MARGINAL DISCOURSES IN THE WORK OF TONI MORRISON

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Abstract: Placing herself at the crossroads of severeal marginal discourses (the feminist, the racial and that of the dismembered), Toni Morrison writes about the necessity to approach our cultural and historical legacies in terms of their ambiguity and multiplicity. In her novels historical amnesia often emerges as a reminder of the wanderings of memory, multiplication of the haunting past being equated by individual filtering and choice. Drawing on so-called reliable documents, Toni Morrison portrays black experience as a challenge to the center and the tradidion.

Keywords: Afro-American, hauntology, dismembered, legacy, jazz.

As Morrison argued in 1992 "the consideration of black experience has become central to our national literature. It is not just a gap to be filled at the edge of what we already know, and must not be permitted to hover at the margins of literary imagination."(Morrison 5) Alongside with this shifting of the assumed marginal to the limelight,she addresses historical questions from the starting point of amnesia, rather than from the assumption of knowledge. Instead of offering a grand historical sweep, her writing directs us to the "disremembered", who, by definition, do not feature in the historian's reconstructed scheme. A unique intertwining of the individual marginal with the historical one may be envisaged as lying at the foundation of Toni Morrison's work.

In his collection of essays *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida attempts to theorise the relation of contemporary culture to its histories in terms of what he calls "hauntology". Showing how the past is often figured as a kind of haunting force, Derrida states that it continues to assert itself in the present, it returns as a half-presence, something which is "simultaneously remembered and known, and at the same time strange and unknowable."(Derrida 24). Using a kind of "hauntology", what Morrison's writing does is "to open up a sense of histories whose buriedness and half-knowability weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."(Morrison,25) Beloved, like the girl Dorcas in *Jazz*, represents the past that will not lie down to sleep, a reminder of history that no one wants retold, an old wound which must be treated, if there is to be a healing. Morrison's novels echo, therefore, Derrida's considerations on the necessity to approach our cultural and historical legacies in terms of their ambiguity and multiplicity. In her novels historical amnesia often emerges as a reminder of the tortuousness of memory, multiplication of the haunting past being equated by individual filtering and choice:

"If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. One always inherits from a secret –which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so'…The injunction itself (it always says 'choose and decide from among what you inherit') can only be done by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times- and in different voices."(Derrida 16)

Drawing on documents deemed reliable, depending on commercially and institutionally preserved traces such as books and archived papers is tantamount to favouring the literate and the

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educated. Looking at pre-twentieth century records, when literacy was denied to the vast majority of African Americans, means dealing almost exclusively with the white voice. Morrsion's work challenges this kind of historiography. In her portrayal of black experience her focus moves away from the exclusionary habits and effects of traditional history towards a concern with the ordinary and the unrecorded.

Beyond the frequent references to documented history in Toni Morrison's novels, there exists a much stronger commitment to the private, the undocumented and the everyday. She seems to be interested in those with least ability to speak for themselves and in her rendering of black experience she continually moves away from important and well documented figures towards those with less chance to be heard. In *Jazz* for instance, the historic setting of the Harlem Renaissance could easily form the background for a homage to great African American musicians and writers. But her novel is in fact a study of trauma and desire in the lives of individuals living far away from the limelight. As argued by Caroline Denard in *The Black Book*, "she wanted to bring the lives of those who always got lost in the statistics to the forefront- to create a genuine black history book that simply recollected life as lived."(Denard 119) If we ask what the novel is about, we might say it is about a period of racial oppressionn and violence, studied throught the lives of specific characters, but it is also represents a celebration of black words and voices, of the rhythms of black music itself.

The book is illustrative of the migration experiences of African American women epitomized in what was called 'the blues matrix", a cultural artifact whose characteristics respond to a crossroads from which readers can and should re-audit the music and history of 1920' Harlem. In an interview with Nellie Mckay, Morrison asserts:

" Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. The function of jazz is to speak desire" and she sees in unfulfilled desire "a quality of hunger and disturbance which is specifically Afro American it is an ineffable quality that is obviously black." (McKay 138)

What is traumatic is not only a sense of loss, but also its reiteration of something palpable that occupies a palpable emotional space: the presence of absence. *Jazz* is a sequel to *Beloved* in recalling a traumatic past and both novels were inspired by real documents. Morrison had read in Camille Billop's manuscript about the peculiar origin of the photograph of a young woman's corpse. She had rescued her lover who had shot her by refusing to identify him. In an 1985 interview with Gloria Naylor, Morisson had explained her obsession with fragments of stories, two of which ran into prominence: one was a newspaper clipping of a runaway slave, Margaret Garner, who had killed her daughter to save her from enslavement, and another was the funeral story of the girl mentioned above. Both were stories of black women and of their sacrifices of their selves for one's child and lover, respectively.

