

Toni Morrison's *Love* and the Trickster Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to propose a reading of Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) as a trickster novel. The trickster paradigm, characterized by ambiguity, indeterminacy and transgression, pervades Morrison's fiction and dominates her latest novel in a clear continuation of her challenge to unquestioned univocal concepts and world views. Two of its female characters, Junior and Celestial, join the ranks of Morrisonian tricksters like Pilate or Sula. As a writer of trickster fiction, Toni Morrison turns into a figurative trickster herself, playing with language and words and welcoming paradoxes like those engendered by the multidimensional concept of love.

In her Nobel Prize Lecture of 1993 Toni Morrison tells the story of a blind old woman who manages to draw her young interlocutors into the weaving of the very story they are demanding of her. The old woman's concluding remark about the process of creating stories can be applicable to most of Morrison's narrative. By saying "Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together" (1997: 273) the old woman is focusing on the importance of the communal participation of readers or listeners in the narrative process, be it oral or written. Morrison's demand of reader participation in her novels is well known, as well as her narrative technique of open endings which characterizes her fiction. Likewise, much has been written about the nature of *Beloved* in the homonymous novel—whether that character is a runaway slave, a ghost-made-flesh which incarnates Sethe's daughter or even a "surrogate self" of the author.¹ The open-endedness of Morrison's novels together with the elusiveness of some characters attest to the indeterminacy of meaning and interpretation and to the multiplicity of viewpoints that the novel must entail,

since “Morrison knows that meaning ... is always a construction, most often a production of our social environment ... open to a body of interpretations” (Osagie, 1994: 434) or, in Morrison’s own terms, “The imagination that produces work which bears and invites re-readings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language” (1992: xii).

The ambiguity and indeterminacy of meaning, the non-linear layered narrative structure and the deconstruction of established boundaries and categories make of Toni Morrison a postmodern writer. But we should also bear in mind her African American ethno-cultural background and thus posit other literary traditions that imprint a heavy mark on Morrison’s fiction. One of these traditions is the trickster tales of West African and African American folk culture which, together with the dilemma stories, constitute the sources from which Morrison draws to create her novels. As Alta Jablow (1961: 34-35) argues, “The dilemma story ... poses a problem for which there may be many answers, based upon as many different points of view” and they are also characterized by “the open-ended culmination”. On the other hand, Morrison’s novels and those of many contemporary ethnic women authors are created under what Jeanne R. Smith (1997: 11) terms a “trickster aesthetic”. By foregrounding in her narrative characters who clearly embody the figure of the trickster in its multiple facets, Morrison plays the role of a literary trickster herself implicitly challenging “an ethnocentric as well as a phallogocentric tradition” (Smith, 1997: 11) through the decentralization of monolithic, static, univocal perspectives, focusing instead on multivocality, fluidity and plurality. In a trickster-like fashion, Morrison upends and inverts established concepts and static world views. Likewise, her eighth novel, *Love* (2003) is clearly in keeping with this trickster aesthetic that pervades her fiction. Although the theme of spoilt female friendship and the final triumph of female bonding between Heed and Christine reminds us of *Sula*, the spiritual overtones that underlie *Love* and the overwhelming presence of the trickster figure act as crucial links not only between these two novels but also among several of Morrison’s works.

Since its publication, *Love* has generated a series of conflicting critical responses. While most reviews depict it as one of Morrison’s literary achievements, some reviewers describe it as “a clotted, tedious, uninviting novel” (Yardley 2003), a “haphazard novel” and “a gothic soap opera” (Kakutani, 2003: 37). Furthermore, according to Michiko Kakutani (2003: 37), *Love* does not live up to Morrison’s masterpieces, since “it lacks the magic and mythic ambition of her 1987 masterpiece, *Beloved*” and is but “an awkward retread of *Sula* and *Tar Baby* combined”. Although *Love* is certainly a complex novel, such complexity should not be viewed as a stylistic flaw but as one of the novel’s assets through which the author deliberately attempts to encourage the reader’s engagement in the composition of the narrative jigsaw this novel represents. On the other hand, while *Love* deals with some of the issues included in Morrison’s previous novels—female friendship, the loss of innocence, the haunting of the past, race and class politics and the need for redemption—new light is shed on the intricacies of love and the complexity of human emotions. Despite the short number of unfavourable reviews, *Love* has received wide critical praise as shown by the numerous positive reviews written on it.²

