

Mnemonics and Orality in Toni Morrison's *Love*

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This paper explores how Toni Morrison's insistence on orality as central to the African American narrative tradition and her challenge to Western logocentrism is realized in her latest novel *Love* (2003). It will focus on the orality-literacy dichotomy by opposing the vivid and irrefutable memories of the illiterate, female central character, Heed, with the legally valid, though much disputed, will of her dead husband, Bill Cosey. Whilst Cosey's written will stands as a major example, in both the narrative and the text, of unreliability and forgetfulness brought about by writing, Heed's body is the *locus* where memories become available for her to be vocalized, recounted.

The novel opens with Junior, a young 'fine-boned' woman, asking for directions on a cold day of 'chafing wind' (Morrison 2003, p.13). Junior, in a tiny skirt, leather jacket and high boots, is a stranger in Silk, the seafront village where the wealthy Bill Cosey and his restaurant and resort were once known to everyone. Holding a piece of paper with a pencil circled address of a job advertisement, she is in search of One Monarch Street, once Bill Cosey's family house, and now inhabited by Bill's lonely widow, Heed, old and plagued by arthritis. Heed is confined to solitude in her room, in the large marital house that she shares with Bill's niece, Christine. Bitter and accusatory, Christine opens the door to Junior and, looking incredulously at the notice Junior shows her, questions the young girl for a while before allowing her to Heed's chamber.

Tension and resentment dominate Christine and Heed's life in One Monarch Street. Once close childhood friends, the two women were irremediably separated when old Cosey chose Heed, still a child, as his wife. At the age of eleven Heed, a tender bride, was taken away from her childhood, from the innocent and playful days that she shared with Christine. This episode severed their friendship by placing the two girls in permanent opposition regulated by power games:

Once – perhaps – twice a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped. Never drawing blood, never apologizing, never premeditating, yet drawn annually to pant through an episode that was as much rite as fight. Finally they stopped, moved into acid silence, and invented other ways to underscore bitterness. (Morrison 2003, p.73)

The acrimony of Heed and Christine's endless fight escalated after Bill's death when his ambiguous will passed on his estate to his 'sweet Cosey child' (Morrison 2003, p.34). As a consequence, both women claimed to be his legitimate heir on the ground of this vague and questionable document.

Junior's arrival at One Monarch Street breaks the silence around Heed, incapacitated by her arthritis and entirely dependant upon her worst enemy, Christine. Seeing Junior's 'messy hair and tacky clothes' and her 'bold laziness' (Morrison 2003, p.24), Heed is sceptical. Bill Cosey's looming portrait overlooks the bright room where Heed interviews this extrovert candidate who, upon request of a reference letter, promptly responds with a challenge to the authority of the written word: 'a letter won't tell you even if it says so. I say I am. Hire me and you'll see' (Morrison 2003, p.25). Such 'blunt speech' convinces Heed to hire this young stranger.

The 'light but highly confidential work' (Morrison 2003, p.20) that Junior is supposed to do is described by Heed with satisfaction and secrecy: 'I am writing a book [...] It's about my family. The Coseys. My husband's family' (Morrison 2003, p.26). Recalling the old days at the resort, the 'more than just literate' and wealthy guests, Heed talks about the guest books, which are invaluable material for her writing project. Lost in her memories she reiterates the importance of handwriting: 'you couldn't achieve nothing worthwhile if your handwriting was low. Nowadays people write with their feet' (Morrison 2003, p.27). While Heed sits in her large bright room claiming to be writing a book, Junior, not impressed by the old woman's boasting, shows once again how suitable she is for the job:

Look. Mrs. Cosey. I can read; I can write, okay? I'm smart as it gets. You want handwriting, you want typing, I'll do it. You want your hair fixed, I'll fix it. You want a bath, I'll give you one. I need a job and I need a place to stay. I'm real good, Mrs. Cosey. Really real good. (Morrison 2003, p.27)

Heed, remembering this speech, will make use of Junior's skills on several occasions, but never for the writing of her book.