In the same interview, Morrison explained what made her interested in the two separate stories in which she noticed certain correlation:

"…what it is that really compels a good woman to displace the self, her self. So what I started doing and thinking about for a year was to project the self not the way we say "yourself', but to put a space between those words as if the self were really a twin or a friend orf something that sits next to you and watches you, which is what I was talking about when I said "the dead girl." So I had just protected her out in the earth… So I just imagined the life of a dead girl that was the girl that Margaret Garner killed, the baby girl that she killed".(Morrison 58)

The image of the dead girl is the embodiment of the absence/loss that engulfs the present in the novel. In the first few pages, the narrator supplies almost all the information: the thirty years' troubled marital status of Joe and Violet, Joe's shooting of the eighteen year-old Dorcas, Violet's

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revenge in defacing the corpse, her craving for a baby that almost led her to stealing one, the restless nights after the shooting. When the reader thinks there is nothing left to know about the tragic affair, the narrative takes a sudden twist with Violet' determination to gather the information on Dorcas as she thinks that she would "solve the mystery of love that way."(Morrison 27) When she finally reaches the dead girld's aunt and gets hold of the latter's photograph, this turns into an isolated historical document, a sample of the haunting past's intrusion into the present.The dead girl's face becomes an inward face, watching them curiously, igniting in them a keen desire to know a past which would probably help them understand the present:

" And a dead girl's face has become a necessary thing for their nights…What seems like the only living presence in the house…If the tiptoer is Joe Trace, driven by loneliness from his wife's side, then the face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from sleep hungry for her company. No finger points…But if the tiptoer is Violet the photograph is not that at all…It is the face of a sneak who glides over your sink to rinse the fork you have laid by her plate. An inward face- whatever it sees is its own self. You are there, it says, I am looking at you."(Morrison12-13)

Hauntology therefore manifests itself into this instant of descent, both into the distant past and into the innermost recesses of the soul. Thus Dorcas, who no longer exists, encompasses both Joe and Violet in such a manner that they themselves have become an embodiment of the dead girl. Their present epitomizes what they have lost, which they want to forget. But forgetting a history, be it individual or collective, cannot be a solution for the traumatized; it must be brought to light , with a reconstructed meaning, for the healing of the traumatized.

Jazz music is best attuned towards embodying this form of descent. On the one hand, as Morrison herself stated, it represents a descent into tradition: "Like the music that came to be known as Jazz, she took from everywhere, knew everything-gospel, classic, blues, hymns-and made it her own."(Morrison xiii) Jazz also supplies readers with solos, duets, trios and also a mediator, some Ms. Know-all, mysterious narrator.In order to release the present from an entrapping past, stories must be told and retold, in a counter-narrative that involves speakers and listeners, recurring leitmotifs and resuming of themes This is a therapeutic solution that Morrison's characters are in permanent search of.

On the other hand, jazz also expresses the mood and fascination of a new era, heralded by what the author emphasizes with capital C: "I'm crazy about this City." This time, jazz equates dissent, rebellion and rejection of the past, an interpretation Morrison herself offered in the foreword to the novel:

" I was struck by the modernity that jazz anticipated and directed and by its unreasonable optimism. Whatever the truth or consequences of individual entanglements and the racial landscape, the music insisted that the past might haunt us, but it would not entrap us. It demanded a future and refused to regard the past as an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle".(Morrison)

The novel opens in 1926 in Harlem, the centre of a new historical era whose fascination works its way on people:

" City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one…At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes sad stuff. The bad stuff…History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last."(Morrison 17)

History here refers to the painful experience of slavery that happened to black people in the past and that must be left behind. The passage sums up the philosophy of the New Negro, as

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envisaged by Harlem leaders, but in reality the new are the black intellectuals of the Urban North, the cosmopolitan elite Renaissance, the protoytpe of white superiority having migrated to the city for the betterment of their lives.*Jazz* highlights a wide gap between what seemed to be the fulfilment of all desires, a keynote to Harlem Renaissance, and what it practically turned out to be. Most often the novel conveys a strong sense of of a promised land for the Afro-Americans in Harlem, but they rarely have access to the spheres of social, economic and educational opportunities.The narrative voice points out to the many inequities prominent in the city:

"Everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the man, the postbox(but no high schools), the furmiture store, street newspapers vendors, the bootleghouses, (but no banks), the beauty parlours, and every club, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable".(Morrison 10)

The novel also focuses on the bitter socio-economic realities faced everyday by the black people in the city where racial violence is internalized, made visible in the innermost recesses of their souls,where once again dissent and descent intertwine, against the unique background of jazz music.The novel creates an atmosphere of dispossession and longing in which people constantly exploit one another. The husband has betrayed his wife but kills another girl for betraying him, the wife treats the girl most savagely for dispossessing her of her husband. In her utter confusion of the life style of black people, Alice Manfred keeps her niece away from "the kind of Negro, the embarassing kind."(Morrison 79) Her ironical comment on the furies and revenges inflicted on blacks by blacks is noteworthy:

" Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose…What the world had done to them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? Yes, but look where the mess originated…But in God's eyes and theirs every hateful word and gesture was the Beast's desire for its own filth. The Beast did not do what was done to it; but what it wished done to itself: raped because it wanted to be raped itself…Their enemies got what they wanted, became what they visited on others". (Morrison 78)

This passage reflects on the internal conflict that had consumed the whole community of blacks like the side effects of some powerful drug the Afro-Americans had swallowed in the name of Harlem Renaissance: "I like the way the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it."(Morrison 8) This image of dissent can only be matched with that of a "colored man who floats down of the sky blowing a saxophone," but even within this liberated environment old habits die hard and deeply rooted prejudices still linger in people's minds.

At the core of the history of loss lies the history of black women who suffer dispossession, betrayal, alienation along with the age-long oppression of class, race and gender black people are generally submitted to. The music that Alice Manfred hears is not "real music…Just colored folk's stuff…not real…not serious.. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous."[59] The experience of loss is felt not only by individuals who have been separated from parents, children, lovers, but by an entire community uprooted by a legacy of cultural dislocation According to Gurleen Grewal :

"*Jazz* highlights the consciousness of black women's struggle to survive the violence of disfranchisement reverberating across generations, across the North-South and rural-urban divide, a violence that is rendered in the elusive and mute figure of Wild". (Grewal 58)

Thus Wild in the novel "indecent, speechless lurking insanity" is an incarnation of Afro American women who have endured the brutality of slavery. She lays bare the history's wound of denial and dispossession performed on black people, especially women. Years later, this status hardly seems to have changed. In the City after the Reconstruction Violet , not having the necessary

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license required for a beautician must be at the “beck and call” of women who want their hair done in return for low wages. By setting her novel in the Harlem of the 20s, Morrison reminds us how the movement failed in fulfilling the black female desires when Harlem itself was an enactment of the fulfillment of all desires. Ironically, these women share in Violet’s lot, feeling suffocated in overpowering drowsiness:

"They are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down. They fill their minds and hands with soap and repair… because what is waiting for them in a suddenly idle moment is the seep of rage. Molten. Thick and slow-moving. Mindful and particular about what in its path chooses to bury."(Morrison 16)

However, her traumatic experience, her dissent and descent into herself gradually transform Violet. When she confesses “Then I killed the me that killed her” (Morrison 2o9) she demonstrates her ability to re-create herself through the process of killing that part of her which stood as an impediment for coming to terms with her “inward face.” When asked “Who’s left?” Violet answers “Me” in such a way as if “…it was the first she heard of the word”. (Morrison 209). Thus Violet demonstrates her ability to create herself through the process of killing that part of her which stood as an impediment for her reaching her true self. Once again, dissent proves instrumental for a journey of descent into one’s innermost recesses of the soul out of which a new identity arises. After spending some hours with Alice, Violet’s new self reaches towards her, as if Dorcas’ s death, metaphorically, the presence of absence, brought them closer: “By this time the women had become so easy with each other talk wasn’t always necessary. Alice ironed and Violet watched. From time to time one murmured something- to herself or to other.”(Morrison 112). This is Morrison’s manner of rewriting the history of black women, of showing how the solidifying bond between them could hasten the therapeutic process of healing after the traumatic effects of geographical and emotional dislocation. The lesson taught by her novel may be summed up as follows: although the history of denial, dispossession and depression is almost unavoidable in the lives of black women, they must not allow themselves to be subdued by its reiteration.