Although the novel opens in the 1990s, it narrates the family story of Bill Cosey and the people that surrounded him in his Hotel and Resort before, during and after the Civil Rights' movement. Set on the East Coast of the United States, *Love* moves from the heyday to the collapse of Cosey's business after the end of segregation. Thus, the story unfolds against the backdrop of the class differences within the African American community and the social changes brought about by the Civil Rights movement, among which were the disappearance of many Black schools, businesses, resorts and hotels. Despite the social advancement such movement represented for African-Americans in the United States, the loss of a part of African American life seems to be the source of Morrison's nostalgic feeling in *Love*, as some reviewers have pointed out.³

As she had done in most of her previous fiction, Morrison imbues her new novel with spirituality, which is harmoniously intertwined with those socio-historical concerns the author deals with. The punishing actions of the mysterious Police-heads, the intriguing otherworldly identity of Junior and Celestial, the conversations with the dead and the allocation of narrative voice to the ghost of a dead character who speaks from the beyond are all instances of the spiritual load Morrison has included in *Love*, transgressing one more time the established boundaries between real and unreal, natural and supernatural. As she had done before, Morrison uses the spiritual and supernatural in her fiction because, as she admits, "that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew" (Davis, 1988:144).

The novel opens with an omniscient narrator who turns out to be dead and who sets the background stage for the story that is going to be told about a well-off black entrepreneur, Mr. Cosey, and several women who are related to him in some degree. Two of those women, Junior and Celestial, embody the spiritual connection between this world and the other world for a number of reasons that we intend to expose here. Furthermore, the character of Junior epitomizes the figure of the trickster in many ways, resembling to some extent other trickster characters like Pilate, Sula or Son in Morrison's previous fiction. Junior's arrival at the house on One Monarch Street to apply for a job advertised in the newspaper is surrounded by unexpected low temperatures, ice and snow and a "freezing weather in a neighborhood that had no history of it" (Morrison, 2003: 14). This change of weather points from the beginning of her arrival to the ideas of inversion, fluidity and change that are associated with Junior and with tricksters. Likewise, the implicit reference to water in the ice and snow signal a further connection of this character to the world of the supernatural, since water is a highly symbolic element in African and African American folklore as the element of the dead ancestors (Mbiti, 1989: 73). As it is usually the case with tricksters, Junior appears physically marked. Interestingly enough, the first distinctive feature that is mentioned about Junior is her "faint limp" (Morrison, 2003: 13), which reminds us of the African god of crossroads Legba and his symbolic lameness, something that establishes deeper connections between Junior and a spiritual or supernatural dimension: "In Yoruba mythology, Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world" (Gates, 1988: 6). As

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988: 29-30) suggests, Legba “is the epitome of paradox” and the representation of indeterminacy, since “Legba’s sexuality is a sign of liminality, but also of the penetration of thresholds ... [Esu] [exists] as the third principle--neither male nor female, neither this nor that, but both ... Esu is a figure of doubled duality, of unreconciled opposites, living in harmony ... he is the epitome of paradox”.