Enclosed by mystery and memories, Heed's nonexistent book is central to *Love's* narration: it epitomizes a major contradiction which lies behind Heed's statement 'I am writing a book' and her illiteracy, known to everyone but Junior. Heed was a young black woman during the turbulent sixties, at the height of the protests for Civil Rights, years which brought about the rectification of the Jim Crow laws' abuses, but her gender and her social and cultural background ensured her illiteracy. Relegated to a lower status in

comparison to the Coseys and to her friend Christine, Heed embodied the perfect wife for old Bill: illiterate, young and poor, she was easily given away by her family to the wealthy benefactor like a commodity. Heed was

a girl without a nightgown or bathing suit. Who had never used two pieces of flatware together to eat [...] whose family salvaged newsprint not for reading but for the privy. Who could not form a correct sentence; who knew some block letters but not script. (Morrison 2003, p.75)

Heed's inability to read and write, strikingly highlighted by the rather practical use of printed paper in her family, prevents her from writing a book in the conventional way she seems to imply, but Junior, sharp and intuitive, senses something behind the old woman's story. Looking at Heed's hands, 'small, baby-smooth, [...] like fins' (Morrison 2003, p.28) Junior wonders if it is arthritis that prevents her from writing the book, or perhaps 'some old lady sickness', 'memory loss maybe' (Morrison 2003, p.28). The old lady's problem however is not memory, on the contrary:

with the necessary prowess of the semiliterate, Heed had a flawless memory, and like most nonreaders, she was highly numerate. She remembered not only how many gulls had come to feed off a jellyfish but the patterns of their flight when disturbed (Morrison 2003, p.75)

Being illiterate, Heed has a reliable memory rendered solid by a constant and inevitable exercise to supplant the lack of writing skills.

The association between Heed's infallible memory and her illiteracy calls to mind the writing-memory relation explored in classical works. The famous passage described in Plato's *Phaedrus*,

where Socrates condemns the advent of writing as threatening the art of memory, is perhaps the most eminent example of this dichotomy conceived as antithetical:

If men learn this [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. (1914, p.275a)

Derrida strongly argues against this hierarchical conception of writing and speech. He deconstructs the binary opposition claimed in Plato's text maintaining that if, as Plato has it, writing is derivative, this is equally true for speech. By positing writing on the same originary level as speech, Derrida dismantles a metaphysical opposition that has dominated Western culture. He writes as follows:

the historical usurpation and theoretical oddity that install the image within the rights of reality are determined as the *forgetting* of a simple origin. [...] The violence of forgetting. Writing, a mnemonic means, supplanting good memory, spontaneous memory, signifies forgetfulness. [...] Forgetfulness because it is a mediation and the departure of the logos from itself. Without writing, the latter would remain in itself. Writing is the dissimulation of the natural, primary and immediate presence of sense to the soul within the logos. Its violence befalls the soul as unconsciousness. Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather showing why violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first [...] writing. (Derrida 1976, p. 37)

The Derridian stance, though deconstructive, does not necessarily entail a Copernican revolution in the conception of these two terms.

Indeed, in *Ad Herennium*, an anonymous yet distinguished Latin source on the *ars oratoria*, writing and memory are posited as two alternative means to spread, produce and apprehend knowledge:

Those who know the letters of the alphabet can thereby write out what is dictated to them and read aloud what they have written. Likewise, those who have learned mnemonics can set in places what they have heard, and from these places deliver it by memory. For the places are very much like wax tablets or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of images like the script, and the delivery is like the reading. (Caplan 1954, III.xvii.30)

Writing and memory (hence speech) are placed on the same level, thus eliminating what Plato defines as the Socratic hierarchical concept. However, this passage, whilst investigating speech, is concerned with the notion of memory and mnemonics, a crucial issue when exploring orality. Indeed Morrison's novel explores orality and its relation to memory. Heed's oral accounts mainly rely upon her recollections; her way of recalling the past echoes ancient mnemonic techniques.