In this way Violet testifies to the way in which the trauma of history, be it collective or individual must be prevented from being all consuming. True to the spirit of the age, *Jazz* is permeated by a sense of loss as well as a note of yearning according to which characters are bound to improvise and sometimes go ahead of the beat. *Jazz* offers healing to those who survive the trauma of a repressed past, yet the unfolding of various strands of individual stories in the novel is so intricate and varied that the novel does not offer any single totalizing meaning. In one of her interviews Morrison explained: "It is important not to have a totalizing view. In American literature we (African Americans) have been so totalized- as though there is only one version. We are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way.”(Mckay 117)

In a typically postmodernist manner, the writer launches a warning against the danger of “master narrative” according to which individual players do not have any role in it unless they contribute to its predetermined resolution. While filling up the gap between the master narrative and an account of everyday life in her community, Morrison strongly relies on her power of imagination. In the novel the wide gap between “the slippery crazy words” of the “explanatory leaflets” distributed by demonstrators at the Fifth Avenue march and Dorcas, the silently staring child, is articulated in Alice’s attempt to find out connections:

" She read the words and looked at Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas and read the words again. What she read seemed crazy, out of focus. Some great gap lunged between the print and the child. She glanced between them struggling for the connection, something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words". (Morrison 58)

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Morrison's conviction stated in the novel is that "The past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle."(Morrison 220) It is the function of both the writer and the reader to lift the needle and rewrite the history of people in such a manner as the narrator in the novel says, which will be "both snug and wide open."(221) If the focus of the narrative is to project the damage of history, such confession on the part of the narrative voice also registers a space for narrative reparation.

In *The Art of Fiction,* Toni Morrison links the ability of learning something out of a mistake to jazz as a mode:

"In a performance you make a mistake and you don't have the luxury of revision that a writer has; you have to make something out of a mistake, and if you do it well enough it will take you to another place where you never would have gone had you not made that error. So you have to be able to risk making that error in performance."(Morrison 117)

Morrison's approach to what blues and jazz mean in the larger cultural context of early 20th century Afro American urban culture is a complex interweaving of tropes of the blues and jazz which constitutes itself into an intricate narrative strategy meant to make articulate a heretofore repressed and silenced black woman' story and voice. The narrator of *Jazz,* though impersonal, is metafictional. This narrator tells stories not only about characters, but also about herself as a cultural sample:

"The narratives embodied in the manifestation of the blues to which the novel's title refers are rendered in the narrator's onomatopoeic descriptions of the characters' interactions with the urban landscape, the streets of which are often compared to the seemingly deterministic tracks, or grooves, of a record."(Morrison 2)

This analogy invokes the material conditions of the Afro American men and women who migrated to Northern cities in the early 20th century, and creates the premises for celebration. At the end of the novel, the narrator, metaphorically playing a record on a phonograph, must acknowledge that she was wrong in its anticipated "bluesy" outcomes for its characters.

In the attempt of laying bare the wounds inflicted on Afro American women by the treason of history, the novel ends with a mutual writer-reader desire: "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."(Morrison 229)It is therefore a coming full circle of the novelist's intentions, according to which both descent and dissent embodied in *Jazz* lay the foundations for a novel of affirmation, whose medium is the lyrics and rhythms of black music itself. From Jazz's first word, "Sth" teasing our ear, "like the muted soundsplash of a brush against a snaredrum"(Rodriguez 245), Rodriguez traces the beat and rhythm of the Harlem Renaissance throughout Morrison's text:

"The harsh blare of consonants, the staccato generated by the commas that insist on hesitations needed to accelerate the beat, the deliberate use of alliteration and of words repeated to speed up tempo- all come together to recreate the impact of jazz ..sexual metaphors, charged with energy, leap into life Language is made to syncopate, the printed words loosen up and begin to move, the syntax turns liquid and flows." (Rodriguez 125)

The previous quotation does justice to Morrison's confession in the Foreword of the novel, where she insisted on the complex relationship between the lives of Afro-American women she wanted to render and the characteristics of their music. Jazz music becomes thus symptomatic of that experience and of its ambivalent quality:

" I was struck by the modernity that jazz anticipated and directed and by its unreasonable optimism. Whatever the truth or consequences of individual entanglements and the racial

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landscape, the music insisted that the past might haunt us, but it would not entrap us."(Morrison x)