As the embodiment of indeterminacy and paradox, Legba also represents the ultimate trickster and as such, the ultimate mediator (Gates, 1988: 6, Holloway, 1990: 54, Teish, 1994: 49-50). One of the trickster qualities of this god lies in the mutability of his name--Legba, Esu/Eshu Elegbara (Gates, 1988: 5) which resembles Junior’s changing name and surname from Junior to June, from Vivian to Viviane (Morrison, 2003: 21). This mutability also attests to the indeterminate identity of the trickster, and by extension, to the indeterminacy, fluidity and multiplicity of interpretation of the text in the literary discourse. Like Legba and most tricksters, Junior is a “shape-shifter” (Smith, 1997: 159) since her damaged foot appears to Romen as a hoof (Morrison, 2003: 154).⁴ As we have seen, the quality of mutability also affects tricksters’ sexuality in their ambiguousness. In their mediating unifying role they are also defined as “copulators”, as Gates’ description of Legba aptly indicates: “Esu is the guardian of the crossroads ... the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane ... linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation ... ” (1988: 6). Junior’s name bears both feminine and masculine possibilities since her father, Ethan Payne Jr., had named her after himself before disappearing from her life (Morrison, 2003: 55). Junior Viviane’s sexuality also reminds us of this god, her desire and plan to “make it everywhere” (Morrison, 2003: 115) being indicative of her highly active sexuality. As a matter of fact, “lewdness and amorality” characterize most tricksters, as Jeanne Smith (1997: 8) points out, as well as their being “uninhibited by social constraints, free to dissolve boundaries and break taboos” (Smith, 1997: 7). Back in the strictures of her neighbourhood, the Settlement, Junior soon discloses herself as a Sula-like pariah who is adamant to break open the closed circle of a patriarchal community: “Unlike the tranquillity of its name, the Settlement heaved with loyalty and license, and the only crime was departure. One such treason was undertaken by a girl with merged toes called Junior” (Morrison, 2003: 54-55). Junior’s flight is prompted by her uncles’ refusal to let the young girl give a cottonmouth to her school friend. In a bleak neighbourhood that was “unevolved and reviled ... and feared” (Morrison, 2003: 53) letting the cottonmouth leave would imply altering the status quo especially in relation to the patriarchal order, since the serpent stands for woman (De Weever, 1991: 74). Junior’s daring act finally brings about her uncles’ running over her toes, crippling her as a punishment for transgressing boundaries and for the challenge she posed to their male-centered world. But, as tricksters “can escape virtually any situation” (Smith, 1997: 7), Junior can still manage to escape not only the Settlement but also the Correctional she had been put into for stealing a G. I. Joe doll in her search for a father figure.

Junior’s appearance to Christine’s eyes as “an underfed child. One you wanted to

cuddle or slap for being needy” (Morrison, 2003: 23) can be read not only as Junior’s need for nourishment but also as her need for both fatherly affection and sexual intercourse. From the beginning of her stay with Heed and Christine, Junior feels attracted to Romen, the boy who works for the two women and who is at some point referred to as “this beautiful boy on whom she had feasted as though he were all the birthday banquets she’d never had” (Morrison, 2003: 196). But she also focuses on Mr. Cosey’s portrait from her arrival to the point of becoming obsessed with the father figure he represents for her and that she lacks. Her image of copulator is in keeping with her role as link and mediator between Heed and Christine, the driving force that will propitiate the resurgence of the language and the communication lost between the former friends: “She could make it happen, arrange harmony when she felt like it” (Morrison, 2003: 120). As a trickster mediator, Junior enforces the birth of the word, *nommo*, “the life force” (Jahn, 1990: 124) and its power, as it is after her trick at the end of the novel that Heed and Christine release their long pent-up feelings for each other and let their renewed use of language stifle their mutual love-turned-hate. Not only does the trickster Junior encourage dialogue between the two women but she also embodies the connection to words that stands as one revealing characteristic of tricksters, as Jeanne R. Smith (1997: 11) contends: “The trickster’s medium is words. A parodist, joker, liar, con-artist, a storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words--and thus becomes author and embodiment of a fluid, flexible, and politically radical narrative form”.

Junior’s comparison with a spider further enhances her weaving skills: “Heed is doing something secret with an able-bodied spider to help her”, Christine thinks (Morrison, 2003: 169). The symbolic image of the spider evokes not only the ability to weave webs--in this case a tricky web of elusiveness--but it also conjures up one of the most popular tricksters, Anansi the Spider from West African folklore.⁵ During her sojourn at Monarch Street Junior spins her own web of lies and tricks, which she puts forward from the very first meeting with Christine, when she tells the woman that she used to live “around here ... I’ve been away” (Morrison, 2003: 21) and deliberately hides her background at her neighbourhood, the Settlement, which “is a planet away from One Monarch Street” (Morrison, 2003: 53) as well as her unpleasant experience at the Correctional. Nevertheless, her manners and physical appearance give her away as a wanderer, a survivor and a liar, “lacing her lies with Yes, ma’ams” (Morrison, 2003: 169), all trickster-like features (Smith, 1997: 7-8).⁶ As Christine soon realizes,

The telltale signs of a runaway’s street life were too familiar: bus station soap, other people’s sandwiches, unwashed hair, slept-in clothes, no purse, mouth cleaned with chewing gum instead of toothpaste ... She should have known. She did know. Junior had no past, no history but her own. The things she didn’t know about or had never heard of would make a universe ... And you had to admire any girl who survived on the street without a gun. (Morrison, 2003: 23, 169).

