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## Narration, Figuration and Disfiguration in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*

Mysteriously united, the face and the voice. Is it possible to conceive of a face without a voice or a voice without a face? In poetic works, voice and face are the most frequent images of the body. Painting and music, portraits and songs are the true stories of the face and voice and of their complex relationship. A mask or a bare face, melopoeia or a cry: the modality of representing a face or a voice challenges consciousness, blending opacity and transparency. To lose one's voice or face, to become mute, aphasic or disfigured, are experienced as a loss of self. In moments of passage or metamorphosis, it can seem that the voice and the face change, that we speak with a different voice, say something never said: we are faced with a different self who is heard differently, seen differently.

Without going back to the classic distinction between *phoné* and *logos*, or to the effects of a de-contextualization which lead to a discovery of voice, another voice in another discourse, or which risk losing the voice to the de-territorialized subject, questions can be asked about the exchange of glances, about how they affect the self's sense of possession or dispossession; how the eye (and the brain) can capture the emotions registered in the face of another, in the voice of another.

The concept "voice," understood as a linguistic construct of social beings, introduces the problem of "who speaks?" and, by implication, of "who listens?", i.e. "who speaks to who?"<sup>1</sup>

The voice has to do with the oral and the physical, is apparently the opposite of the writing and abstraction that connote text: whatever type of text — literary, visual, cinematographic or even a simple notice, text is always *graphing*. However, in order to reflect on texts, in literature as in cinema or art,

we use terms like narrating voice, character's voice, lyrical voice, poetic voice; terms like *authoriality*, which is related to authority and plays on oral/aural. The dichotomy voice/writing has been in state of crisis for a long time now as Bachtin (1986) and Derrida (1967) underline.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the features we normally associate with writing also belong to the domain of speaking, and the term "in-scription" covers both oral and writing practices. The literary text, for example, is usually analyzed according to oral linguistic acts, contextualizing them, and the con-text often consists of supplementary readings of other information capable of co-textualizing/contextualizing the text we are in the process of reading. Our literary reading practices, when teaching, are nothing if not the staging of the orality of a text. The voice of the teacher or of the student reading, gives voice to the characters or the narrator. Equally, writing can preserve its orality through an excessively paratactic style, or a repetitive style, or by using the device of asking us, as in an oral tale, to listen: "Listen," the incipit of many works asks us. "Hush, now": silence, the narrator of *Jazz* asks us in the incipit.

Searching for the driving forces of the writing process, in a study on the forms of repetition, I moved towards the hypothesis that writing, among other features, assumes the figure of a line, a string which has the function of putting in touch two distant bodies-beings who can touch each other through the *graphos*.<sup>3</sup> Is this not true for the voice, too? Is speech not directed towards reaching another? Reaching and even touching, for better or for worse? Even a cross, conflictual word, in reality wants to strike the other, to reach him/her, even hit violently. Words are like stones, as the saying goes. The idea of writing as a way to "touch" the other, is consonant with one of the most touching and most meta-narrative passages in *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. Let's read it right now, so that it can accompany us as a sort of indispensable subtext. It can be read as the incarnation, not the conceptualization, of the reading process:

... I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your

eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing your answer — that' s the kick.

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.<sup>4</sup>

I prefer not to make any comment for the time being, but to leave it to Morrison to take us back to this point.

Literature has, it is well-known, already *per sé* a doubling function: the narrator assumes the voice of a character or, vice versa, projects, mirrors and castrates himself in the other.<sup>5</sup> In the field of diegesis, a doubling is staged, which re-doubles (duplicates) the division author/narrator. I don't intend to linger on the well-known distinctions between author/narrator/character, nor on the distinctions between a homo — or hetero — diegetic narrative, given that Toni Morrison herself, author of *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), the works I have chosen, abandons any such neat genre type definitions, narrative schemes and the rest, constructed from text books of rhetorics or stylistics, narratology, criticism and literary theory, from Wellek and Warren to structuralists like Genette.

As a young woman in a pre-Cultural Studies epoch, Morrison studied at college, like all American students, modernism, critical categories and narrative modes, later elaborating them according to an awareness of cultural pluralism: although she had been taught the Cartesian "I think therefore I am," fundamental to the hegemonic reality of "white, capitalist, suprematist" America," later on she — as other African American artists — moved towards the re-elaboration of the West African proverb "I am because we are; we are because I am. I am we." Morrison was able, as another Africanist well-known proposition affirms, to "dismantle the master's house with his own tools," that is, to deconstruct, contaminate, review and (re)construct. Let us see how.

Literature, it is often said, is a duplication of voices; this can be intended as an echo, sound projected into a cave, voices without origins, replicating voices (in this case underlining the separate nature of the speaker from other

bodies; this echo manifests itself as the opposite of the game "call-and-response" of the musical duo or trio.) It can also stage the split description/narration, seeing/hearing, eye/ear. Analyzing the first elements in these pairs — description, seeing, eye — we are taken directly onto the visual plane: the face, the "figuration." In reality, any narrative needs both parts of the pair: it needs to blend the semantic field and significance of the ear (voice, narration: listening) with the semantic field and significance of the eye (face, description-figuration: sight.) If the eye were separated from the listening function in a narration, it would work like a fixed camera, reducing the story to a silent film. A story is born from and of the fusion of these two elements. In order to proceed, a narration must create characters, that is "assume a figure." In order to give a sense of direction to this paper, I have selected from the dictionary entries some of the possible meanings of "figure" that can inform a careful textual analysis of the narrative 'nodes' mentioned in the title.