But it would be interesting to notice the fact that the ambivalent quality of jazz music in the novel does not function at the level of the past/future dichotomy alone. The multifold openness of this musical genre can be assimilated to as many different interpretations of the novel. Consequently, in his formal analysis of how Morrison's narrative strategies parallel the musical strategies of jazz, Eusebio Rodriguez likens the "Sth" that begins the novel to the sound of brush against a drum. An alternative or complementary reading might interpret "Sth" as the sound of a train slowing down and exhaling steam, possibly announcing *Jazz* as a traditional blues text. If this is a blues text, then it is one with a "difference", since "woman" also appears in the very first sentence of the novel. This beginning might be interpreted as indicative of gossip, a traditionally devalued form of female communication. Such a reading supports the idea that Morrison is trying to recover female cultural forms to which traditional accounts of history (specifically Afro-American history) and the history of feminist consciousness have not paid attention .

Nevertheless, the interpretation advocated by the writer herself would be to read/hear this onomatopoeia on the novel's own terms "as the preparatory hiss as the needle slides towards its first groove of a record"(Morrison 67), an interpretation also supported by the repeated references to tracks connoting grooves, records and phonographs as metaphors for the narrative , as well as those of its characters and of jazz itself. When Morrison, through her impersonal narrator, cites the conventions of the blues matrix as manifestations of the post-slavery economic circumstances facing Afro-Americans in the early 20th century, she implicitly reframes that matrix by creating a new one based on the image and motion of a record.

By aligning the narrator with the technological apparatus of the phonograph and the cultural artifact of the race record, Morrison invokes the material production and dissemination of the classic blues and their relationship to life in the city for Afro-Americans. This analogy works in conjunction with the narrator's seemingly incidental, but highly generous references to phonographs and records. Thus, when Felice comes to talk to Joe about Dorcas at the end of the novel, it is an Okreh record from Felton's record store that she is carrying. The specificity of the Okreh label cannot be accidental, since Mamie Smith's Okreh recording of "Crazy Blues" (originally entitled "Harlem Blues") has been pinpointed as the product that tapped the potential market of " The Negro as consumer…Friday nights after work in those cold gray Jordans of the North, Negro workingmen lined up outside record stores to get the new blues, and as the money rolled in, the population of America, as shown on sales prognostication charts in the offices of big American industry, went up by one-tenth."(Baker Jr. 8)

The narrator's analogy between record grooves and city streets foregrounds issues integral to the process of identity and community formation for the early 20th century Afro-American urban population, a process for which blues and jazz music in general were emblematic. The sidewalks of Harlem are represented in such a way as to suggest the blues narratives against which characters struggle. Significantly, Joe's search for Dorcas during which country trails turn to railroads, then city pavement tracks,(also related by Morrison to the grooves of a record), suggests that the fatalism often attributed to the City has its roots in the South and in the economic, cultural and psychological impacts of slavery.

By making use of the narrative tropes of the jazz record, Morrison encodes in the novel the complicated, often jealous and violent responses of Afro-American women to their post emancipation freedom of choice. If the "Sth" at the beginning of the novel draws the analogy between the artifact of the record and African American cultural narratives, the music Dorcas

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anticipates could represent the specific narrative that casts black women in the role of commodity, a narrative of which the classic blues and jazz, however subversive, is not entirely free. For Dorcas is “acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove.”(Morrison 67) When she is questioned about who shot her, the reader is faced with another reference to how instrumental blues and jazz narratives, exemplified in the text by the narrator’s playing of them, have been to her fate:

"People are blocking the doorway; some stretch behind them to get a better look. The record playing is over. Somebody they have been waiting for is playing the piano. A woman is singing too. The music is faint but I know the words by heart"(Morrison 192-193)

For Afro-American women, however, Morrison’s portrayal of Harlem in *Jazz* through the tropes of jazz narratives becomes a site of contesting narratives that both determined and silenced their identities. Just like in the case of jazz music, aspects of their life-experience are displayed, excluded, totalized or fashionably commodified in a revised version of history’s role for Afro-Americans. The novel comes thus full circle in its challenging approach of dissent versus descent , in its attempt to capture:"the essence of the so-called Jazz Age. The moment when an African American art form defined, influenced, reflected a nation’s culture in so many ways, the bourgeoning of sexual license, a burst of political, economic and artistic power; the ethical conflicts between the sacred and the secular; the hand of the past being crushed by the present. Primary among these features, however, was invention. Improvisation, originality, change. Rather than be about those characteristics, the novel would seek to become them."(Morrison xii)

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