Inside the house, Junior turns into a trespassing watcher, penetrating into Heed’s and Christine’s lives and secrets. It is not by chance then that many references to Junior focus

on her eyes: Junior has the “unnerving look of an underfed child” (Morrison, 2003: 23), Christine “did not like the heart jump that came when she looked in the girl’s eyes” (Morrison, 2003: 23), Junior’s “bold eyes, mischievous smile” (Morrison, 2003: 169), and Romen, Junior’s lover, “was surprised to see how dead her sci-fi eyes were” (Morrison, 2003: 179). This focus is symbolic of Junior’s watching position but it also evokes the manifold implications of the eye-sight metaphor, to the point of implicitly calling for a revision of different ways of seeing, which Morrison has so often manifested in her narrative. Indeed, as a true trickster, Junior “exposes the sacredness of everyday life, ‘the sacredness that discloses itself when the world is seen to be more than meets the eye, ... a web of multidimensional planes of being” (Pelton, 1980: 256, qtd. in Smith, 1997: 147). The spiritual dimension enclosed in the image of the eyes as the potentiality and power of a metaphysical dimension out of ‘common’ sight is implicit in two more references to eyes in the novel. One is connected to water, another spiritual element in African and African American culture and it comes from the dead narrator L: “Having a star-packed sky be part of your night made you feel rich. And then there was the sea. Fishermen say there is life down there that looks like wedding veils and ropes of gold with ruby eyes” (Morrison, 2003: 105). On the other hand, after Junior is finally locked up in a room at the end of the novel, the direct reference to eyes and their red color recurs: “unfriendly-looking clouds were sailing over the roof of One Monarch Street, their big-headed profiles darkening all save one window, which, like the eye of a determined flirt, keeps its peachy glint” (Morrison, 2003: 198-99). The repeated connection between water--sea, rain--and red eyes emphasizes Junior’s supernatural qualities and her liminal existence between worlds, that of the living and that of the ancestors--hence her having “dead” “sci-fi” eyes. At this point, it is necessary to point out the deep supernatural implications of the color red, which was “an almost universal ‘fetish color’ in Afro-America. Among black populations of the Americas as in Africa, red was a color symbolizing danger and power” (Piersen, 1993: 42). On the other hand, the red color of the eyes is attributed to conjurers (Herron and Bacon, 1990: 361), who usually use red flannel to make their tricks (Bass 1990: 382; Thompson 1984: 131). Furthermore, as Maude S. Wahlman (1993: 113) reminds us, this color “can symbolize *ase*, the Yoruba concept of the power to make things happen and the power to make things multiply”, red being associated with Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning.

In her attempt to fake her husband’s will, Heed expects Junior to help her but here again Junior’s tricks come into play. While Heed is dictating Junior what to write on an old hotel menu to turn it into a fake will, Junior does not write Heed’s sister’s name, Solitude, as she had been required:

she was sure he would laugh when she told him, showed him the forged menu his airhead wife thought would work, and the revisions Junior had made in case it did. Sorry, Solitude ... It was a long shot, sudden, unpremeditated, but it might turn out the way she dreamed. If either or both got out, she would say she fled to get help or something. But first she had to get to Monarch Street, find him, share the excitement and her smarts. (Morrison, 2003: 177-178)

Later on, talking again to Cosey's portrait, she will pride herself on her master trick, Heed's death (Morrison, 2003: 196). With a trickster smile on her face, Junior causes Heed's fall from the hotel attic and her ensuing death in the arms of Christine. But in her multifaceted tricksterism, Junior's mischievous act triggers off the re-union of the two former friends and, most importantly, the resurgence of words that shape memories from the past: "there in a little girl's bedroom an obstinate skeleton stirs, clacks, refreshes itself" (Morrison, 2003: 177). The power of *nommo* supersedes now the poisoned silence between the two women; and even after Heed's death they both keep talking:

The future is disintegrating along with the past. The landscape beyond this room is without color. Just a bleak ridge of stone and no one to imagine it otherwise ... An unborn world where sound, any sound ... the scratch of a claw, the flap of webbed feet--is a gift. Where a human voice is the only miracle and the only necessity. Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold. Sudden, raw, stripped to its underwear. (Morrison, 2003: 184)

Language, words and voices can certainly be empowering and outlast physical existence. As Morrison (1997: 271) puts it, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives".