"Figure" can mean: 1. the external shape or outline of a thing, in particular, the appearance of the human body; 2. an illustration, drawn, sculpted or painted image; historical character or character in a work of art; 3. an image given the dignity of or connoted as a symbol. ("the dove as a figure of peace"); 4. appearance; 5. rhetorical figure; figure of speech: an expression that moves away from the everyday, in order to achieve greater expressive power. From Latin: *figura*, from *figere*, to shape, to mould.

A narrative proceeds: 1) by giving form to or creating an outline for things and bodies; 2) sculpting and drawing images and characters with words 3) which can become a symbol or exist quite simply as decoration. All of this occurs through the use of rhetorical figures (5).

From the etymology of the word, it is possible to discover the *sememe* of "figure": it is connected to construction, to shaping, sculpting, representing and modeling. It is plastic, non-mimetic (the Latin 'figere' is connected to 'fiction'), belonging to the field of aesthetics (verbal representation or iconic visualization), iconology above all. The etymological root of the word is connected directly to the world of fictionality, to creative modalities, to narration and "figuration."

In recent times, much has been written about the figure and "figuration": Rosi Braidotti, in her introduction to the translation of *Manifesto Cyborg* by Donna Haraway, speaks of "figuration," taking the lead from Haraway herself and from Thomas Khun's notion of the *paradigm* in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1962), defining it as a fundamental myth, a shared narrative.<sup>7</sup> This means that figuration is not simply a figure of speech, or a rhetorical device, an image raised to the status of a symbol,<sup>8</sup> but it is both something around which the life-narrative partnership hinges (shared narrative — shared, that is, by a community), and a construct, a working image-thought-action.

Thus, we can say that "figuration" is the performative impulse of the figure. Iconic figuration gives movement and performativity to the (verbal) figure, which then can attain the status of an imaginative construction-narration so different from canonical models as to become the transmitter of de-stabilizing, alter-native political proposals. It can thus be posited that all that is figurative, *fictional*, concerned with mental constructions, can become political figur(e)action, the incarnation of a powerfully anti-hegemonic, political-poetic imagination.

This is what I believe occurs to figures like Beloved and Sethe, or like Denver and Paul D in *Beloved*, or to the figures, or characters if you prefer, (although they are not just simple characters) in *Jazz*.

I wish to concentrate here on one particularly symbolic figure, who is also highly historicized and politicized: Beloved in the novel *Beloved*, and Wild, a re-appearance of the same figure, complete with new, but equally explosive significance, in *Jazz*.

Going back to the dictionary that I am trying to create here, I resume again the term "figuration" as a concept-figure in which the idea-action of representation, narration (fiction) and performativity intersect: this joining, this meeting, produces new possibilities, new fictions-actions. These "figurations" are narratives that, utilizing the performative functions of language, express the power of the *agency* inside the created subject, producing the reply *agency* of the receiver: figurations are imagin-a(c)tions, capable of activating new paths and new processes.

The moment in which Morrison, (an expert not only of western traditions of intertextuality but of African oral narratives structured around recall and repetition, as well as the pattern of *call and response*), took the figure of Beloved into *Jazz*, giving her, like in the first novel, not a real name but an appellative, a nickname — Wild— she did so both to re-trace the forgotten story, that can neither be forgotten by passing it on ("It was not a story to pass on"), and to create an historicized link between the two novels, in order to play with the idea of 'trace' in the sense Derrida gives to it, to the point that "Trace" becomes Joe's surname (Joe Trace) as if it were the title of his project to re-trace his origins, to find traces of his mother, traces of slavery (and of the cancellation of any traces of origins performed by the slave trade) — the Africanist traces. Playing with the white view of Africans, and slave-descendants, as primitive and closer to nature than culture, the probable, lost mother is "wild," this name/lack of name indicating primitiveness: a wild, animal-like vagabond, just as the whites tend to describe women of African origins. In spite of all this, the indescribable, unportrayable, unreachable origin, which Joe tries to trace like a bloodhound, like an inconsolable lover, like an abandoned son, becomes a figure and a name: Wild is the "figuration" of the trace and the naming of it(self).

"I am because we are; we are because I am. I am we."<sup>10</sup>

The African proverb cited by Johnnella Butler, encapsulates the significant interrelations in African American artistic theory and practice, between individual subjectivity and the community, between narrating voice, or soloist, and the voice of the characters, or the band. Considering musical rhythms as a structuring framework in both novels (the first set in the years between slavery and Abolition, thus structured according to the patterns or canons of the work song and the blues; the second set in Harlem in the '20s, informed by jazz rhythms), Toni Morrison underlines the need to narrate in order to create a past and a future, as well as to live in the present, and the impossibility of assuming a definite voice.