The art of memory's ancient origins are recounted in an anecdote in Cicero's *De Oratore* (1954). At a banquet at the house of Scopas, a nobleman of Thessaly, Simonides of Ceos, chanted a lyric poem in honour of his host and in praise of Castor and Pollux. He then resumed his place at the table, only to be told that two men were waiting outside to see him. Leaving the banquet hall, he could find no one, but in his absence the roof caved in, killing all inside and mangling their bodies so badly that their relatives could not identify them. Simonides, however, was able to remember the places in which they had been sitting when he recited his lyric.

Identifying the bodies for burial, he realised on the basis of this experience that an ordered sense of place is essential for good memory. As Cicero has it, Simonides went on to infer that those wishing to train the memory

must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store those images in the places, so that the order of the things and the images of the things will denote the things themselves, and we shall employ the places and images respectively as a wax writing-tablet and the letters written on it. (1954, p.467)

A fundamental aspect of the classical art of memory was the identification of a *locus* in which to locate the image, the notion, or the word that had to be remembered. To create an imaginary space in which to place what had to be memorized became central to classical and medieval mnemonics. Classical rhetoricians imagined an architectural structure in which they could locate the objects that would prompt their memories as, in their imaginations, they moved through it. In post-classical texts on mnemonics, however, the human body becomes the common *locus* of memory (Berger 1981, p. 104). Thomas Aquinas and his theory of ‘corporeal similitudes’ initiated a tradition of practice of artificial memory which recalled information and facts from a corporeal *locus*.

Heed’s way of remembering past resonates with late medieval mnemonics and with the tradition of identifying a bodily *locus*. Indeed her naked body becomes the *locus* by which she recollects her memory, and conceals past vicissitudes which she recalls as she bathes. Being immersed in water is essential to Heed’s capacity to

recollect the past: Heed's bath brings thriving recollections.¹ In chapter four, where we see her lying in hot water, her 'flawless memory' plays over events from her childhood and the more recent past: 'Heed's own story was dyed in colors restored to their original clarity in bubbly water' (Morrison 2003, p.74-75). Heed takes, or is rumoured to take, three baths a day. This compulsive habit, associated with the act of recollection which takes place in the bath, suggests a necessary and unavoidable urge to remember. The old woman, in her bright room swathed in a frosty and bitter silence, unable to write or to recall the past from printed records, repeatedly soaks her frail body to see her 'own story dyed in colors'. This obsessive rehearsal of the past brings about the 'body's recollection of pleasure', for instance her memories of the wedding night, when she lay 'submerged in water in his arms'. The decrepit Heed bathes in 'lilac bubbles' remembering her first night with Bill on the 'powdery sand': 'No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her' (Morrison 2003, p.75). It is interesting to note that 'the bath, in the tradition of oral and bardic storytelling, is a ritual' (Middleton 1955, p.22). Similarly, Heed tells Junior of her past in concurrence with bathing, with rites involving soaking, cleansing or immersing in water part of her body.

Her crippled hands, however, make bathing alone a dangerous venture: she has to hang on to the rim of the tub to lower herself in, and has to pull the plug well before getting out to prevent herself from drowning should she knock herself out. As she gets in, she tells herself 'this can't last' (Morrison 2003, p.71). As she gets out, she thinks 'this is dumb as well as dangerous [...] I can't do it no more',

¹ This image echoes the mythic river of Mnemosyne. One of the two springs in Hades, the other being Lethe, representing respectively memory and oblivion. (In ancient Greek myth Mnemosyne is also the name of the mother of the Muses).

and decides to ‘ask– no, order’ Junior to help her in and out of the tub in the future (Morrison 2003, p.77). Yet the idea of giving up her privacy disturbs her, although not because of the sense of ‘dependency’ or ‘awkwardness’ her body might feel under ‘the judging glance of a firm young girl’ (Morrison 2003, p.77).