To such extent is Junior's identity indeterminate that it is left to the reader to shaffle diverse interpretations which are in keeping with both the trickster and postmodern aesthetics that characterize Morrison's novels. One such interpretation would focus on the relationship between Junior and the deceased Mr. Cosey as surrogate father and daughter. Lacking the feelings of love and protection from an absent father, Junior experiences a continuous search for fatherly love: "During years of longing for her father, Junior begged relentlessly to visit him ... She kept on looking for the tall, handsome man who named her after himself to show how he felt about her. She just had to wait" (Morrison, 2003: 55). When she first sees the portrait, she feels immensely attracted to it and starts a series of conversations with the man portrayed in it, who represents her surrogate father. In him she identifies the man whose protection and care rescued her in a recurring dream:

Sleep came down so fast it was only in dreaming that she felt the peculiar new thing: protected. A faint trace of relief, as in the early days at Correctional when the nights were so terrifying; when upright snakes on tiny feet lay in wait, their thin green tongues begging her to come down from the tree. Once in a while there was someone beneath the branches standing apart from the snakes, and although she could not see who it was, his being there implied rescue ... (Morrison, 2003: 29-30)

This dream with clear Edenic overtones reveals Junior's search for protection against the danger and maybe sin that snakes, in one of their multiple meanings, symbolize. As if she had known Mr. Cosey for a long time, she talks to him openly, using sometimes a language and acting in a way that verges on incestuous love. This peculiar type of love can be perceived in episodes like the one where she tells him about her sexual relationship with

Romen. Once again, the boundaries and categorizations of a concept, love, are deliberately blurred by Morrison. What are the limits of love? As we can see in this novel, there is no clearly defined border between love and hate nor is there a clear-cut distinction between filial love and sexual love. In another description of her dream with his saviour, we can read:

This was the right place and there he was, letting her know in every way it had been waiting for her all along. As soon as she saw the stranger's portrait she knew she was home. She had dreamed him the first night, had ridden his shoulders through an orchard of green Granny apples heavy and thick on the boughs. (Morrison, 2003: 60)

The erotic and sinful implications of apples together with the indirect reference to the loaded image of the horse signal Junior's sexually charged vision of Mr. Cosey. On several occasions Junior is described as "riding" her Good Man's shoulders in what can be read as sexual intercourse, if we take into account the phallic connotations of the horse. According to psychotherapist Nor Hall (1980: 56), "When a girl's sexual nature awakens she often finds herself equally drawn to babies and to horses -to undomesticated libido".

In her trickster role of mediator, Junior seems to act as well as a messenger of Mr. Cosey's ghost, judging from her own thoughts: "it pleased him to see her taking care of his wife ... I know you called me here. I read the ad in a paper I found in the bus station ... " (Morrison, 2003: 124, 156). Even this special kind of 'love affair' Junior entertains with Mr. Cosey ends up in unexpected betrayal. After Heed's accident, Junior returns to the house eager to see and talk to her Good Man's portrait but he

had been missing for days now, and had not appeared in the hotel attic or returned to this room. Confronting his portrait, eager to report her cleverness in the hotel, she had suppressed suspicions of his betrayal, and when Romen arrived, she forgot about him ... the Good Man vanished from his painting altogether, leaving her alone with Romen. Who ran. (Morrison, 2003: 196)