In the two novels, the voices, those of the characters and those of the narrator, create figures; they are voices that are able to call up the dead, to

transform the invisible (a ghost, that which is never seen and thus unutterable; that which is excluded; or quite simply the figure for slavery; or everything that we wish it were, or that the other characters wish it were: sister, daughter, Sethe young again ...) into a figure. These figures become huge, omnivorous, they encompass all the "us" that meet to feed the "I" (Beloved). This is why the community, the "us," must chase out the ghost back into the world of shadows, giving voice to the storyteller. But in the following story, the storyteller is aware that the author has lost control of the characters, they become something else to such an extent that the chased-out ghost Beloved can become reincarnated in *Jazz* as the wild woman with no voice.

These novels raise theoretical issues that cannot be resolved by Western literary theory. They are novels that question even the stimulus of the older to cure the skin imperfections of the younger generation (the adolescent killed for jealousy in *Jazz*) or to disfigure the face. Like *Beloved* and *Wild*, Dorcas, Joe's young lover, has a sweet tooth and her skin is imperfect. Joe, in one of the *refrains* around which the jazz narrative revolves, believes that only by not eating sweets and by drinking more water, will this be cured. In the same way that the sweet tooth is a common element linking the three women, water is a recurrent figure in the narration-obsession of *Beloved*, who comes from water, the maternal waters, the water of the *middle passage* — *Beloved's* tomb is associated with the Ocean, full of the corpses of dead Africans, suicides or victims of violence during the deportation from Africa to America.

But let us start from the beginning: in a house on the edge of Cincinnati, immediately after Abolition, outside the freed-slave community, where Sethe lives, after having escaped from slavery while pregnant with her fourth child Denver. This house, from where her two sons run away and where her mother-in-law dies, is inhabited, from the very beginning of the novel, by a voice-less and face-less presence, a (non)figure in the sense established by the dictionary: 1) the appearance of the human body and 2) illustration; drawn, painted or sculpted image, but also an existent figure in the sense of 3) image raised to the level of symbol and 5) a rhetorical figure. The house is home to this presence that terrorizes the children, worries Baby Suggs, the grandmother,

and represents the mother's sense of guilt. The house is so full of this presence that "there was no room for any other thing or body" (39). This invisible one, faceless and voiceless, is already a figure, in the sense that its invisibility and its power attract the evocative power of words, symbolizing the unspeakable/invisible, not yet ready to take shape, or in narrative terms, "to assume human shape" or to become a character. How is it possible that something invisible can occupy the living space and the narrative space? The ghost makes the narrative into a ghost story; the past, violent and violated, cancelled out, inhabits Sethe's every pore, as it does every corner of the house. When the past suddenly erupts into the present through a reunion with Paul D, an old friend from the days of slavery, when a stranger arrives on the scene of the crime, when the male tries to take away her maternal self the ghost assumes a form, and just like before, when it was not a shaped figure, either for the narrative voice or for the eyes of the reader, when it still had no external shape or figure, it occupies all the maternal/domestic/narrative space: "Beloved swallows everything, absorbing them into her ever larger body."<sup>11</sup>

In the most rhythmical part of the novel, in a series of monologues by mother, daughter and sister, each of the three female voices has her own poetic and dramatic space to rebuild, like everyone involved in the tragedy. Differently from the tight sequence of words which structures the monologues of Denver and Sethe, Beloved's monologue unravels, takes time and breathes, fails to recompose the fractures, separations and violence, looks for words, looks for memories, looks for a place, a face, a smile, until it finds that face, celebrates the arrival on solid ground after the journey, and perhaps even death by water. It is the rediscovery of the first face ever seen, the mother or perhaps the nanny who brought up the slaves' children, "her smiling face is the place for me, it is the face I lost" and invites us to a reunion: "now we can join a hot thing." (213)

This counterpoint of blues voices ends with the interlacing of monologuing voices, intertwined in such a way as to cancel out the distinctions between the "I" and the "other," between the soloist and the trio — a monologue that stages the apotheosis of the desire for fusion, introjection and possession: the beating, drumming repetition of the blues "you are mine, you are mine, you



are mine," and the elimination of the reply in an apotheosis of affirmations, blur the difference between figures, eliminating both the concept of otherness and the African "I am because we are, I am we." Mother, daughter and sister become a single voice and face, superimposed and absorbed into the ghost of the past, which takes the form of the woman taken on by the strangled child.

The passage ends in fusion, the indecisiveness of identity, exchange, the unrestrained necessity, after a long abstinence, to possess another, acting out the drive of the baby still unable to recognize itself as separate from the mother, but also the introjection of the slave owner's concept of ownership of the slaves:

You are mine  
 You are mine  
 You are mine

It is the voices from the past — those of Stamp Paid that saved Denver from Beloved's destiny, and those from the newspaper article that Paid gives Paul D — that re-shape, that give an assassin's face to Sethe. It is the voices from the past, the history of a bloody crime involving a certain Margaret Garner who killed her three-year old daughter in 1856, rather than hand her over to slavery, that led Morrison to write this novel. It is the history of the enormous loss that took place in those Ocean crossings that led Morrison to represent those devastated lives — not just voices, traces.