What troubled Heed, had made her hesitate, was the loss of skin memory, the body’s recollection of pleasure [...] Skin might forget that in the company of a sassy girl whose flesh was accumulating its own sexual memories like tattoos [...] She would have to figure out a way to prevent Junior’s presence from erasing what her skin knew first in seafoam. (Morrison 2003, p.77-78)

This passage reveals Heed’s fears of being divested of her memories by Junior’s presence; the old woman is alarmed about the loss of her ‘skin memory’, of the multiplicity of signs virtually inscribed on her body. Her memory is threatened by a ‘sassy girl’, the record of her life, a will privately preserved in her body, might be forgotten. How can Junior help her to write the book without sharing her memories?

Junior is never asked to help Heed in and out of the bath, but she learns much about Heed’s memories while colouring, shampooing and massaging her hair. ‘Correctionals knew all about grooming’ (Morrison 2003, p.123): June, as she liked to be called, with gloved hands, capably takes care of the old woman’s hair. ‘Encouraged by Junior’s obedient but interested silence’ (Morrison 2003, p.124), Heed recounts fragments of her story. When Junior turns on the blow dryer ‘warm, then cool air played on Heed’s scalp, stimulating more reminiscence’ (Morrison 2003, p.124); Mrs Cosey tells about ‘those early days’ when the war was just over and her deceased husband, who had more money than most, built the house at One Monarch Street. The victory celebration parties held at the

hotel and at the house, the flags, the firecrackers and rockets on the beach: all this is dredged from Heed's memory while her scalp is gently being massaged by warm air and caring hands. When Junior, cutting off the dryer, abruptly asks about Heed's own family, uneasiness and sadness creates an unspoken bond between the two women: both recall sleeping on the floor when living with their folks. Heed, looking at Junior's face in the mirror, thinks: 'that's what it is, what made me take her on. We're both out there, alone. With fire ants for family' (Morrison 2003, p.127).

Junior will never see Heed's story 'dyed in color' on her old body and will never write the book about the Coseys; Heed, perhaps alarmed by the idea of the young girl seeing her body, her form of tangible 'written' memory, her *locus* of recollection, denies access to it. Or perhaps what Heed actually wants is to be listened to, she wants someone to break the bitter silence around her and hear what she has to say.² Hers is a compelling desire to hear the sound of her own voice and be spoken to: in her world of illiteracy, sound and voices are vital. Hence in *Love Mrs. Cosey* recounts most of her past to her young companion in the warm and intimate beauty parlour atmosphere brought by June to the bright room which Heed used to inhabit motionless and in silence.

Crucial to the narration of *Love* are voice, the human body and its relation with mnemonics. The novel is mainly narrated by the ghost of L, once the main cook in Cosey's exclusive hotel and resort. L is a bodiless being, she is a voice unravelling the vicissitudes of the

² It should be noted that Heed's name holds relevant significance to her role in the novel; indeed the verb 'to heed' means 'to take notice of, to pay attention to' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). Heed demands attention, she wants to be listened to.

Coseys for the readers.³ From the very first page and throughout the narration L's humming reminds us of her incorporeal nature: she is only voice. Her 'hum' recurs twice only on the very first page, followed by others, and 'hum' is the very last word of the novel. Her voice is a continuous droning sound which permeates the text. On the other hand, Heed, unable to write, tells her story by recalling memories from her body, the depository of a *logos* that can only be voiced, not written. Indeed, as Cixous in 'The Laugh of Medusa' has it, the female 'body must be heard' (1976, p.880). Heed retrieves her memories from her body when the loving caress of water indulges her skin, or when caring hands bathe and stroke her scalp. The memories buried on her flesh are spelled out in words when her skin is stroked and rubbed. The act of rubbing cream into her hands on a summer day is epiphanic for the old Heed, a 'jolt' to her memory. 'Lotioning her hands, trying to flex her fingers, move them apart, examining the familiar scar tissue on the back of her hand' (Morrison 2003, p.80), Heed recalls an incident that occurred thirty years earlier: 'what was new, recent, was the jolt to Heed's memory' (Morrison 2003, p.80). This episode sheds light not only on the facts that she recalls, but also on the disputed will of her dead husband. The incident is focalized through Heed and it is narrated in the present continuous tense. This implies that the action is taking