Mr. Cosey's disappearance at the end of the novel takes place in the chapter entitled "Phantom". Once Heed and Christine resume their dialogue, analyze the past and express their mutual love, Mr. Cosey is relegated to the nature of a phantom, which somehow explains his complete disappearance from his portrait. But Junior's feeling of betrayal is not the only one in the novel. Indeed, although Cosey's women have all felt some kind of love for him, most of them have also felt betrayed by him: Christine and his mother May because he chose Heed as a wife; Heed because he was unfaithful to her with other women; and L, his cook, because he had willed everything he had to a licentious woman named Celestial, who appears to be Mr. Cosey's real and most enduring love. Thus, Cosey fails to satisfactorily fulfill the male roles several women had assigned him and which are used as chapter titles in the novel: Friend, Benefactor, Lover, Husband, Guardian, Father. Heed's and Christine's hate of Cosey turns into hate of each other, while they fail to realize that their friendship is the best thing they have. As Morrison (Solomon 2003) has argued

about Mr. Cosey and his women, "It's not that he didn't ruin their lives the way they believe he did. The point is get rid of it... Move on. It's only after they relegate him to a phantom that they can finally begin to talk". Hence, Morrison claims the decentering of the male figure in women's lives, calling for the reinforcement of female agency, as she (O'Connor 2003) has further explained: "Patriarchy is assumed, but women have to agree to the role... It's not that [Cosey] gobbles them up, but they allow themselves to be eaten. When you're able to stop blaming other people--your father, your grandfather, your husband--for your shortcomings or confusion or failure, then language is possible, and so is love".

Morrison's special interest in outlaw, wayward women is once again revealed in the creation of this enigmatic character whose name is Celestial. Although she is hardly present in the novel, the scarce references to her create in the reader a growing curiosity about this mysterious character, whose absent presence is all powerful. Morrison introduces Celestial with short glimpses given by different characters, like the one provided by Christine when she refers to the place she is going to work at as "Celestial territory ... remembering a scar-faced woman on the beach" (Morrison, 2003: 92). Or when L finds some connection between Celestial and Junior: "This Junior girl--something about her puts me in mind of a local woman I know. Name of Celestial. When she was young, that is ... Mr. Cosey knew her too, although if you asked him he'd deny it. Not to me, though. Mr. Cosey never lied to me. No point in it" (Morrison, 2003: 67). At first sight, both characters appear linked by a bodily mark which, in Morrison's narrative, is usually indicative of spiritual or supernatural powers or at least signals some otherworldly connection. If Junior has merged toes, Celestial has a scar on her face which, incidentally, reminds us of Sula's birthmark or Pilate's lack of navel. But the connection L establishes is not coincidental. Apart from their physical marking, both characters share their active sexuality-- Celestial is supposed to be a prostitute--and a special relationship with the supernatural. The fact that, being a prostitute, she does not suffer retaliations from the Police-heads "hunting desperate women" (Morrison, 2003: 201) confers her special power, as L acknowledges: "I know at least one woman who ... stood right under their wide hats, their dripping beards, and scared them off with a word--or was it a note?" (Morrison, 2003: 201). Celestial's unidentified or unidentifiable utterance is in keeping with the trickster aesthetic of indeterminacy that dominates the novel. Just as important, the association between Celestial and the word or the sound similarly contributes to that aesthetic.

Like Junior, Celestial is also a pariah in the community due to her condition of licentious woman. Thus, women warn children to keep away from her, as Heed and Christine were told:

when they were about ten years old, they heard a man call out 'Hey, Celestial' to a young woman in a red sunback dress ... The woman didn't look around to see who called her. Her profile was etched against the seascape; her head held high. She turned instead to look at them. Her face was cut from cheek to ear. A fine scar like a pencil mark an eraser could turn into a flawless face. Her eyes locking theirs were cold and scary, until she winked at them ... Later they asked May who she was, this Celestial. 'Stay as far away from her as you can ... Because

there is nothing a sporting woman won't do'. (Morrison, 2003: 187-88)

The color red of Celestial's dress and her scary eyes allow for the establishment of new parallelisms with Junior's wearing of another red dress in the house and with the multiple references to her eyes.