Denver suffers because her mother seldom looks at her, and thus never helps her feel different from the ghost of her sister, and it is Denver who, on those rare occasions when she is "looked at" by Sethe, feels the beatitude of being accepted for what she is (118), and it is Denver who, after trying to acquire a face for herself, goes dumb when she hears that her face is not human, but resembles that of an animal — Denver, made dumb by the traumatic realization that white children see her as inhuman; it is Denver, the child who has known the horrors of race discrimination who begins a process of re-integration, differentiating herself from her mother and her sister inside the house, and thus accomplishes the re-integration of an "I" hereto indistinguishable from the community of "we." Through the entrance of Denver in the outside world, the individual traits that distinguish one figure from another are defined, the ghost

is chased out of the house, with the help of the community. But the narrator leaves us with some clues: perhaps Beloved, once again disappeared, was not the ghost of the murdered child, which continued to haunt the mother sixteen years later (as would emerge from a *supernatural* reading), but is symbolically the ghost of Black America, forgotten as much by the whites as by the slave-descendants themselves; and supposing she was a girl escaping from a slave owner-rapist (as would emerge from a realistic reading of her presence in the narrative, supported by the phrase "he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there," 212), and was really pregnant, not symbolically or hysterically, but really carrying a child with her when she was rejected and ostracized by the community, becoming an outcast, wild, closer to nature than culture, "gone primitive," just as the consciousness and representation of white modernism liked to portray the black mother as mother Africa. Then it is possible to imagine that the baby she carried was Joe Trace, the male character in *Jazz*. Paternity, as black history shows, is uncertain. Is the father of the child born of Beloved-Wild Paul D? And what of the man who kept her in the hut?

This other story, that those who have only read *Beloved* cannot appreciate, is discussed by Martha C. Cutter in her fascinating essay "The Story must Go on and on: The Fantastic, Narration and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*" by examining all the clues or traces that connect the two novels.<sup>12</sup> These traces add something more to the interest, excellence and intricacy of the novels of this writer and are designed for the most attentive of her readers. Those who love Toni Morrison must love re-reading the novels, love picking up the traces or following the trail, with eyes like those of an African hunter, the native *hunter* and the American trapper; they must be disciples of Hunters Hunter or Henry Lestroy (the narrator hybridizes the figure of the African Griot, with western traits) or of Les Troy (a pun on the French for "the stories," "les histories": read together in French, Les Troy sounds like "lestuar," which recalls the African habit of eating and shortening words), the black hunter, or the Africanist presence of black hunters in America. Finally, Lestroy is one of the characters in one of the many subplots in the novel. Only by re-reading, listening again to the improvisation at the base of this jazz performance, is it

possible in the second novel in the trilogy, to recognize the traces left by figures from the past (the co-text) which in the new text appear as new "figure-actions" who recount and re-enact the story of African Americans in a different way, giving the reader the possibility of figuring, of shaping new visions that form the rizomatic texture of black American history, a weaving together of voices that give a face to one of the faces that no one wanted to see.

Morrison has never liked the closed-ending in her narratives nor uni(vocal) interpretations or single voices. Cutter maintains that Morrison, constructing figuration in movement, complex identities and plural significances, rejects the concept of literature-as-consumerism (from "to consume" which means both to devour and to use up), of the book-object to be read and thrown away once read, and of objective interpretation; she embraces instead a search for narrative modes that "resist the totalizing impulse of narrator and of readers themselves." This, Cutter asserts, is certainly connected with Morrison's "investment in an oral, African American tradition of storytelling, of the Griot." The reader in search of a single meaning fails to see the open interpretations that *Beloved* (text) implies, interpretations which derive from the novel's blending of realism and fantasy, novel and romance, and risks in this way formulating an interpretation that ignores the narrating voice of the work, busy sowing doubts about who Beloved (figure) is: a survivor of the Middle Passage (she shows a certain knowledge of the conditions on these slave ships: hunger, violence, death, corpses jettisoned into the sea), or a young woman held in slavery by a man who rapes and abuses her — the narrator says that a white man called her "Beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" (215) and that Stamp Paid himself has heard "voices" about a whiteman from around Deer Creek keeping a girl locked up. Later this man is found dead and "the girl gone." (235)

*Beloved* (novel) is a composite narrative, a song for many voices, at times involved in monologues, at times dialogues, voices moving autonomously (narrative devices of monologue or stream of consciousness) or together with another (dialogue): from separation to connection to interconnection. In our reading, these voices are dressed in figures, en-visions in the mind, in our imagination, in our being, in that we are perceptive subjects able to trans-

form words into faces, figures, tired of hearing the history of slavery from the white point of view, as if the slaves had no voice, no face. The extraordinary nature of this narrator is that s/he creates texts made of figures who become "figura(c)tions," figures that stir up and agitate the story, History and the reader: texts constructed to fit in with a multiplicity of intra-texts, tales within tales; texts capable of going beyond themselves, beyond the end of a text, re-forming inter-textually (in other texts.) We can see how, in the first book, a certain figure is just a pretext or a rough draft to be re-figured in the second book.

