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# Language and Cultural Authority in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

**Jeffrey J. Folks**

## Summary

In a novel which focuses on the migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North, Toni Morrison attempts to retrace the mechanism of cultural authority through the representation of repressed speech. In *Jazz* (1992) the author examines the social conflicts of recent African-American immigrants and established middle-class residents of the Northern city. The contestation for cultural authority between these groups is reflected by their assertion of differing linguistic idioms. In Toni Morrison's fiction, the questions of who is enabled to speak, of what may be spoken, and of how the language of the past may be "rewritten" are nowhere more crucial than in *Jazz*. Given the colonial position within American economy of Southern African-Americans, it is not surprising that Morrison should be concerned with reclaiming language as a first step toward cultural assertion.

## Opsomming

In 'n roman wat op die uittog van die Afro-Amerikaners van die landelike Suide na die stedelike Noorde fokus, strewe Toni Morrison daarna om die meganisme van kulturele outoriteit op te spoor deur die voorstelling van onderdrukte spraak. Die outeur deurskou die sosiale konflikte van onlangse Afro-Amerikaanse immigrante en gevestigde middelklas inwoners van die Noordelike stad. Die mededinging om kulturele outoriteit tussen hierdie groepe word weerspieël in hulle handhawing van verskillende linguistiese idiome. In Toni Morrison se fiksies is die vrae wie toegelaat word om te praat, of wat gesê mag word, en hoe die taal van die verlede "herskryf" mag word, nêrens meer deurslaggewend as in *Jazz* (1992) nie. As die koloniale posisie binne die ekonomie van die Suidelike Afro-Amerikaners in aanmerking geneem word, is dit nie verrassend dat Morrison gemoeid sou wees met die herwinning van taal as 'n eerste tree na kulturele handhawing nie.

Language is the primary instrument of colonial authority, according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. As Ngugi writes, "[t]he choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to

their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (Ngugi 1986: 4). As in African literature, in African-American writing the liberation of the vernacular plays a crucial role in the definition of the culture and consciousness of a people. Conversely, the destructive effects of continuing to accept the conditions of speaking imposed by a colonial system, in which both linguistic and economic authority is retained by a powerful elite apart from the people, include a crippling alienation of self and separateness from sources of identity and creativity. On the social level, the perpetuation of colonised language alienates an educated elite from the general population out of which they have "risen". Since, as Ngugi points out, language "is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngugi 1986: 13), the cultural effect of suppressing a native or vernacular language is to block the transmission of culture, limiting the full development of identity for a people and for individuals within a people.

Within American society, a system of internal colonialism functions to concentrate capital and cultural power in a hegemonic class. Excluded from this hegemony and comprising a marginal class are those who are disenfranchised by virtue of social class, race, gender, region, and other factors. In the American economy as it existed in the first decades of the twentieth century, the lowest position in the social hierarchy was occupied by poor blacks in the rural South: this class earned the lowest per capita income, enjoyed the least educational and cultural opportunities, and suffered racial discrimination. This class was marginalised, as Morrison makes clear, both by white and other middle-class and Northern blacks. Within the system of internal colonialism, numerous other groups were excluded as well and while these groups (recent immigrants, Southern poor whites, disempowered women) are not the subject of Morrison's novels, their colonised condition resembles that of Southern poor blacks and makes Morrison's writing directly relevant in a much broader sense. As in all hegemonic systems (as defined in classic analyses by Fanon, Gramsci, and Marcuse), marginalised classes are disempowered both by economic exploitation and cultural exclusion, and as the traditional culture of these classes is destroyed or devalued, marginalised people suffer what Ngugi terms cultural alienation and a loss of identity. This analysis is familiar from such studies of colonialism and alienation as Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, but it is equally relevant to problems of internal colonialism as it exists within American society.