In a recent interview Morrison expresses her keenness on the literary representation of outcast women who go against the establishment but who are necessary pillars for the community: "Outlaw women who don't follow the rules are always interesting to me ... because they push themselves, and us, to the edge. The women who step outside the borders, or who think other thoughts, define the limits of civilization, but also challenge it" (O'Connor 2003). And dealing with her character Celestial she emphasizes the idea of female freedom: "She's unfettered and unencumbered ... I wanted that scene. She goes into the water, she goes into the night. She's fluffing her hair. I wanted the notion of a free female, or a licensed one, anyway" (O'Connor 2003). It is noteworthy the fact that Morrison places this 'free, licensed' character in a water context, which again coincides with Junior's appearance on stage marked by this loaded element. As some critics have aptly argued, the image of water is extensively used by many contemporary women writers as a metaphor of freedom, fluidity, flexibility and indeterminacy, all of which do away with enclosed monolithic worlds.⁷ In the scene Morrison refers to L sees Mr. Cosey on the beach with Celestial. L describes that memory as follows:

Down a piece I saw somebody else. A woman sitting on a blanket massaging her head with both hands ... she got up, naked as truth, and went into the waves. The tide was out, so she had to walk a long time for the water to reach her waist. Tall, raggedy clouds drifted across the moon ... this woman kept on wading out into black water and I could tell she wasn't afraid of them [Police-heads]--or of anything--because she stretched, raised her arms, and dove ... Her hair, flat when she went in, rose up slowly and took on the shape of the clouds dragging the moon. Then she ... made a sound. I don't know to this day whether it was a word, a tune, or a scream. All I know is that it was a sound I wanted to answer. Even though, normally, I'm stone quiet, Celestial. (Morrison, 2003: 105-06)

Apart from water, other natural elements like the clouds and the moon are associated with Celestial, whose very name connects her with heaven and sky. This closeness to nature is a common feature of ancestral and supernatural characters in Morrison's novels, the most revealing example being that of Pilate in *Song of Solomon*. Together with the trickster aspects mentioned above, Celestial has the ability to create in L an urge to establish a dialogue, to answer back, thus engaging in what might remind us of the African American call-and-response technique.

It is precisely with language and music that Morrison chooses to open and finish her novel in a circular movement that connects beginning and end, both of which are dominated by L's italicized first-person narration. Although some of the questions and dilemmas raised throughout the novel remain unresolved, L provides two fundamental answers; on the one hand, she confesses she killed Mr. Cosey and, on the other hand, he had left

everything he possessed to Celestial on his will and that is why she felt she had to do something about it. Thus she finally discloses the truth about Mr. Cosey's will, the fact that Heed and Christine "never saw the real thing ... leaving everything to Celestial. Everything. Everything ... It wasn't right ... Regardless of what his heart said, it wasn't right" (Morrison, 2003: 200-01). Heed and Christine had had access only to a 1958 will which left "the sweet Cosey girl" as the main inheritor. The ambiguity of such words had provoked a rivalry over who that girl might be, since "Sweet Cosey girl" could apply to both women. L narrates how she destroyed the real will before Mr. Cosey's funeral and she then focuses on the potential magic of language: "It took nerve, and long before the undertaker knocked on the door, I tore that malicious thing up. My menu worked just fine. Gave them a reason to stay connected and maybe figure out how precious the tongue is. If properly used ... " (Morrison, 2003: 201). Like the African concept of "nommo," language encloses the power of creation and healing. As Janheinz Jahn contends, "All magic is word magic, incantation and exorcism, blessing and curse. Through Nommo, the word, man [sic] establishes his [sic] mastery over things" (1990: 132). L's words echo Morrison's own words in the Nobel Prize Lecture about the power of language and how that power can be used for better or worse purposes. Language is magical also because it is flexible, indeterminate and open to interpretation, like the expression "sweet Cosey girl". Morrison sees language under the trickster paradigm, which "embodies an expansive, dynamic cultural identity rather than a reductive, static one" (Smith, 1997: 156). Language, Morrison (1997: 268) argues, is "susceptible to death, erasure, certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will ... [if] unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences".

