “jazz” for her novel’s title. But like its musical namesake, _jazz_ can also be read as an allegory of urbanization. Borrowing a phrase from African American poet Cecil S. Giscombe, the novel can be described as an improvisation on the theme of “the melodious southern wild coming into the city” (10).

In _Jazz_, this process is accounted for on several narrative levels. Joe and Violet Trace come to New York from rural Virginia as part of the so-called Great Migration, which began in the late 1890s and peaked in the 1920s when Harlem became the “Negro capital of the world” (Claude McKay). Long sections of the book recount Joe and Violet’s past life in the South. The landscape of Virginia is not only presented as their ‘original’ home but becomes the device through which Morrison explicates her protagonists’ character and present behavior. As one of Morrison’s mythical figures, Joe Trace’s mother is “not a real woman but a ‘vision’” shaped like “a naked berry-black woman” who is “covered with mud and leaves are in her hair” (144). She is pregnant when Golden Gray, another of the novel’s Southern characters, spots her “in the trees” (144). And because of her appearance, he calls her Wild, the only name by which she will be known through the entire novel. Wild gives birth to a baby boy, but she leaves him to be raised by another family, who call him Joe. Asking his adoptive mother about his biological parents, Joe learns that “they disappeared without a trace” (124). “The way I heard it,” he explains, “I understood her to mean the ‘trace’ they disappeared without was me” (124). This dialogue reworks Joe’s function in the novel in Lacanian terms. By relocating her protagonist’s origin point from the realm of myth and nature into the symbolic realm of language, Morrison expands Joe Trace’s protagonistic function as fictional representative of specific social and historical experiences, now also rendering ‘Joe Trace’ as a floating signifier, leaving it to the reader to determine what it signifies.

Or perhaps not leaving it completely to the reader’s interpretive caprices. For as Jonathan Culler observed, “the most radical play of the signifier still requires and works through the positing of signifieds” (qtd. in Chandler 2002: 74). And Morrison directs that “positing” in several ways, most effectively through the puns on “wild” and “trace” in telling the story of Joe and Violet. In the semiotic order of _Jazz_, Joe literally is the Trace of Southern Wild that survives in the urban grid of the Northern city, an image further reinforced by Violet’s floral name. The bathos attached to a flower that common-

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12 Although _Jazz_ has a principal narrator who appears at the beginning and initiates the story-telling, the novel’s structure is such that provides significant narrative space to the voices and perspectives of various other characters.
ly symbolizes modesty and virtue is counterbalanced when, by the simple act of adding one letter, Violet becomes Violent – which is what neighbors begin to call her after the incident at Dorcas’s funeral. Growing up in the South, an apprentice-hunter learning “how to fool snakes, bend twigs and string to catch rabbits, groundhog; make a sound waterfowl couldn’t resist” (125), Joe is “more comfortable in the woods than in a town” (126). Reflecting on this time in his life and sounding somewhat surprised about the leap he has taken from the narrated past in the woods to the narrative present in the city, Joe says: “Folks thought I was the one to be counted on never to be able to stomach a city. Piled-up buildings? Cement paths? Me? Not me” (126). When the Traces first arrive, they find “a railroad flat in the tenderloin,” then move further south to “the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa,” and later back north again to “the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third” (127). Eventually, hard work and the changing housing market in early twentieth-century New York make it possible for this African American couple to progress “uptown” where “row houses and single ones” have “big yards and vegetable gardens” (127), and where they can create their private Eden, an urban pastoral of “birds and plants everywhere” (127). On a mimetic level, Joe and Violet’s movement from downtown slum to uptown garden represents the trajectory of African American social and economic progress in the early twentieth century. On the semiotic level, where floating signifiers produce meaning by latching themselves to each other rather than to their nontexual referents, Joe and Violet’s spatial movement signifies the resilient presence of wild nature in the grid of the city’s “laid-out roads” (120).