Starting from this generative quality the works have, found in the novels not only of Toni Morrison but also Ishmael Reed, Johnella E. Butler develops a scheme that clarifies the implications inherent in the differences between African American literary theory, based on Nommo, which "generative, multiple, changing, interactive, unfixed but connected." (Butler, 268) and an American literary theory based on a western Logos, outlining "the fundamental dimension of the African American double consciousness and the battle for integrity." (269). "Nommo" is the word that sets the vital energy free: saying the word is a creative act, and the word is power; tangible things are not the only real things but, once said, narrated, every expression of thought is real, in the sense that it has been conceived. Moreover, the word has the power to change and transform reality, says Butler quoting J. Jahn: "there is no 'harmless', noncommittal word, Every word has consequences."<sup>13</sup>

Butler's theoretical reflections on African American literary works and criticism, aimed at challenging the binary oppositions of Logos, continue affirming "There is no such thing as literary work or artistic work that 'fixed' since the word interacts with the reader. One's identity is only fixed when forces outside the self prevent or distort the expression of its agency and multiplicity, and then it is only fixed from the perspective of those outside the self who view it as fixed." (271)

This theory illuminates our understanding of the narrative structure and of vision in works by authors like Toni Morrison.<sup>14</sup> Glancing quickly at the fascinating notion that identities are "fixed" by pressure exerted from external forces, we can read Sethe as trapped in her solitude, in her sense of separa-

tion and repression, not only because of the psychological trauma she has undergone, but because of the pressure exerted on her by the 'normalizing' forces outside, from the freed slave community on one hand and from white society on the other.

Using Butler's first proposition — that the literary work is mobile and fluid because it is transformed by its meeting with the reader — an examination of the inter-textual relationship between *Beloved* and *Jazz* can be undertaken, especially the treatment of the narrating voice and its relationship with the reading subject in *Jazz*. Cutter reconstructs all the details that connect the many-sided figure of Beloved with the traces of the figure of Wild: Beloved disappears into the woods, naked, with leaves in her hair/ Wild lives in the woods with leaves in her hair; Beloved, greedy for honey and sugar sandwiches, sucks sugar cane/ Wild loves honey, which she steals from the bees, and lives in a sugar plantation; when Beloved disappears in 1873, she is probably pregnant/ Wild gives birth to a boy, probably Joe (Trace) in 1873. As Cutter says, "Joe's name is the trace of Beloved in *Jazz*, the remainder of a presence that could not be contained." Joe chooses the surname 'Trace' for himself. "Trace" is a clue, a trace for the reader to follow Wild, to read her inter-textually with Beloved (novel and figure.) In *Beloved*, Beloved is the ghost of the daughter; in *Jazz* she is the ghost of the mother — actually in *Beloved* there is a ghost of a mother who has left her traces on Sethe, an identification mark. In *Jazz*, the repetition of the words "traces," "stitches," "seams," "prints," "trails," "tracks" and "marks," all of them plural, appears to alert us to Morrison's intention of scattering clues and traces, until the reader, following the narrating voice, encounters a figure that remains invisible, with the exception of the meeting with Golden Grey: Wild appears as a trace herself, a presence-absence even in the moment in which Joe finds her cave and discovers the signs— "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 a silver cigar case," but no face: "But where is she?" (184)

This narrative construction repeats a similar one used to describe the house in Bluestone Road, haunted by the presence-absence of the ghost baby.

By following the narrating voice, as it were the music of a jazz performance, we too can create, by stitching together the narrative threads, suturing the infra-textual seams, (or intra-diegetic, if within the same text), the intertextual stitches (between texts by the same author, also defined as 'auto-textual') and the metatextual traces — picking up, for example, in the description of the earrings found in the cave, inter-diegetic traces leading to the earrings so dear to Beloved, which in turn are traces of her past — the reincarnation or ghost of a young woman escaping from slavery; or they can recall Sethe's glass earrings, pressed closed to her face when she was breast-feeding. Or else, African jewelry that survived the crossing, considered as valueless knick-knacks by the unscrupulous slave traders. The silver brushes and cigarette case and the cream-colour silk shirt, recall the presence of the mulatto Golden Grey, who, looking at Wild's body, covered in mud, experiences a moment of ethnic epiphany: Wild incarnates the great, black woman, the beauty of the colour black and she reveals to him his own, concealed negritude. Beloved-Wild is, however, attracted by the blonde hair, the yellow shirt and the silver brushes, attracted to the apparent racial otherness of Golden Grey, the golden-grey boy, the mulatto, the half and half, unable to come to terms with, or better 'to give a face to' his blackness until that meeting with Wild who, significantly, is a receptacle of blackness: "a naked berry-black woman. She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair. Her eyes are large and terrible" (144). Helping her in the delivery, Golden Grey himself gives birth to the blackness within him; looking into her large and terrible eyes, the boy who didn't know to be 'golden-grey', that is, a bastard, worse perhaps than being a black, is forced to come to terms with his racial diversity, different from that which his mother with her lace, silk and silver, tried to construct.