As a writer of trickster fiction, Toni Morrison turns into a figurative trickster herself, or a conjurer who has dealings with magic, and who "perform[s] liberating 'tricks' with words" as Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Baker, 1991: 101) suggests, drawing on the definition of "conjure" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Indeed, Morrison plays with language and words, welcomes paradoxes and contradictions and deconstructs such binaries as visibility/invisibility, absence/presence, living/dead, good/evil. Despite Mr. Cosey's absence, he is still the centre around which his women's existence revolve. Significantly enough, in a novel entitled *Love*, the word is not even mentioned but once by a living character and more than love, there seems to be a predominance of related feelings such as hate, contempt, revenge, lust or need. Only the dead character L speaks at some point about the scope of such feeling and its diverse kinds. The opening narrator of the novel has been dead for years and her name is just one letter, L, which stands for Love. The house at One Monarch Street is seen as both a church and a jailhouse (Morrison, 2003: 14) or, in other words, as the embodiment of both love and hate. In the relationship between Heed and Christine love and hate intermingle to a point that it is impossible to distinguish between the two feelings. L's hidden love for Mr. Cosey paradoxically engenders in her a desire to kill him. And, finally, Junior and Celestial remain "an enigma," as J. R. Smith (1997: 114) writes of Morrison's character Sula. The readers can never be sure about their true identity and Junior's final confinement in a locked room does not necessarily put an end to her

tricksterism. The end of the novel is, once again, open and the readers must engage in the interpretive performance that is required of them. Love and language share their extremely tricky nature; while love has intricate ramifications--betrayal, jealousy, hate, revenge--language can similarly have multidimensional, even contradictory functions and meanings. Love and language also share their capacity to transcend time and enter the realm of eternity. This is why Morrison closes her novel with the permanence of love, the words of a song and the humming of a voice:

I sit near her once in a while out at the cemetery. We are the only two who visit him. She is offended by the words on his tombstone ... "Ideal Husband. Perfect father." Other than that, she seems content. I like it when she sings to him ... Either she doesn't know about me or has forgiven me for my solution, because she doesn't mind at all if I sit a little ways off, listening. But once in a while her voice is so full of longing for him, I can't help it. I want something back. Something just for me. So I join in. And hum. (Morrison, 2003: 201-02)

As we have demonstrated, both in its content and layered structure, *Love* epitomizes the mode of the trickster novel in its multiple tenets. Junior is Morrison's new trickster, represented as the embodiment of transgression and indeterminacy. In adopting the trickster paradigm in her eighth novel, Morrison reaffirms her challenge to the accepted unquestioned univocality of the Western cultural tradition. Like Junior's toes, different time frames, different ontological dimensions and traditionally opposed concepts appear merged in this novel, which can therefore be read within a postmodern aesthetic. Finally, in *Love* coalesce two of the most recurring themes in Morrison's narrative, those of love and language in all their dimensions, intricacies and 'tricks'. Both have a lot to do with what Morrison terms as "The important thing that happens in [this] book ... reconciliation" (Solomon 2003). If language proves to have redemptive effects in Heed's and Christine's relationship gone awry, so does love since "Whatever the demons are--love can un-demonize them" (Solomon 2003). In its trickster-like nature, language encloses the potential to be misused and to exert oppression but it can also foster redemption and a will to love.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the multiple interpretations of the character Beloved see, for instance, Broad, 1994; Horvitz, 1989; House, 1990; and Rody, 1995.

2. See, for instance, Davis, 2003; Heinze, 2003; Hellmann, 2003; Jaggi, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Pinckney, 2003; Showalter, 2003 and Thomas, 2003.

3. See Showalter, 2003 and Jaggi, 2003.

4. The image of the hoof is especially relevant here as a possible allusion to either the Greek god of forests and wilderness, Pan (Walker, 1983: 765), or to the Christian devil. Both connections relate nonetheless to the spiritual dimension of this novel. On the one hand, Junior epitomizes the female wilderness, freedom and transgression that Morrison is so interested in; on the other hand,

the implicit reference to the devil would imply Junior's embodiment of evil and sin in a patriarchal system. However, as we can see in our analysis, Morrison dismantles the borders between evil and good, blurring the received clear-cut notions of such binarism.

5. For one of Anansi's stories, see De Weever, 1991: 35-36.

6. Smith (1997: 159) quotes William Hynes' list of features that identify most tricksters: "ambiguous and anomalous personality", "deceiver/trick-player", "shape-shifter", "situation inventor", "messenger/imitator of the gods" and "sacred/lewd bricoleur".

7. See, for instance, Morey, 1997.

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