In Toni Morrison's fiction, the question of the control of language is the centrepiece of her narrative. Indeed, the questions of who is enabled to speak, of what may be spoken, and of how the language of the past may be "rewritten"

are central in all of her works, but nowhere more so than in *Jazz* (1992), her novel of the emotional ordeals of African-American immigrants to the Northern city. Given the colonial position within American economy of Southern African-Americans, it is not surprising that Morrison should be concerned with reclaiming language as a first step toward cultural assertion. With "standard" American speech defined as in every respect "other" than theirs, blacks arriving in Harlem from the rural South are automatically excluded within a prestige system in which urban speech is taken to be more "cosmopolitan" than rural, Northern speech "superior" to Southern, male privileged over female. Within Harlem itself, the expression of new arrivals, such as Violet and Joe Trace, is judged inferior even by other black residents, including Alice Manfred, who has established middle-class credentials of "respectability" and whose speech mimics middle-class standards of correctness. Morrison uses every means to mock this prestige system. Simply put, she implies that the "superiority" of the prestige group is derived from a colonising misuse of power. The "refinement" of middle-class speech is a technique of cultural control intended to block access for those outside the controlling class, regional, and ethnic groups. Linguistic "correctness" reflects and supports economic power, and it does so in multiple ways, with systems of education and publishing reflecting the same base of economic hegemony.

At the base of this social and linguistic pyramid is Violet Trace. The incoherence and gradual silencing of Violet's voice results from the censorship and alienation of her colonial environment, but her difficult speech serves also as a form of resistance and articulation. In Violet's case, as a poor black woman from the rural South, she has been marginalised in every possible respect. Violet's silence suggests the mythic figure of Philomela, whose protests against rape by her brother-in-law, Tereus, resulted in her tongue being removed. As Madonne M. Miner summarises the myth, Philomela is "[d]eprived of speech and lodged in `walls of stone'" where she "weaves the tale of her plight into a piece of fabric" which reveals the rape to her sister Procne (Miner 1985: 177). While Miner relates the myth to *The Bluest Eye*, it is alluded to in the figure of Violet as well. As Barbara Rigney suggests in a reading of *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's writing is often about "absence" rather than "presence", an absence connected, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr believes, with the metaphorical absence of "blackness". (One recalls that Joe's chosen name "Trace" also refers to absence: after hearing that his mother has disappeared "without a trace", Joe believes *he* is the "trace" left behind, as indeed he is.) Like Sula and Nel, Violet finds "life and its choices are defined more by what they are *not* than by what they are" (Rigney 1991: 23), yet in the extreme forms imagined in Morrison's narrative, such absences become artful expression. As Rigney goes on to

suggest, they are also "political", as narrative silence must be taken to designate the site of historical and cultural structures which enforce silence.

Because of Violet's exclusion, a sympathetic relation exists between her and Morrison's narrative voice, and in the absence of her character's power, the narrator brings to her support an empowering control of language. Morrison's narrator not only satirises Violet's oppressors within the novel, she mocks the reader's complacency as well. As if to express Violet's inarticulate feelings, the narrator's voice at times is fanciful, sarcastic, overbearing, self-possessed, subtle and fluid, slipping in and out of dialect in an effort to authorise the vernacular. Implicitly, the narrator identifies her own speech with Violet's. "Words connected only to themself pierced an otherwise normal comment" (Morrison 1992: 23), she says of Violet, but the narrator's own expression claims the same right of linguistic free association. Like Morrison herself as an artist, perhaps like "everybody [with] a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own" (1992: 24), Violet is constructing an empowered individual voice that at once has everything and nothing to do with her race and class. The language that Violet adopts, and that the narrator adopts in speaking for her, reflects her colonised status, but Morrison also envisages Violet's liberation from her colonised position. However, Morrison's conception of colonial empowerment contrasts significantly with that of those theorists who suggest a return to the collective identity of indigenous language and local culture. In Morrison's case, the rejection of the imperial discourse points to a more personal empowerment: a creative freedom associated with individuality and self-expression that may employ but is not circumscribed by folk speech. It is the privilege of individuality that the narrator claims for Violet - an ascension to the conditions of privileged expression but a paradoxical dismemberment of hierarchy as well, as Violet's "piercing" of normal codes of expression forces itself upon the complacent correctness of accepted conduct and speech.