Golden Grey's identity, Golden Grey's face, is fixed by/towards whiteness, "by external forces" (Butler). Interestingly, the narrative voice itself, the voice constructing the "figur(narr)action" of Golden Grey, becomes aware of the narrative fixity, that is, her identification with the African American discursive, identity-creating constructs. The narrator is irritated by this spoilt child but, getting to know Golden Grey's point of view while 'figuring' him,

she changes perspective, challenging the fixed identities existing within the black/white polarity, feeling the hurt of the other, 'other' both for his whiteness and for his blackness. The narrator picks up on the complexity of the figure she has created:

How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin.... But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in his place, effortlessly without the need to acquire a false face... I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am. (160)

She was not aware that Golden Grey exists in the narrative not simply as a figure, the symbol of a pre-constructed idea, but after the meeting with Wild, he has moved into figuration: he incarnates the identity of the other; in the American whitened context, he is other even to himself, as "otherness is determined by perspective, position, and power relationships, and not simply assumed as the essential condition of African Americans. Likewise, otherness is not the assumed condition of the dominator." (Butler, 272) Carrying within him traces of the dominator (white mother) and dominated (black father), of the white-gold and of the black, Golden Grey problematizes simple binary oppositions. The narrative voice moves towards a dia-nnomic narration that "accepts difference and identity as inter-agents," no longer avoiding contradictions and dissonance, but working from within a position of consciousness-awareness, capable of mending wounds, stitching seams or leaving them open, to avoid clear distinctions between identity, culture and race. The narrative voice "takes care" of Golden, wanting him to become someone who can "alter things," using "the language that wishes him well, speaks his name." (161) The narrating voice on several occasions admits that with characters, like with people, mistakes can be made: "So I missed it altogether" (220); she too is forced to re-read her own pre-constructed, assumed positions, including those 'whitened' narrative models that find their way into the text. As one familiar with modernist/post-modernist strategies, she explicitly re-writes them, deconstructing the certainties of self and those of the reading subject used to certain reassuring and identifiable models. Certainties in narrative lead

to the construction of stereotypes, the perpetuation of the same, while here the characters in the story spurn the narrator's certainties, becoming "figure-actions," "busy being original, complicated, changeable - human" (p. 220), capable of challenging the reality around them, challenging the laziness of the writer who can be more predictable than the characters, "confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or mattered." (*ibid.*)<sup>15</sup>

This continual breaking of focus and re-focusing of the narrator's voice/gaze is one of the most unsettling narrative strategies that I have ever come across in my career of "consummate reader": within the narrative, during the narrative process-progress, Morrison explores racial space in order to reveal its inherent heterogeneity, underling the impossibility of drawing a black-white line; in the same way she plays with gender differences, refusing a gender line, leaving the reader uncertain as to the narrating voice — is it male or female? In this way the narrative resists simple generalizations or the taking of positions or even the identification with a single sex (narrator and reader might risk taking sides only with Joe or only with Violet, blurring the complexity of the situation.) Morrison explores gender differences in order to remind us that there are women and women, women and men, grieving women and grieving men, young women, still traumatized, who break down, and older women, traumatized by slavery, who don't break down.

The shift in the narrative away from *Logos* towards *Nommo* produces figurations in the text and raises destabilizing questions about our consumeristic and escapist ways of reading. The reader is obliged to follow the story, the "figuration," and to create his/her own story, re-making the text, giving a voice, and a face, to the text ("make me, remake me.")

One of the possible interpretive readings or deducible stories in *Jazz*, which can be traced back to *Beloved*, relates to Dorcas, another young woman, portrayed between adolescence and youth— like *Beloved*, like *Denver*, like *Amy* in *Beloved* — a kind of jazz age *Beloved*, transferred into another time, another story, another face.



Joe uses Dorcas in his desire to re-trace his mother, and ends up shooting her after convincing himself that loosing Dorcas implies loosing every trace of his mother. Shooting Dorcas, he is finally able to do what he was not able to do with the shadow of Wild. The reader must then ask whether Dorcas is not a re-figuration of the mother, essential to Joe's erotics and essential to "re-mernory" the mother, to use a Morrison term. Violet, another woman with a terrible maternal history (she died in a fire), is cut off from her past in the moment in which Joe does not tell her about Wild: she is so traumatized by her own experience as a child that she refuses the idea of having children. Canceling any trace of her past, she is gradually cut off from the community, from the future, from the "I am because we are." Confined by the solitude of the present, alone in a room, she "silences" the bird she says she loves and thus, unknowingly "silences" Joe, who in order to open his mouth/beak, finds another. Joe finds a lover who puts him in touch with the present, with the city, with the 20's: she represents the Jazz Age (she loves clothes and dancing and gives way to the yearnings of "life below the sash.") She also manifests similarities with, or traces of, Wild and Beloved: she loves sweets, so much so that her skin is blemished, "dirty," a skin that Joe wishes were perfect while continuing to give her presents of sweets. The isolation from the community is another trace which connects her with Beloved: just as Beloved, although pregnant, is rejected by the society of Sethe and Denver, no one tries to save Dorcas from death. And while Joe actually only wounds her, she leaves herself to bleed to death while the community stands by and lets it happen. Why? As a result of the general violence and promiscuity of the period? Because of her role as a catalyst for the events narrated at the beginning of the novel — kind of liberation from the restrictions of the plot? A young woman in Harlem is shot by her 50-year old lover when he thinks she is leaving him. She is left to bleed to death. His wife, Violet-Violent, then tries to disfigure the young woman's face in the church, "trying to do something bluesy," as she herself admits. (114)

*Disfiguration:* could this be the trace that as a reader I have to follow? The very nature of disfiguration suggests a violent action. Violet goes into the church with a knife. On a literal level, the betrayed woman wants to slash the

face of the young woman: she wants to kill the young woman, who is already dead, again; she wants to strike out against the younger generation, the generation that, 60 years after the abolition of slavery (a slavery which implicated the abolition of freedom and rights, the abolition-cancellation-disfiguration of motherhood) still has no mother (neither father.) The mothers and fathers, even of those born into freedom, are dead, have run away, burnt in their own houses, or have no children (Violet, Alice Manfred, Dorcas) and are still unable to recount the story of themselves, their history, so oppressed are they by the pain of the un-said.