In the ‘mental’ space of Morrison’s fictional New York City, nature is an ineradicable presence. It exists in that space either unexpectedly and in spite of itself (Joe), or as a mixture of beauty and irrational cruelty (Violet/Violent). The story of Joe and Violet Trace links the urban-industrial North with the rural-agricultural South. Because they share the same narrative space (the text of Morrison’s novel), the existing conceptual boundaries that separate the city from the country, rural from urban America, begin to crumble, and readers begin to realize that nature cannot be abstracted from the social and cultural space that is the city. Nor are the differences between nature and culture always visible. In a brilliant passage at the beginning of *Jazz*, Morrison presents the imaginative dissolution of the nature-culture antagonism as the enthusiastic narrator’s identification with “the City”:

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the building in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. 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. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible – like the City in 1926 when all wars are over and there will never be another one. (7)
To the extent that the narrator is unable to perceive the difference between “people” and “the work of stonemasons,” between anatomy and architecture, the organic and the inorganic, landscape and cityscape, Morrison’s novel refuses to recognize traditional conceptual boundaries separating nature and the grid. The syntactical conjunction of river, church, and apartment buildings (or homes) produces a unified urban vista in which ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ elements coexist. Moreover, given that river, church, and home are three of the most conspicuous coordinates in the cultural landscape of the South, the passage also functions like a palimpsest, where the actual, visible reality is scraped and its residual surface layered with the memory of a distant landscape. Located at the very beginning of the novel, this vista introduces the theme of Southern presence in the North which, as we have seen, will be developed in more detail by an ensemble of voices engaged in telling the story of Joe and Violet. The end result is *Jazz*, a fictional account of a significant period in the cultural history of African Americans that also promotes what urban design theorist Sanford Kwinter, in a different context, called “a pastoral urbanism of inflection” (31). Inspired by the image of a shepherd closely observing and then responding to “the unfolding life of the flock, its movements, its collective affects, the flow of the continually reshaping mass and the flow of the landscape in continuous interaction” (ibid.), Kwinter sees this new, dynamic concept of urbanism as the mental prerequisite for revitalizing the space of the city. He urges urban designers and architects to adapt their work to the spatial forces that are already operative in the city rather than vice versa, adapting the city to the definitive forms of their designs. Kwinter’s pastoral urbanism is suggestive of the dynamics that underlie the way in which *Jazz* ‘thinks’ urban space.13 Morrison inflects existing notions of urban spatiality – traditionally perceived as “piled-up buildings” and “cement paths,” as the regular grid that displaced irregular nature – by carnivitalizing its gridded structure with traces of the wild, thus presenting urban space as an ecological (and historical) hybrid. As in the Bakhtinian carnival, which signifies the temporary suspension rather than the complete destruction of existing social orders and hierarchies, the spatial order of the city (crystallized in the grid) is not fundamentally challenged in Morrison’s novel. Yet *Jazz* definitely suspends traditional perceptions of the city as a space that is disconnected from the natural world, thus doing in fiction what new urbanists do in the social realm, and cultural critics, historians, and geographers in the discursive realm.

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13 I am adopting the terminology Nancy Armstrong introduced in *How Novels Think* (2005). She suggests that the British novel was “thinking up” (3), or producing, the modern individual in a narrative process of “invalidat[ing] competing notions of the subject” (ibid.) that had emerged in philosophy, science, and fiction during the period covered by her study.
Nature in the Grid: Jazz, New Urbanism, and the Practice of Ecocriticism