In her reading of Morrison's earlier novels, Barbara Christian stresses "the integral relationship between the destructive limits imposed on Black woman and the inversions of truth in ... society" (1980: 179). Certainly the language associated with Violet, such as the description of her as a "domestic" woman, can be discussed in terms of signifiers of a colonising discourse. Her sense of alienation climaxes during her husband's affair with Dorcas, as she literally splits into two identities - her disempowered present self and "*that* Violet", the younger and physically desirable woman of thirty years ago. Like Eva Peace in *Sula*, who "converts her very body into a dismembered instrument of defiance" (Baker 1991: 141), Violet's silencing of her tongue is a defiance of those, including her husband Joe, who would have her accept the normalised condition of colonialism. However, if Violet's silence results from her continuing sense of

oppression, its effect is also to separate her from Joe, who explains to Malvonne that he is "driven to" an affair by his wife's silence. The emotional release of stabbing Dorcas's corpse - her knife glancing off Dorcas's ear, that other organ of communication - releases Violet's tongue and reunites her split selves.

The figure of Violet is a particularly subtle reworking of the pattern of heroic women in Morrison's fiction - those women who struggle toward a "sense of owning themselves" (De Weever 1991: 32). In *Sula*, for instance, Smith notes "Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family" (Smith 1982: 165). Clearly Violet's mute isolation is related to the construction of gender as well as to the racism under which she has lived. As Miner notes of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, "men, potential rapists, assume presence, language, and reason as their particular province. Women, potential victims, fall prey to absence, silence, and madness" (Miner 1985: 181). The same critique of gendered language informs *Jazz*, in which the same potential for madness and death exists for Violet as for Pecola and Sula, yet the resolution of this most recent of Morrison's novels brings into question Smith's and Miner's conclusions, as the marriage of Violet and Joe is lovingly restored and the supportive potential of married life is affirmed.

When they arrive in the Northern city, Violet and Joe assume that they have arrived in a land of unlimited freedom, but they find that new forms of social repression exist. Those blacks who have already established themselves in the city and particularly those who have achieved middle-class status refuse to accept newly arrived poor blacks from the rural South. Elliott Butler-Evans has analysed the extent to which middle-class education and the aspiration to "respectability" have "suppressed desire" in Morrison's characters (Butler-Evans 1989: 70-71). In *Jazz*, the fifty-year-old Alice Manfred is the product of middle-class "training" which is shown to be largely negative in its teaching of how to avoid the "pitfalls" of one's native language and culture. In creating the figure of Alice Manfred, Morrison engages the period of the 1920s intertextually as she cites the widespread cultural critique of Victorian respectability during the Jazz Age. The familiar figure of the Victorian spinster, suffering from crazed repression, references an extensive modern canon of socially warped antagonists, including the small-town librarian in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, or William Faulkner's Joanna Burden in *Light in August*. Like her predecessors, Alice is tormented by, but curious about, the new sensuality of the twenties, especially by the quality of "appetite" in the music of the twenties. Popular music, in fact, becomes an important motif in the novel, serving as it does as an expressive medium that transcends the divisive cultural hierarchies embedded in language. As Barbara Hill Rigney notes, music is not

merely a "motif" in Morrison's novels but a mode of writing as well:

> One of the freedoms Morrison claims in her novels is to move beyond language, even while working *through* it, to incorporate significance beyond the denotation of words, to render experience and emotion, for example, as musicians do.
>
> (Rigney 1991: 7)

Alice Manfred is portrayed as a woman of "independent means", a marker not only of economic status but of cultural authority. Unlike most other middle-class figures in her circle, however, Alice Manfred is black - a fact that, despite her wealth and culture, connects her with Violet Trace as well as with the white middle class. A number of facts suggest that Alice's separateness from her race is a damaging illusion. Not only is she snubbed by white middle-class women, her sister and brother-in-law have been killed in the East St Louis race riots of 1917, and their daughter, whom Alice has adopted, is attracted to the "[street]life below the sash" (Morrison 1992: 60) rather than to the protective upbringing she receives. Alice's dilemma, in fact, reflects what Missy Dehn Kubitschek sees as the "incompatibility between middle-class life and historical memory which [from middle-class perspective] can only be conceived of as embarrassing, limiting" (Kubitschek 1991: 129). It also illustrates the error of the former colonial in identifying more with the imperial culture than with one's native culture, as the resultant alienation from one's native culture and language separates the "educated" former colonial from the people and place of one's birth, and indeed from one's own selfhood (Ngugi 1986: 16ff). As Ngugi writes, "colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment" (p. 28). In the case of a colonised elite, this process of alienation involves a repression of vernacular spoken language and a simultaneous identification with the written colonial language. Alice Manfred's focus on "respectable" speech and "proper" reading, and conversely her quite literal closing off (by closing her windows) from the local environment - the music and speech of the street - illustrates Ngugi's point. Alice's alienation is shared by her daughter Dorcas, and even by Morrison's sympathetic narrator, who, commenting on Dorcas's unbearable adolescence, writes: "when I think about it, I know just how she felt" (Morrison 1992: 63). The limited options of colonial life are suggested by Dorcas's feeling that by age seventeen sex and romance are everything: "there is no other thing to do" (1992: 63). In Dorcas's affair with Joe Trace, the consequence is, in the polite language of her mother's circle, "pregnancy without marriageability" (Morrison 1992: 76).