So who is Dorcas? The face of a beautiful girl who loves dancing, already spoiled by the effects of urbanization, by the lascivious and transgressive atmosphere of Harlem, portrayed as a painting by Chagall, where all the windows are open, letting the rooms fill up with the rhythms of saxophones, trumpets and drums, making everybody, even religious Alice Manfred, "aware of flesh and something so free she could smell its bloodsmell." (58)

Who is Dorcas? A narrative projection of all those who "thought the life-below-the-sash as all the life there was" (60), a black woman who can indulge in her own sexuality after centuries in which the only conceivable form of sensuality for black people was copulation linked to procreation, reproduction aimed at the production of new slaves; or sexual abuse from the slave owners, plantation managers or white farm hands.

Perhaps Joe kills her without really wanting to kill her, but only because he feels he cannot lose the woman who has led him towards the discovery of his mother, or towards what as Roberta Rubinstein describes, is "the radically unavailable embodiment of a primary emotional attachment, whose absence persists as a haunting, idealized presence."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Violet desires to kill her again, to disfigure her face, rendering her unrecognizable, with "no figure," because, within the inter-textual web between *Beloved* and *Jazz*, she represents the continuation or re-figuring of Wild-Beloved. Conceived in this way Dorcas incarnates: (a) the past that Violet cannot come to terms with and which Joe wants to bring back to life, 'transfusing' Wild into Dorcas (who, when she hears music, goes 'wild'); (b) the present in which no dialogue between the

married couple exists, a present they share physically (they love the city, the music of the trains) but not emotionally, even choosing discontinuation by refusing to have children.

Violet's insistence on having a photo of Dorcas, on staring at her, interpreting her face, reveals perhaps a desire to repair, understand, "interpret" and recompose her features after the *effacement*, the cancellation of her face (and her voice) first by Joe and then, with the attempted disfiguration, by Violet herself. A new narrative evolves and revolves around the photo of Dorcas, emanating from those first ten lines of the novel. The photo of Dorcas functions as the *mise en abyme* of the narrative mystery. The narrating voice puts into words, creates figures and figurations, stimulated by a single snapshot, a fleeting glance, a news article in a paper. Characters in *Jazz* attain the status of figurations by looking and re-looking at the face of Dorcas, making and re-making their own histories by interweaving them with the stories of other characters, met in the city or from the countryside. Moreover, through the character of Golden Grey who encompasses both the story of Violet (whose grandmother, True Belle, was Golden Grey's nanny) and the story of Joe, (probably Wild's son, who reveals Golden Grey's African origins, forcing him to recognize his own blackness), we are brought back to the origin, incarnated in Wild, who is both (a) the ex-slave, saved from slavery by her mother's violent act (Beloved, the murdered child) and (b) the reincarnation of that child — Beloved aged 18 — who is one of the survivors of the Middle Passage, and the maternal space (that essential emotional bonding denied to the children of slaves and ex-slaves) and, finally, (c) that "wild space" that exists in all women of African descent. She is also the ghost of slavery who has never been shut out of the American house.

Looking at Dorcas with the psychological, de-racialized, culturally-aware gaze of the narrator or with the gaze of characters, like Joe, searching for their origins or with the hermeneutic gaze of the reader — is to re-make her, it is a form of therapy to counteract the desire to cancel the other, to empty her of a meaning; it is a way of not looking at oneself, or a way of going beyond the belief that in her, someone else — the mother — can be found. The gaze cast on Dorcas is cast on the wound of slavery, still open, bleeding, unwritten,

un-figured, unaided just like Dorcas. Looking at her implies narrating and re-narrating *ad infinitum* that simple but dramatic story contained in the initial ten lines; to weave together the threads, strands and filaments that form the history of an African American narrative. Disfiguring her implies a refusal to recognize any trace of Wild and Beloved, any trace of one's own mother, of one's own history. It is a radical attempt to stop memory, to create a distance and, at the same time, quite simply an act of hatred "in the face of" the woman who stole her man.

During the promotional tour for *Paradise*, the last volume in the trilogy, Morrison spoke about the relation between her characters and memory or, as she prefers to call it, "rememory." She spoke about how when the past, in the form of memory, bursts into the present, no amount of energy spent in the attempt to 'not see' will suffice. Something simply has to be done with that memory: re-memory, which is not "simply memory or remembering, but the process of learning what to do once you've remembered."<sup>17</sup> These words cast light not only upon the Joe-Violet dynamic, with the bursting of a past previously kept at bay into the present, but also illuminates the intention of the writer in telling this tale.

Dorcas, in her re-narrated, re-figured form at the end of the work (Felice's story), is instrumental both in generating the impulse towards re-memory that lays bare the inter-textual dynamics of the text(s), and at the same time reveals the connection between reading and writing, a read book and a written book, interpretive voices and narrating voices. In the final act of closure, a new opening is created ("make me, remake me.") It is not only possible to read the love relationship that joins writer and reader, narrator and figuration, narration and interpretation, but to read the syntax of desire, the vocabulary of the erotic, that forms the ending, that per-forms or "figures" the novel, and the interpretation of it, as a body (the body of Dorcas.)