William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis* (1991), an environmental history of Chicago, was one of the first histories of a city premised on the author’s realization that the opposition between city and country, nature and civilization is “far more ideological than real” (16), a remark that implies the need to revise the narrative conventions and rhetorical figurations that support the dogma of separation. Cronon’s own historical narrative eradicates the perceptual boundaries between one of the United States’ most representative modern cities and its nonurban hinterland; and it exposes “the common past” (19) of industrial Chicago and the agricultural Great West. In the two decades that followed the publication of *Nature’s Metropolis*, other writers joined Cronon’s project. *Sagebrush and Cappuccino: Confessions of an L.A. Naturalist* (1995) is David Wicinas’s account of “reconciling” his life of “a café-hopping boulevardier” (1) with the “little forest ranger within me” (2) who followed the Hemingway code of manly life in the world that “lay beyond the asphalt grid” (3). Suggesting to his readers that the small natural oases within metropolitan Los Angeles “might help refresh your soul, especially if it is feeling a little withered from living in the city” (6), he casts nature and the city as spaces that affect people in fundamentally different ways. While such individual comments may perpetuate the perceptual and experiential separation of nature and the grid, the narrative of *Sagebrush and Cappuccino* as a whole guides readers in the direction of recognizing that Los Angeles is a megalopolis with a “rich natural history” (5). Charles Siebert’s *Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral* (1998) is much more self-consciously Thoreauvian in approach, but it is far from being nostalgic in tone. *Wickerby* describes the process by which the author comes to “see the streets that bind these buildings, or the parked cars, or the bent metal trash container on the corner of Washington and Lincoln, or even our trash […] as anything but what they all are: extensions of us, and therefore, of nature” (179). Matthew Gandy’s *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (2002), Lisa Benton-Short and John Rennie Short’s *Cities and Nature* (2008), and Eric W. Sanderson’s *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York* (2009) take a more academic approach to conceptual and perceptual reconfigurations of the relationship between nature and the grid. But they share with each other, and with Wicinas and Siebert, an interest in integrating nature into what we can call, with Lefebvre, the ‘mental’ space of urbanity. For geographer Matthew Gandy, the intellec-
tual work of “radically reworking the relationship between nature and culture” (5) is an indispensable prerequisite for countering the ideology of anti-urbanism that is a vital element in American culture and “a powerful current running through Western environmental thought” (7). Thwarting the rhetoric of antimodern nostalgia in popular ecological thought, Gandy proposes abandoning the conception of the modern city as the anti-thesis of nature and, instead, conceiving of it as the product of “a historical and political process” he calls the “urbanization of nature” (5).

For many practitioners of ecocriticism, particularly in the US-American context, this is exactly the process that needs to be halted, if not reversed – by the promotion of nature writing rather than urban novels, and by images and metaphors that expose the city as a cancer on the skin of the earth. Yet while the polemical force of such metaphors, and their usefulness as ecological wake-up calls, may be undeniable, they are less effective in providing paradigms for reconceptualizing the nature-culture relationship. The only treatment or remedy proposed is total eradication, which in the Judeo-Christian tradition that shaped the cultural imagination of the West, is in its narrative form nothing less than apocalyptic. One of the most prominent recent examples for narrating the apocalyptic downfall of a city in order to communicate an environmentalist message is Roland Emmerich’s film The Day After Tomorrow (2004), in which nature (metonymically represented by a gigantic flood wave) invades the grid of New York City. Emmerich’s film was rather successful in popularizing discussions of global warming, at least in Germany.

Yet as effective as the apocalyptic scenario may be on the visual level – viewers vicariously witness the environmental effects of global warming – on the epistemological level of providing new conceptual ‘visions’ of the nature-culture relationship it fails. Premised on narrative scenarios of cataclysmic destruction, on a psychology of fear, and on the presentation of nature as a force that will always triumph over culture, stories of environmental apocalypse can function as an effective counterpoint to narratives of cultural hubris. Yet in order to achieve this effect, apocalyptic narratives must assume

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best exemplified in the life and work of the many authors who campaigned for its construction” (93) – among them Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, George Bancroft, and Charles F. Briggs. Frederick Law Olmsted, the man most often associated with the design of the park, had a successful career as a journalist before he became one of the nineteenth century’s most famous landscape architects. Between 1790 and 1850, New York City grew from a town of c. 33,000 to over half a million inhabitants. By the time Central Park opened in 1859, the city had grown by another 300,000 residents. Fears about the city’s economic and social collapse were a psychological corollary of such rapid growth, at least among New York’s powerful. Creating a city park was seen as a countermeasure. “When they spoke of nature, park advocates referred to a man-centered cosmos in which the natural realm functioned as a beneficent, orderly presence” (95). However, in order to make room for that presence, New York removed 1,600 residents from the land on which Central Park was to be built. These residents were poor immigrants and members of one of the city’s most prominent African American community at the time.
that nature is “a site of treacherous and vindictive forces bent on retribution for her human violation” (Soper 71), thus reinforcing the conceptual separation between nature and culture. With my reading of *Jazz* I demonstrated that nature’s ‘invasion’ of the city grid can be narrated as a non-destructive process. But more importantly, it proves that an ecocritical pedagogy does not depend on the genre of nature writing, nor is it bound to an apocalyptic rhetoric or narratives of antiurbanism.
Works Cited