If a woman's life in this environment centres on romance, such as Dorcas's adventure of sneaking out to a forbidden dance party or her love of "foxy" clothing and make-up, the forms of expression available to young black men are limited as well - limited in part by the masculine roles available within the colonised society. The spectacle of black youths dancing, provocative as "young roosters" (1992: 70), is succeeded by a lifetime of relationships with black women in which black men are seen as physically alluring but unworthy of true respect. The clubwomen who automatically adopt a flirting manner toward Joe Trace communicate this disrespect: "they thought men were ridiculous and delicious and terrible, taking every opportunity to let them know that they were" (pp. 70-71).

In order to "rewrite" the colonised past, that is, to revise the very language in which the past makes itself available to the present, Morrison returns to Violet and Joe's family history. In this story we learn that True Belle, Violet's grandmother, had accompanied Vera Louise Gray, the daughter of Virginia planter, Col. Wordsworth Gray, to Baltimore after Vera became pregnant with the child of a black servant named Henry Lestroy. Morrison's tale of miscegenation retraces the literary tradition of the "tragic mulatto", with the difference that Morrison intends to heal rather than agonise the mulatto's fate. The major representative of this tradition is William Faulkner, in whose novels the mulatto is represented as the tragic victim of a racial history of separation and distrust. Morrison's parody of Faulknerian narrative retraces, and by retracing, intends to exhaust the cultural myths of both the tragic mulatto and of the Southern gentleman toward which he aspires in Faulkner's portrayal, and by this parodic technique makes possible a new language for the figure's presentation. Specific images and words are repeated from Faulkner, as for example the mulatto's focus on the supposed fecundity and assumed "corruption" of the black female body, the emphasis on blood in connection with the menstrual cycle and with the birth process, and the metaphorical comparison of miscegenation with contagion. The dominant figure in this discourse is the "mixing of bloods", the intertwining of genetic strains which is the focal point of racist ideology.

Like the Faulknerian narrator - Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* imaginatively constructing the consciousness of Thomas Sutpen and Charles Bon or the nameless voices piecing a collective memory of Joe Christmas in *Light in August* - Morrison's first-person narrator enters the narrative to suggest versions, correct and incorrect, of Golden Gray, the child of Henry Lestroy and Vera Louise Gray. In narrating the incident of Golden's discovery and "rescue" of a nude pregnant black woman while he is en route to find and kill his black father, Morrison's narrator presents a "hateful" version of Gray, the arrogant and racist "white" gentleman disgusted by the woman he calls "Wild", but

honour-bound to rescue her. But in arriving at Golden's real pain as he grieves for a father he has never known, Morrison's narrator alters her telling, having now worked through different versions of his character and different discourses and models of racial union, from initial dislike to liking and loving, and even beyond love to an imagining which "alter[s] things" (Morrison 1992: 161). As Morrison writes, "I want to be the language that wishes him well, speaks his name, wakes him when his eyes need to be open" (p. 161). The language in which Gray is imagined will put at his disposal "a kind of confident, enabling, serene power" (p. 161).