Through the assassination/suicide of Dorcas, her re-elaboration, in the work is a reciprocal collaboration between narrator and character, between narrator and reader. It is here that the shift from invisible to visible occurs — from the cancellation, the disfiguration of the history of black America to

its transcription into jazz and in *Jazz*. The voice in love of the woman or man who narrates the story, seems to come from the body of Dorcas, from this woman so in love with the life-below-the-sash, a prototype of that first generation of African American women free to choose whether and with whom they had sex. But even this affirmation is only partly true, given that Dorcas is left to die, abandoned by the brothers and sisters of her community. And here is another story: the violence of slavery gives way to a new kind of violence, sex against sex, generation against generation, the unresolved trauma of African Americans — unresolution due to a lack of courage to re-read the traces of origins, or to go beyond reductive schemes that create opposition and conflict; or lack of courage to mend the fragmentation and separation and alienation of "the past, of other human beings" formed initially by the experience of slavery and later perpetuated in the space of *logos*. The healing comes from the shift through the *Nommo*, that word that generates vital energy — towards the space of consciousness, inter-connections and integrity, where "individuality exists within the context of communality." (Butler, 269)

## NOTES

1. Keane, Webb. "Voce/Voice," in *Culture e Discorso*, A. Durand ed., Roma: Meltemi, 2001, 407.
2. Bachtin, M., "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986 [1979]. Italian translation: *L'autore e l'eroe: teoria letteraria e scienze umane*. Torino: Einaudi, 1988; Derrida, J., *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Editions de minuit, 1967; and Derrida, J., *La voix et le phénomène*, Paris: PUF, 1967.
3. On this, Zaccaria, P. *Le Forme della ripetizione. Le ipertrofie di EA. Poe, i deficit di S. Beckett*, Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1992, p. 57.
4. Morrison, T., *Jazz*, London: Picador, p. 229. From now on, the pages from this book will be directly written after the citations. The italics are in the text.
5. Zaccaria, cit., p. 63.
6. Expression used by bell hooks, particularly in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End Press, 1990, and *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations*, New York: Routledge, 1994.
7. In her new book, *In metamorfosi. Verso una teoria materialista del divenire*, (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2003), Braidotti moves the concept of figuration towards cartographic analysis, which is not

central to my discussion, whereas what is interesting for my enquiry into Morrison's texts is the hypothesis that figurations "try to draw a cartography of the relationship of power which define the mutual positions... in this way they [figurations] can contribute to identify possible sites and strategies of resistance." (11)

8. Definition 3 of the reported dictionary entries for "figure."

9. Morrison, T., *Beloved*, London: Picador, 1987, pp. 274-5. From now on, the pages from this book will be directly written after the citations.

10. West-African proverb quoted in: Johnnella E. Butler, "*Mumbo Jumbo*, teoria ed estetica dell'integrità nella letteratura Africana-americana," in *Estetica e differenza* (P Zaccaria ed.), Bari: Palomar, 2002, pp. 261-274.

11. Nancy Jesser, "Violence, home, and community in Tony Morrison's *Beloved*," p. 19.

12. In *African American Review*, Spring, 2000 (available online [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_O/m2838/1\\_34/62258906/pl/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_O/m2838/1_34/62258906/pl/article.jhtml), copyright 2000 *African American Review* and The Gale Group.) As I have downloaded this text from the web, I cannot refer to pages.

13. Jahn, J., "Mantu. The new African culture," New York: Grove Press, 1961, pp. 132-3.

14. Butler does not limit this vision to the implications of a dia-nommic theory of African American literature, but extends it to all the literatures in America, making reference to Leslie Marmon Silko, native American, Maxine Hong Kingston, Asian American, Rudolpho Anaya, chican and others. (274)

15. Lack of space prevents us from reflecting here on the narrator's choice to renounce the role of God-like creator of plot and characters, to avoid omniscience and even narratorial reliability and to escape from identification with either a particular character or with a precise or univocal position. In this, Morrison takes her inspiration from jazz music where there is no score for the musicians, just points of departure. Jazz frees the musician from the score (written page), from a known beginning and return, and for this reason a jazz piece is always different, even if played by the same musicians or the same band. (On this, see Calefato, P "Hush now, don't explain": su *Jazz* di Toni Morrison, in *Europa fenicia*, Franco Angeli, 1994) The jazz performance derives from the dynamic interplay between the musicians and the audience, in the same way that the novel *Jazz* re-creates itself anew with each new relationship reader/writer, or, referring to the last lines *in jazz*, quoted at the beginning of this study, the novel resurrects with the caress of the reader's hands on the novel; is seen again by the eye-face of the reader who peruses at and responds to the page/body of the text/writer who, for the duration of the reading, feels "gazed at."

16. In "History and Story, Sign and Design: Faulknerian and Postmodern Voices in *Jazz*," in: *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned* (C. Kolmerten, S. M. Roos and J. Bryant Wittenbers eds.), Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1997, 161).

17. Reported in the "Points for Discussion of *Beloved*" in the website of the University of Warwick, © 2001.

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