³ The name hidden by the capital L is kept mysterious until a clue is given later in the narration; to explain her reason for telling Heed's and Christine's story, L declares: 'If your name is the subject of First Corinthians, chapter 13, it's natural to make it your business.' (Morrison 2003, p.199) First Corinthians chapter 13 is *The order of importance in spiritual gifts. Love*. Love is indeed L's name and it is what the novel is about: Heed and Christine had a 'strong passion', a love turned by 'real life' into hatred. Morrison's love story is inspired by its biblical source and yet it is the exact reverse. In fact one can read from the Scriptures: 'Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and it is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Love does never come to an end' (1 Corinthians 13: 4-7).

place at the moment of the narration signifying that Heed, in remembering also re-experiences the event once again, as if it occurs while she lathers her hands. The scar is from a burn caused by ‘an arc of hot fat’ escaped from the fryer while L was deep-frying chicken parts battered in egg in 1964 or 1965 (Morrison 2003, p.81). In that circumstance, Heed was questioning L’s refusal to use brand new equipment for the hotel kitchen – ‘electric knife, Sunbeam mixer, general electric toaster oven’ (Morrison 2003, p.80) – while May, Christine’s mother, ‘frantic with worry’ that the hotel was in danger from the presence of ‘city blacks’ (Morrison 2003, p.80), was carrying to the attic an old Rinso box full of junk – ‘useless packets of last New Year’s cocktail napkins, swizzle sticks, paper hats and a stack of menus’ (Morrison 2003, p.80). Thirty years later, on a summer day, Heed recalls that the Rinso box, with a ‘stack of menus’ might still be there in the attic.

This is particularly important to her: it was on a menu that Bill Cosey wrote his will, but neither she nor Christine ever saw it. In fact, L forged the surviving will to prevent Celestial, Bill’s secret lover and only beneficiary of his authentic will, from inheriting the estate; with the deliberately ambiguous formula ‘to my sweet Cosey child’ (Morrison 2003, p.87) L cunningly kept both Heed and Christine in One Monarch Street. For Heed the Rinso box means a sudden and intuitive realization: only one from the pile of old menus is needed to forge another will and end the feud between her and Christine.

There would be a lot of untampered-with menus in that box. Only one was needed. That, a larcenous heart, and a young, steady hand that could write script. (Morrison 2003, p.82)

Her illiteracy, together with the incapacitating arthritis, prevents Heed from accomplishing her furtive plan. With the help of Junior's 'young steady hand', Heed plans a visit to the hotel's attic, in search of the old Rinso box, to forge a will which 'identified the deceased's 'sweet Cosey child' by name: Heed Cosey' (Morrison 2003, p.79). Accompanied by June, Heed visits the hotel's attic where, after counterfeiting a new will, she meets her death.

Once again, Heed recalls memories from *loci* placed on her body, specifically her hand. Interestingly, the hand is an illustrious example of a mnemonic tool, employed as a mnemonic device as late as the seventeenth century.⁴ Around 1000AD many texts were written upon the use of the hand as a mnemonic instrument, with particular attention to music, the calendar and calculus. It is probable, however, that the use of the hand for such purposes belonged to the classical and/or biblical tradition. The use of hands as a means to memorize is documented in the Scriptures, where several references to the hand and other parts of the body as reminders are made.⁵ As Karol Berger notes, 'the hand itself, its finger tips and joints, function as the system of places providing an order to the images located within them' (1981, p.103). One of the most important of the tracts

⁴ I would also make a distinction between the private and the public marks of bodily memory. Heed's constant bathing allows her to access her 'body's recollection of pleasure' (Morrison 2003, p.77) which is private and only available to her, while the scar on her hand is a public sign carved on her skin, visible to anyone. Whilst the former recalls pleasure, the latter recalls pain from a burn, from her quarrel and disappointment with L.