The enabling power that the narrative language extends to Golden Gray is also extended to Violet and Alice, whose limits of expression are the legacy of Golden Gray's social assumptions. In their friendship following Dorcas's death, the dialogue between Violet and Alice admits the sort of naturalistic narrative discourse that the narrator terms "clarity". The relentless clarity of Violet's questioning elicits Alice's memories of her own violent self - her wanting to kill the woman who claimed her childhood lover in St Louis thirty years ago. Alice in turn helps Violet to understand that she needs to "make life", not to fear Dorcas or others who are also victims of the same environment. In the process of talking, or simply in the silent communion of sewing and ironing in Alice's company, Violet explores her own repression of her maternal instinct stemming from her determination not to repeat her mother's brutal existence. Violet's craving for children grows as she nears menopause, "the place of shade without trees where you know you are not and never again will be loved by anybody who can choose to do it" (Morrison 1992: 110). Confronting her fears of maternity and of aging is as important for Violet as confronting the fear of having been denied choice is for Joe.

In her re-examination of consciousness and language, Violet realises that both she and Joe had imagined "golden" lovers and were each, in the other's mind, "substitutes" for the other's perfect dream. As Morrison's narrative retraces the historical origins of Violet's and Joe's search for the golden beloved, it attempts gradually to heal their pain. In the story of Violet's mother and grandmother, and in the narrative of Joe Trace's childhood, Morrison uncovers the source of their present motives. In 1888 Violet's mother, Rose Dear, with her five children, is dispossessed by a paper signed by her husband, who temporarily disappears (only to reappear periodically with gifts - "this defiant birthday-every-day man who dispensed gifts and stories" (Morrison 1992: 100)). Four years later Rose Dear commits suicide and her mother, True Belle, is left to raise the family. Morrison establishes the historical and ancestral abuse as a source of Violet and Joe's marital problems, since Violet's "love" for Joe, whose "talking" alleviates her pain, was founded not so much on affection as on her desire to escape

memories of her mother's suicide.

In a narrative which moves between past, present, and future, Morrison overcomes a difficult artistic problem of representing the possibilities for the sort of change which exists outside the colonised value system. In other words, how does the artist work from a liberating discourse for both black and white characters who, from within their limited cultural roles, are themselves unable to imagine and articulate a different life? Morrison conceives of the artist's role as "productive" in promoting change, but the artist herself does not operate outside her culture; instead she draws on the materials of folk and mass culture itself - the popular music, the everyday speech, the dance, costume, and story-telling of the popular and folk culture - to suggest points of "opening" within the experience of a people. To promote change, Morrison explores other ambiguities, connotations, and associations of language, the traces left by the erasures attendant on colonised discourse, so that language will not merely replicate conventional consciousness but open the past to imaginative rewriting.

The relationship of the artist to the culture, and the way in which the culture itself can be used to promote change, is suggested in Morrison's figuration of "the City" in *Jazz*. For African-American immigrants, the Northern city is vital and creative, especially in spring when "the range of what an artful City can do" (Morrison 1992: 118) becomes more obvious. In this "sweetheart weather" Lenox Avenue "spread[s] itself wider to hold the day" (p. 195). The transforming power of urban life is suggested by the speed with which new residents are changed, seemingly to the extent of forgetting their past lives entirely. While a majority of Harlem residents have ties with the rural South, they quickly forget that they are "country people" and fall in love with the city:

> The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves.
>
> (Morrison 1992: 33)

The false lesson that Joe had learned from the "hunter's hunter", Frank Lestroy, involved survival in the rural South ("the secret of kindness from white people - they had to pity a thing before they could like it" (Morrison 1992: 125)), but the new realities of urban life can involve a more subtle perpetuation of colonial legacies. Indeed, the basis of identity for African- American migrants to the city, in Morrison's view, is "the presence of the ancestor, the person who connects past and present and embodies a sense of historical continuity and communal wisdom" (Scruggs 1993: 174). For the city to be viable, an imaginative return to ancestral origins is required, in order to perform an "erasure" of the colonial

culture and to rewrite the language in which it is passed down. By circling back to their childhood and imagining the lives of their ancestors, Violet and Joe attempt to gain freedom from the colonial past. Although only implicit in this novel, the figure of the wise ancestor "imagined as surviving in the village but not in the city" (Morrison, quoted in Baker & Houston 1991: 136) is always invoked in Morrison's writing as the agency of an imaginative return to ancestral times. Although in *Jazz* it would be difficult to attribute wisdom to any specific ancestor, Baker is nonetheless accurate in her conclusion that "Morrison's narrative is ... marked by the motion of return, of reclamation" (Baker & Houston 1991: 137).

The imaginative return is not only a retracing of events; more importantly, it is a revision of language that controls the present by passing down a colonised consciousness. The imagery of hunting by which Joe interprets his life continues to determine his actions, but paradoxically the same words that limit him may, with revision, lead to a maturity in which he understands the limits of "pursuit" and "prey". In his jealous pursuit of Dorcas, Joe relies on his tracking skills, as he imagines, to discover Dorcas's disloyalty with his rivals, the "sweetbacks", those "City men ... [c]losed off to themselves, wise, young roosters" (Morrison 1992: 132). The language that Joe applies to young urban males ("sweetbacks" and "roosters") derives from his rural experience, and the language available to him is insufficient to understand his new urban experience. Joe Trace is not adept at change, although he convinces himself that he has changed "seven times" by the time he settles in New York. In fact, Morrison suggests that Joe, who had mastered the rural art of hunting and loved the woods, would have stayed in the South, where he held on for eighteen years, had he not been driven off his farm by swindlers. It is economic necessity, as well as the alluring promise of the city, that carries him forward. What Morrison attempts, largely by examining and refashioning the language of Joe's past, is a deeper understanding of both the past and the present, and through this understanding, a revision of the meaning of the past so that it can serve the needs of those living in the present.

In part because of Joe's resistance to change, his transformation into a mature and emotionally sensitive man is a crucial action in the novel, and Joe's ultimate ability to change makes him one of Morrison's more significant male characters - a character who departs from De Weever's generalisation that "[i]n Morrison's novels, it is not the men who develop a feeling, feminine side, but the women who develop male attributes" (De Weever 1991: 31). In De Weever's view, Joe Trace becomes an androgynous hero whose "heroic deeds" consist of resisting his "male" training and gaining everyday happiness. The track that leads him to fall in love with and finally murder Dorcas also involves the lesson of how to

"choose", for in falling in love with Dorcas, Joe feels that he has "chosen" love for the first time - not "falling" (as he had from the walnut tree into Violet's presence) but "rising" in love. As an "orphan" abandoned by his mother, "Wild", Joe resembles other major characters in the novel, those who have been deprived of the supportive communal environment which might promote integral selfhood. Yet the entire past, however filled with memories of assaults and loss, is integral to the present, and must be understood as such before it can be transcended.

Despite the impetus for Joe and the other immigrants to "forget" their country manners and disguise their rural speech, their dismissal of the rural past, by its repression of ancestral knowledge, hinders the present. Paradoxically, the uncovering of secrets of family history is shown to be liberating. The "pattern of departure, initiation, and return" which De Weever defines as the classic myth of the hero, and which she traces in Morrison's earlier novels, is apparent in *Jazz* as well. Both Violet and Joe undertake heroic quests which involve departure, initiation, and return, and this pattern of discovery and return governs the linguistic consciousness of all major characters. When Joe goes "hunting" for Dorcas, for instance, simultaneously he is, as past and present merge in his consciousness, "hunting" his mother in Virginia. When Joe "accidentally" shoots Dorcas, he is deluded by the powerful memory of his firing an unloaded gun at his mother (the "indecent speechless lurking insanity" (Morrison 1992: 179) - a figuration of woman repeated in his treatment of Violet) whose absence nonetheless torments him. By revisiting the wound of his abandonment and more specifically by creating language which fully comprehends the past, Joe begins the process of freeing himself from the control of a colonial idiom.

In her fiction, Morrison investigates the ways in which a colonised speech and consciousness alienate persons from their indigenous language and culture, a problem that is particularly complex in an immigrant society such as the United States. Without self-determination, Violet and Joe grow unaccustomed to choosing and are increasingly alienated from their own "appetites" and will. While each finds ways of surviving in the absence of real power (Violet compensates for having to cut hair "without a license" by improving her art and accommodating her customers, to the point that her labour is appreciated; Joe charms his female customers by playing an alluring and at the same time boyish role), the long-term effect of subordination is to silence their voices and to dull if not nullify their wills. They simply lack an accessible communal language in which to articulate their experience.