⁵ 'And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the Lord's law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt' (Exodus 13:9); 'Let these words of mine remain in your heart and in your soul; fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as a circlet.' (Deuteronomy 11:18). Interestingly Berger points out that 'traces of the mnemonic and computational uses of the hand probably still linger in such expressions as having something by "rule of thumb" or "at one's fingers' tips"' (1981, p.109).

on the hand and memory was that of Johannes Tinctoris's *Expositio Manus*, written around 1477. For Tinctoris,

the teaching device to which this elementary stage of learning is tied is the hand with the tips and knuckles of its fingers [...] The simplicity of the whole system is built upon the invariable presence of particular notes upon a line or space. (Seay 1965, p.196)

Rudiments of music, tones, notes, solmization system and intervals were virtually placed on the hand: the hand, specifically the right one, was the space where sound patterns were recalled. Relating Heed's memory to mnemonic techniques of hundreds of years ago might seem arbitrary and unhelpful. However, as Steven Connor observes,

there seems to be a striking homology between the power to send out voice and other sounds of the body into the world and executive power possessed by the hand. (2004, p.162)

Mainly drawn from the theory that spoken language replaced gesture language, the cooperation of hand and voice is crucial in oral communication. Indeed the sound-touch relation is a mimetic one: hand, epitome of touch, 'accompanies, mimics, performs sound' (Connor 2004, p.154). Hence, when we consider the hand in the light of its relation to writing and to telling, the connection with Mrs Cosey's memory seems more fertile. Heed's illiteracy is fundamental to *Love's* plot. The use of the body as a mnemonic tool is inevitably relevant especially when the written word is a rare commodity. Karol Berger writes:

It is understandable that the art of memorizing, of propping the natural memory with artificial devices, would be important in the centuries before the invention of printing greatly increased the availability of copies of texts and made the task of memorization less urgent. (1981, p.98)

Without the aid of a written record, sound, and patterns of sound, form the basis of a mnemonic system. In an oral tradition, mnemonics and sound are closely entwined. Orators, bards, singers and storytellers relied on mnemonics, and the recollection of patterns of sound, in order to recall lines, facts, and songs for a performance. As Middleton puts it,

oral memory, in contrast to textual memory, depends completely upon formulas, rituals, and other oral art forms to strengthen recalling and retelling stories. (1995, p.20)

The ritual of the bath, the lotioning and rubbing of the skin, are Heed's formulas to recall the past in order to tell her story.

The memories secreted on Heed's body belong to the realm of the oral: this might explain her reluctance to allow Junior to help her in and out of the bath. Moreover, it also explains the fact that her young assistant, though hired for the specific purpose of helping her to write the book, is never asked to do so. Once objectified on the page, Heed's bodily memory might cease to exist. However, she feels comfortable and content to tell her own story to Junior, to recount it in the cosy atmosphere of her own room. The orality-literacy dichotomy is clearly spelled out by Toni Morrison in *Love*: Heed's oral memory and illiteracy stands in sharp opposition to Bill Cosey's written will. Arguing that one is superior to the other is simplistic and futile; nonetheless, Morrison seems to insist on the

unreliability of the written record: Cosey's will, forged time and again, is legally binding – at least in those circumstances – no matter how deceitful it is. Heed's record, available on her body, is private; Cosey's will, written on the page, is public, for it is accessible. The first constitutes a real memory, though oral, the latter is a false memory, yet written. *Love* questions the validity of written evidence by positing a false will as the focus of a ferocious and everlasting family feud. Casting doubt on written words also has significant implications on a political and ideological level: insisting on their fallibility implicitly questions mendacious historical accounts responsible for mis-telling African American history. Morrison's accusatory attitude toward the Eurocentric historical records is not new; indeed it is part of the postcolonial insistence on the necessity to reconsider black history, to engage with the past.⁶ Her fiction, set in a period stretching from slavery to the 1970s, is an attempt to rewrite African American history and to offer an alternative to the albocentric version of it.