Colonial alienation displaces the wound of powerlessness into other forms of vicarious control that mimics integral selfhood - for example, Joe's "maniacal" labour after he attempts to kill his mother, Dorcas's obsession with getting and

holding onto Acton, Violet's silent rejection of Joe. In place of generous self-determination, Morrison's characters pantomime control within their personal relationships, as for instance in the "power" of young women with red lips and silk stockings met by young men at a train stop: "The red lips and the silk flash power. A power they will exchange for the right to be overcome, penetrated. The men at their side love it because, in the end, they will reach in, extend, get back behind that power, grab it and keep it still" (Morrison 1992: 181-182). The social freedom of the city works against this repression ("Do what you please in the City" (p. 8)) but its freedom is dangerous as well. The modern city is an appealing destination, especially for black men who have migrated from the rural and small-town South. In contrast with the past, Harlem seems, in the first decades of the century, a near paradise of racial freedom and economic opportunity. Like a million others, Joe participates in the freedom of Harlem in the twenties as one who "treated language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play" (p. 33). For these immigrants, the Northern city promises freedom not only from Southern oppression but also from the conservatism of their own African-American rural culture, in which religious fundamentalism and a hierarchical class consciousness are important elements.

The urban environment can alleviate some of the controls that exist in the closed rural and small-town culture, but it is up to Violet and Joe to "make" life in the city. After Joe's murder of Dorcas, he and Violet begin, with the help of others, to remake their lives. When Dorcas's friend Felice visits them to retrieve her opal ring, she is attracted to Violet and Joe, in part because they seem a worthy substitute for her own absent parents. The opal ring itself has been stolen by Felice's mother "to get back at the whiteman who thought she was stealing even when she wasn't" (Morrison 1992: 215); a convoluted grammatical construction in which the multiple negations represent exactly the defensive inheritance passed down to Felice from her mother. Felice is rescued from this colonial grammar by Joe, whose concerned gaze makes her feel "interesting" and by Violet, who tells her to make the world "something more than what it is" (Morrison 1992: 208). As he repeats her name, Joe understands the true meaning of the name "Felice" - the "happiness" that one makes for oneself in the world.

Just as Felice is saved from repeating the mistakes of her parents' generation, Violet, Joe, and even Alice seem determined to salvage what happiness remains. Violet realises that she has lived most of her life fascinated by the "little blond child" of her grandmother's stories, and Joe admits that he shot Dorcas because he was "scared" and "didn't know how to love anybody" (p. 213). Repeating the novel's musical motif, Alice, possibly the most damaged character in the novel, admits that she has been controlled by the memory of past injuries: "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" (p. 220). With this realisation at least, Alice returns to St Louis, where she will revisit the site of her own controlling fictions.

For Violet and Joe, there exists the more hopeful chance of love restored. At the end of the novel, they lie under the covers of an old quilt which they plan to replace - like the patchwork of past abuses - with a new comforter, and like lovers they are "whispering, old-time love" (p. 228). They now think of their life as chosen; they lie "in a bed they chose together and kept together" (p. 228), but the significance of their restored love extends beyond the privacy of their domestic relationship. As Scruggs points out in a discussion of Sethe and Paul D. in Morrison's *Beloved*, the restoration of intimacy between two persons can have meaning for an entire community, as their lives enter the communal discourse and become the subject of public comment and "collective understanding" (Scruggs 1993: 199). Oddly enough, the first-person narrator, who re-enters the text in the last paragraphs, speaks of her "envy" for their "public love". Unlike Violet and Joe, she has not quite arrived, as a narrative voice can never fully arrive, at the *embodiment* of love that Violet and Joe convey in every "public" gesture. Perhaps only the reader can duplicate their recovery of love, as the narrator implies in the novel's final words: "You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (Morrison 1992: 229). The reader's hands are, of course, holding the book that contains the narrator's creative refashioning of colonial language. As a revisionary historian, Morrison focuses our interest on the confining legacy of a colonised discourse, but she also asserts the usefulness of recovering and examining that discourse.

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