Nevertheless, I would argue that *Love* also offers a problematic representation of orality and of the female body as a depository of memory. Indeed, withdrawing from Heed's subjectivity, the memory she recalls while bathing gains a different significance. Heed's 'body's recollection of pleasure' is actually a mere abuse: what is remembered and cherished by Heed as love is in fact an instance of paedophilia. Bill Cosey abuses a poor, illiterate eleven year old child, sold for money by her family, and deprives her of the only love she has ever had – her friendship with Christine.

⁶ Among the numerous postcolonial writers are Derek Walcott and Jean Rhys who engage with Caribbean history; Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar whose fiction attempts to re-write Algerian history; Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, and Rohinton Mistry who use the novel to revisit colonial and nationalist versions of Indian history.

I return to Heed's memory of the wedding night:

Undressing. No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees, and opened her legs to the surf. (Morrison 2003, pp.77-78)

This memory is displaced by the memory of her first meeting with Christine – it was ‘down to big water and along its edge where waves skidded and mud turned into clean sand’ (Morrison 2003, p. 78). The sea is a metonymy for love and her compulsive bathing habit explains her craving for affection.⁷

Heed's oral and bodily memory is actually a false memory too: it is the memory of an abuse reinterpreted by her subjectivity and associated with pleasure. As Yukiko Fukase maintains, the Cosey women

collect their memories of Bill Cosey, and in the end exorcise them to reclaim their own stories on the beach, the site where the borders of race, gender and class are delineated in Morrison's depiction. ([n.d.], p.151)

Despite Junior's help, Heed refrains from writing her story: it is not her illiteracy that prevents her from recording her memories, but the awareness that the truth will destroy her subjectivity. Once objectified on the page, her ‘body's recollection of pleasure’ (Morrison 2003, p.77) will appear what it is in reality, it will loom as a despicable abuse. On the contrary, she vocalizes her

⁷ The sea as metonymy for love occurs in the narration focalized by L: ‘The ocean is my man now. He knows when to rear and hump his back, when to be quiet and simply watch a woman. He can be devious, but he's not a false-hearted man’ (Morrison 2003, p.100). The quote alludes to the sea as lover, as being devious and yet still good-hearted. Here there seems to be an overlapping between L and Heed: L's narration is pervaded by Heed's memory of the wedding night and by her distorted and subjective perception of it.

story, she sounds the cry of her body in pain years after the abuse. Sound is in fact ‘closely and recurrently associated with the deliberate application of pain on the body’ (Connor 2004, p.162): the ‘eeks of pain’ that she fails to emit during the wedding night, are now sounded through her telling. Orality, which persistently pervades Heed’s telling, is a necessity that enables her to deal with unsolved issues.⁸

Morrison’s latest novel challenges logocentrism by exploring the orality–literacy dichotomy. Touching upon traditional mnemonic practices and popular orality, this challenge is mainly realized through the character Heed, whose inability to write does not prevent her from telling stories. The female body becomes central to the novel’s discourse to assert its crucial role in storytelling and to question its reliability. Indeed *Love*, whilst questioning the authority of the written word, also problematizes the notion of orality and of its validity. Heed’s body, though a depository of *logos* offers a distorted version of past memories. Insisting on the necessity to reconsider history, to rescue the past from silenced cultures, Morrison portrays the body not only as repository of the past, but also, and above all, as a fallible site of memory. Through a twofold representation of Heed’s body, *Love* questions the authority of both written and spoken words demanding readers to revisit and reconsider tales.

⁸ The cathartic effects of oral testimony are not uncommon in treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed during therapy ‘oral narrative is repeated several times [...] to reduce fear associated with the memory’ (Falsetti & Bernat, 2000).

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